

## The Crack: Generational Strategies in Mexico at the Turn of the Century

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To Nacho Padilla,  
*in memoriam*

The Crack phenomenon occupies a central place in the study of Latin American literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Critical studies pertaining to the group, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2016, are very much in vogue, and it is more than ever necessary to define the movement, establish a critical apparatus to sharpen its contours, and examine its aesthetic positions to see how they reflect—or clash with—those of the individual authors. It is likewise time to question errors, stereotypes, and clichés that have continually surrounded it since even before its public debut with the reading of the *Crack Manifesto* on August 7, 1996. While one of the major critical challenges resides in treating the group as a literary generation, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda (b. 1961), Pedro Ángel Palou (b. 1966), Eloy Urroz (b. 1967), Jorge Volpi (b. 1968), and Ignacio Padilla (1968–2016) did not reject such a

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notion in the manifesto, addressed to “us, authors born from the sixties onwards” (40), and “we, authors born in the sixties” (36). This chapter aims to evaluate the alleged identity of Crack as a literary generation, its links to other *generational* movements in Mexico and Latin America during the turn of the century, and the possibility of developing additional critical devices that offer, from a sociological study of literature, a consistent explanation of these writers as a whole. The points of departure are the reconstruction of central moments in the history of the group, bibliographic sources on the concept of the literary generation (Petersen 1946; Ortega 1970; Krauze 1983; Paz 1987; Marías 1989; Gambarte 1996; Sánchez Prado 2008), and previous studies that have defined the Crack from this perspective (Domínguez Michael 1996; Santeliz Soto 2003; Zavala 2006; Alvarado 2016b).

The Crack has been defined as a literary generation by at least four groups that participate in the genesis and structure of the literary field, as it was defined by Pierre Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art* (1992). First, the publishing houses. In 1996, the Grupo Patria Cultural published the first three Crack novels, Eloy Urroz’s *Las Rémoras*, Ignacio Padilla’s *Si volviesen sus majestades* and Jorge Volpi’s *El temperamento melancólico*. In 1997, they were followed by four more novels under the Crack label. On the cover of the seven books there was a red ribbon with an inscription defining the Crack as “a new generation of narrators who are changing the map of today’s literature” and “those Mexican narrators born in the sixties who have put a decisive new spin on narrative technique in the Spanish-speaking world: The *Crack Generation*.”

Secondly, cultural journalism. In 1994, a Mexican cultural magazine described the trilogy *Tres bosquejos del mal*, composed of three experimental novellas by Padilla, Urroz, and Volpi, as “the most important generational approach made up to this point” (Cárdenas 34). In “La bronca de las generaciones” (“The Clash of the Generations”), one of the first columns written after the reading of the *Crack Manifesto*, Christopher Domínguez Michael examined the document exclusively from a generational perspective.

Thirdly, academic approaches. Many scholarly studies have defined the Crack as a literary generation. Agnes Zavala states, “the five authors meet the extraliterary criteria to form a generation” (56) and, according to Cristina Santeliz Soto, “if we use Paz’s definition of a generation as a ‘group of men born around the same time in the same country that belong to the same socioeconomic class, read the same books, and possess the same passions and interests’, much of that applies to the *Crack*” (201).

Finally, writers belonging to what Bourdieu called the *consecrated avant-garde* (121). In his essay *La gran novela latinoamericana* (2011) Carlos Fuentes dedicated a chapter to the Crack phenomenon, in which he defined it as a “the self-appointed generation” (359) and as “the first literary generation that was properly named after the Boom phenomenon” (360). In the journal *Letras libres*, Enrique Vila-Matas celebrated in 2000 the arrival in Spain of the “*Crack Generation*, who are the sons of the Boom” (104).

As Eduardo Mateo Gambarte has pointed out, for many decades literary studies have suffered an epidemic of “generationitis” (245). Although frequently used in critical essays, the term *literary generation* has only been subjected to minimal scrutiny since the middle of the last century. This is particularly true since 1996, when Gambarte himself wrote *El concepto de generación literaria*, a book that in fact deconstructed its very validity (Sánchez Prado 9–10). This has not undermined a longstanding tradition in Mexico regarding the use of a generational methodology, a practice inherited from Spanish literary studies that was later extended to other countries in the Hispanic world. In Gambarte’s words, “in Spain, and in Latin America due to Spanish influence, the idea still resembles that of trying to square a circle” (97). This method was used in Mexico by writers such as Carlos Monsiváis and José Emilio Pacheco (Krauze 129), and there are key reference books about the topic including chapters in *Generaciones y semblanzas* (1987) by Octavio Paz, *La ronda de las generaciones* (1997) by Luis González y González, and the essay “Cuatro estaciones de la cultura mexicana” by Enrique Krauze, written in 1981 and later included in his book *Caras de la Historia* (1983). Krauze divided the twentieth century into four generations of Mexican artists, writers, and intellectuals, according to divisions lasting about fifteen years, an idea inspired by Thibaudet, Julián Marías, and Ortega y Gasset (Alvarado, “Escribir América” 82–83). Krauze’s study started with the *1915 Generation*, those born between 1891 and 1905 (such as the members of the *Contemporáneos* group). It continued with the *1929 Generation*, comprised of those born between 1906 and 1920, largely a generation involved in academics and cinematography (Octavio Paz and José Revueltas, for example). The *Generación de Medio Siglo* were those born between 1921 and 1935, and they lived in an era marked by skepticism, fate, and the historical trauma of World War II. Included in this group were Carlos Fuentes, Sergio Pitol, and the so-called *Generación de la Casa del Lago*. Finally, the Generation of ’68,

comprised of those born between 1936 and 1950, and whose experience was determined by the Tlatelolco trauma (Carlos Monsiváis, José Emilio Pacheco, and Jose Agustín, among others).

