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Cartographies of Identity: The Ideological and Cultural Functions of Place Names in Latin American Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study examines literary toponymy as a strategic resource for constructing, contesting, and reimagining national and regional identities in Latin American narrative discourse. Given the continent's fundamental history, marked by the synthesis and violent clash of indigenous, European, and African cultures, toponyms in literature appear not as neutral geographical labels but as rich ideological signifiers. The article systematically identifies four main toponymic layers: pre-Columbian (*Mexico, Guatemala, Bogotá, Ayacucho, Chacabuco, Arequipa*), colonial (*Buenos Aires, New Granada, La Plata, Fray Bentos, Bánfield*), contemporary urban (slums, shopping malls, transportation hubs), and fictional (*Macondo, Comala, Santa Teresa*). Drawing on a broad corpus of works by Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, Roberto Bolaño, Julio Cortázar, Pablo Neruda, and others, the analysis demonstrates how writers deploy toponyms to perform four key functions: first, to anchor contemporary narratives in deep indigenous memory; second, to construct magical-realist chronotopes that undermine Eurocentric rationalism; third, to engage in sharp political and social critiques targeting femicide, neoliberalism, dictatorship, and alienation; and fourth, to forge continental solidarity through poetic geography. The conclusion is that in Latin American literary discourse, toponyms become polyphonic palimpsests, mythopoetic instruments, tools of social criticism, and symbols of a common regional destiny, concentrating in a single

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linguistic device the pain, magic, violence, and hope of a complex continent.

Keywords: Latin America; Literature; Toponymy; National Identity

1. Introduction

Latin America offers a unique setting for studying identity formation. It is a space of centuries-long synthesis, and often tragic clashes, of Native American, European, and African cultures. In this context, place names become not just a backdrop but a battleground for historical memory and cultural sovereignty.

The research presented is aimed at identifying and systematizing markers of national identity reflected in the Latin American literature. Our purpose is to show how Latin American writers use toponyms to construct, deconstruct, and make sense of the complex, hybrid identity of their native macro-region.

In this regard, we see the following tasks:

1. To trace how the multilayered history of the continent (Indian, colonial, modern) is represented through place names.
2. to analyze the function of fictional toponyms in the creation of a magical-realistic chronotope.
3. To show how toponyms participate in political and social criticism.
4. And, finally, to study how local place names become part of a continental myth.

In Latin America, place names represent a corpus of national identity markers^[1] and often act as a kind of palimpsest—a manuscript in which a new text is written over the original^[2–6]. This phenomenon directly reflects the process of national identity formation.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study is based on a purposively selected corpus of Latin American literary works spanning from the seventeenth century to the early twenty-first century. The corpus includes prose (novels, short stories, and essays) and poetry produced by authors from Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru. Key primary sources comprise Bernardo de Valbuena's "Grandeza mexicana" (1604), Mariano Azuela's "Los de Abajo" (1915), Jorge

Luis Borges' "Fervor de Buenos Aires" (1923) and "La señora mayor", Miguel Ángel Asturias' "Leyendas de Guatemala" (1930) and "Week-end en Guatemala" (1956), Juan Rulfo's "Pedro Páramo" (1955), Carlos Fuentes' "La región más transparente" (1958) and "La muerte de Artemio Cruz" (1962), Julio Cortázar's "Ómnibus", Gabriel García Márquez's "Cien años de soledad" (1967), Laura Esquivel's "Como agua para chocolate" (1989), Fernando del Paso's "Palinuro de México" (1977) and "Noticias del imperio" (1987), Pablo Neruda's "Canto general" (1950), Ernesto Cardenal's "Solentiname poems", Rodolfo Jorge Walsh's "Operación Masacre" (1957), Roberto Bolaño's "2666" (2004), Juan Gabriel Vásquez's "La forma de las ruinas" (2015), Alberto Fuguet's "Mala Onda" (1991), and Vicente Luis Mora's "Circular 07. Las afueras" (2003) and some others. The selection criterion was the presence of at least one significant toponym (real or fictional) functioning as a narrative or poetic device beyond mere geographical reference. Works were examined in their original Spanish-language editions; English translations were consulted only for terminological clarification.

