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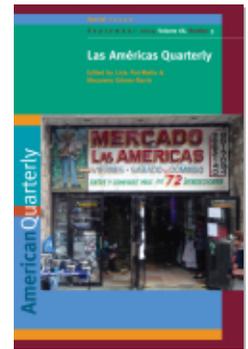
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Barrio Affinities: Transnational Inspiration and the Geopolitics of Latina/o Design

Johana Londoño

Scholarship on the cultural production of Latina/os has underexamined the role of designers, even as urban design, architecture, and graphic design are increasingly marketed to appeal to Latina/o tastes in housing, commercial packaging, branding, advertising, and other consumer goods. Academic disinterest may stem partly from a fine arts perspective that usually portrays design, especially the commercial kinds, such as graphic design, as a less cerebral, transcendent, and rarified visual field, linking design's roots in applied arts to an instrumental, capitalist approach to creative practice where the client or message rules, not the creator's conceptual brilliance. Though some artists are also designers, and some designers assume an artistic prerogative and eschew the client for their own conceptual interests, design of mass production is by and large emblematic of the "death of the author" and thus in contrast to the dominant conceit of the fine artist as genius.¹ Designers seldom sign their creations. Authorship is often concealed in portfolio compilations, hard-to-come-by award announcements, or design magazines that circulate almost exclusively among professionals or knowledgeable amateurs. Communication between the audience and product or message, rather than the identity of the creative, is central to the field.

To this complex arena of expectations for what designers can and should do enter Latina/o designers whose creative output is—by will or the client's demand—linked to cultural identity. Why and how these designers express identity while most designers continue to operate under a modernist premise that design should follow a pseudoscientific method to solve visual problems that communicate at a universal level—trumpeting the very universality that has subsumed Latina/o and other minority cultural difference—is the question underlying this article. Part of the answer has to do with the role of place in Latina/o identity formation and cultural expression and the desire to represent the barrio and render it culturally valuable. This is what Raul Homero-Villa terms "barriological" practices: the cultural and social affirmations of the barrio that Latina/o scholars and activists have promoted since the Latino nationalist

movements of the 1960s and 1970s to counter dominant perceptions of the barrio as blighted and devoid of praiseworthy culture.² These barriological practices took barrio life and culture as a source of inspiration to provide its very residents with new spaces of enjoyment and pride, such as Mexican murals and Puerto Rican casitas.³ This article argues that in the field of design, desires for representing Latino-majority places are emerging and transforming the spatial and cultural contours of long-standing barrio cultural politics.

Discussions of place and identity should be familiar to a design history in which the nation or region prominently figures. Graphic design history books are organized by categories such as French art nouveau, Russian constructivism, De Stijl (Dutch for “the style”), and Swiss design, and current practitioners and marketers promote, among others, Scandinavian design, Italian design, and Brooklyn design. Latina/o, Latin American, Asian, African, or African American designs, however, are rarely provided with the legitimacy of a place-based style in graphic design literature. In Philip B. Meggs’s classic *History of Graphic Design* (1983), a chapter titled “The Asian Contribution” is reduced to ancient paper and printing technologies in Asia prior to the year 1150, and African and Latin American designs are limited to revolutionary propaganda of the mid- to late twentieth century.⁴ Among modern architecture styles alone, European nationalisms such as De Stijl, the Glasgow School, and the Nordic tradition, and Latin American nationalisms, such as the Spanish colonial and Mexican and Brazilian modern architecture, are among the most popular styles.⁵

Several designers are calling for ethnic-specific design to fill the lack of Latina/o representation in design history and using the barrio in lieu of a nation for this design production.⁶ Urban planners and architects have emerged at the forefront of this Latina/o-based design, proposing related but incommensurate practice-oriented categories such as the urban planner Michael Mendez’s “Latino New Urbanism,” the urban planner James Rojas’s “Latino urbanism,” and the designer Henry Muñoz’s “mestizo regionalism.”⁷ Proponents of these models believe that by elevating the contributions of Latina/o culture in cities, especially the marginalized barrios that conventional urban place-making has ignored, these practice-oriented urbanisms will diversify the built environment and represent the needs of a growing Latina/o population. The models are certainly contemporary, professional manifestations of barriological practices.⁸ Yet these models, especially Latino New Urbanism and its typologies of Latino urban living, are also aestheticized developments that reify cultural stereotypes and are at a distance from the actual diversity and vivacity of the barrio.⁹ Thus, such designs risk merely reflecting a multiculturalism that plays into the ethnic atomization convenient for current neoliberal marketing strategies.¹⁰

