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Introduction: The Search for Wholeness

The urgent duty of our America is to show herself as she is, one in soul and intent, rapidly overcoming the crushing weight of her past and stained only by the fertile bloodshed by hands that do battle against ruins and by veins that were punctured by our former masters. The disdain of the formidable neighbor who does not know her is our America's greatest danger, and it is urgent—for the day of the visit is near—that her neighbor come to know her, and quickly, so that he will not disdain her. Out of ignorance, he may perhaps begin to covet her. But when he knows her, he will remove his hands from her in respect. One must have faith in the best in man and distrust the worst. One must give the best every opportunity, so that the worst will be laid bare and overcome. If not, the worst will prevail.

Thus wrote José Martí, the Cuban poet and freedom fighter, in “Nuestra América (Our America),” his seminal essay published in 1894. The quest to look at the Spanish-speaking Americas whole, in a hemispheric context, was a recurrent theme before this time, but Martí helped turn it into an ideology.

The purpose of that quest was to form the Americas with roots in the Iberian Peninsula into a cohesive, harmonious entity, defined by its shared ancestry and common goals. Martí sees the 21 countries of Latin America as unified by language, political views, social structures, and religious persuasion. He sees them as having a coalescing body: “one in soul and intent.” Believing there are fundamental differences between *nuestra América* and *la América sajona, la América ajena*, he discards the English-speaking Americas as alien, invasive, disconnected from the other planets in the galaxy he is looking to assemble. He is sympathetic

only to those Americas recognized by ruins and “veins that were punctured by our former masters.” His essay is a manifesto for a Latin America victimized by “the disdain of the formidable neighbor who does not know her.”

Martí lived most of his adult life in the United States, during a time when the country defined itself as Anglo-Saxon and suppressed its other cultural roots, including the Hispanic ones. He ultimately developed a deep understanding of the Anglo nation, its great achievements, and its flaws, especially its expansionist goals and determination to become the hegemonic power in the hemisphere. He died a martyr three years before the Spanish-American War, in which Spain lost control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines and the United States became the centripetal empire in the Caribbean Basin. But for Martí the Spanish-speaking Americas were always in great danger, at the mercy of a nation eager to lay hands on them.

Despite the imbalance of power created by U.S. imperialism, however, Martí hoped to avert confrontation. He suggests in his essay that the weak Latin American nations should seek not enmity but pride. Since they are not capable of fighting the United States with force, their upset has to be achieved through creativity. “One must give the best every opportunity, so that the worst will be laid bare and overcome.”

Clearly, in his mental map, Martí does not envision a translinguistic utopia from Alaska and Greenland to the Pampas and the Caribbean Basin. That overarching concept—encompassing English-, French-, Portuguese-, Spanish-, and Creole-speaking areas—is of more recent origin. Yet Martí is its source of inspiration.

Latinos are a byproduct of the age of empire: transplanted, uprooted, in a process of constant reinvention. The first representatives of this uprootedness are the indigenous tribes who went head-to-head with the conquistadors, explorers, missionaries, and other imperial envoys, such as Pánfilo de Narváez, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, and Hernando de Soto, in the territories that now are part of the southwestern United States. From the early sixteenth century on, the encounter between these two civilizations, Spanish and aboriginal, established the foundation on which Latino life would eventually be built. These beginnings preceded, by

a substantial amount of time, the arrival of the Puritans on the *Mayflower*, in 1620. Indeed, despite the frequent misconception, Latinos are not invariably immigrants or the children of immigrants. In Florida and the Southwest, it was not that the Latinos came to the United States. As is shown in the work of Southwestern writers such as Eulalia Pérez, Andrew García, and Eusebio Chacón, it was the other way around.

Approximately three centuries after the arrival of the Spaniards, the people of Latin America became feverish for independence. In a domino effect that started in 1810 and continued unabated for many decades, these people severed their ties with the Iberian Peninsula and established autonomous republics. But at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States sought to compete with Europe for world domination and became the reigning force on the western side of the Atlantic. In this effort, the nation was guided by the Monroe Doctrine (President James Monroe's proclamation, in 1823, that European nations were not to interfere in the activities of the Americas and the United States would reciprocate by not interfering in the affairs of Europe) and the concept of Manifest Destiny (the belief, articulated during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, between 1829 and 1837, that the United States was destined to expand from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast). Under President Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick policy, his corollary to the Monroe Doctrine—"Speak softly and carry a big stick," Roosevelt explained in 1901—the U.S. invaded Mexico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, and it annexed Puerto Rico, which remains an unincorporated territory under commonwealth status.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a series of stunning political and economic shifts—following from conquests, annexations, and migrations—relocated millions of people from these Iberian-colonized places to the United States. Over time, this unrest has resulted in the formation of a minority that, more than a hundred years after Martí, is the nation's largest. The writer who surfaces from this sea of changes exists at the borders of Hispanic and Anglo worlds, a hybrid vessel navigating within the English and Spanish languages, literarily between the American poet Walt Whitman (Martí's contemporary), whose *Leaves of Grass* sang to the American multitudes, and the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, our