In “La bronca de las generaciones” Domínguez Michael extended Krauze’s generational divisions by creating a fifth category featuring those born between 1951 and 1965. He named them the “generation of the *End of the Century*” (1) and, parodying the manifesto, the “*crackientos*” (1). Born in 1962, Domínguez Michael considered himself a part of this generation, stating that “in the field of arts, letters, and politics we, the *crackientos*, are the most spoiled generation of the century” (1). He goes on to say that “in the year 2000 Volpi, Palou, and I will be between thirty and forty years old and we all will be, God willing, in the prime of life” (1), and he also offered some of its defining characteristics:

We are children of the heroes of 68, we played in the time of cultural welfare, we got grants and we have been published and republished since the time we were 18 years old; we went out into the streets to riot without fear of the police, experiencing the democratic (or undemocratic) mobilizations of the 1985 earthquake, the elections of 1988, and the chaotic excitement of the Zapatista movement of 1994. (1)

In the last part of his column, however, Domínguez Michael warned against the willingness of the Crack writers to define their generational position too quickly, because “there are very few generations that successfully manage on their own to classify themselves as generations” (1) and, also because, “in this particular field of intellectual tradition, nothing counts but individual talent. The rest is a marketing strategy of dubious efficacy” (1).

Ignacio Sánchez Prado (8–20) proved that a mechanistic approach to the notion of “literary generation” presents as many successes as critical challenges. The Crack is no exception.<sup>1</sup>

If, as claimed by Ortega, a “generation is a set of men around the same age” (40) and the “community of time and space are the primary attributes of a generation” (39), then the Crack does seem to evince the foremost characteristics of the concept. Volpi, Urroz, Padilla, Palou, and Chávez Castañeda, the five writers of the *Crack Manifesto*, were born between (b. 1961) and (b. 1968), while Alejandro Estivill (b. 1965) and Vicente Herrasti (b. 1967), occasionally associated with the group, were also born during the same time frame.

The *vital contact* and *personal community* are also defining features of a literary generation, according to Ortega y Gasset, Petersen, and Krauze. The German critic defined it as “the common temporal experience within defined spatial limits, which establishes affinity for the shared events and content of life” (172) and, according to Krauze, “one belongs to a generation if one lives within the same time period” (127). The Crack group enjoyed this *vital contact* through a friendship that transcended the members’ shared interest in literature to encompass the personal, educational, and intellectual realms in their entirety, thus forging a strong personal relationship. Volpi, Urroz, and Padilla met in 1984 at the Centro Universitario México, a high school located in the Colonia del Valle of Mexico City and built on the foundations of the old Colegio Francés, the same school that, decades before, had been attended by famous Mexican literary figures such as Emmanuel Carballo, José Emilio Pacheco, Jorge Ibargüengotia, and Carlos Fuentes. Fittingly, Volpi, Padilla, and Urroz met each other thanks to their participation in an annual writing contest organized by the institution. Padilla won that year with a short story titled “El héroe del silencio” about rural aesthetics, influenced by magical realism, and clearly indebted to Rulfo. At seventeen or eighteen, the respective individual trajectories of the trio dissolved into a collaborative embrace of their literary vocation. They shared philosophical, ideological, and aesthetic influences, and they also developed a common attitude toward literature inseparable from their joint educational and intellectual growth in the streets of Mexico City, cinemas, classrooms, literary workshops, and restaurants (*Sanborns* was their favorite).

In the words of Volpi:

We learned to combine the development of our own literary work with the teachings of the only liberal arts school we ever attended. At those endless meetings, dinners, and breakfasts, we exchanged preferences, stories, and disappointments. Furthermore, we thoroughly and unmercifully dissected our writing, our obsessions, and even our lives. (2000)

During these years, Crack writers used some of the most important groups or generations in the history of world literature as role models. Among them were the *Generation of '27* in Spain—known as the *Generación de la amistad*—and London’s Bloomsbury Circle. Mexican referents, in turn, included *Contemporáneos* and the *Generación de Medio Siglo*.

Attending the same educational institutions has been traditionally identified as another defining trait of literary generations. As previously mentioned, Volpi, Urroz, and Padilla met at a young age at the Centro Universitario México in Mexico City. Volpi and Urroz continued their studies at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), where they met the fourth member of the Crack generation, Alejandro Estivill. He participated with them in an original joint project, the collective novel *Variaciones sobre un tema de Faulkner* (1989). Ricardo Chávez Castañeda (Psychology) and Vicente Herrasti (Law) also studied at UNAM. Pedro Ángel Palou was thus the only Crack writer not educated in Mexico City, but in his native state of Puebla. In cases such as Palou, coevality has been used to explain the generational link regardless of the fact that he did not grow up with the other writers. That was the guiding principle for the anthology *McOndo* (1996), which included writers of the same age but who had grown up in eleven different countries. In the prologue, Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez explained that the writers were incorporated into the anthology, despite the geographical distance. They reasoned, “we grew up watching the same television programs, admiring the same movies, and reading everything that deserved to be read, synchronized in a way that should be considered magical” (18).

A fourth characteristic of every literary generation is the open denial of the aesthetics of the previous generation. The Crack writers were aware of this concept even before founding their literary group. In 1990 Jorge Volpi stated that “each generation—this resembles a Freudian idea—must kill the previous one” (González Suárez 12). Likewise, in “La *Generación fría*: Síntesis de un diccionario para consumo propio,” an essay published in the newspaper *La Jornada* in 1992, Chávez Castañeda confirmed the urge for radical rupture. He stated that the previous generation, made up of writers born in the 1940s and 1950s, “will fall, as if the *skinheads* invaded the Frankfurt Book Fair and decapitated all contemporary Mexican literature” (17). This rejection of the previous generation cannot be disassociated from the genealogical approach to literature that defines the *Crack Manifesto*, which declares that the novels of the group had sprung from a unique lineage “of champion parents and grandparents” (32). It furthermore advocates returning to that “genealogy that since the *Contemporáneos* group (or perhaps a little earlier) has forged a national culture when it has been willing to take formal and aesthetic risks” (38). Consequently, the group openly rejected the literature of the previous generation, that of writers born in the 1940s