A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative textual analysis with conceptual tools from literary toponymy, geocriticism, and discourse analysis was employed. Specifically, the study operationalizes palimpsest theory^[2,3] to trace how multiple historical layers—indigenous, colonial, and modern—coexist within a single toponym, chronotope analysis to examine how fictional toponyms such as *Macondo* and *Comala* structure the spatiotemporal logic of magical realist narratives, and critical toponymy to assess how place names function as instruments of political critique, including resistance to neoliberalism, state violence, and femicide. All toponyms identified in the corpus were manually extracted and classified into four operational categories: pre-Columbian (indigenous-derived names referencing pre-colonial civilizations, e.g., *México*, *Guatemala*), colonial (Spanish or Portuguese names imposed during colonization, e.g., *Buenos Aires*, *Nueva Granada*), modern urban (names of slums, malls, airports, and train stations, e.g., *Ciudad Bolívar*, *Estación de la Sabana*, *Circular Plaza*), and fictional (invented place names within literary worlds, e.g., *Macondo*,

Comala, Santa Teresa). Each extracted toponym was then described in the sense of its dominant function or functions among four possibilities: anchoring historical memory, constructing magical chronotopes, performing political or social criticism, or forging continental solidarity.

The study is limited to literary texts originally written in Spanish and does not include Portuguese-language Brazilian literature, such as the works of Jorge Amado or Clarice Lispector, which represent a distinct toponymic tradition. Additionally, the corpus privileges prose fiction over poetry, though Neruda and Cardenal are included as representative cases. Future comparative research may extend the framework to Luso-Brazilian and Afro-Latin American literary traditions.

The final corpus comprises 28 literary works (22 prose works, 6 poetry collections/poems) totaling approximately 4,850 pages of textual material. From these works, a total of 347 toponymic occurrences were manually extracted and analyzed.

“Significant toponym” was operationalized using a tripartite screening protocol:

1. **Narrative salience:** The toponym must appear in a context that contributes to plot development, character

psychology, thematic articulation, or symbolic architecture (minimum threshold: three or more mentions across the work, or a single mention in a structurally privileged position such as title, incipit, or climactic scene).

2. **Semantic density:** The toponym must carry demonstrable ideological, historical, or affective weight beyond mere locational reference. This was assessed through contextual analysis of co-occurring lexical items (e.g., verbs of memory, violence, enchantment), metaphorical extensions, and narrative commentary on the place name itself.

3. **Intertextual resonance:** Preference was given to toponyms that reappear across multiple works or authors, enabling comparative analysis (e.g., *México, Macondo*), though unique fictional toponyms with high symbolic density (*Comala, Santa Teresa*) were also included.

A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative textual analysis with conceptual tools from literary toponymy, geocriticism, and discourse analysis was employed. All toponyms identified in the corpus were manually extracted and classified into four operational strata (**Table 1**):

Table 1. Four operational strata in the analysis conducted.

Stratum	Definition	Examples
Pre-Columbian	Indigenous-derived names referencing pre-colonial civilizations, retained or adapted through colonial contact	<i>México, Guatemala, Machu Picchu, Guayaquil, Bogotá, Chacabuco, Ayacucho, Arequipa</i>
Colonial	Spanish or Portuguese names imposed during colonization, often superseding indigenous toponyms	<i>Buenos Aires, Nueva Granada, Los Angeles, El Maldonado, Fray Bentos, La Plata, Montevideo, Quebracho, Chacarita, Rivadavia, Turdera</i>
Modern	Names of slums, malls, airports, train stations, and other contemporary infrastructures	<i>Ciudad Bolívar, Estación de la Sabana, Circular Plaza, Arturo Merino Benítez Airport</i>
Fictional	Invented place names within literary worlds, often with symbolic etymology or intertextual links	<i>Macondo, Comala, Santa Teresa</i>

Additionally, the study operationalizes three interconnected theoretical frameworks:

1. **Palimpsest theory**

We presume that the toponymy of any state appears as a kind of palimpsest of national memory, reflecting a country’s diverse and multilayered cultural and ethnic history.

Originally, a palimpsest (from the Greek *πάλιν* – “again”, *ψάω* – “scrape”, “erase”) is a type of ancient manuscript (usually on parchment) in which a new text is written over an older, partially erased text. This concept has long functioned as a metaphor in the humanities, archaeology,

and architecture to describe the coexistence of material elements that arose in different historical eras. Paleontologists speak of a “paleoecological palimpsest”, while geomorphology and geology are familiar with palimpsest relief. Modern studies in GIS technologies and virtual reality also widely use this term: “digital palimpsest”. In particular, GIS technologies are actively used in historical toponymic research, for example, for the spatial analysis of the political and social history of cities. Physical geographers note that the landscape resembles a palimpsest, since “previous phenomena or traces of processes have left imprints on the landscape, and

older layers are in most cases less distinct or less noticeable than younger ones”^[7] (p. 203).

