

Book Review

On Latinidad: US Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity

Marta Caminero-Santangelo
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The most obvious but also the most important question for a field or a journal called *Latino Studies* is: how best to use the term Latino? Asking this question means considering the ways in which thinking in terms of such a category is both problematic and productive, as well as reflecting on exactly what the use of this label achieves. Marta Caminero-Santangelo's book *On Latinidad* speaks to this issue in two fascinating, interlinked ways: first, she examines the identity "Latino/a" and the larger community that term is meant to describe, arguing as her point of departure that it exists only as an imaginary idea, and yet exerts enormous pressure on how people think about themselves and are thought of by others; and second, she considers the role that literature plays in constructing the content and boundaries of that identity.

Books such as Suzanne Oboler's *Ethnic Labels*, *Latino Lives* or Juan Flores' *From Bomba to Hip Hop* have previously explored how categories like Latino/a are socially constructed but still able to create meaning; this is thus not a new subject, although Caminero-Santangelo does an especially elegant job of framing these issues. The book's major contribution comes from the

way that its literary perspective allows Caminero-Santangelo to attend to the role that storytelling and fiction-making play in how individual identities as well as national, transnational, ethnic and panethnic communities are imagined. Caminero-Santangelo makes a compelling case for why reading literature matters, and what kinds of insights close readings of literary texts can offer the field of Latino/a studies.

The introduction to *On Latinidad* provides a thorough and nuanced exploration of the different models of ethnicity and the implications of each of these ways of thinking about identity. Certainly, any course that takes a panethnic approach to Latino/as would benefit from including such a critical and self-reflective exposition of what it means to talk about Latino/a literature or Latino/a performance, and an "Introduction to Ethnic Studies" course could use this essay as an excellent overview of how ethnicity is both imaginary and real. Caminero-Santangelo begins by taking on what she describes as some of the ways that essentialist constructions of ethnicity remain ingrained in thinking about Latino/as, even while the category itself resists notions of similarity based on biology or blood: anyone who has heard well-meaning students (sometimes Anglo, sometimes Latino/a) mention in a class discussion "how important family is to Latinos" knows how rooted these modes of thought can be. At the same time, the introduction calls attention to how models that purport to criticize essentialism can fall back on language or a common historical experience as what defines Latinidad.



Caminero-Santangelo counsels skepticism towards any such claims as harboring a will towards covering over difference and specificity to establish some basic commonality that will allow the category to make sense.

After deconstructing almost every potential definition of US Latinidad, Caminero-Santangelo makes the case for why it is worthwhile to use the label Latino/a, albeit in a more careful and contingent way. First, she argues that the panethnic category, if treated as constructed and problematic, allows for a seriously comparative study of different Latino/a experiences that can attend to both the overlaps and disjunctures among various Latino/a groups, and her book is itself an excellent example of the value of this kind of comparative scholarship. Second, in what emerges as her central case, she suggests that imagining panethnicity critically can present a model for a type of solidarity that acknowledges difference as a necessary pre-condition to the search for the common ground that would allow positive bonds to be built.

As Caminero-Santangelo gets into her readings of literary texts, she shows how these fictions directly engage with and explore how ethnicity works, the same text frequently deploying multiple and even contradictory ways of thinking about ethnicity. The first section, with chapters on Rudolfo Anaya and Piri Thomas, focuses on how classic Chicano/a and Nuyorican texts configure ethnicity in relation to indigenous and black identity; the second section turns to the ways in which Julia Alvarez, Cristina García and Achy Obejas highlight issues of class, diaspora and the racial heterogeneity of the Caribbean, to call even national identity into question. The most discreet and focused ethnic identities are thus rendered proble-

matic before we can move on to thinking about panethnicity. These chapters are useful in framing the issue of the constructedness of all communities or identities, especially in calling attention to how understanding US Latinidad as a hybrid form combining Americanness with Latin Americanness relies on overlooking the ways in which each of those entities is itself hybrid and conflicted. As Caminero-Santangelo acknowledges, these first four chapters themselves follow the relatively traditional approach of the dominant trend in Latino/a literary criticism, for they are “dealing with the separate ethnicities separately” and assuming that “Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz write about Dominicans. Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer and Piri Thomas write about Puerto Ricans” (p. 9).