These new Latino urban design categories, together with the more mundane and ubiquitous commercial activity of graphic design, demonstrate that there is a growing desire to visualize Latina/o culture in what the art historian Hal Foster has called today's "world of total design" in which multiple design disciplines subjectivize an expanding array of commodities,¹¹ adding aesthetic value that targets segmented markets. Interest in designing Latinidad may continue to grow if the numbers of self-identified Latino designers and architects rise as they did in the past six years to 9.9 percent and 7.9 percent, respectively. Although slight, these increases are notable, since in both instances Latina/os are the largest population of color in professions dominated by non-Latina/o whites (85.4 percent of designers and 90.5 percent of architects). And in urban planning Latina/os are the second largest at 1.5 percent, while non-Latina/o whites are 90.9 percent.¹² But because there are no predictable links between a designer's ethnicity or race and her designs, a better indicator of Latina/o-themed design may be the growth in this consumer market, whose estimated US population of about 58 million in 2015 is supposed to have a purchasing power of \$1.5 trillion.

How is graphic design situated in this larger context of an emerging Latina/o-themed design field? By focusing on graphic design—the discipline with the most ephemera and intangible designs and spatial circulation—this article seeks to highlight how the mass-production and aesthetic hierarchies central to the larger field of design alter the historical politics of gathering inspiration from Latina/o majority places. In general, analyzing design also has much to teach us about how creative producers navigate the multiple places and translocalities of Latina/o identity in the Americas and in turn affect visibility, here defined as a contested terrain of power dynamics that images exhibiting Latina/o identity negotiate.

The graphic design and typographic work of Pablo Medina foregrounds the issues that arise out of place-inspired design production. Medina, a Cuban Colombian, New Jersey–raised founder and head designer of Cubanica, a design studio located in downtown New York City, is assistant professor of communication design at Parsons The New School for Design. When we met for an interview in 2008 Medina told me that as a graduate student at the Pratt Institute in New York in the 1990s he turned to Latina/o-themed design to assert his Latina/o identity.¹³ At the time, he was living in northern New Jersey and drawing inspiration from street signs created by a Cuban sign painter in the poor, working-class barrio of Union City (fig. 1). By the time Medina and I spoke, however, he sought a balance between Latina/o cultural representation and a modernist aesthetic that would change the representational



Figure 1.

An example of a street sign created by Leonard. This one is located on Bergenline Avenue in Union City, NJ. Compare lettering on this sign to fig. 2.

teaching at Altos de Chavón School of Design, an affiliate of Parsons, and presenting and exhibiting his design work.

The creative output that results from Medina's experiences across the Americas is an example I use in addition to interviews and archival research to explore how cultural value accumulates differently across racialized and classed places, influencing how designers express their ethnic identity and affinity for barrios in contrast to long-standing barrio cultural politics and leading ideals of universal communication. In what follows I provide more details about the hierarchies of cultural value in each place that Medina draws inspiration from: Union City, New Jersey, and Altos de Chavón and its surroundings. I end by examining how the sociogeographic particularities of Medina's creative process propose a geopolitical framework through which to think about the alternative

mode through which he would affirm the barrio. Medina attributes his newfound appreciation for modernism to a visit to the Dominican Republic, where he was

visual knowledge that an emerging trend in Latina/o-focused design can add to an increasingly ubiquitous but not-as-yet-diverse field of design.

Drawing Inspiration from Union City, New Jersey

Various factors led Medina to mine the street culture of Union City, a *barrio* located in northern New Jersey across the Hudson River from midtown Manhattan, for design inspiration. First, by quoting the colorful built environment of this northern Jersey *barrio* in his designs, he sought to affirm his Latina/o culture and contrast it to the modernist aesthetic dominant in the design training at the Pratt Institute in the 1990s. Though exploring the built environment for creative purposes is a common educational exercise for design students, Medina's exploration specifically targeted the expression of cultural difference to diversify the professional field. The need to express an ethnic identity through design was particularly poignant given that the graphic design profession in the United States at the time was majority, non-Latina/o white, a demographic that has hardly changed.