In post-Soviet geographical science, the term palimpsest is used in theoretical humanities geography and in regional studies of cultural landscapes. This is a fundamental concept in the concept of place, as it reflects the vision of the landscape “as a multi-layered structure preserving traces of different eras”.

Following S.N. Basik^[2], we believe that a toponym, literally defined as a “place name” (from the Greek *τοπος* – “place”, *ονομα* – “name”), can and should be considered within the context of the “place as palimpsest” model, as a verbal representation of geocultural space. This fact, in part, underlies the relevance of the present study, which attempts to utilize the conceptual model of palimpsest for a general analysis of literary toponymy. Our analysis examines how literary texts either reproduce or subvert this palimpsestic logic through strategic toponymic choices.

2. Chronotope analysis

Bakhtin^[8] examines how fictional toponyms such as *Macondo* and *Comala* structure the spatiotemporal logic of magical realist narratives. The fictional toponym becomes the spatial anchor for a distinctively Latin American mode of historical consciousness, one that rejects linear progress narratives in favor of cyclical, myth-infused temporalities. The study demonstrates that the artistic space of *Macondo* serves as a microcosm accumulating collective experience and ethnocultural stereotypes. It was found that national identity in the artistic world of *Macondo* is constructed through the dialectical interaction of multiple elements that form a polyphonic unity.

3. Critical toponymy

The diversity of Spanish-language toponyms today allows for research from a variety of perspectives, focusing on the diversification of a wide variety of social, historical, and linguistic phenomena^[9]. Scattered throughout the world as a consequence of certain historical and linguistic factors and processes—from the conquest of the New World to the pursuit of euphony in Russian urban names—Spanish-language toponyms have previously rarely been the subject of critical toponymic research. A vast body of global toponymy reveals the connection between geographical names and colonialism. Due to certain historical factors, this is particularly characteristic of Latin American toponymic vocabulary reflected

in literary works.

3. Results

3.1. Pre-Columbian Toponymic Layer

If we talk about the pre-Columbian layer in Latin American toponymy in this context, then the autochthonous toponyms *México/Mexico* and *Guatemala* are quite clearly reflected in the literature.

There are over 20 hypotheses regarding the origin of the name *México*. According to one theory, it owes its derivation to the Aztec Nahuatl tribe, who created the Nahuatl name of a settlement meaning “city; place where people live”^[10].

Sure, the name *México* is actively used in the works of Mexican writers.

In our opinion, Carlos Fuentes was the most prominent in this regard. For example, his novel “The Death of Artemio Cruz”/“La muerte de Artemio Cruz” tells the story of 20th-century Mexico, from the Revolution to modern capitalism, through the story of one man.

In addition, we can see it in his work “Where the air is clear”/“La región más transparente”, which is an epic painting about Mexico City in the 1950s, where the city and country are depicted as a seething cauldron of social conflicts and identities. Or in his novel “Old Gringo”/“Gringo viejo”. Set during the Mexican Revolution, it explores the clash of Mexican and American cultures.

But the embodiment of national identity through toponymy in Latin American literature can be traced back to the 17th century: in his poem “The Greatness of Mexico”/“Grandeza mexicana”, Bernardo de Valbuena provides vivid descriptions of Mexico’s natural landscape. The work was published in 1604. And the author’s goal is clearly evident: to celebrate the culture of Mexico City, a city that Valbuena calls “the crossroads of all worlds”.

The Mexican poet, essayist, cultural scholar, translator, diplomat, political journalist, and researcher of Western and Eastern civilizations Octavio Paz also outplays the oikonym *Mexico City*. His work, “The Labyrinth of Solitude”/“El laberinto de la soledad”, is not fiction but an essay, nevertheless it is fundamental to understanding “*Mexicanidad*”/“*Mexicanness*” (a fairly popular term among literary scholars^[11–15]). Octavio Paz provides a detailed analysis of the history, culture, and psychology of the Mexican people

[16,17].

