

**THE LABYRINTH  
OF MULTITUDE AND  
OTHER REALITY CHECKS  
ON BEING LATINO/X**

**Julio Marzán**

Critical Perspectives on Social Science



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For Clarissa, Janese, and Olivia



*Much the same thing happens with... people at a certain critical moment of their development. They ask themselves what are we and how can we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are?*

–Octavio Paz, “The Pachuco and Other Extremes”



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## INTRODUCTION: WHEN BE IS THE FINALE OF SEEM

This was a skit on *Saturday Night Live* in May 1982. That week Argentina had invaded the off-shore islands it calls Las Malvinas to reclaim them from the UK that knows them as The Falkland Islands. Solomon, played by Eddie Murphy, reads from a newspaper and asks his friend Pudge at the piano, played by Joe Piscopo, what he thought about those Puerto Ricans down in the Falklands. Pudge clarifies: "They ain't no Puerto Ricans, man, they Argentine." Solomon scowls skeptically, "I seen them in *Newsweek*: they Argen-Ricans." Comic irony in Solomon's being a black man for whom all Latinos looked alike.

Solomon was also parroting Joe White Guy in seeing no difference between one group of Spanish speakers in New York probably up to no good and another the length of a hemisphere away invading islands the home to some decent English-speaking folk. On the plus side, Pudge's clarification that the invaders were specifically Argentine demonstrated that by the eighties Latin America had advanced beyond the traditional Spanish lumping: in the seventies, after its political and literary emergence, Latin America came into sharper focus in the sight of a generation of educated Americans now more cognizant of discrete Americas nations as distinct political and socioeconomic theaters, no longer monolithic Spanish.

Still, Solomon, a man more of the people, couldn't be blamed for repeating the established popular homogenization of Spanish speakers. One day in the seventies the Spanish playwright José Ruibal, frequently invited to universities in both halves of the country, quipped "Oh I'm used to it. In the West I'm Mexican and in the East I'm Puerto Rican." One night in the seventies, a non-Hispanic couple and I were looking for a Spanish restaurant in the Wall Street district where our New York Rican woman friend, a flamenco dancer, was to perform. We asked a carrot-topped, presumably Irish, passerby if he knew of a Spanish restaurant in the immediate area. He shook his head and, with no nuance of irony, answered "No, I don't know of any Puerto Rican restaurants around here."

As late as the mid-1980's in English the two "Spanish" points of reference for most Americans were still Mexican Americans in the West and Puerto Ricans in

the East understood as encompassing the identity “U.S. Hispanics”<sup>1</sup> that in the sixties spoke for Spanish-speaking minorities in the Civil Rights Movement. Long before then, of course, Mexican Americans and both mainland and island Puerto Ricans were distanced *latinos*, fraternal descendants of the same Spanish-speaking heritage, sharing the same music, art, and literature of a then-monolithic Hispanic culture. Still, except for the more sophisticated or well-traveled members of those communities, other than an assumed parallel Hispanic minority experience and clichés about a shared Spanish heritage, neither knew much about the other.

In the seventies both communities rediscovered shared hemispheric roots in emergent Latin America that became the grand theater of Third World liberation, symbolized politically by the Cuban Revolution and intellectually by its joining the ranks of world-class culture with a body of literature whose explosion the French termed a literary Boom. We U.S. Hispanics basked in this new Latin America, which suddenly gave our challenge to Anglo-Saxon presumptions of cultural supremacy an international dimension and a patina of prestige. After all, as the voices of Latin America in Anglo America, U.S. Hispanics fought for the civil rights of all *hispanos*.

Unforeseen in the U.S. Hispanic civil rights gains was that making the United States a more just and equitable place for all *hispanos* also meant making this country an even more attractive refuge from Latin American poverty and political oppression as well as a vehicle for the upward mobility of its better off. For even though most Latin Americans were compelled to escape their own countries by a legitimate spectrum of grievances on which international attention mainly focused, the promise of post-civil rights minority equality and entitlements provided additional incentive for the northbound migration that began in the early eighties, the majority Mexican.

By the 90’s that immigration significantly changed the nation, with the composite of native Hispanics and immigrant Latin Americans projected to become the new century’s largest minority. This massive Latin American influx also revitalized the original seventies roots-consciousness, prompting my revolutionary U.S. Hispanic generation to identify with Latin America and making trendy our identifying as *latinos*, the Spanish shorthand for Latin American. In short time, its Anglicization, Latino, caught on in the national media to encompass both native and the recently-immigrated “Latinos.”