A second reason Medina chose to simulate Union City's street culture in his typography was to preserve the sign paintings fading from the built environment, as neon signage and digital prints became the norm.¹⁴ To counter the depreciation of hand-painted lettering, Medina extracted from street signs a Latina/o aesthetic of brightly colored, imprecise forms that could be reproduced in other contexts.¹⁵ Though his designs seem to feed the main thrust in Latina/o cultural studies and practice that perceives the *barrio* as a cauldron of cultural activity worth sustaining, Medina's typefaces in actuality propose another relation between cultural production and the *barrio*. In contrast to early modes of cultural production that took *barrio* life and culture as a source of inspiration to provide its very residents with cultural empowerment, the mass production of design and its entry in professional and commercial circuits exceeds the audience of the *barrio*. In Medina's designs, preserving street culture leads to displacing it from its usual environment for the presumed longevity that an expanded circulation in a design economy may offer.

Medina's *barrio*-inspired typefaces, "Cuba," "Vitrina (store window)," and "North Bergen" (fig. 2),¹⁶ were exhibited in the first Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum's Triennial in 2000. Displayed in the exhibit's "reclaimed" section, the typefaces were juxtaposed with other postmodern designs that reframed found objects.¹⁷ Soon postmodern trendsetters who sought artistic expression in type rather than the rigidity that modernism imposed on communication—such as the designer David Carson, well known

THE THROAT IS TIGHT,
PALM TREES
IN THE GUT, EL BORDE
DE LA MENTIRA:
MEMORY
ALL THE SAME

Figure 2.

Cuba, above, is one of Pablo Medina's typefaces included in the Smithsonian exhibit. Text for this type specimen is excerpted from the poetry of Pablo Medina Sr.

material. Wendy's fast-food restaurants used *Cuba* for their "hot sauce" packaging, and other designers and companies purchased the typeface via online font databases.

But the street signs that Medina admired were not so prized in Union City. A few years after Medina created his typefaces, neoliberal policies of urban development were making Latina/o culture invisible and the everyday life of Latina/os in the city ever more precarious. Though the city's urban elites, fearing corrosion of the city's tax base brought on by midcentury "white flight" to suburban Jersey, at first celebrated the arrival of white Cuban exiles fleeing the Cuban Revolution of 1959, by the 1990s, as Medina walked the streets of Union City looking for inspiration, the city's growing racially and nationally diverse Latina/o population was greeted coldly. These later migrants, composed of Afro-Cubans, Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and many other Latin

for his design of the rock-and-roll magazine *Ray Gun*—were collecting the typefaces. Companies eager to appeal to Latina/o consumers also began to use the typefaces in their marketing

Americans, entered a postindustrial city in which service and retail sectors that depended on the commercial appeal of cities would play a large part. City elites responded to these shifts by subjecting cultural expression in the built environment to ever more policing to suit the perceived needs of these sectors.

One of the major state programs that arose to assist private business, the Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ) of New Jersey,¹⁸ directed its appetite for renewal at the facade of a flea market that had a sign similar to that from which Medina drew inspiration (fig. 1). To lure consumers away from outlying malls to Union City and appeal to middle-class tastes that may generate economic growth, the UEZ urged business owners along the main commercial strip to homogenize their facades and create a suburban “Main Street” look with white sans serif lettering on burgundy and hunter green awnings. Some of the tactics that administrators used to sanitize the environment were less direct. The UEZ specifically asked the market’s owner to remove the sign affixed to the building’s exterior, claiming that it might fall on passersby. Locals I spoke with, however, argued that the UEZ wanted the sign removed because they found the figure portrayed on its left side—an elderly Afro-Cuban man dressed in *guajiro* clothing who is an icon of Santería—particularly disconcerting. At first the market owner complied with administrators and moved the sign to the interior of the business, but eventually his belief in the icon’s ability to attract money and good luck led him to reposition it on the facade. The UEZ has not asked the owner to move it again. Not all retailers were as resilient; many have in fact been pressured to permanently change their storefronts, which they argue has negatively affected their business.