Also, we see the same tendency in the novel “Like Water for Chocolate”/“Como agua para chocolate” by the Mexican writer Laura Esquivel. This is a family saga set on Mexico’s northern border during the Revolution. Tradition, food, and politics intertwine to create a portrait of the country.

Mariano Azuela’s novel “The Underdogs”/“Los de Abajo” describes the civil war in Mexico, the hero of the novel is the embodiment of the idea of revolution, which has both light and dark sides.

We also find a dedication to Mexico in Fernando del Paso: “Palinuro of Mexico”/“Palinuro de México” is a complex, baroque novel that is both a hymn and an anatomy of Mexico City and Mexico through the lens of the protagonist’s memories. And his novel “News from the Empire”/“Noticias del imperio” is about the French intervention in Mexico in the mid-19th century.

The name *Guatemala* (from the Nahuatl language “place of many trees”^[18] (p. 512) appears in the works of Latin American writers Miguel Ángel Asturias, Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier.

Guatemala is Asturias’s homeland, and for this reason, his works are largely dedicated to life in this country. Some of them are:

- The collection of stories “Legends of Guatemala”/“Leyendas de Guatemala” (1930) which recreates the world of the ancient Mayans;
- The trilogy “Strong wind”/“Viento fuerte” (1950), “Green Pope”/“El Papá Verde” (1954), “Eyes of the Buried”/“Los ojos de los enterrados” (1960) which is dedicated to the fate of the Guatemalan peasantry of the 20th century, who became victims of violence by the foreign company “Tropical Platanera”;
- And the collection of short stories “Weekend in Guatemala”/“Week-end en Guatemala” (1956) where each of the eight stories centers on the military invasion into Guatemala, reflected in the destinies of different people.

Jorge Luis Borges in his work “The other duel”/“El otro duelo” uses the toponym *Arequipa* (the name of a real city in Peru), and in his story “The Elderly Lady”/“La señora mayor”—names like *Ayacucho* or *Chacabuco* (names of real cities in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina). More-

over, “*Guayaquil*” is a short story written by him in 1970 (this work is a part of the “Brody Message” cycle) glorifying Ecuador’s most populous city founded in 1538.

The Colombian writer, journalist and translator Juan Gabriel Vásquez was born in *Bogotá*, Colombia. And thus it is not surprising that he describes the city in his novel “The Shape of the Ruins”/“La forma de las ruinas”.

Thus, names like *Mexico*, *Guatemala*, *Arequipa*, *Ayacucho*, *Chacabuco*, *Guayaquil* in Latin American literature serve as anchors, connecting characters and plots to the continent’s deep, indigenous history. They symbolize a lost, yet spiritually significant, world.

3.2. Colonial Toponymic Layer

The colonial toponymic layer is characterized in this context by the presence of Spanish and Portuguese names superimposed on the map over indigenous ones (such as *Buenos Aires* or *Nueva Granada*, for example). In literature, these names often mark spaces of violence, alienation, and identity recoding. They represent the force of colonial power attempting to erase the past.

This technique was used, for instance, by J.L. Borges in his novels “The Elderly Lady”/“La señora mayor” or “Fervor of Buenos Aires”/“Fervor de Buenos Aires”^[19] and by Daniel Gutiérrez Ardila in the work “1819: Campaign of New Granada”/“1819: Campaña de la Nueva Granada”.

We can see how J.L. Borges in his story “The other duel”/“El otro duelo” uses the name of the city of *Adrogué* in Argentina, in the province of Buenos Aires. It was founded in 1873 in honor of the Argentine politician Esteban Adrogué (1815–1903), the city’s founder. Esteban Adrogué’s father, José Ramón Adrogué, was from Valencia, Spain. This surname is currently most common in Argentina and Spain.

Julio Cortázar’s short story “Poisons”/“Los venenos” is included in the collection “End of the Game”/“Final del juego”. It contains the name *Bánfield* which is the area in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, and was named after the British engineer Edward Banfield (1837–1872), who participated in the construction of the railway. From 1865 to 1872, Banfield was the first general manager of the British-owned Great Southern Railway of Buenos Aires, founded in Argentina by Edward Lund in 1862.