and the 1950s and their narrative associated with magical realism, light literature, rural themes, and direct political engagement. Critics such as Donald L. Shaw defined this trend as the post-Boom of the 1970s and 1980s in Latin American literature (253–324), and the *Crack Manifesto* branded it as “baby-food literature” (37) and “the cynically superficial and dishonest novel” (37). Examples include novels such as *La casa de los espíritus* (1982) by Isabel Allende, *Ardiente paciencia/El cartero de Neruda* (1985) by Antonio Skármeta, *Arráncame la vida* (1985) by Ángeles Mastretta, and, above all, *Como agua para chocolate* (1989) by Laura Esquivel.<sup>2</sup> The name Crack, in fact, referred to the fissure (not a real rupture) in Latin American tradition that figuratively happened between the 1960s and the 1990s. It was a regressive journey, with a few exceptions, from formally complex Boom novels such as Carlos Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963), Vargas Llosa’s *La casa verde* (1965) and García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967) to the linearity and degradation of form that characterized Latin American narrative during the 1970s and 1980s. In the same vein, Chávez Castañeda and Celso Santajuliana identified Mexican writers born in the 1960s as the *Generación de los enterradores*, because they were aware that “their immediate descent was a hindrance” (11), that the previous generation “lacked aesthetic qualities and attributes” (32), and that “the generation of Mexican writers born in the forties and fifties had to be sacrificed as a part of this pact” (28).

In the theory of literary generations this Freudian denial of the previous generation was generally accompanied by the proposal of a new generational language, different from the established aesthetics. The five novels that accompanied the reading of the *Crack Manifesto* in 1996 can serve as supporting evidence in this regard. Jorge Volpi’s *El temperamento melancólico* was a tribute to the tragic intelligence of the Russian movie director Andrei Tarkovski, using essay techniques with the backdrop of universal reflections about art, creation, and melancholy. Eloy Urroz’s *Las Rémoras* was a novel with a bipartite structure inspired by Vargas Llosa’s *La tía Julia y el escribidor* and William Faulkner’s *The Wild Palms*. Its portrayal of gender roles, existential questioning, and sexual relations reminds the reader of other novels by the Peruvian Nobel prize winner such as *La casa verde* and *La ciudad y los perros* (1962). Perhaps the greatest example of this new generational language is Ignacio Padilla’s *Si volviesen sus majestades*, a postmodern novella that hybridizes languages such as Cervantes’s Spanish, computing jargon, Mexican

colloquialisms, Hollywood movie clichés, and virtual reality. In *Memoria de los días* (1995), Pedro Ángel Palou linked literature and tarot reading to parody the end-of-the-century apocalyptic discourse through the narration of a pilgrimage by a millenarian sect from Mexico City to Los Angeles. Chávez Castañeda's *La conspiración idiota* (2003) offered a representation of violence. Its fragmentary structure and the fragility of human memory embodied by its teenager characters are reminiscent of novels by Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti like *El astillero* (1961) and *Juntacadáveres* (1964). In the two decades since the manifesto, the Crack writers published more than one hundred books, and this ample corpus embodies numerous practical examples of the formal renewal they postulated in theory in 1996. The initial stock of common novelistic elements morphed into a profusion of diverse aesthetic forms, a phenomenon that makes it difficult to distill an all-encompassing definition of generational language. After that inaugural moment of personal and aesthetic confluence, the Crack novelists may have experienced the process of aesthetic dispersion that Gambarte noted in the development of any literary generation. According to the Spanish critic, this occurs because "the common thematic and tonal characteristics are always part of matching impulses, then the particular evolutionary line of each writer is imposed on that generational language" (202) and, sometimes, "the good poets [or novelists] are able to anticipate with their style the expected development of a new generational language" (202).

Another defining element of any literary generation is what Ortega y Gasset defined as the concept of the "historical crisis" (59), or the traumatic collective situation that prompts young writers to seek ideological mechanisms for overcoming the crisis. For the Generation of '98 it was identified with the loss of Spain's overseas possessions, for the Generation of '27 the generational trauma was the Spanish Civil War, and for the Beat Generation, it was the war in Vietnam. In Mexico, the first theoretical approaches rejected the existence of a unifying historical trauma for the Post-Tlatelolco Generation. This absence of a unifying trauma or a cohesive ideology was the reason they were dubbed the *Generación fría* and *Generación sin contienda*. As noted above, Chávez Castañeda coined the former term to reference the absence of a unifying event—"no 68's here that obsess us or bring us together" (15)—along with the willingness to write books based not on passionate life experiences, but on previous readings. According to the novelist, "the problem is the multiple meaning of the word *cold*: it implies a serene,



dispassionate, indifferent feeling, but it is also the temperature of dead bodies. As if instead of calling us the *Cold Generation*, we would be called the *Dead Generation*" (16). The poet Javier Sicilia also defined the Mexican writers born in the 1960s as the *Generación sin contienda* due to the absence of an identifiable ideological struggle, in opposition to the immediately preceding generation:

[This generation is comprised by] those who are not yet thirty years old and grew up without the memories of 1968, with battles whose causes grew ever more obscure, with the spectacle of the depletion of non-renewable resources and global pollution, the ozone hole, the proliferation of famine, the balance of terror, the growth of relativism, the loss of ethical standards, the fall of totalitarian regimes, voracious industrialism, and post-modernity. (qtd. in Castro 53)