contemporary, whose *Cien años de soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude) presents a fictional Caribbean family at the mercy of major natural, historical, and magical forces. The Latino writer inhabits a liminal zone, a Latin America *inside* the United States.

Martí understood the agony of exile and felt the meaning of *diaspora*, or the dispersion of a group of people from their homeland. Yet what Martí did not and perhaps could not have conceived of is the ultimate richness and complexity of Latino literature, birthed from the confrontation of the two worlds he believed should be kept apart, separate but respectful of each other. During his time in the United States, in the late 1800s, the country had more than 61 million people, of which around 250,000 were Latino. Could Martí have imagined that within a century, roughly one out of every seven U.S. citizens would be of Hispanic descent? Could he have foretold that in parts of Texas the Latino population would outnumber that of any other ethnic group? That Mexican cuisine, Caribbean music, and South American folklore would become essential cultural ingredients north of the Rio Grande? To visualize these scenarios, Martí would have needed to accept that the English-speaking United States could become part of a more inclusive, less either/or *nuestra América*. More than a century after Martí wrote his piece, the Americas are inhabited by 900 million people, roughly 14 percent of the world population. These people belong to diverse groups. One out of every five Mexicans in the world, one out of every two Puerto Ricans, and one out of every ten Cubans now lives north of the Rio Grande.

The Latino writer now resides at a unique junction of traditions: Latin American literature, Anglo American literature, and minority literature. The writer no longer develops in a monolithic culture, but absorbs many cultures during the course of a life. For instance, Jaime Manrique was born in Barranquilla, Colombia; immigrated to the United States in his adolescence; switched from Spanish to English; and is at once a Colombian writer, a U.S. writer, and a Latino writer, reacting to creative impulses from several places. Like Manrique, the Mexican-born critic Luis Leal, the Cuban-born poet Lourdes Casal, the Dominican-born writer Franklin Gutiérrez, and many other Latino writers moved to the United States to look for a more open intellectual atmosphere or even to escape political persecution. Surely Martí would

have perceived the irony in this reversal of fortunes: The same “formidable neighbor” supporting the tyrannical regimes that propel some writers out of their homelands also opens its doors as a safe haven.

Some exiles return home when the political situation in their home country stabilizes, but many never do. The latter is the case for hundreds of thousands of Cubans who left the island soon after Fidel Castro’s takeover in 1958–59. While waiting (hoping) for Castro’s downfall, they became full-fledged residents, even naturalized citizens, of the United States. Cuban-exile writers in the U.S. include Heberto Padilla, Dolores Prida, Reinaldo Arenas, and Carlos M. N. Eire. And, of course, Martí himself. What would Martí have made of the effort to see him as a cornerstone of the foundation of a Latino community he could not visualize? Is Martí a U.S. Latino in spite of himself?

Each intellectual who moves to the United States as a political exile faces a unique set of circumstances in creating a self-identity. Mariano Azuela, a Mexican doctor and author of novels such as *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs, 1915), lived on the north side of the Rio Grande during the Mexican Revolution (1910–21). This temporary stay did not significantly affect his worldview. José Vasconcelos, who in 1914 (during the presidency of Eulalio Gutiérrez) was briefly Mexico’s Minister of Education and went on to become chancellor of the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the founder of the Ministry of Public Education, also spent time in exile north of the Rio Grande. Yet he always saw himself as *mexicano*. Likewise, the Argentine writers Manuel Puig and Luisa Valenzuela and the Chilean writers Gabriela Mistral and José Donoso always identified primarily with their home countries, despite years of living as exiles in other places. Among the countless intellectuals and artists from the Hispanic world who passed time in the U.S. as students, teachers, lecturers, diplomats, and tourists are Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Luis Muñoz Marín, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Jorge Mañach, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Mario Vargas Llosa, Octavio Paz, and Elena Poniatowska. None considered himself or herself Latino. Among those who do, Latino identity has not always been a matter of choice. The writers Rosario Ferré, Isabel Allende, and Ariel Dorfman might have embraced a Latino identity as a survival strategy, to make themselves comfortable in their new habitats, or as a sign of empathy or