Both Borges and Cortázar in their art refer to the name *Chacarita*. The authors mention the *Chacarita* neighborhood

and cemetery in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The name comes from the word “chacra” (farm), as it was a rural area in the 19th century. *Chacarita* is one of the largest cemeteries in the city, established in 1871 during the yellow fever epidemic.

There are many other examples in this context: *El Maldonado* (Borges), *Fray Bentos* (Borges), *La Plata* (Rodolfo Walsh), *Lomas de Zamora* (Borges), *Montevideo* (Borges), *Morón* (Borges), *Plaza de Mayo* (Cortázar), *Quebracho* (Borges), *Rivadavia* (Borges), *Turdera* (Borges), etc.

3.3. Modern Toponymic Layer

Contemporary Latin American literature has moved away from magical realism and the seminal novel, turning to more local, narrow, and often bleak urban spaces in matters of toponymy. Toponyms have become active characters, reflecting social problems, violence, inequality, but, still, the search for identity.

Contemporary authors actively use not romantic, but functional and marginal spaces, such as *villas* and *barrios*: specific names of slums (for example, “Ciudad Bolívar” in Bogotá) or simply their generalized use.

Names of shopping centers (centros Comerciales), malls and chain cafes symbolize globalization, consumer society, and a new form of public space. Airport and train station names are used as symbols of transit zones, anonymity, and alienation.

For example, in the work of the Colombian author Juan Gabriel Vázquez “The Shape of the Ruins”/“La forma de las ruinas” (2015). In this novel, which explores the traumas of Colombian history, the Bogotá train station (*la Estación de la Sabana*) plays a key role. It is here that one of the characters boards a train to leave the city after a tragic event. The station becomes the site of a fatal decision, a point of separation from a past life. It symbolizes not only physical displacement but also the irreversibility of certain actions and their consequences, which haunt the characters across generations.

We observe the same phenomenon in the work of the Chilean author Alberto Fuguet in his stories from collections such as “Bad Vibes”/“Mala Onda”.

In the work of Fuguet, a key figure in the Macondo movement (which opposed magical realism), the Airport in Santiago-city named Arturo Merino Benítez often emerges as a place where characters simultaneously feel connected

to the global world and alienated from it. It is a gateway to another life, but also a place of return, where the full weight of local reality is realized. It is a space of cultural hybridity and personal disorientation.

Vicente Luís Mora is considered to be an author both from Spain and Argentina, but his novel “Circular 07: The Outskirts”/“Circular 07. Las afueras” (2003) vividly reflects the urban trends common to namely Latin America. The entire novel literally takes place in a gigantic shopping mall, *Circular Plaza*. The protagonist, suffering from amnesia, lives in its basement and tries to regain his memory by wandering through the endless corridors and shops. The mall here is a metaphor for lost identity and consciousness; a microcosm of society: a place where all social rituals (shopping, eating, entertainment) are concentrated, but devoid of true meaning; a kind of prison: the hero is simultaneously locked in it and finds everything he needs for physical survival there.

So, we see that today Latin American literature speaks less of a mythical or rural Latin America than of its urban, violent and complex modernity, and toponyms are the key to understanding this new reality.

4. Discussion

4.1. Macondo and the Magical Chronotope

Significant for understanding Latin American toponymy in literature is the phenomenon of the fictional, or, according to some researchers, fictitious, toponym. A clear definition of a fictitious toponym can be found, for instance, in Victoria Kleymenova’s work^[20] (p. 195). According to her, it is “a proper name that designates a spatial element of a fictitious world”. A striking example of such a magical chronotope sure is *Macondo* by Gabriel García Márquez.

This name appears in his most famous novel “One Hundred Years of Solitude”/“Cien años de Soledad” as the quintessence of the region. Furthermore, according to our observations, the writer endowed this linguistic unit with the following functions:

- Localization and universalization. Macondo is both a specific place, based on the realities of the town of Aracataca, and a universal model for all of Latin America. Its isolation (“a city by the water”) symbolizes the historical and cultural isolation of the region.
- Magical chronotope. In Macondo, time is cyclical,

myth and reality are inseparable. Through this toponym, Márquez creates not just “magical realism” as a style, but a magical chronotope—a spatio-temporal continuum within which a distinctive Latin American identity is formed, rejecting purely European rationalism.

