

daily lives and as important to their sense of identity. The Pew Hispanic Research Center (Taylor et al. 2012) reports that nine in ten Latinas/os believe Latina/o immigrants need to learn English to succeed in the United States, but fully 95 percent believe that future Latina/o generations need to be able to speak Spanish. As the progeny of two empires, Latinas and Latinos are keen to possess English as well as Spanish—two instruments of global power.

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Latinidad/es

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The question “How is it possible to know Latinidad?,” posed by late queer Latino critic José Esteban Muñoz (2000), reveals the semantic messiness and the multiple layers of meanings that the term “Latinidad” suggests in its numerous and contradictory iterations. Yet, rather than indulge in skepticism about this term, I exhort Latina/o studies scholars to reclaim it and deploy it in ways that allow our communities and others to exert agency and more control over the public definitions of who we are. If the term “Latinidad” emerged most strongly in literary studies as an abstract signifier that remitted us to the condition of being Latina/o, today it is more strongly anchored in the social, everyday realities of our diasporic communities and in the spaces populated by Latinas/os of various nationalities, generations, immigrant statuses, and racial and gender identities. It now signals the mutual transculturations and horizontal hierarchies that emerge in these spaces. In this essay, I will trace some of the semantic shifts in the ways Latina/o studies scholars have deployed the term. If umbrella terms have been appropriated by the market, by media, and by activists, as G. Cristina Mora (2014) has examined in *Making Hispanics*, the term “Latinidad” has also been claimed as a hemispheric framework for the study of the Americas, as well as critiqued and rejected as a label that homogenizes the rich heterogeneity of our communities and inadequately, if at all, recognizes the inclusion of Afro-Latinas/os and mixed-race Latinas/os.

Since the 1980s most of the popular debates around labels of identity have centered on Hispanic versus Latino/a (Oboler 1995). Yet now most scholars deploy the terms “Latina/o” and “Latinidad” in generalizing ways. There are underlying tensions, however, that reveal our anxieties about umbrella terms. Marta Caminero-Santangelo (2007), in *On Latinidad*, summarizes the multiple scholarly voices that have resisted the term “Latina/o” as a reference to our collective identity. While it is the preferred term in academic circles and in many community organizations and groups, it is still suspect for its homogenizing potential. This effect is evident in the many scholarly works that include the word “Latina/o” in their title in order to sell, yet ironically tend to caution against the “homogenizing” effects of this term, which “elides historical specificity, ethnic and racial differences, sexual preference, and varying class perspectives into a monolithic conception” (McCracken 1999, 5). Chicana/o scholars have denounced Latinidad as a challenge and threat to the institutional spaces for which Chicanas/os have struggled (I. García 1996; Chabram-Dernersesian 2003). In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands / La Frontera* positioned the immigrant Mexicanos and the “Latinos from Central and South America” (1987, 87) as groups that needed to learn about Chicanas/os in order to create a truly strong front against Anglo domination. She critiqued the separatism that the dominant society imposes on people of color in order to “weaken” them. Instead, Anzaldúa proposes mutual knowledge about and among minorities, which will allow a stronger sense of an oppositional community. While she urges her readers to learn about each other, the fact that she separates Chicanas/os from undocumented immigrants, from Mexicanas/os, and from other Latina/o immigrants suggests her own personal awareness that these groups are not the “same” as hers. This suspicion is articulated earlier in “How to Tame a

Wild Tongue,” where she acknowledges her own anxiety about speaking Spanish in front of other Latinas (1987, 58). Much later, in 1996, Ignacio García denounced “a militant form of Latinidad” as a challenge to Chicano studies, arguing that other Latina/o immigrants claim “racism” and “poverty” as a common experience with Chicanas/os and thus demand inclusion into the academic spaces originally fought for by the latter. Despite the significant apertures of many Chicana/o spaces, institutions, and scholars vis-à-vis the larger Latina/o community in the United States—for instance, the changes in the names of programs and departments that include the term “Latina/o”; the curricular inclusion of Central Americans in the United States and of other ethnicities in teaching; the central participation of Chicana/o scholars in the Latina/o Studies Association (LSA)—even today there exist significant anxieties that the increasing strength and visibility of this “Latina/o” presence will ultimately destroy the institutions and resources that Chicanas/os have fought for in decades. This defensive posture on behalf of Chicana/o studies is also shared by Puerto Rican studies on the East Coast, which by the late 1990s was facing the challenges of how to represent and include Colombianas/os, Dominicanas/os, and the more recent Mexican immigrants in New York, where the proportion of Puerto Ricans in the Latina/o population decreased from 80 percent to 30 percent (Fritz 2003).