Neither has Leonard, the Cuban painter of the market’s sign and most likely of the very sign that inspired Medina (it is unclear because the latter had no signature), fared very well with changes to the city’s commercial avenue. Locals spoke of Leonard as an elderly man with health troubles whose business was kept afloat with the help of his Cuban business-owning friends. One Cuban business owner who knew that Leonard had learned the skill in Cuba asked him to paint several murals advertising goods in a style reminiscent of Cuban storefronts. But the diminishing number of Cuban-owned stores and the rise of urban policies that target seemingly unkept and unappealing built environments along the city’s main avenue are narrowing the cultural impact that hand-painted lettering may have. Moreover, they are limiting Leonard’s ability to eke out a living from his skills. When I phoned Leonard to schedule an interview, his nephew refused on the basis of Leonard’s deteriorating health, but pressed me to commission a sign, an indication of Leonard’s dire circumstances and of a shrinking ethnic niche.

The UEZ's disciplining of a Latina/o-majority built environment shows that the street signage Medina admires is unacceptable to urban elites who aspire to gentrify cities, especially those on the periphery like Union City whose location in the New York City metropolitan area makes it most suitable for gentrification by professionals instead of the creative type who may be more inclined to value such landscapes. In this context of aspirational gentrification, hand-painted signs are racialized symbols of the barrio and thus deemed of little value to elites anxious to cater to the presumed tastes of professional gentrifiers. In other settings, however, such typography is thought to attract a variety of people (not specifically Latina/os) who want an authentic and trendy consumer experience. The popularity of Medina's Cuba typeface in Wendy's packaging shows as much. Such tastes also develop among upwardly mobile, young, and creative consumers (i.e., hipsters) for whom classed and racialized Latina/o facades are refashioned into trendy storefronts. A walk through the gentrified areas of Manhattan's Lower East Side or Williamsburg, Brooklyn, reveals that when Latina/o culture is displaced from poor settings and detached from racialized, impoverished bodies, and culturally specific iconography, it too can connote a desirable cool factor.¹⁹

The differing values generated in the places in which hand-painted lettering appears point to a struggle over the politics of visibility. The geographic specificity of this struggle shows that place, and the socioeconomic demands made on it, influences how Latina/o culture is visualized in the urban setting. Several scholars have framed the power dynamics of this struggle for visibility as a dichotomy: the visual upholds hegemonic culture, yet it counters hegemony with resistant images.²⁰ But as Shu-mei Shih reminds us in her study of Sinophone cinema, such dichotomies ignore how some resistant images travel through hegemonic channels of visibility, for instance, through the "capitalist appropriation and artistic political creativity [that] can occur simultaneously in different combinations."²¹ Medina offers insight into the forms that immigrant spaces visualize, in particular, elucidating how these populations are vulnerable to the erasure brought on by urban development and gentrification. However, his visual mediation between street culture and professional design results in a commercial image at a distance from the barrio.

Medina's visual mediation is bittersweet, since in displacing this culture to other contexts for the sake of preservation, it shows how design is also complicit with a capitalist process of co-optation where value does not extend to the initial site or its creator. The inequity in cultural valuation that the design process points to is worth examining. The redistribution of barrio culture for the enjoyment of the upwardly mobile economic class parallels the unequal

processes by which revanchist urban policies evacuate the poor, racialized spaces of their cultural and social vitality.²² The inclusion of hand-painted lettering in the circuits of a capitalist logic of reproduction foretells the loss of cultural sustainability in the barrio. Is this the price for producing countervisualities that may diversify—through the parameters of liberal multiculturalism—a white-dominant world of design?

There is no disputing that Medina's designs are well intentioned and his creative process is par for the course in design schools, but it is also clear that the ethics of barrio inspiration for mass production are murky. Questioning such ethics would require revisiting the ethical debate that has framed the cultural production of fine artists who draw inspiration, and economic and cultural capital, from poor, marginal places. Usually this debate is formulated along the lines of the relation of the creative to the place of inspiration or the ability of the creative to give a helping hand to the people and places that inspire. Sebastião Salgado's documentary photography of starving children and displaced populations has repeatedly been the topic of the latter, while hip-hop artists circulate within the debates of the former. Here, I want to address the ethical debate that arises out of a barrio-inspired cultural production where the bestowment of honors on authorship and cultural value are indeed not fairly distributed and weigh toward designing up with multiracial pretenses. Jacques Rancière explains that the redistribution of the sensible (or the aesthetic experience) through cultural institutions of power, such as museums, produces new publics besides that from which the sensible stemmed and may in turn produce new political subjectivities.²³ When viewed positively, barrio culture, by traveling through various spaces, including the mediations of professionalized graphic design and advertisement, may attract new audiences and thus challenge the very social order of who gets to see and experience barrio culture. However, will Medina's typefaces accrue enough value in these elite professional spaces to be seen as normative parts of the landscape that urban elites in Union City can then recognize as worthy? To justify its existence, the co-optation and displacement of the aesthetic—the distribution of the sensible—bets on the impact of a distribution of value. However, the redistribution of the sensible may not alter the redistribution of power that shapes culture in those places that inspired design production. It is likely that the racial and class dimensions of visibility, and the limits imposed on it by urban development and gentrification, will continue to devalue barrio-based cultural production. The circulation of the barrio image through its hand-painted lettering does little more than diversify commercial spaces reconfigured to accommodate neoliberal multiculturalism.²⁴ Then again, given the lack of diversity and possessive