In the *Crack Manifesto*, Padilla implicitly borrowed this idea—he spoke about the "Sicilian concept" (37)—while confessing explicitly that "the absence of a common fight, whether we like it or not, is one of the few elements that unites us" (37). On a similar note, many of the writers anthologized by Sandra Lorenzano in *Lo escrito mañana: Narradores mexicanos nacidos en los 60* (2012) also pointed to the absence of a suffocating historical burden, as opposed to their parents' generation.<sup>3</sup> However, the passing of the years and the concomitant historical distance have rendered possible the correction, qualification, and nuancing of this view—even by those who had originally theorized it. In reality, Mexican writers born in the 1960s, Crack novelists included, had also suffered generational traumas along with the rest of the country that determined their personal and intellectual formation. One of these experiences was the earthquake in September 1985, accompanied by the physical destruction of Mexico City and the institutional crisis that it provoked along with, as Carlos Monsiváis pointed out in his essay *Entrada Libre* (1987), the subsequent spontaneous awakening of civil society. There was also the demise of the system during the 1988 elections, which awarded a dubious electoral victory to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), or the profound social, political, and economic crisis during 1994, linked by at least two critics with the emergence of the Crack phenomenon (Anderson 10; Alvarado, "El Crack" 215). Over time, the Crack writers significantly changed their discourse relating to this generational trauma. In "El *Crack* a través del espejo,"

an essay published in *Crack: Instrucciones de uso* (2004), Padilla linked the group's ideas with other generational projects by writers born in the 1960s, both inside and outside the Hispanic world. Examples of the former are *McOndo*, or the Colombian *Generación mutante*; among the latter are the British group All Hail the Puritans, the Young Cannibals in Italy, and Generation X, a term coined by the Canadian writer Douglas Coupland. In all of them Padilla identified a triple path that began with the writer's apparent apathy towards the changes that were happening in the world, since they were doomed to "inaction, media frivolity, cultural complacency, extreme individualism, and ideological indifference" (163). The cycle continued with a second stage where they expressed their critical concerns in fiction, whose turning point for Mexican writers was "the cybernetic electoral fraud of 1988" (165). The cycle ended with a third stage of maturity, ideological depth, and reflection, and an increased access to public opinion. In "Que veinte años no es nada," his fragment in the *Postmanifiesto del Crack* (1996–2016), Volpi linked this generational trauma to the events of 1994, including the emergence of Zapatismo, the so-called Tequila Effect, and the political assassinations of the PRI leaders Luis Donaldo Colosio and José Francisco Ruiz Massieu:

It is the winter of 1994 and the PRI has once again won the elections. It's the end of a year full of astonishment and catastrophe: the Zapatista uprising and the assassination of the presidential candidate. If the 5 [Crack novelists] tremble, it has nothing to do with the cold December air, rather it is due to the political and economic debacle of a country alienated by the crisis. (355)

It would be more controversial to posit a specific generational leadership in the *Crack* group, no matter how often the name of Jorge Volpi has come up in that connection. Ramón Chao bestowed a title laden with meaning on his 2001 article in the French newspaper *Le Monde*: "Jorge Volpi, chef du groupe de *Crack*" ("Jorge Volpi, the boss of the *Crack* group"). In *La generación de los enterradores* Chávez Castañeda, and Santajuliana named Volpi the "spokesmen for the group inside and outside of the Mexican Narrative Continent" (128). More irreverently, in 2004 Domínguez Michael considered him "the head of school, a man that you would admire, envy, and hate in a predictable manner for having achieved the dreams of many" (48). However, Alvarado Ruiz notes

that “many wanted to see Jorge Volpi as the leader of the group, but this statement does not exist among the other members of the group” (“El Crack” 212). In an interview Volpi himself openly refused this title, saying: “I think the media has created an imaginary idea of my role in recent Mexican literature by younger authors; however, that is imagination and not reality,” and “I do not believe I have that type of leadership” (Carrera and Keizman 260–261).

Although the Crack appears to satisfy a priori the theoretical criteria that define a literary generation, this mechanistic approach employed here also reveals numerous critical obstacles. First, it is important to clarify the methodological difference between the Crack group, a small group of five (or seven) authors born between 1961 and 1968, and a significantly broader group made up of all the writers born in Mexico in the 1960s, to whom the Crack members also belong. This generation was widely discussed in Mexico during the 1990s in essays, newspaper articles, and anthologies, and it received the names *Generación fría*, *Generación sin contienda*, *Generación de los enterradores*, *Generación de la caída*, *Generación de los talleres*, *Generación de la modernidad fallida* (Warketin qtd. in Lorenzano 109), or simply, *Generación de los sesenta(s)*.<sup>4</sup> Already in 1990 Jorge Volpi spoke about the *Generación de los sesenta* as “a political label to classify the work of a group of individuals” (González Suárez 12), and a term making reference to “the youngest generation of Mexican literature, comprised of those born in the sixties, that will inevitably, build the new structures of thought in Mexico” (12). Two years later the same writer nevertheless noted that “one cannot speak of a generation of writers born in the sixties, but instead one must speak of a certain number of individuals faced with common challenges, but with the particularities of each place and each culture” (López 3). As stated above, Chávez Castañeda’s essay “La *generación fría*” was a pioneering attempt in 1992 to define an aesthetic identity applicable to Mexican writers born in the 1960s. The novelist articulated the impossibility of a unifying proposal that could encompass the work of his contemporaries, who were condemned to the individualism of their own literary work, who were unable to share their *ars poetica* with other writers, and who were victims of the surrounding chaos that, according to the author, explained the “many forms of narrative approaches” (14). In 1995 José Homero edited the first collection of stories by writers born in the 1960s, *La X en la frente* (*The X in the Forehead*), which appeared in Xalapa, Veracruz. As we know, in 1996 the

*Crack Manifesto* limited its purview to “authors born in the sixties” (36) without further explanation about the geographical scope or the list of the writers included.<sup>5</sup>