The discourses of exceptionalism that continue to emerge from each of the three historically major Latina/o groups—Mexican American, U.S. Puerto Rican, and Cuban American—constitute strong obstacles to engaging in comparative work. The Hispanic Trends Project conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2012 revealed that 69 percent of Latinas/os questioned believed that Hispanics from different countries all have separate and distinct cultures, while 29 percent believe

they “share one Hispanic/Latino culture” (Taylor et al. 2012). This suggests that among U.S. Latinas/os, there is a strong, commonsense knowledge that, despite post- and trans-nationalism, national identities are still strong values in our lives. Writing about the demographic diversification of a global New York, Juan Flores (1996) consistently argued for the need to recognize the historical primacy of Puerto Ricans in the city as the “original” Latina/o group, which all other more recent newcomers must recognize as a model. For him, Puerto Ricans are to be seen as “the historical touchstone against which much else that follows must be tested” (Flores 1996, 147). This argument leads to primordial hierarchies among U.S. Latinas/os. The grassroots origins of Chicana/o studies and Puerto Rican studies, informed by imaginaries of cultural nationalism, have historically fueled the resistance to acknowledge similarities and shared experiences. For colonized communities, one of the strategies of resistance has been precisely performing nationalism in the public space. Thus, there is a need to examine further the slippages between justified cultural specificity and exceptionalism.

In 2003, Angie Chabram mapped the contradictory meanings and social and political locations of the term “Latina/o” as it has been deployed by a variety of scholars, highlighting its close association with an increasing globalized world as well as its continued risks as a potentially homogenizing label: “If it is true that the promise of ‘Latino/a’ lies in its ability to access multiple social identities and their realities in political study, it is equally true that these aspects of its articulation remain difficult to access within global articulations of Latino Studies that do not allow us to see ‘the differentiation along the lines of gender and sexuality,’ ‘the specific identity positions of Black Latinos’ and ‘mixed Latino backgrounds,’ ‘the critical understandings of translocality,’ and the no less important and often obscured

differences of social class” (Chabram-Dernersesian 2003, 116). The Mexican feminist scholar states that this is in part due to “what might be construed as a settling down of semantics and poetics in the language of many emergent Latino studies” (2003, 116).

In the spirit of Chabram’s critique, I have examined the more recent deployments of Latina/o and *Latinidad* as the basis for new scholarly conceptualizations. Unlike Chabram, I have found a more dynamic semantic field around these terms, which has allowed critics to modify and rewrite them. I have described the term “Latina/o” as a site of “competing authenticities and paradigms of identity that, together, and in conflict with each other, constitute the heterogeneous experiences of various Latina/o national groups” (Aparicio 1999b, 10). Thus, it is important to highlight the mobile, nomadic nature of this signifier, for it allows the field and its practitioners to rewrite, transform, and reclaim the term, even if, and precisely because, the signified, its referential content, the Latin American descent population in the United States, is constantly changing.

The plural term “*Latinidades*” has been preferred by many scholars to refer to the shared experiences of subordination, resistance, and agency of the various national groups of Latin American in the United States. “*Latinidad*” has been highly contested and defined in various ways. While for some it is still a problematic term, seen as “dangerously essentializing and rigidly identitarian . . . primarily functioning on literary, often elite realms” (Roque Ramírez 2007, 8), the plural form of the term has allowed other scholars to embrace it as an index of the diverse geocultural profiles of Latinas/os across the United States. The terms “Latino” and “*Latinidad*,” as Marta Caminero-Santangelo writes, are of a dual nature: while they risk homogenization, they also allow scholars to produce the comparative work that “undermines the category’s homogenizing tendencies”

(2007, 219). In other words, only under the rubric of “Latina/o” can we do the comparative work that highlights the differences, specificities, and commonalities among the diverse national groups.

“Latinidades” as a conceptual framework allows me to document, analyze, and theorize the processes by which diverse Latinas/os interact with, dominate, and transculturate each other. While the analysis of vertical power differentials between the Anglo-dominant society and Latina/o racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities is still much needed, given state ideologies of border security and anti-immigrant anxieties in these neoliberal and global times, I have suggested that we also need to begin to examine the horizontal scope of power differences, conflicts, tensions, and affinities between and among Latinas/os of diverse national identities, or what I call “horizontal hierarchies” (Aparicio 2014). These power differentials, in turn, are closely linked to geocultural regions and territories, each of which is producing unique Latina/o profiles. Chicago itself includes nineteen different Latin American national groups, from the Mexican population that represents 79 percent, to Dominicans at 4,000 or less than 1 percent. In New York, Mexicanos are now the third-largest Latino group in the city, forcing Puerto Ricans to reconsider their own privileged position as the “original” Latina/o minority in this region. In the Southeast, Mexicanos and Central Americans are now settling down in many small towns, radically transforming black-white relations in the region. In California, on the West Coast, and in the Northwest, Central Americans, particularly Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Indigenous groups, are transculturating Chicana/o spaces, opening them up to the historical memories and traumas of the Central American populations. Karina Alvarado has approached these liminal positionalities as the result of the “anxieties of transculturation” on the part of dominant Latina/o groups in the region (2013, 367).

