

With Us or Without Us

The Development of a Latino Public Sphere

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I want to thank the editors of *Nepantla* for giving me the opportunity to read and comment on Eduardo Mendieta's thought-provoking piece about the need for Latino postcolonial intellectuals. I learned a great deal from the first part of the essay, where Mendieta lays out a typology of the different kinds of public intellectuals, and I appreciated his critique of the provincialism of those thinkers who bemoan the "demise" of the Eurocentric public intellectual. However, I had trouble at first understanding his motivation for focusing on Cornel West in the second part of his article. Although I admire much of West's work, I found it curious that Mendieta would single out West as the *one* model of a public intellectual from whom Latinas/os can learn. For one thing, West is far too silent on issues of gender and patriarchy. This silence is not, to my mind, incidental, and it seriously impedes my ability to see him as a model public intellectual. For another, proposing West as a model for Latino public intellectuals presupposes an analogy between the African-American and the Latino communities that does not obtain (I'll say more about this later). It was only after I followed up on Mendieta's comment in the endnotes that his piece had been motivated by his "utter dissatisfaction" with a conversation published in *Harper's Magazine* that the focus on Cornel West began to make sense to me. That roundtable of West, Jorge Klor de Alva, and Earl Shorris on the "uneasiness between Blacks and Latinos" points to the absence of a highly articulate, politically astute, academically grounded, and visible Latino spokesperson who can hold his or her own in a conversation with someone like Cornel West.¹ The piece also suggests that however questionable the attempt to find "a" spokesperson

for a community as diverse as our own, the political logic of our society (which is fundamentally also a racial logic) continually demands that we produce one. In the case at hand, it is worth noting that Klor de Alva and West were invited to converse with each other as representative members of their respective groups. The conversation in *Harper's* is introduced thusly: "Knowing that questions of power and ethnicity are no longer black-and-white, *Harper's Magazine* invited three observers—a Black, a Latino, and a White moderator—to open the debate." So, whether we Latino intellectuals actively cultivate spokespersons from our own ranks, or whether we sit back and let them emerge on their own, the one thing we can all be sure of is that they *will* emerge. And so I take Mendieta's effort in this forum seriously—he is making a powerful effort to create a Latino public intellectual sphere where we can begin to discuss the myriad issues that affect us as "Latinas/os."

It is to this effort to represent—in the triple sense of *speak for*, *speak about*, and *embody*—a highly diverse and divided group of people that I turn now. The difficulty of this task stems in part from the fact that, unlike African Americans, Latinas/os do not yet constitute a cohesive, or even a readily identifiable, national minority community.² The different national/ethnic groups (Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Salvadoran, etc.) that are even now being hailed by the U.S. government, corporate advertisers, television executives, print media, and the entertainment industry as constitutive members of this not-yet-quite-there umbrella ethnic group, "Hispanic" or "Latino," are still very different from one another. Their histories of entry and incorporation into the economy and body politic of the United States diverge greatly. To illustrate my point, let me briefly consider the three largest groups—Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Mexicans.

Ever since Puerto Rico was incorporated into United States as a commonwealth its citizens have been born citizens of this country. As a result, Puerto Ricans are free to move back and forth from their country of origin to the mainland of the United States. The political imagination of Puerto Ricans is crucially shaped by the dynamics of colonialism, and they are often subjected to a kind of second-class cultural citizenship, but they do not imagine themselves—nor should they—as foreigners in the United States. By contrast, immigration, the quest for citizenship, and the threat of deportation have been huge (even culturally determining) issues for Mexicans and Central Americans. Much of the literature and folk culture of Mexicans in the United States explicitly treats their antagonistic

relationship with the U.S. government and its border agents. In truth, it is hard for me to imagine Chicano cultural production without the ubiquitous trope of the border; Mendieta's desire to see this trope as somehow exhausted and anachronistic does not make it so.

Meanwhile, the relationship of Cubans to the U.S. government signals their difference from other U.S. Latinas/os. As the former ruling classes of a prerevolutionary Cuba, those Cubans who fled to the United States in the wake of the Cuban Revolution—who with their descendents make up the largest concentration of Cubans living in the United States—were both wealthier and phenotypically whiter than either the Cubans who remained on the island or the Mexican and Puerto Rican laborers who (im)migrated to this country. Unlike Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, Cuban newcomers have been welcomed by the U.S. government and have been given assistance with housing and jobs. Their politics and their art reflect this difference. Not only are Cubans more likely than other Latinas/os to vote Republican, but many express a rabid anticommunism that most Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans simply do not share. These differences make all the more poignant the irony that “we,” collectively, have been newly named as the largest minority community in the United States.