investment in a dominant aesthetic in graphic design's history this is not a contribution to take lightly.

Drawing Inspiration from the Dominican Republic

Though the hand-painted lettering in Union City is often found in Latin American cities, it was while working and living within the Dominican Republic that Medina began to question identity-based design. In the Dominican Republic Medina met Latin American designers whose ideas about design coincided with their socioeconomic status and class aspirations and state economic development imperatives. Medina was particularly struck by how much his admiration for a set of photographs portraying cables chaotically strung between poles in a barrio of Santo Domingo differed from other designers' tastes and aesthetic judgments. While the cables captivated Medina, the photographer of the images, a Mexican designer, said, "[They] are just a mess. They're dysfunctional, they're a symbol of lack of development."²⁵ The teleological assumptions about "messy" barrios embedded in the design prejudices in this quotation are precisely the associations with barrios that Medina's cultural production seeks to undo.

Such contrasting perspectives between Latina/o and Latin American designers frequently surfaced in my interviews with other Latina/o graphic designers. Latina/o designers were often enamored with the symbols and rich resonances of barrio culture, but they found that their Latin American counterparts were often less enthusiastic, especially when it came to socioeconomically poor barrios. To Latin American designers, barrio-inspired designs signify the glorification of poverty, rather than aesthetic inspiration. Moreover, design inflected by street culture is pushed aside because taste for such "lowbrow" design conveys a lower socioeconomic status. One Mexican graphic designer I interviewed on a separate occasion described such design as the work that community college graduates do, not alumni from prestigious design schools such as himself.²⁶ While these voices do not, of course, represent all Latin American graphic designers, they are indicative of the class biases of a profession within Latin America that is anxious to show that it can compete with a Eurocentric history of graphic design in which universal communication rules. In this Latin American context in which a hierarchy of aesthetic value situates poor urban cultures at the very bottom, modernist aesthetics for cultural production are at top.

This attitude is partly due to Latin America's middling position in a global design industry where design production has historically concentrated itself within the global cities of the North. Perhaps this derogatory stance toward

street culture will change as design plays a bigger role in Latin American economies and the region welcomes a so-called creative class.²⁷ The cover of a Colombian design magazine, published during the global financial crisis of the late 2000s, suggests as much when it declares “*el diseño es la vía*” (design is the way) and in small print asks, “Wall Street?” If the implication is that the creative industries provide more stable sources of economic growth than financial speculation seems overdrawn, then the reality is that neoliberal global competition over manufacturing coincides with the proliferation of design schools and programs in Latin America’s largest economies.

The development of the design school at Altos de Chavón corresponds with industrial shifts on the island and is an early reminder of how design’s cultural value has been rooted in geopolitical differences. Initially a cultural center in the city of La Romana, Altos de Chavón School of Design was founded in 1983 by the Bluhdorn family of the Gulf & Western Corporation with the assistance of Parsons, its educational affiliate. In the 1960s Charles Bluhdorn, president of Gulf & Western, which up to that point had focused on auto parts manufacturing and was only beginning to diversify holdings by acquiring such companies as Paramount Pictures Corporation, bought the South Puerto Rico Sugar Company’s long-established sugar mill company town in La Romana. There, Gulf & Western took advantage of the repressive conditions set up by the US invasion of 1965 and the subsequent US-friendly presidential administration of Joaquín Balaguer to quell union activity and create Zona Franca Romana, the first privately run free trade zone in the Dominican Republic.²⁸ By the 1980s, as if to provide a paternalist counter to its exploitation of locals, the company began to invest in local social and cultural institutions. The school was the centerpiece of a larger village that Bluhdorn constructed a year prior to the school’s opening. Planned by the Dominican architect José Antonio Caro and designed by Roberto Coppa, an Italian architect and Paramount studio set designer, the village, a medieval re-creation with cobblestone streets, a coral-stone church, and an amphitheater, is a reminder of how investment capital dresses itself in hegemonic landscapes. Shortly after the school’s inception, Gulf & Western sold most of its property in La Romana to the Cuban Fanjul Brothers, owners of Domino Sugar, among other companies. Under this new leadership, tourism has come even more to the fore, bringing with it the art and design industries that provide the bohemian ambience essential for marketing the area. Today the village is the setting of the luxurious resort, Casa de Campo, as well as exclusive restaurants, shopping, and entertainment destinations, and a hub for art and design professionals.