The term “Latinidades,” in this regard, has been open to transformations and rewritings. It has been consistently modified by additional labels of identity that anchor it in a particular subgroup within the U.S. Latina/o sector. A group of scholars in Amherst, Massachusetts, are deploying the term “translatinidades” to refer to the translocal migrations of Latinas/os and Latin Americans, not only within the United States but also in Asia, Europe, and Africa. In terms of gender and sexuality, Jennifer Rudolph (2012) has proposed the term “masculinidad” in her eponymous book as she examines the intersectionality of race, class, and masculinity among U.S. Latinas/os. Horacio Roque Ramírez has highlighted the term “Latinaje” to foreground the “always already plural process of making Latino worlds from below” and the “collectivist character in the creation of public cultures” (2007, 8), thus queering the term, as Juana María Rodríguez (2003), Alicia Arrizón (2006), and Ramón Rivera-Servera (2012) have done as well. The term has also been given gender modifiers such as *Latinidades feministas* in the *Telling to Live* anthology (Latina Feminist Group 2001). Deborah Pacini Hernandez (2010) has recently referred to “cosmopolatino” in the context of the musical flows and border crossings of the Colombian *cumbia*. Likewise, “Latinidad” has also been modified by a national identity, as in “Puerto Rican Latinidades” (Rúa and García 2007), in order to transcend the exhausted binaries that have been erected between national spaces and the sites of *Latinidad* (Rúa 2012).

Mérida Rúa and Lorena García’s (2007) article, entitled “Processing *Latinidad*,” highlights how *Latinidad* emerges from within nationalist spaces. They describe “complex moments of convergence” as they point to the Mexicanized version of the Puerto Rican plena “Qué bonita bandera / es la bandera mexicana,” performed on a float sponsored by Puerto Rican politicians during the Mexican Independence Parade in Chicago. Local

politicians, such as Luis Gutiérrez, have continued to make public overtures aimed at consolidating the political power of Latinas/os in the city, producing a strategic form of Latinidad. The ways in which Latinidad in Chicago brings into the public sphere the convergence of different national identities, as in this example, makes it an ideal site for exploring the power dynamics, interactions, and potential transculturations among Latin-American descent populations, which could be termed “interlatina/o” social dynamics. Latinidad has traveled from a semiotics of suspicion in which modifiers anchor it to a particular identity or community to one of plurality that recognizes the heterogeneity from within.

Moreover, the morphological shift of the term “Latinidad” from a label of identity to a doing, a political and liberatory action, is significant and illustrative of these semantic transformations in the scholarship. Marta Caminero-Santangelo, for instance, concludes her book *On Latinidad* by emphasizing the affiliative texture, the relational identities, and the “solidarity” that the terms “Latino” and “Latinidad” evoke (2007, 213–19). Contesting the numerous instances in which Latina/o identifications are deemed “strategic,” Caminero-Santangelo argues that identifying as Latina/o “also allows us to express, to ourselves and to others, our commitment to attending to the historical and present differences among Latinos” (2007, 219), thereby speaking to the self-fulfilling effect of the term. The more we use it, the more we construct spaces and discourses of Latinidad. The equation of Latinidad with “solidarity” continues to engage with the activist, oppositional, and politicized deployments of this term. From the different disciplinary frame of political science, Cristina Beltrán echoes Caminero’s postmodern approach to Latinidad—“the category . . . produces what it claims to represent” (2010, 9)—as well as exhorting scholars to reconsider Latinidad “as a site of permanent political contestation, as a site

of ongoing resignifiability—as a political rather than merely descriptive category” (2010, 9). Examining civic Latinidad as a “commitment to unity” and as illustrated through “mass participation and innovative performativity” (2010, 16), Beltrán adds another semantic layer to our understandings of Latinidad, one that tweaks the dominant homogenizations that we have all challenged for decades. Finally, Michael Rodríguez-Muñoz (2010), in “Grappling with Latinidad,” discusses the participation of Puerto Ricans in Chicago in the struggles on behalf of their undocumented Mexican counterparts. He lucidly examines the ways in which U.S. Puerto Ricans deploy their citizenship—a privilege that traditionally marks this colonized sector as different from other Latinas/os—precisely “into a responsibility to act” (2010, 252). Thus, Latinidad sheds its homogenizing effects to become a signifier and label of collective identity that propels U.S. Latinas/os to become political agents and to have a public voice—hence, the term “liberatory Latinidad” (2010, 253), as Rodríguez-Muñoz proposes. By now, the signifier deserves our close attention as a semantic field rich with possibilities for empowerment.

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