The deep political and experiential divisions that exist within the population of people designated as “Latino” cause me to be less sanguine than Mendieta about the possibility (or even advisability) of jettisoning nationalist identities, and the cultural tropes that have grown up around those identities, in favor of a “panethnic Latino public sphere that overlaps with a transnational, postcolonial, diasporic public sphere in and of the Americas.” It is possible that our divergent feelings about this issue may be influenced by the size of our respective national/ethnic groups. Although I may not always choose to do so, I recognize that it is possible for me to write *as a Chicana* and find a significant enough number of people to read what I have written for it to be worth my while to write it. I understand that this must be frustrating to someone like Mendieta who, as a Colombian, would be hard-pressed to find a Colombian community in the United States large enough to write to or about. Moreover, it would seem that many Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Chicano academics are quite comfortable with the idea of focusing on the problems and cultural productions of their compatriots. Their publication records appear to indicate that they feel no need to expand their scholarly scope or realm of vision beyond their nationalist communities.

In broad strokes, these are the challenges faced by the intellectual who wishes to find a Latino public sphere within which to discuss interests common to all of us. In painting this rather grim picture, I am not suggesting that the project Mendieta has undertaken is either ill-fated or unnecessary. Public spheres do not simply exist; they are, in Benedict Anderson's famous formulation, "imagined." And the Latino community, for all its heterogeneity, is being vigorously imagined into existence as a more or less coherent community even as I write. Arguably, we can locate the official start of the current trend in the year 1980, when the U.S. government created the category "Hispanic" for the census as a way of lumping together all the various communities with some genealogical link to Latin America or Spain. At about the same time, Jesus Chavarria founded *Hispanic Business* magazine with the intention of shaping and then reporting on the Hispanic market.³ It was not until the late 1990s, though, that Latinas/os really arrived on the stage of the larger public imagination. *Latina*, the magazine for the young woman who is simultaneously "modern" and "firmly rooted in tradition," was launched in 1996.⁴ Two years later, Ricky Martin became an international sensation with his performance of "La copa de la vida" at the World Cup soccer championship. By the time Martin released "Livin' la Vida Loca" in 1999, he had made being "Latino" desirable (and sexy) in a way that it had never been before. Meanwhile, Jennifer Lopez was busy parlaying her *In Living Color* fly girl routine into a movie and recording career that has made her a household name on par with any celebrity currently walking the red carpet. And what is notable about the success of these media projects and these stars is the extent to which they all project a generic (that is, nonnationalist) "Latino" image. JLo, for example, may be Puerto Rican, but her first major national exposure was playing the Chicana icon Selena. John Leguizamo, the brilliant Latino comedian, does an even better job of illustrating my point. His 1997 Broadway hit show *Freaky* is studiously nonnationalist. Over the course of the show, Leguizamo alludes to a variety of different Latino national/ethnic groups (through his choice of music, dance styles, accents, and themes) in a manner designed to convey an overall sense of Latinidad. He clearly intends for his audience to identify him as "Latino"—but not as a member of any one specific ethnic group under that umbrella. So the question becomes this: If people outside our communities can't tell us apart, and if some of us Latinas/os are actively working to create a shared sense of identity (and so refusing to tell us apart), how long will it be until we *all* cease to tell ourselves apart? Will

there come a point where we will all see ourselves primarily as “Latina,” and secondarily, if at all, as “Chicana,” or “Puerto Rican,” or “Cubana”?

It bears mentioning that Mendieta has done as much as anyone to imagine an academic Latino public sphere. Not only did he initiate the exchange in this issue of *Nepantla*, but he organized the “Hispanics: Cultural Locations” conference that took place at the University of San Francisco in October 1997, bringing together a large number of people from various Latino communities, among them such academic Latino luminaries as Walter Mignolo (an Argentine), Jorge Gracia (a Cuban), Linda Martín Alcoff (a Panamanian), Fernando Coronil (a Venezuelan), and Norma Alarcón (a Chicana). That conference has led, indirectly at least, to the publication of several books that attempt to construct and/or speak to a Latino public sphere (see, e.g., Gracia and de Greiff 2000; Gracia 2000). Moreover, like his teacher and mentor Cornel West, Mendieta is an extraordinarily generous intellectual who promotes the work of a number of his Latino colleagues, whether or not they are philosophers and whether or not he agrees with everything they say.⁵ He is the editor of *Latin American Philosophy: Issues, Currents, and Debates* (2002), the coeditor (with Linda Martín Alcoff) of *Identities: A Reader* (2002), and he regularly brings together and puts into conversation Latinas/os from diverse disciplines and locales who might not otherwise meet. Mendieta’s efforts have been enormously intellectually productive, and I want only to encourage him to continue the good work he has started.