The area's developers clearly had a Western outlook on urban design, but like most tourist locales in a developing country, Altos de Chavón also trafficked in local, racialized difference, albeit a highly selective form thereof that encompassed other creative disciplines. In the early planning phase, David C. Levy, executive dean at Parsons, wondered if the site would be best suited for landscape painting, which according to him would surely benefit from the environment's "exotic touch."²⁹ Even though Levy stressed that the last thing the school should do is serve a tourist economy, the crafts section of the first course bulletin emphasized indigenous pottery, a favorite among tourists: "The Taino Indians, who inhabited the southeast plains of the Dominican Republic and the banks of the Chavon River, were the first master craftsmen of the area. Continuing in their tradition, students will develop skills that prepare them for the production of one-of-a-kind pieces or multiples."³⁰ The Dominican Republic's large Afro-descendant population and culture and traditions, however, go unmentioned in the entire bulletin and in subsequent bulletins. Also left unaddressed in the correspondence that circulated between administrators during the school's initial years, or in the school's promotional materials, are the impoverished communities that surround the school, the very sites in which Dominican culture may form and be sustained.

The lack of confidence in Dominican design production precluded the creation of a first-rate art and design school. Creative people, Levy argued, thrived in metropolitan cities, not villages. Besides, he noted, "the restricted population base of the island . . . is not large enough to produce a substantial amount of first quality talent in a diversified range of art areas . . . local industry and/or the Dominican 'art market' can only absorb and support a very small number of artists, designers and craftsmen."³¹ Because of the perceived dearth of talent on the island, and the small location, Levy thought a good strategy would be to offer a two-year college curriculum that incorporated

various design disciplines, conceived for young people living in the Dominican Republic and, to some extent, drawing students from other parts of Latin America as well. This would serve a local industrial or cottage-industry base. Such a program should be staffed by first-rate professionals and, though such people are available, they will not be "stars." Designers must work within a very fast-paced industry and can rarely survive outside of major cities. Even a cursory look at design activity in Europe and America clearly demonstrates that the most creative designers, in all fields, are not supported by even medium-sized population centers. Such places as New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Zurich, Milan are the places to look for them—not Kansas City and not the Dominican Republic. So your faculty must consist of youngish and moderately successful people who are competent but haven't begun to "make it." Such designers often welcome the chance for a change of pace and Altos is

perfect. But they must not stay beyond two or three years. Their professional careers depend upon their reentering the mainstream.³²

Levy's partiality toward major cities of the global North reinscribes a coloniality of power and projects an alterity onto design culture in the Dominican Republic that sets it apart from the "mainstream."³³ This othering sets limited expectations for Dominican designers and has the potential to frustrate their possibility of being at par with "star" designers. Although there is no indication that Medina taught at Altos de Chavon because he was less than a "star," his teaching there is a recent occurrence of this revolving door of professional design instructors coming from the NYC campus and reflects a neocolonial theory of cultural production in which the direction of knowledge and power flows from the metropolitan centers of the North to the peripheral South. This travel reinforces the idea that cultural agents from the North, even those who have just "begun to 'make it,'" have more value than those in the Dominican Republic.