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<sup>1</sup> Cubans, having started to arrive earlier in that decade, were still neither perceived nor had yet announced themselves as Americans, and in subsequent years with the arrival of the *marielitos*, they didn’t identify with racial plight of any kind, especially voiced by the Civil Rights Movement, which conservative America resisted as a communist subversion.

I was all for this new epithet, understanding that it performed as did Spanish *latino*, one sweet fruit being the new Latin American writing's coattails extending to U.S. Hispanic writers because the two had dovetailed to become what publishers identified as a "Latino" market. After all, a publishing niche is better than none. But it was also in response to publishing's influence on school reading assignments, that I began to have questions about the semantics of English Latino. In schools, post-civil rights curricular correctives promoted assigning multicultural readings, and Latin American translations were read alongside or as surrogate U.S. Hispanic writings. Over time in the media and in conversations one heard this fusion of discrete demographics and not always aligned cultural experiences –hemispheric Latin America, immigrant *latino*, and U.S. Hispanic– referred to as simply Latino.

As a writer I had been writing from the perspective of what I understood to be a discretely Puerto Rican culture whose specificity as Spanish *latino* had not changed. Meanwhile, out in America, I was now a Latino, the epithet having evolved from trending to being the most politically correct. Everywhere homonymic "Latino," pronounced as the embedded Spanish *latino*, ricocheted in media and pop cultural venues not always signifying consistently and more reliably defined as a political epithet. Latino had become a voting bloc that could tilt presidential elections or secure funding for programs or campaign for laws or policies.

Native Latinos and immigrant *latinos* all seemed fine with being conflated until, as the latter settled in, that pan-Latin American romance wore off, and I more sharply appreciated that Latino was becoming the public harmonic cover over how communities actually think of each other and themselves, not always in unity. Latinos and *latinos* were on the same screen when on Univisión and rubbing shoulders on the dance floor to *musica latina*, but that shared pop culture camouflaged not always being on the same cultural page. Still, an appearance of unity afforded a political empowerment that superseded not always making linguistic or intellectual or cultural sense. Many who culturally preferred Hispanic saw the political advantage of publicly acceding to Latino even though it did not mean the same as the *latino* they used when interacting among other *latinos* in Spanish.

Presumed to translate *latino*, and even pronounced to highlight its Latinate sound, Latino is actually a transliteration that once coined immediately began diverging semantically from its Spanish source word. *Latino* is a heritage epithet that is only figuratively a cultural epithet but resonances of *latino* allowed Latino to suggest that it was a cultural epithet. This veneer of authenticity warranted its flourishing unexamined, assumed to be a politically-correct self-generated American identity that gave cultural backing to a united Democratic Latino vote and a consolidated Latino approval of policy. But presidential

elections began to tell a different story as Republicans could also win a sizeable Latino vote, disrupting the presumption of a monolithic Latino.

While *latino* invoked Spanish culture and language rooted in a threading Romanic heritage, culturally amorphous Latino had a distinctly American political and racial function, with a conflicted array of applications in American English that at times contradicted what *latino* signified in Spanish. In this divergence, Latino proceeded to sow cultural confusion, generating solidarity as satisfying a millennial generation's aspiration for a defined American identity also rooted in *latinidad*, an aspiration so anxious that in optimism it deluded itself into having found that identity, making, to borrow from Wallace Stevens, Be the finale of Seem.

In politics, Anglophone Latino is presumed to represent all Latinos/*latinos* when, except passively in socioeconomic and political self-interest, not all subgroups identify with Latino consistently or at all. Latino is the public mask of a labyrinth of multitude that consists of rhetorically homogenized subgroups, camouflaging what in reality is a competition between one better-heeled community against another less fortunate, between whiter and darker demographics, each subgroup its own discrete theater of internecine cultural, social, and political drama blurred by boilerplate American interpretations. On the other hand, Latino came into existence because its time had come, responding to the aspiration for a more unified, participatory, self-identifying, less foreign-sounding American identity.

Latino was also fast-tracked in English because it satisfied a post-sixties mainstream need for a handle on Hispanics as Americans. Latino was turned by American media into the popular forum from which all variants of Hispanic citizens addressed American society although in this endeavor Latino and American attempt to put behind them a history of working at cross purposes. American culture's traditional proclivity to racialize "Hispanic," especially in the southwest, extended that proclivity to marginalize Latino. Emerging post-sixties, multicultural America presumably corrected that traditional racialized demotion of cultural value, and born on a cresting wave of post-sixties multicultural optimism, Latino promised much as an American identity in what appeared to be a changing America.