solidarity with a downtrodden population with which they share cultural and linguistic commonalities. But José María Heredia, Eugenio María de Hostos, Felipe Alfau, and Reinaldo Arenas never contemplated such a decision, and they might even have been opposed to the idea since it suggested a rejection of their roots. These writers' inclusion in the Latino tradition is less a matter of self-identification than of the way literary culture has considered each author's work.

Unlike the exiles, however, most of the Latino writers in the United States today have little relationship with the south-of-the-border educated elite. Whatever strings connect them to the elite are often tenuous. These Latinos are part of the immigration route, legal and otherwise, through which people look for *un futuro más estable*, a better life elsewhere. Because the Latin American economies have often been unstable over long periods, people move north seeking *el sueño americano*, the (often elusive) American dream.

Just before the census was taken in 2010, the Latino minority in the United States was estimated to be around 48 million. Almost seven out of every ten of its members are of Mexican descent, but the rest are from or trace their roots to all over the Americas. This minority "group" is therefore extremely diverse in terms of national background, class, ethnicity, race, religion, and political affiliation. It is more unified in terms of age: Compared to other Americans, the Latino community is young, a majority being between 17 and 25 years of age. In addition, far more than other immigrant groups, Latinos have through generations retained their connections with their homelands through language, in this case through *el español*, which was present in the lands that now make up the United States even before the arrival of the *Mayflower*. In fact, as a result of demographic growth, Spanish has become the unofficial second language of the United States. Parts of Miami, Los Angeles, and New York seem Latin American because of the amount of Spanish spoken there: After Havana, Miami has the greatest concentration of Cubans in the world; after Mexico City, Los Angeles has the largest Mexican population; and there are almost as many Puerto Ricans in New York as there are in San Juan's metropolitan area.

Latinos differ from earlier immigrant groups in four crucial ways. In shaping people's lives, these differences have helped create a uniquely Latino literature. The

first difference is the closeness of home. An Italian immigrant in the 1880s, for example, needed substantial amounts of money and time to travel to Italy. An Ashkenazi Jew in the 1880s would not have been able to visit the homeland, in Russia's Pale of Settlement, because of anti-Semitic violence there. For Latinos, particularly those on the U.S.-Mexico border, returning home can be dangerous, but generally it is quick and relatively inexpensive. Air travel has contributed to back-and-forth migration and thus to stronger transnational connections between most U.S. Latino groups and their countries of origin. The second difference is that the waves of immigration from Spanish-speaking countries have not been limited to a particular period. No sooner have Guatemalans ceased moving north, for example, than they are followed by Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Colombians, and Venezuelans. Key countries such as Mexico continuously generate immigrants. The third difference lies in the immense influence of the media on Latinos and, in turn, their growing influence on the media. The global movement of information and capital reinforces confused notions of "home" as, more than ever before, technology enables immigrants to live, virtually, both in their home countries and in their adopted one.

The fourth difference is arguably the most significant. Large portions of the Southwest (parts of present-day Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming; all of California, Nevada, and Utah) were sold under pressure by the Mexican government under General Antonio López de Santa Anna to the United States in 1848, as part of the settlement of the Mexican-American War. Some descendants of the Spanish-speaking population in the region see the subsequent "occupation" of lands previously owned by Mexico as a form of colonialism. A similar notion exists in Puerto Rico. After the U.S. annexation of the island as a result of the Spanish-American War, through the Jones Act (1917), Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens—a prelude to the island's becoming a commonwealth (known in Spanish as the *Estado Libre Asociado*), in 1952. As U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans have many of the same rights and privileges as stateside citizens. Yet because the United States exercises territorial jurisdiction over this still-unincorporated territory, many island Puerto Ricans perceive their status as second-class. Despite their U.S. citizenship, they are not allowed to vote in presidential or congressional elections,

and thus they do not choose the ultimate authorities in any decisions affecting their future. Mainland Puerto Ricans, too, are subject to discrimination and remain part of an underprivileged minority. Like the American Indians, the Puerto Ricans ask why they are not treated equally when they are citizens by birthright.