This cultural order renders the school to be a Dominican outpost of US design pedagogy.³⁴ Parsons helps organize the college curriculum, and student work strives to re-create modernist notions of sophistication and derivative forms of postmodern cool. This knowledge and aesthetic hierarchy may filter into the island's design output as a whole, especially given that, "from its inception, the School of Design has been dedicated to providing a solid professional education which equips graduates to compete in national, regional and international design circles . . . and to the goal of training designers who will serve as the creative lifeblood for new Caribbean Basin industries."³⁵ By the 1990s, as design industries developed around the world, the need to compete was even more palpable, as seen in a school bulletin for 1993–94: "The goal is to endow students from the moment of graduation with the professional capabilities necessary to serve in the global industry of design."³⁶ Global competition between Latin Americans and the North would not be easy, let alone among Latin Americans, as a Mexican design publication claims: "In Latin America we are confronted with a barrier of economic interests that close off a path toward a Bolivarian project of unification. Designers are trying to navigate in this sea of strong winds where some nations float and others sometimes drown."³⁷ The thirst to compete might augment the role that Eurocentric notions of (modernist-defined) "good design" will play in the island's design profession. Of course, the extent to which European and US design trends infiltrate Latin American design will be uneven across the region, varying with each country's history of graphic design and artistic legacy. Places where artists have long

sought to incorporate cultural difference in the fine arts, such as Mexico, may be more inclined to do so in design. Nonetheless, as Latin American design industries try to bolster their role in the global economy, long-established aesthetic hierarchies make for easy design solutions among those aspiring to compete for international awards, prestigious jobs, and clients.

In Altos de Chavón elites created an environment in which cultural value resides and emanates from a European and white-dominant US design industry. Despite this context, Medina's turn to a modernist aesthetic should not be construed as him obeying these aesthetic hierarchies or reduced to a cop-out from his earlier barrio-inspired designs. Rather, his engagement with a modernist visual vocabulary was the result of a serious consideration of a careerist attitude among Latin American designers and ideas of what "good design" should be, the built and social environment that surrounded him in the Dominican Republic, and the identity-based design that had shaped his design practice in the United States. In light of all this, Medina began to doubt the representational urgency of a Latina/o-identified design, ruminating that "style only goes so far when you are talking about an aesthetic that needs to fulfill specific necessities, especially in Latin America" where "you really need to communicate" and "we need stuff to work. We need signs to get from point A to point B. We need electricity to work, we need a grid, we need light, we need to not have power outages on a regular basis."³⁸ Upon seeing Dominican communities that had scarce economic resources, Medina concluded that there was a profound need for cultural, political, economic, and social modernity that transcended the importance of representation based on the barrio's built environment. "Style" he repeated, "became very thin,"³⁹ suggesting that instead of picturing the barrio typographically, design should express the lessons that the socioeconomic deprivation of the barrio may offer.

After his time in the Dominican Republic, Medina created the "Medina Gothic" typeface that, like his previous typefaces, is sold through his studio's website (fig. 3). Trying to avoid bold and colorful Latina/o cultural stereotypes, the black-and-white type specimen shows a utilitarian type with soft, round corners. Moreover, unlike his previous type specimens, this one demonstrates the type's applicability to large bodies of text, a further sign that this new modernist type was meant to be "legible" to a variety of consumers and thus more widely appreciated.⁴⁰

The impulse to resort to a modernist aesthetic to gain recognition has roots in the aesthetic hierarchies that a legacy of European dominance has imposed on Latina/o and Latin American expression. Such hierarchies shame designers into thinking that ethnocentric concerns are narrow-minded and too place-

Remember that
There is a poetry of light, a house wren on the branch,
and the mountains
glowing
Poetry of civilization men who think the
with words like bullets.

Figure 3.
Medina Gothic typeface by Pablo Medina. Text for this type specimen is excerpted from the poetry of Pablo Medina Sr.

specific to be widely legible, when in fact a modernist aesthetic also has its places of origin, too. Even though design history pinpoints Europe as the authentic source, the location of modernism is a topic of

contention that has been fruitfully debated in postcolonial research in which the site of modernity and modernism is as much the colonial periphery as the metropolitan North. By drawing inspiration from inside the Dominican Republic, Medina unsettles authentic narratives of modernism's geography. His take on a modernist aesthetic does not completely disengage with cultural difference, nor is it a turn to Eurocentric modernism. Medina's modernist aesthetic aims to be symptomatic of the classed places he experienced, not the reproduction of visual hegemony.⁴¹

Barrio Affinities and the Geopolitics of Latina/o Design

The world order, as imagined by a history of design, concentrates power in metropolitan centers of the global North, which in turn subsume much of

the cultural difference of the global South. For the global South to be heard, or more specifically *seen*, designers often emulate and uphold the superiority of the visual vocabulary of European and US trends. For designers of color who live in the global North, adopting multicultural expectations may suffice when clamoring to be recognized in elite cultural spaces, such as museums and artist-friendly gentrified places, but not in racialized barrios struggling to get by. As shown in Union City and the Dominican Republic, the transnational places that inspire design face extensive policing and cultural value hierarchies that deny the expression of low-income, racialized communities.