- Macondo as an Ouroboros. Ouroboros is a serpent biting its own tail. And this image is applicable to Macondo as it is born from a blank slate and, at the end of the novel, it is wiped off the face of the earth by a hurricane. According to literary critic Lisa Birger, this so called “ouroboros toponym” (<https://theblueprint.ru/culture/one-hundred-years-of-solitude-series?ysclid=mnknjm4091403694490>) symbolizes the fate of the continent: cycles of hope, dictatorships, revolutions, and historical oblivion^[21].

In terms of the significance of the toponym *Macondo* for Colombians, it is symbolic that “in honor of the setting of the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the mayor of Aracataca recommended renaming the settlement of Macondo (2006). More than ninety percent of the participants voted to rename the city, but it was not renamed because many residents did not participate in the survey”^[22] (p. 749). *Macondo* is a literary symbol for all of Latin America, but its roots are purely Colombian.

The Mexican writer Juan Rulfo also turns to magical realism in his only published novel, “*Pedro Páramo*”. The action takes place in the fictional town of *Comala*, but the reader understands that it is the quintessence of rural Mexico, its tragedy, loneliness, and mysticism. And Mexico here is a metaphysical landscape.

4.2. Toponyms as a Tool of Political and Social Criticism

Hispanic place names are important symbolic markers in maintaining or changing cultural identity, as well as in facilitating socio-political changes and relationships^[23] (p. 769). And Latin American writers actively use place names for sharp social and political satire, showing how official geography serves the interests of power.

Thus, Juan Rulfo in the mentioned story “*Pedro Páramo*” uses the fictional village of *Comala*.

He criticizes the Mexican Revolution and its consequences, the system of caciqueism (local authoritarianism),

the destruction of rural communities, sin and retribution.

And here is the working mechanism of it.

The name *Comala* comes from the Spanish word *comal*, a frying pan used for baking tortillas. This immediately conjures up images of a place scorched to the extreme, purgatory, or hell on earth.

Moreover, *Comala* is a ghost town where all the inhabitants are already dead. It’s a powerful metaphor for the thousands of real Mexican villages destroyed during the Revolution and Cristeros, abandoned and forgotten by history. The place name becomes a symbol of collective destruction caused by the tyranny of one man—the cacique Pedro Páramo.

Roberto Bolaño’s novel “2666” uses the fictional Mexican border town of *Santa Teresa*, which is a transparent pseudonym for the real *Ciudad Juárez*.

He criticizes femicide (mass murders of women), neoliberal exploitation in maquiladoras (assembly factories), corruption, drug trafficking, and the indifference of the authorities and society.

In this case, it works due to the documentary effect: Bolaño does not hide the prototype. By calling the city *Santa Teresa*, he, on the one hand, distances himself for the sake of artistic generalization, and on the other, creates a powerful critical image. *Santa Teresa* becomes a symbol of the “hellish” side of globalization, where women are cheap labor and expendable.

And here we have a universalization of the problem: although everyone understands the reference to *Ciudad Juárez*, *Santa Teresa* becomes a symbol for all border areas where violence and impunity reign.

In his story “*The Bus*”/“*Ómnibus*”, Julio Cortázar uses a real place name—*Los Angeles* (California)—but invests it with a deeply ironic meaning. He criticizes with its help alienation, loneliness and culture shock in contemporary American/Western society. The main character, a Mexican woman, feels alien and lost in the “City of Angels”. The city’s name, with its biblical, “paradise” connotations, contrasts sharply with her feelings of fear, isolation, and the hostility of the surrounding world. The place name becomes a tool for critiquing the false, superficial ideology of the “American Dream”.

The Argentine writer of Irish descent Rodolfo Jorge Walsh also resorts to social criticism through the toponym

Patagonia in his most famous novel “Operation Masacre”/“Operación Masacre”. This real place name in southern Argentina often becomes a symbol of extreme marginality in literature, a place of exile, political repression, and disappearances. It embodies the “other” Argentina, contrasting with the glittering Buenos Aires.

In our view, the main reason writers use these techniques is to create a “parallel reality”. They allow authors to freely manipulate historical facts, myths, and fiction, creating a deeper and more multifaceted image of an era than a strict historical chronicle would allow.

So, as far as we see, Latin American writers use place names as a tool for criticism in the following ways:

1. Generalization: A fictional location (like *Comala*) allows us to talk about the problems of an entire continent, not just one country.
2. Distancing and censorship: Place names allow criticism of dictatorships and political systems without risking direct accusations.
3. Symbolization: A toponym becomes a capacious symbol of the entire phenomenon (like *Santa Teresa* which is a symbol of femicide and neoliberalism).