That prospect encouraged younger immigrant *latinos* to replace their origin cultures with Latino, which residually reserved being also *latino*, signifying a preservation of *latino's* Romanic and Hispanic roots. But Latino itself couldn't actually provide a heritage because it had burned itself into mainstream America as a racial minority consciousness. Instead, in this evolving confusion, Latino threatened to racialize *latino*, prompting rejection from some member subgroups although any internecine distinction had no effect on Latino as a public entity. It meant nothing to Americans who advocated the building of

Trump's wall out of simple racism against a brown associated with all Latinos/*latinos*.

And that is where Latino stands today, at times invoking a *latino* culture, which strictly speaking doesn't exist (*latino* being the heritage of many cultures), while engaged in combating the racism among less-educated popular America, riled up by policymakers who use race as a fuse, ostensibly against Latino as America's browning but really because underlying Latino is a historical rival Hispanic culture whose "cultural assault" threatens to redefine traditional America.

In the post-sixties, racialized Latino as consciousness started out emulating the early African American model, oscillating between identifying as a culture and a race. But younger Latinos did not follow the African American arc in coming to see that, while race was a political unifier, it was not the foundation of a cultural identity. Tribes are racial; cultures are transracial. African American identity expanded beyond politics and activism and even race to encompass ideation, critical discourse, and especially its particular contribution to history as also American history, history being the component that Latino pretends to be able to shed in political overcorrectness.

Needless to say, history remains important to many Latino scholars, but they are overshadowed by the numbers of Latinos who define themselves by a sociopolitical presentism. For those Latinos, identifying with Hispanic means identifying with white conquerors, and so the more populist, racialized Latino discourse is based on a liberation from its white history, implying a purer other history.

That Latino mindset often situationally borrows *latino* as cultural consciousness or even promotes Latino as a culture discounting that a culture is fundamentally a history. The canceling of a Hispanic history is the canceling of a Hispanic culture, leaving a *sui generis* Latino to reinvent itself against the Hispanic claims of its *latino* roots while proceeding, thanks to an American education, unaware of the Hispanic heritage in American cultural history that Latinos inherit as Americans.

My witnessing Latino become the currency despite its dysfunction as a chaotic semantic plane inspired my writing the essays that became this book. In the first part, I revisit the semantics of Latino as epithet and its consequences as consciousness, inquiring into much taken for granted in the twin reliance on both oral "you know what I mean" reasoning, and the preeminence of political solidarity. The body of this book consists of essays that, although in the first-person, are not about their author but that chronicle first-hand my experience with earlier segues to Latino in the Puerto Rican experience, in all cases

revisions of established Latino perspectives on cultural milestones and familiar iconic personages.

My thesis on Latino as a rhetorical unifier of actually discrete subcultures is not original. Latino Studies scholars have researched, chiefly from a social science perspective, the discrepancy between a public Latino unity and an underlying disunity. The bulk of that study examines the influence of political and economic forces at work in the making of a market or the inventing of a people from the multitude of subgroups. The originality of this book is its contemplating the Latino condition through the methodology of the humanities.

Latino Studies presumes as core the social sciences, having established the convention of assigning to the humanities the ancillary role of providing graphic or entertaining representations of social science insight. This book questions that convention not as an academic vendetta but as the inescapable result of carrying out what humanities disciplines do: apply critical thinking using a more exacting distrust of language. In examining the semantics of Latino, this book incurs into cultural consequences of Latino on which social science research provides data as evidence but does not put conclusions on trial for consequential nuances or intellectual soundness. Nor is there the political will to perform such testing because, as I will demonstrate, Latino Studies struggles with giving primacy to cultural criticism over solidarity with popular community perceptions.

Culturally undefined while performing as if culturally defined, Latino allows a bundle of semantic possibilities, an amorphousness that invites creativity. The most notable example is the circumventing of true introspection by something that poses as an intellectual discussion, correcting an invented grammatical gender bias in English. This tinkering in stages produced today's Latinx, which the more woke extended to express a generational questioning of binary identities.

That activism is piggy-backed onto the use of gender-correcting Latinx, claiming an identity neutrality represented by a supposedly Latinx people. Do Latinos who adopt Latinx to express simply gender awareness know that they are also advocating a dismantling of identity? And should they discover that application of Latino, do they betray their solidarity to gender consciousness and not use Latinx? Into the churning stream of creative possibilities enters yet another obfuscating variant of Latino.