It is the final section of *On Latinidad* that introduces a surprisingly uncommon, extremely productive critical lens for examining Latino/a literature: a focus specifically on how writers depict the interactions between different Latino/a groups within their fictional worlds. Paying close attention in this final section to how Cuban-American writers depict Dominican immigrants and Puerto Rican *independentistas* or how Demetria Martínez’s *Mother Tongue* centers on a relationship between a Chicana and Salvadoreño allows Caminero-Santangelo to evaluate the positive and productive aspects of these bonds without ignoring some of the more troubling tendencies towards essentialism or cultural imperialism. This innovative methodology allows her to compare, on the one hand, the romantic idea of similarity ultimately underlying Alisa Rodriguez-Valdes’ *Dirty Girls Social Club* with, on the other hand, the attention to incommensurable differences in Ana Menéndez’s *In Cuba I Was a German*



Shepherd, to see the kinds of solidarity enabled by each of these fictions.

The goal of evaluating these different ways of constructing individual and community bonds is thus ultimately political. Arguing that different formations of Latinidad should be evaluated in terms of their political usefulness (rather than the all-too-common assumption that Latino/a literature or popular culture is inherently revolutionary or progressive) gives Caminero-Santangelo her sharpest focus. Menéndez's story and Martínez's novel in particular allude to "the fundamental necessity of recognizing *difference*, as a prelude to the forging of 'solidarity' or coalitions" (p. 196), as a more productive, anti-essential or strategically essentialist way of constructing panethnicity. Placing the question of politics in the front and center also leads *On Latinidad* to focus on the uneasy relationship of Cuban Americans with the Civil Rights traditions represented especially by Chicano/as and Boricuas. Cubans thus become a sort of test-case for thinking about panethnicity as solidarity, with the book devoting two of its longest and most comprehensive chapters to exploring the position of Cuban Americans within the broader Latino/a category. Focusing on Cubans as the limit of a political construction of Latinidad makes sense but can sometimes lead to the tendency towards exceptionalism that often appears in theorizations of panethnicity: for example, the undeniably true claim that Cuban exiles' distinct relationship to Latin American revolutionary movements gives many Cuban-American writers a much different political orientation than the general Latino/a canon leads to the debatable argument that "Cuban difference might be a more significant obstacle to imagined collectivity than are other forms

of difference" (p. 186) and that Chicano/as and Puerto Ricans have a less "troubling relationship" (p. 187) to one another than those groups have to Cuban Americans. On the whole, though, *On Latinidad* effectively navigates the complex routes connecting these different sub-groups to provide a valuable mapping of Latino/a as a panethnicity.

If we take seriously the idea that identity and community require acts of imagination, that we are connected through narratives that we create, that even if we decide to believe that Latino/as have a common culture we are only telling ourselves a reassuring story, then it makes sense that the skills we learn reading literature can help us analyze the way in which panethnicity is constructed when empirical approaches such as the study by Jones-Correa and Leal, cited by Caminero-Santangelo, cannot explain the power of the fiction of Latinidad (pp. 27–29). There is a trend in Latino/a studies to move away from reading literature as an esoteric or isolated activity that is not as connected to everyday life as is the analysis of popular culture.¹ The scarcity of thorough, rigorous, panethnic engagements with Latino/a literature is compounded by the tendency Caminero-Santangelo identifies among literary critics to "take [ethnicity] for granted as a relatively fixed or, at least, a known and self-evident category" (Sollers xiii, quoted in Caminero-Santangelo, p. 30). In this context, *On Latinidad's* attention to how literature participates in the formation of Latino/a identities and communities through drawing boundaries but also creating bridges is an enormous intervention in literary studies, as well as an important overture towards relocating literature's place in interdisciplinary Latino/a studies.

Note

1 For a discussion of this trend, cf. Dalleo and Machado Sáez (2007), especially Chapter 1.

Reference

Dalleo, Raphael and Elena Machado Sáez. 2007.
*The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of
Post-Sixties Literature*. New York: Palgrave
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