Therefore it is not surprising that the Latino literary tradition is characterized by a deep sense of rupture. That same sense, for African Americans, was defined by the scholar W. E. B. Du Bois as one of “double consciousness.” As an exile, Martí knew of such displacement. In 1869, the “apostle of Cuban independence” was arrested for sedition against Cuba’s Spanish rule; he was, as the government at the time put it, “repatriated” to Spain, and he then traveled to France and Guatemala before arriving in New York City in 1880. But the displacement of many Latino writers is less related to globe-trotting. It comes from racism, anti-Hispanism, and the feeling of being an alien in one’s own homeland, the feeling of constantly being pushed and shoved because of one’s skin, one’s background, and the language one speaks. René Marqués, in his controversial essay “The Docile Puerto Rican” (1962), meditates on the psychological impact of U.S. colonialism on the Puerto Rican people. Some Latinos in the United States see themselves as an extremity of Hispanic civilization living under occupation. For others, the Latino minority is an integral part of the American mosaic, yet one that suffers from ingrained racism and xenophobia.

But not every writer sees darkness instead of light. Latinos’ double consciousness and the plurality of views exhibited in their worldview is the result of the historical journey they have traveled, individually and collectively. Many Latinos value their divided selves, which allow them to exist in multiple states of being at the same time. They are Latin Americans. They are U.S. citizens. They identify by their individual national backgrounds. More than anything else, they are their own creations, whether they struggle with or celebrate their complex identities.

This self-creation surfaces in the search for wholeness. In “Our America,” Martí described that wholeness rhetorically, but since the 1980s it has been seen as representing the community-building that Latinos must do. Before then, the various groups within the Latino minority, differentiated by national backgrounds, most often perceived themselves as traversing their own paths. For example, Chicano

letters—whose moment of political determination came during *El Movimiento*, as the Chicano Movement was known during the civil rights era—were defined as works by writers of Mexican ancestry living and writing in the United States, such as Ernesto Galarza, Fray Angélico Chávez, Daniel Venegas, Mario Suárez, and Sabine Ulibarri, some of whom wrote their work in the preceding decades. While authors such as the Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz were included in anthologies of Chicano literature, and while literary critics such as Luis Leal invited readers to think of the colonial period in Latin America as part of Mexican American history, historical figures of the colonial period, such as Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, were often left out. Nor did the movement embrace *vendidos*, “sell-outs” such as the nineteenth-century California and Texas politicians Antonio María Osio y Higuera and Juan Nepomuceno Seguín. The links between Chicano literature and that of Puerto Ricans on the mainland, from Bernardo Vega to Nuyorican “street” poets such as Miguel Piñero and Miguel Algarín, were contemplated in journals such as the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, but the impact of those links was limited. And vice versa: Mainland Puerto Rican writers did not necessarily see themselves as connected with Chicanos or, for that matter, with their Cuban counterparts in the United States.

In other words, before there was an entity called the Latino literary tradition there were parallel national literatures by writers from the Spanish-language Americas living in the United States. The Latino minority did not yet see itself as a unit. With the Chicano Movement opening things up, the decisive change took place in the 1970s, as multiculturalism came to the fore. Economic, political, and cultural forces consolidated Latinos from all nations and ethnicities, urging them to become a whole just like African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups. The media played an important role, especially Spanish-language TV and radio, which stressed a feeling of commonality across class, geographic, and cultural divides within this continuously growing demographic. The Latin music market enlarged exponentially. The first anthologies presenting cross-national Latino literature belong to that time. And politics was crucial in that local, state, and federal leaders embraced the idea of “a Hispanic electorate.” The term *Hispanic* was adopted by the U.S. government on September 12, 1969, when President

Richard M. Nixon signed into law the celebration of a Hispanic Heritage Week. The term was then consistently used in government documents as an umbrella category for Spanish-speakers, regardless of their ethnic and national backgrounds. In 2000, the U.S. Census began using the term *Latino* as well.

The search for wholeness manifests itself differently in each writer, but Latin America serves as a rich well of possibilities. When regional differences are downplayed to the point of being inconsequential, camaraderie increases among Latino artists. Thus, breaching geographical borders within the Spanish-speaking world, the Puerto Rican poet Martín Espada embraces the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda as a model, while the Cuban poet Pablo Medina selects the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca as his precursor. The Chicana writer Ana Castillo sees the Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar as an inspiration, while the Cuban novelist Cristina García draws upon the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Publishers confirm, even “prove,” this unity by marketing a book such as Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) to a wide, non-ethnically delineated readership. In advertising terms, *Latino* has become a buzzword. The 48 million members of the minority are not necessarily viewed as Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and the like. They are Latinos one and all.