In 1997 Leonardo da Jandra and Roberto Max edited *Dispersión multitudinaria. Instantáneas de la narrativa mexicana en el fin de milenio* (Mass Dispersal. Pictures of Mexican Narrative of the End of the Millennium), an anthology with fifty-four short-stories by Mexican writers all of whom were at the time under the age of forty (born from 1957 onwards). In the prologue the editors baptized them with the names Generación X, Generación Postmoderna, and Generación de la caída, the latter due to the impossibility of achieving the same aesthetic maturity of their literary grandparents, the Boom writers, and the certainty that it was a generation that was “inevitably destined to decline” (8). In 1999 David Miklós published *Una ciudad mejor que ésta. Antología de nuevos narradores mexicanos* (A Better City than this One. Anthology of New Mexican Narrators), an anthology with short stories by thirteen Mexican writers born in the sixties that, according to the editor, “in ten years will be the stars of Mexican narrative” (12). In 2001, Jorge Volpi edited *Día de muertos: Antología del cuento mexicano*, a book that included twelve pieces of short fiction by writers born from 1960 onwards. In the preface, though, Volpi downplayed any generational intention by stating that “this particular burial offering does not attempt to represent all Mexican narrators born in the 1960s” (13). In 2004 Jordi Soler edited *Otro ladrillo en la pared: Cuentos de jóvenes para jóvenes*, with twelve short stories by “an urban generation born in the sixties” (as quoted on the back cover) without any further explanation regarding the selection criteria. Mexican writers born in the 1960s also participated in two essay compilations: *La novela según los novelistas* (2007) and *Lo escrito mañana: Narradores mexicanos nacidos en los 60* (2012), edited by Cristina Rivera Garza and Sandra Lorenzano, respectively. Jenaro Talens confirmed many years ago that an anthology is a recurrent instrument for generational classification (qtd. in Gambarte 228), and all these anthologies prove at this point that the concept of the literary generation was no longer being used in Mexico as a historical or literary method, but rather as a means to classify writers and works from an ideological or editorial perspective. Sara Poot Herrera agrees with this notion, as suggested in her article “El que se mueva no sale en la antología (varia cuentística mexicana: 1996–2000),” where she stated that “although the word *generation* appears in some of the anthologies, its use relates only to the

age of the authors” (37). With the exception of the minimalist *La X en la frente*, the Crack writers contributed to all of these anthologies. This fact appears to validate an initial conclusion: the name Crack refers to a group within a generation of Mexican writers born in the 1960s, and therefore, contrary to what appears in certain other venues, it does not constitute a literary generation per se.

The *Generación de los sesenta* in Mexico also generated critical literature. The reference books may be *La generación de los enterradores: Expedición a la narrativa mexicana del tercer milenio* (2000) and *La generación de los enterradores II* (2003), both co-authored by Chávez Castañeda and Santajuliana. These essays included lists with more than 130 writers born in this decade and almost 300 books published by them, with the intention of using sociological instruments to approach the work of those novelists that “promise to change the face of the narrative in Mexico during the new millennium” (13). Once again, Chávez Castañeda and Santajuliana insisted on the radical denial of the previous generation, baptizing the Mexican writers born in the 1960s as the *enterradores* or *gravediggers* because they were destined to bury the work of their *parents* and occupy their *grandparents’* space (Carlos Fuentes, Sergio Pitol, Salvador Elizondo, Vicente Leñero, Fernando del Paso), and because the “offensive mediocrity of the parents drove the children to an unprecedented and temporary alliance with their grandparents’ generation” (11). With this aim the young writers legitimated themselves through specific strategies such as a cosmopolitan tone, or the literary quality of their works, and non-specific ones such as translations, access to the diplomatic service, and the positive reception of the Spanish publishing world. After reading the two volumes of *La generación de los enterradores* it is more or less evident that, from a methodological perspective, the use of the phrase Crack Generation as a synonym for all Mexican writers born in the 1960s would exclude a large group of authors who did not participate directly in the literary camaraderie that defines the Crack. Some of these Mexican writers born in the 1960s shared a similar approach to the narrative genre, including Mario Bellatin (b. 1960), Rosa Beltrán (b. 1960), David Toscana (b. 1961), Mario González Suárez (b. 1964), Cristina Rivera Garza (b. 1964), Pablo Soler Frost (b. 1965), Xavier Velasco (b. 1964), and Alvaro Enrique (b. 1969). These writers lived within the same era, shared many generational experiences with the Crack members, and they also wrote novels also destined to renew the panorama of Mexican literature in

the 1990s, some of indisputable literary value, and some of them not far away from the Crack theoretical approaches, such as *Estación Tula* (1995) by Toscana, *La corte de los ilusos* (1995) by Beltrán, *La muerte de un instalador* (1996) by Enrigue, *De la infancia* (1998) by González Suárez, *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) by Rivera Garza, *Salón de belleza* (1999) by Bellatin, and *Diablo guardián* (2003) by Velasco.

Octavio Paz declared that “every generation fights a two-front war, at home and abroad” (119) and, under this premise, it is possible to understand the horizontal positioning of these writers, sometimes against other members of the same generation. Born in 1960, Guillermo Fadanelli represents, for example, an aesthetic position opposed to that of the Crack, the so-called *realismo sucio* (dirty realism) and *literatura basura* (junk literature) as presented in the journals *Moho* and *La pus moderna*. He questioned sarcastically the Crack ideas (14). Also under the sign of this war among the members of the same generation come the negative opinions aired by Domínguez Michael about the Crack phenomenon (1996, 2004, 2016), and by other Mexican writers such as Javier García-Galiano (qtd. in Castro 56). In a 1996 article in *Proceso*, “La novísima narrativa mexicana, entre la *generación del Crack* y los individualistas sin generación” (“The New Mexican Narrative between the *Crack Generation* and the Individualists without a Generation”), José Alberto Castro masterfully depicted the dichotomy between Crack writers and non-Crack writers within the *Generación de los sesenta*, alluding to the space that the Crack occupies within the generation of the 1960s as a synecdoche. In his essay *La gran novela latinoamericana*, Carlos Fuentes made the mistake of confusing the Crack group with the whole generation by including Cristina Rivera Garza and Xavier Velasco, two Mexican writers born in the 1960s that never participated in the literary friendship, at least not directly (375–376).<sup>6</sup> If we are truly obliged to employ a generational methodology, the Crack would be a Mexican subset of writers, both from Mexico and from the rest of Latin America, born in the 1960s. Crack writers, who have always avoided the *Generación del Crack* label, concur with this assessment. For Ignacio Padilla, for example, the Crack is “what I myself venture to consider a literary group with the good fortune to be embedded in this thriving generation of Latin American narrators” (20), and “rather than being troubled about it, I can now look on with pleasure when someone makes the not infrequent mistake of considering the *Crack* as a whole generation of Latin American writers born in the sixties” (20). According to

Jorge Volpi, the Crack “is one more group among the writers born in the sixties and early seventies. From an academic perspective these writers would, more or less, constitute a generation” (Regalado).