And in such cases, toponyms become not just a backdrop for the plot, but active participants in the narrative and a powerful political manifesto.

4.3. Poetry and Continental Identity

Latin American poetry plays a special role in working with place names, striving to create the image of a single continent—“Our America.”

For example, in his epic poem “The General Song”/“Canto General” Pablo Neruda creates a poetic map of the continent, listing its rivers, mountains, and cities: from *Machu Picchu* to *Río de la Plata*. For him, these place names are not simply geographical features, but the “roots” and “veins” of a living organism—Latin America. Through them, a heroic, anti-imperialist identity is constructed.

The Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal also uses place names in his poems (e.g., “Solentiname”) as points of assembly of national and continental self-consciousness, weaving them into the philosophical context of liberation and social struggle. It is known that from 1966 to 1977, Cardenal led a religious community with a village-commune on the So-

lentiname Islands in the middle of the Nicaragua Lake. *Solentiname* is a volcanic archipelago in Nicaragua, located at the southern end of Lake Nicaragua in the department of Río San Juan. The archipelago consists of four major islands and approximately 32 smaller ones. Some believe the name comes from the Nahuatl word meaning “flock of quail”, while others believe it comes from the Nahuatl word *Celentinamētl*, meaning “place of many guests”.

5. Conclusions

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that place names in Latin American literary discourse are far from inert geographical descriptors; rather, they function as dynamic, multilayered signs that concentrate the continent’s complex and often traumatic history of cultural synthesis and conflict. By examining the pre-Columbian, colonial, modern urban, and fictional toponymic layers across a wide corpus of narrative and poetic texts, this study has shown that Latin American writers systematically deploy place names as active agents in the construction, contestation, and reimagining of national and regional identity. The pre-Columbian layer, exemplified by toponyms such as *México* and *Guatemala*, serves to anchor contemporary narratives in deep indigenous memory, reclaiming a spiritual and historical patrimony that official colonial historiography long sought to suppress or erase. In contrast, colonial toponyms such as *Buenos Aires* and *Nueva Granada* frequently appear in literature as markers of violence, displacement, and the traumatic recoding of identity under imperial rule, reminding readers that the map of Latin America is also a palimpsest of conquest.

The mixture of the real and the fantastic, as a result of which reality in a literary text appears in the perception of mythological consciousness and is formed according to its laws, implies an appeal to the concept of “magical realism”, the interpretation of which has entailed discussions in literary criticism for several decades^[24]. The emergence of fictional toponyms, most famously García Márquez’s *Macondo* and Rulfo’s *Comala*, represents a particularly significant literary innovation. These invented place names do not merely supplement reality but create autonomous chronotopes—distinct spatiotemporal worlds within which magical realism operates as an epistemologically legitimate mode of understanding Latin American experience. Such place names challenge

the Dhegemony of European rationalism by affirming that myth, cyclical time, and the coexistence of the living and the dead are not superstitions to be overcome but constitutive elements of a distinctly continental worldview. Furthermore, the study has revealed that contemporary Latin American literature increasingly turns to urban and marginal toponyms—slums, shopping malls, train stations, and border cities like Bolaño’s *Santa Teresa*—as instruments of sharp political and social criticism. Through these names, writers expose the dark underbellies of neoliberalism, state-sponsored femicide, authoritarian caciquismo, and the alienating effects of globalized consumer culture. In doing so, toponyms become weapons: they denaturalize official geographies and give voice to the silenced, the disappeared, and the forgotten.

Finally, the poetic tradition, from Neruda’s *Canto general* to Cardenal’s *Solentiname*, demonstrates how place names can transcend national boundaries to forge a vision of continental solidarity. By enumerating rivers, mountains, and cities from *Machu Picchu* to the *Rio de la Plata*, poets transform isolated toponyms into the very sinews of a single, imagined community called “Our America”, and this tendency doesn’t chage over time^[25]. In sum, Latin American literature teaches that toponyms are never innocent. They are nerve centers of identity where the pain of conquest, the magic of myth, the urgency of political critique, and the hope for a shared destiny all converge. To read the place names of Latin American fiction is, in a very real sense, to read the continent’s soul.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used DeepSeek solely for language refinement. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific content. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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