Arguably the most significant concept defining a pluralistic Latino identity, one stressed by writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Richard Rodriguez from the eighties on, is *mestizaje*, understood as the physical, social, religious, political, and cultural miscegenation of foreign and indigenous elements. The notion of *mestizaje* goes back to the colonial period, when the crossbreeding between Spaniards and native people in the New World resulted in the formation of a third ethnicity: *el mestizo*. The non-English-speaking Americas were born of this encounter.

However, at the time of the European arrival in 1492, the lands were unevenly populated, so *mestizaje* was more evident in certain regions than in others. Around the River Plate, for instance, in what is today Argentina and Uruguay, there were few Indian tribes. And into the countries that touched the Caribbean (Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil), as well as in Mexican states such as Veracruz, Guerrero, and Morelos, the Spanish and

Portuguese Crowns brought black slaves from Africa. From the transformed racial mix predominantly on the western side of the Atlantic emerged mulatos, zambos, and other hybrid ethnicities.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Mexican politician, educator, and philosopher José Vasconcelos infused the notion of *mestizaje* with a political drive. In his book *La raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race, 1925), Vasconcelos suggested that *la raza de bronce*, the Bronze Race, which is how he described *mestizos*, would dominate the globe in the near future, not only demographically but culturally. Anzaldúa, in her seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), explores the idea:

José Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color*—la primera raza síntesis del globo. He called it a cosmic race, *la raza cósmica*, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At the confluence of two or more generic streams, with chromosomes constantly “crossing over,” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making.

Mobility + mutability + renewal = inclusivity. Latinos: people of many colors, unified by a single language: Spanish. Latinos: part *gringos*, part *indios*, part black, and fully hybrid. *La unión hace la fuerza*: For Anzaldúa, the act of mixing races is also an art. To engage in miscegenation is to embrace a vision of unity.

Rodriguez takes a similar approach to *mestizaje*. He is fascinated by Vasconcelos's idea of the Bronze Race, but adapts it to the U.S. racial context. Between the social constructs of whiteness and blackness, through which the nation has defined itself since its inception, brownness is a third option. Brown, not bronze. The concept comes from the Chicano Movement, in the 1960s, when as part of the struggle for civil rights, César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and other leaders of the United Farm Workers, as well as intellectuals such as the *Los Angeles Times*

reporter Rubén Salazar and the lawyer Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, meditated on brownness as a metaphor for collective identity.

In his book *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002), Rodriguez emphasizes brownness as an alternative to the black/white dichotomy:

I write of a color that is not a singular color, not a strict recipe, not an expected result, but a color produced by careless desire, even by accident; by two or several. I write of blood that is blended. I write of brown as complete freedom of substance and narrative. I extol impurity.

I eulogize a literature that is suffused with brown, with allusion, irony, paradox—ha!—pleasure.

I write about race in America in hopes of understanding the notion of race in America.

Brown bleeds through the straight line, unstaunchable—the line separating black from white, for example. Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction (the ability of language to express two or several things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once).

It is that brown faculty I uphold by attempting to write brownly.

Impurity + contradiction + renewal = freedom. For Rodriguez, miscegenation has given place to a new self that reaches beyond the old U.S. paradigm of race, a self that, in its uncleanness, is emancipated in a way impossible to find anywhere else.

Just as the concept *mestizaje* refers mostly to particular regions in the Spanish-speaking world, so brownness is limited to Latinos whose ancestors are from Mexico and Central American countries, where *mestizos* play a fundamental role in the shaping of culture. The *mestizo* category is somewhat foreign to Cubans and Puerto Ricans. For them, blackness—African heritage—is more familiar. But Anzaldúa and Rodriguez do not want to be too specific about color. They want to discuss hybridity broadly and theoretically. For *them*, the image of an *América completa*, a whole America, is about finding a common ground for people of diverse backgrounds and upbringings.

José Martí advocated the idea of equal dignity and harmony among the races, but he viewed life as either/or, defined by separation and by keeping one culture

at bay from another. The Latino writer today, living in a more complex, challenging time and realizing that polarity is no longer suitable, prefers both/and. In the in-between, wholeness is not about choosing between the north and the south. From this perspective, a new Latino nation has been born in the United States, a country within a country, *gringa* and *latina*, broad and limitless—black and white and brown and multicolored.