This approach acquired a new dimension after 1999, when the writers born in the 1960s in different parts of Latin America started to achieve international recognition and (maybe) become a generation at a transnational level. In this new critical, literary, and publishing landscape, the Crack again figures as a synecdoche, or subgroup, within an entire generation. The signal event came when Volpi’s novel, *En busca de Klingsor* (1999), became the first book by a Crack writer to be published outside Mexico, even going on to win Spain’s Seix Barral’s Biblioteca Breve prize, the same honor that had legitimized Boom writers in the 1960s. At this point, *En busca de Klingsor* may well have become “the generational work that epitomizes the current Latin American narrative scene” (1999, XXV), as advocated by Eduardo Bécerra in the preface to his *generational* anthology *Líneas aéreas*. As it happened, in Mexico, during the previous decade, anthologies were again used as an instrument to legitimize generational discourse, but now in tandem with another sanctioning instrument, congresses of writers organized by Spanish publishing houses. This new Latin American *generation* was legitimized by two foundational events<sup>7</sup>: first, the *I Congreso de Nuevos Narradores Hispánicos*, also called *Congreso de Madrid*, jointly organized by the publisher Lengua de Trapo and Casa de América, held in the Spanish capital in 1999 with thirty Latin American writers in attendance. This resulted in *Líneas aéreas*, an anthology compiled by Eduardo Bécerra, with seventy short stories by Latin American narrators born in the sixties, including most of the *Crack* writers.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the *Congreso de Sevilla*, organized in 2003 by Seix Barral, where eleven Latin American novelists born in the 1960s (including Ignacio Padilla and Jorge Volpi) were symbolically accompanied by one of their literary *parents* (Roberto Bolaño) and a *grandfather* of the Boom era (Guillermo Cabrera Infante). The result was the *generational* anthology *Palabra de América* (2004).<sup>9</sup> It would take further study to understand the emergence of this new generation of Latin American writers in the twenty-first century, as well as the essential role therein played by the Crack movement. This evolution in the generational discourse shows the validity of Gambarte’s view that a literary generation should not be a closed or canonical or exclusive concept, but an entity open to an evolutionary dynamic and in constantly



flux, subordinated to all the tensions, oppositions, and movements that define every literary field.

However, all of this does not exempt the generational method from the artificiality latent in any chronological classification. Why limit the category or the label to writers born between 1960 and 1969 or, in the case of the seven Crack writers, between 1961 and 1968? In the case of the Crack phenomenon and the *Generación de los sesenta*, the artificiality of this division is demonstrated by the emergence of younger writers, born in the 1970s but with very similar approaches to literature, aesthetic perspectives, and similar behaviors in the literary field, both in Mexico (Yuri Herrera, Guadalupe Nettel, Julián Herbert, or Emiliano Monge) and in other Latin American countries (Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Alejandro Zambra, or Andrés Neuman). Other generational strategies have had an identical problem with chronological boundaries. In the preface to *McOndo*, for example, Fuguet and Gómez confirmed that their initial project involved writers born “from 1959 (which coincides with the ongoing Cuban revolution), to 1962 (where in Chile and in other countries, television arrived)” (14). *McOndo* ended up being an anthology made up of eighteen Hispanic writers born between 1959 and 1971, which obviously, as can be read in the prologue, includes those “born some time later” (14). In 1996 Gambarte had already denounced this artificiality by stating that

The chronology leads to a grotesque approach: some writers, had they been two years older or younger, they no longer would be considered part of a generational group. Or they would be out simply because of the artificiality of the beginning of the decade, or a random historical commemoration. (201)

Perhaps the critical challenge does not lie then on the configuration of the Crack as a literary generation, or in the fact that its generational discourse has been incorporated into a larger Latin American context since 1999. Rather the problem may be the very use of the literary generation as a method. Two key studies have directly addressed this question: Gambarte dedicated an entire book, *El concepto de generación literaria*, to rebut the idea of a literary generation as a “sheer tautology” (37) and as an “indefinable metric unit” (12). The Spanish critic proved that the periodization implied in generational discourse can be falsely homogeneous, mechanistic, reductionist, exclusive, and abstract, and it does not



often correspond with the creative works of the writers that it attempts to categorize. According to Gambarte, the generational method runs the risk of turning the concept into a straitjacket that controverts both the dynamic analysis of the literary work and the circumstances that facilitate its production. This critic sees its methodological recurrence as nothing more than “seeking refuge or abandoning the effort to weather alone the awareness of a crisis” (27), or, at best, “a subterranean attempt to nullify the nagging presence of temporality of the individual, which is increased by the imminence of historical temporality, a way out of the anguish” (27). In Mexican studies Ignacio Sánchez Prado followed Gambarte’s ideas in a key article he dedicated to the so-called *Generación de la crisis*, *No Generación*, *Generación Inexistente* and *Generación Atari*, which comprised Mexican writers born in the 1970s, hence one decade younger than the Crack novelists. In “La generación como ideología cultural: el FONCA y la institucionalización de la narrativa joven en México” (“The Generation Concept as a Cultural Ideology: FONCA and the Institutionalization of Young Narrative in Mexico”), Sánchez Prado called into question Ortega y Gasset’s ideas, assuming that the generational methodology “has been particularly seductive as an approach to the literature of young writers, since it allows for the explanation of formative movements and literary groups in a system that combines taxonomy and historicity” (10). Analyzing the positioning strategies of the group of Mexican writers born in the 1970s, Sánchez Prado unmasked Ortega’s mechanistic studies as insufficient. He went on to show that the concept was obsolete in the twenty-first century, reduced to an anachronistic instrument young writers use in their quest for self-definition, a self-conscious strategy that ended up impacting both narrative production and its critical reception. In recent decades, as Sánchez Prado points out, the concept was reduced to “a set of positions within the field of cultural production” (12), giving way to the fact that “literary and cultural studies have opted for the generational method tending to reproduce what the writers proposed rather than questioning it” (11).