In addition to the effort launched in the U.S. mass media in the closing decades of the twentieth century, there exists a much older tradition of imagining ourselves as belonging to a common heritage. I am referring to the notion of “Our America” elaborated so eloquently by Cuban *independentista* José Martí, and nourished by contemporary thinkers such as Roberto Fernández Retamar. This way of conceptualizing those of us “Latinas/os” who live not only in the United States but also in the rest of the Americas as being in some crucial way part of the same group, is the one Ramón Saldívar and I advocate in our coedited issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*.⁶ Crucially, however, this way of seeing Latinas/os presupposes a politics or perspective that acknowledges and then interrogates the ill effects of imperial rule in the Americas, whether colonial (in the case of Spain) or neoimperial (in the case of the United States). Moreover, it is a way of conceptualizing the category of Hispanic or Latino that would not, for instance, include within it people from Spain. As such, it would not

satisfy Jorge Gracia, *Hispanic Business*, or for that matter, the affirmative action officers of most institutions of higher education.⁷

This brings me to my most important point. While I am not about to give up on progressive identity politics—and I would consider the call for a specifically *Latino* public intellectual to be a form of progressive identity politics—I am willing to practice them actively only as long as I can discern within them a politics to which I can subscribe.⁸ In the dual term “identity politics,” the politics are more important to me than is the particular identity. In the specific case of the term “Latino,” my attachment to the identity is yet ambivalent. I am hailed by the name, and I understand the degree to which it grants me visibility in contemporary U.S. society. At the same time, I am aware that the identity emerged first as a marketing category—a demographic to which corporations, entertainers, and the state seek to market their products. Consequently, I am still waiting to see whether the identity can be used effectively for progressive political or social change.

Given the ubiquity of racial thinking in our society, I recognize that I will, voluntarily or not, be compelled to speak as a Latina. Because of this, it behooves me to work energetically alongside people like Mendieta to develop the kind of Latino public sphere that will enable the productive airing of the concerns of those people who come into view under that name. With that in mind, I look forward to the discussions that I hope will follow this exchange.

Notes

1. It is indicative of Mendieta’s characteristic generosity that he chooses to respond to that conversation by championing Cornel West rather than by taking Jorge Klor de Alva to task for his wholly unilluminating views about the sociohistorical concept of race.
2. This is not to imply that all persons of African descent living in the United States are members of an uncomplicatedly homogenous group. There is continuing immigration to the United States by Africans and Afro-Caribbeans, and I do not underestimate the cultural and political differences between these newer immigrants and those persons we typically think of as African American. Moreover, I understand that there are regional differences that particularize different African-American communities in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. Even so, the majority of persons of African descent living in this country are the descendents of slaves. If they did not themselves live through the era of Jim Crow segregation, they have close friends and relatives who

did. One of the legacies of slavery (including the institutionalized forms of racism and segregation that followed in its wake) is that most persons of African descent in this country understand themselves as part of a larger community whose members recognize a sort of “shared fate.” I do not think this is precisely true for those persons who are currently being hailed as “Latinas/os.”

3. Chavarria, founder, editor, and publisher of *Hispanic Business*, remembers the focus groups he put together in diverse regions of the country prior to starting the magazine: “Participants told of significant entrepreneurial activity at the local level, together with an almost aggressive lack of interest in other areas. The people in New York didn’t know about Los Angeles; those in Los Angeles didn’t care about Miami; and those in Miami concentrated on Latin America. *Hispanic Business* ® helped to create a national identity by covering the Hispanic economy as one market instead of a series of local markets” (quoted in Russell 2003; my emphasis).
4. See how *Latina* magazine describes its ideal subscriber in *Latina.com* 2003.
5. I count myself among this lucky number.
6. See our coauthored introduction (Moya and Saldívar 2003).
7. For my critique of Gracia’s understanding of the concept “Hispanic/Latino,” see Moya 2001.
8. For a fuller defense of progressive identity politics, see Moya 2002, especially 131–35. See also Moya and Hames-Garcia 2000, especially the introduction.

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