Nevertheless, motivated by solidarity and a desire to advance social justice, institutions and organizations quickly adopted Latinx, whose actual usage, according to polls that I will cite, do not exceed 3%. In other words, if Latino became institutionalized almost immediately, Latinx remains an advocacy,

staying alive as a gender corrective higher moral ground while functioning as a Trojan Horse on binary identities.

As I write, the nation's oldest Latino civil rights organization, the League of United Latin American Citizens, has instructed its staff to drop Latinx from the group's official communications. What are they actually rejecting? Latinx's gender consciousness, its distorting Spanish in claiming that it has no gender neutrality only binaries, its not being a Latinate word and so stripped of vestige evocations of *latino*? There remains much more to be discussed in greater detail not immediately visible on the surface of that Latino v. Latinx debate, understanding that Latinx is just the latest displacement of the deeper conversation that fails to take place on the identity conundrum of Hispanic-heritaged citizens as Americans.

For that reason, against that background, I focus on the original Latino as the hub of the identity conundrum, discussing where Latinx might need a closer look to complete my argument. Latino's foundational contradictory nuances, questionable readings of history, and inconsistent evocations underlay Latinx's ostensibly novel insight, so both identically obfuscate the cultural context from which I presumably write as a Latino.

Through filters of activism, generations, class, race, and education levels, Latino emits multiple, conflicted senses. Such is its semantic flexibility that applications of Latino that I discuss may not seem immediately recognizable to every Latino, for which even different geographies give different emphases. For example, for those who simply understand Latino to be a more updated identifier than the older umbrella Hispanic and do not follow more academic discussions may respond to my reading of Latino as advocating the canceling of its Hispanic history as exaggerated. On the other hand, because the solidarity semantic feature of Latino tolerates that both viewpoints are validly Latino, that contradiction may be overlooked.

My focus is not on viewpoints or political stances but on Latino as an English word determined by English ethnocentricity that can subvert what bilinguals believe they are making English say. Anglophone Latino, so much a victim of that subversion, saying so many contradictory things, often injects meanings and evocations that are not what the speaker intended if thinking that by saying Latino they are uttering *latino*.

Not out of academic snobbery nor out of a nostalgia for a Hispanic past nor in search of another epithet for which I want to be credited as having invented am I motivated to write cultural criticism on Latino. My effort with this book is to make sense to myself of what today purports to be my Latino American identity, a discussion that I posit needs more critical nuance than the present discourse that as a writer I hear, an undisciplined creativity that defines and

refines in search of an identity perfection that winds up serving politically at the expense of making cultural and intellectual sense. If those who romanticize Hispanic history blind themselves to its role in historical racial oppression, Latino's political effectiveness is sustained at the cost of romanticizing an ignorance of historical facts, that ignorance feeding a racial oversimplification of what is Hispanic and the delusion that an antipathy toward Hispanic as being simply white changes them culturally.

Nor do I presume to define Latino, what no one person can, why there exists literature and art and public intellectual discussion. In this book, I apply my authority as writer and linguist to examine the semantics of the epithets Latino and the newer Latinx as X-rays of our conflicted communal thought process, language usage providing empirical evidence of what we think we are thinking for ourselves and more often are just repeating unexamined.

Like any X-ray, this book is intended to provide a picture of underlying flaws or structural weaknesses, defects that, in this case, require more collective introspection. My search is for the intellectual functionality that any consciousness must have to make cultural and intellectual, not just political and racial, sense, and this book invites today's Latino/*latino* demographic to begin a needed collective introspection, and not just in academe, of what it means or should or could mean to be Latino and American.

I proceed aware of endangering my Latino credentials by disrespecting its solidarity feature with elitist critical thought, in other words, of taking it seriously as an intellectual subject. A siege mentality protects as *nuestro* even conflicting understandings of Latino, so any criticism, including constructive self-criticism, smacks of self-loathing or of a whitening. Intending to keep house as Jack Spicer asks of himself in the epigraph to Part I, I glean encouragement from the experience that I describe in the final essay of this book on my encounter with Pablo Neruda in New York.

Please read it by way of the preceding essays intended to clean up Latino's intellectual clutter that in solidarity we overlook, forgive, convince ourselves that the matter really isn't that important. In fact, that clutter threatens mature Latino/*latino* self-reflection and Latinos' becoming more empowered than passive, ward-culture citizens--whether or not this nation becomes a multicultural country.

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