The search for new critical apparatuses, as Sánchez Prado decisively explains, could begin by revisiting the *Theory of the Literary Field* by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and its various applications to the production, diffusion, and legitimization of Mexican and Latin American narrative during the last quarter century. Eduardo Becerra (165–181) was also one of the first to interpret changes in Latin American narrative of the 1990s from this perspective, approaching both the Mexican

Crack and the Chilean *McOndo* as positioning strategies within the literary field whose purpose was to question, refute, and dismantle the *dominant* order in the Latin American letters. It may be more appropriate, then, to study the Crack phenomenon from the literary theories of Pierre Bourdieu, developed in his book *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1992). According to the French sociologist, literary epochs are structured in accordance with fields, struggles, and debates between those that occupy privileged places in the present and those that threaten to occupy the same place in the future. The latter adopt a systematic position that would enable them to reconfigure the rules of the literary field and occupy the favored space filled by their predecessors. This replacement would occur thanks to the aging process typical of socioeconomic movements. Continuing with the terminology, the young writers would gradually change from the being dominated to being the dominators. As stated in *The Rules of Art*:

Thus arises the conflict between the dominators—content with continuity, identity, reproduction—and the dominated—the newcomers arriving on the scene, intent on winning through discontinuity, rupture, difference, rebellion. Launching a new era of necessity means establishing a new position beyond existing possibilities, in advance of these positions, in the avant-garde. (157)

If we apply Bourdieu's ideas, Mexican and Latin American narrative of the 1990s would be a time of struggle between the newcomers and those that possessed a hegemonic space in the *field*, writers born in the 1940s and 1950s, attached to the ways of writing that included magical realism, rural atmospheres, and political commitment, and who were accused of enjoying the benefits of the market, resisting change, and wanting to perpetuate the aesthetics of yesteryear. In the multiple dynamics of the field, the Crack would be part of a peripheral group of writers born in the 1960s searching for signs of recognition. They stand in opposition to the aesthetic principles of the previous group, which they accuse of enjoying the benefits of the market and resisting change in their desire to perpetuate a stale and antiquated aesthetic. The *Crack Manifesto* and its generational claim would then be an instrument of self-representation in the literary field, a strategy against the central places of production, canonization, and dissemination of Mexican and Latin American narrative—in the words of Bourdieu, “a manifestation of difference” (314),

and a “strategy of distinction” (314) that serves to distance them from those that appropriated the symbolic capital in the 1990s. Alluded to in this chapter, the tension between the Crack and previous generations could have allowed the concentration of typical dichotomies of the system according to Bourdieu: the old versus the new, intellectual authors versus bestselling ones, debanalizing versus banalizing, and, subordinated to the concept of the literary field, the old generation against the new. Significantly, the genesis of the literary field does not contradict the generational discourse, but rather accepts it, both implicitly and explicitly, as one of the positioning strategies within the field. In this system of oppositions, membership in a group like the Crack implies the quest for a dominant position against the *consecrated avant-garde*, which gradually accumulated within the symbolic capital, as Bourdieu literally put it, “through the action of successive generations” (327). Groups or generations are, for the French thinker, instruments of accumulation and concentration of symbolic capital, institutionalization processes involving the adoption of a name, the formulation of a manifesto, and the establishment of rites of behavior within the environment: steps that the Crack group has gone through, almost without exception, since some of its members met in the mid-1980s.

## CONCLUSIONS

As has been discussed throughout this chapter, it is necessary to question the phrase *Generación del Crack* (*Crack Generation*). Although in theory the Mexican group satisfies several of the criteria of a literary generation, the method proves to be artificial, anachronistic, and misleading. All too often, as stated by Gambarte, “it is more important to distribute labels rather than to analyze them critically” (248). After considering the evidence, the Crack is not a literary generation.

If, given the extensive literature on the subject, it were desirable to study the phenomenon from a generational approach, the *Crack* would be considered a group of writers born between 1961 and 1968 that functions as a synecdoche. It forms part of a broader generation of Mexican writers born in the 1960s, whose ideas spread through Spain and Latin America in the early twenty-first century.

The *Crack* group accepted this generational strategy on both the horizontal/synchronic axis (the opposition to or agreement with other Mexican and Latin American writers born in the 1960s) and the

vertical/diachronic axis (the denial of the previous generation, and the tribute to earlier groups in the history of literature, such as the Boom, *Contemporáneos*, and the *Generación de Medio Siglo*), understood as a positioning strategy within the literary field.

Following Becerra's and Sánchez Prado's essays on the topic, Pierre Bourdieu's *Theory of the Literary Field* has proved itself as a tool for analyzing changes in Mexican and Latin American fiction of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. It also offers a valid explanation of factors involved in the history of the Crack, including its conformation as a group, the opinion of critics, and, as discussed here, the generational discourse understood as a strategy of distinction. The Crack is a phenomenon that cannot be separated from other generational projects undertaken in Mexico during the 1990s (*Generación fría*, *Generación sin contienda*, *Generación de los enterradores*, and *Generación de la caída*, among others) and in other Latin American countries (the Colombian *Generación mutante*, *Nueva Narrativa Argentina*, *Nueva Narrativa Chilena*, the Cuban *Novísimos*, and the *Geração 90* in Brazil). Despite differences, they all respond to the need to make "marks of distinction" (157) that characterize peripheral groups or, as stated by Bourdieu, *newcomers* to the dynamics of the *literary field*.

Two decades after the reading of the *Crack Manifesto*, it is certain that the Crack phenomenon is in the middle of a *consecration cycle* on the way to becoming what Bourdieu defines as "a group capable of leaving its mark by establishing an advanced position" (158). And, when the Crack is recognized as *consecrated avant-garde* group, younger writers in Mexico and Latin America will have to start the quest for distinction against it, and against all these generational strategies projected by writers born in the 1960s at the turn of the century.

## NOTES

1. Three traditional definitions of the literary generation. According to José Ortega and Gasset, "the concept of generation does not primarily imply more than these two things: to be of the same age and to have some vital contact ... But this in turns means (1) that if every generation has a dimension in historic time, that is to say in the melody of the human generations, it comes directly after another of its kind, as the note of a song sounds in relation to the way the previous note sounded; (2) that it also has a dimension in space" (43). Julius Petersen, heir to Ortega: "literary scholarship

is the discipline within intellectual history that addresses the issues concerning tensions among 'age classes'. Literary science deals with generational succession. It hardly has any other option than offering an overview though chronological 'communities'" (137). Octavio Paz, in *Generaciones y semblanzas*: "the history of literature is the history of works and authors of those works. Among the authors and their pieces lies a third term, a bridge that connects authors to their social environments and literary pieces to their first readers: literary generations. A literary generation is a society within a society and, sometimes, against society. It is a biological fact, and it is also a social fact: the generation is a group of young men around the same age, born in the same socio-economic class and in the same country, they read the same books and they share the same passions, and ethical and moral interests. It is often divided into groups or factions with conflicting opinions, and it combines external with internal wars. However, the vital issues of its members are similar; what distinguishes one generation from another are not so much their ideas, but more so their sensitivity, their attitudes, preferences and dislikes, in one word: their *temperament*" (119). Significantly, Octavio Paz associates the literary generations with the interplay between rupture and continuity that motivates all literary traditions. This dynamic tension is also one of the *Crack*'s defining traits.

2. In the words of Ignacio Padilla "in just two generations, magical realism created a scenario abroad that led to a misunderstanding of Latin American literature abroad. This literature was full of clichés" (2000). In 1989 four Crack novelists wrote *Variaciones sobre un tema de Faulkner*, a collective novel whose main objective was to parody magical realism, rural motifs, and the local color that defined the literature of the previous generation. This novel could be an example of what Julius Petersen defined as "the young generation satirizing the old-fashioned themes of previous generations" (184).
3. According to Adriana Díaz Enciso, for example, her generation was born with "the conviction of being late for everything" (qtd. in Lorenzano 25). And, in the words of Ana García Bergua, "those of us who were born in the sixties, we could not fully participate in the enlightenment and the party scene that aroused in that era" (qtd. in Lorenzano 34).
4. Gambarte suggested that the end of the century is traditionally a good time for the reflection upon generational change, since "it is the period of the complete reexamination of existing values, a period of crisis, everything is questioned and existing ideas are systematically and thoroughly put into question" (143). Gambarte's opinion offers evidence for two factors in end-of-the-century Mexican literature: first, the numerous generational strategies, and secondly, the recurrence of apocalyptic themes in Crack novels. Actually, the *Crack* group was tentatively called *Los Milenaristas*,

and the *Crack Manifesto* had the tentative title “Hacia una renovación milenarista de la novela latinoamericana” (“Towards a Millenarist Renewal of the Latin American Novel”).

5. The critical challenge here is the Crack configuration as a group, and the writers that belong to the category. In *Crack: Instrucciones de uso* (2004) the Crack novelists included a list of eleven Spanish-speaking writers born in the 1960s, accepting them as “Crack members” (180) and “fellow travelers, whether they want it or not” (180). The list included Cristina Rivera Garza, Mario Bellatin, Rosa Beltrán, and Mario González Suárez (Mexico); Alberto Fuguet (Chile); Santiago Gamboa (Colombia); José Manuel Prieto (Cuba); Belén Gopegui (Spain); Rodrigo Fresán (Argentina), and Fernando Iwasaki (Peru).
6. Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas made the same mistake in 2000 when he included under the *Crack generation* label a group of Latin American writers who only shared as a common trait to have published in Spain during the 1990s. Some of the writers included in his list, such as Mexican Daniel Sada and Juan Villoro, Argentinian César Aira, and Guatemalan Rodrigo Rey Rosa, were members of previous generations.
7. There was a third meeting called *Bogotá 39* in 2007, organized in the Colombian capital with thirty-nine Latin American writers younger than thirty-nine years old. Guido Tamayo compiled later the anthology *B39* (2007). Writers born in the 1960s such as Jorge Volpi and Iván Thays were invited, but most of them were born in the 1970s.
8. Eduardo Bécerra denied the generational classification in *Líneas aéreas*: “the following pages do not attempt to define generational groups, aesthetic lines, ideological approaches, schools and literary styles within the current panorama of Latin American prose” (XIV). However, according to Jorge Volpi, “the meeting in 1999 was the starting point of the new Latin American literature, revealing the names of those writers who ten years later belonged to this literary generation” (153).
9. According to Adolfo García Ortega, editorial director of Seix Barral, “this new Latin American literary generation has a strong personality, and it already aroused a high interest. With its long history behind and its prestige, Seix Barral provides the space for these reflections” (from the back cover of *Palabra de América*). Jorge Volpi recalls: “we all spoke the same language, we all struggled for success—for a Latin American writer success can only be measured by that the *Boom* writers—, we all respected Bolaño, and we all ignored what it means to be a Latin American writer” (153). Aside from Padilla and Volpi, the attendees were Rodrigo Fresán and Gonzalo Garcés (Argentina), Jorge Franco, Santiago Gamboa, and Mario Mendoza (Colombia), Cristina Rivera Garza (Mexico), Fernando Iwasaki and Iván Thays (Peru), and Edmundo Paz Soldán (Bolivia).

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