Medina's design production travels these circuits and negotiates the aesthetic hierarchies that elitist concerns impose on places. Medina's resistance to the dominant forms of cultural value he interacts with in northern New Jersey and the Dominican Republic has produced different visual manifestations, but his work is guided by a common way of seeing the places that inspire his design. The class, racial, and geographic positions that inform Medina's way of seeing stem from a position of affinity with marginalized spaces and their people. This way of seeing, and the position from which he looks, is best described as a committed "barrio affinity," a scopic regime that values and frames the marginal.⁴² It is this barrio affinity that makes the poor spaces Medina finds in the Dominican Republic and Union City resonant and stimulating for his creative activity. And it is this barrio affinity that aligns Medina's cultural production with a legacy of cultural production in US Latina/o barrios that was created for the sake of the barrio. In this vein, regardless of the visual outcome, Medina's cultural output is continuing a legacy of barrio affirmation. However, this design production also departs from the usual barrio cultural production. Its departure is of the same kind evident in recent Latina/o urban design, such as Latina/o New Urbanism and the less politically driven, Latina/o-themed shopping malls, whose barrio affinity, critics show, masks the exploitation of barrio culture and its people for the sake of creating sanitized versions of the barrio for consumption.⁴³ Graphic design's more expansive reproducibility in the context of mass-market imperatives exacerbates this issue, highlighting how design may yield an abstraction of place and culture that creates a Debordian spectacle distanced from the signifier even as it tries to represent a population. Because of its mass reproducibility, design moves beyond the place confines of a Latina/o "spatial imaginary" in which the barrio is the site of origin and the beneficiary of Latina/o cultural politics.⁴⁴ The disciplines of design spatialize and aestheticize the barrio and its culture, dislocating a barrio image from its racialized and classed places; this is the geopolitics of Latina/o design.⁴⁵

What theorization is needed to understand how Latina/o designers of multiple disciplines morph places into an image? A significant epistemic location to consider when analyzing Latina/o design is precisely the cognitive space of barrio affinity that Medina occupies. More than what is materially visualized, which is always already reified, this cognitive space shows how designers intend to create new aesthetic methodologies that produce alternative, class-based visualities to a Eurocentric and white-dominated field of design. It is also useful for critiquing those designs that conceal their economic interests in barrio simulacra and a rhetoric of representing the needs of Latina/o communities. A barrio affinity groups together designers who, regardless of outcome, evince a desire to continue barrio cultural production in a context in which design's aesthetic hierarchies entrench themselves and shift across the globe and a design industry expands the visualization of Latina/o identity and culture. For Latina/o urban studies, this is most significant, for it shows that designers' barrio affinities are the latest stage in a trajectory that has moved from a place-defined barrio cultural production to a terrain of power dynamics in which designers negotiate their affective and class affiliations of place in order for their designs to be visible in an ever more designed world of consumption.

Exploring design production in relation to barrios across the Americas is also a reminder that in addition to the barrio being dialectically produced by discriminatory US urban policies and the Latina/o grassroots organizing of the 1960s, it is important to think of the socioeconomically poor barrio as a contemporary hemispheric place whose cultural values and reproducibility are variously shaped by global policies, elitist interests, and design culture, professionals, and industries. As Gina M. Pérez, Frank A. Guridy, and Adrian Burgos Jr., the editors of *Beyond El Barrio*, argue, it is time to question the US national framework that has shaped so much academic knowledge on the barrio.⁴⁶ The argument is especially relevant given that design is increasingly shaping barrio culture across the hemisphere. To name but a few additional urban design projects in Latin America, the cognitive space of barrio affinity has given rise to internationally lauded architectural developments in the economically impoverished barrios of Medellín, Colombia, and the bicycle paths that put urban planning in Bogotá, Colombia, on the global stage. Studying the geopolitics of this latter urban design or that of Medina's graphic design across *las Americas* expands the national cultural borders and political economy that have historically shaped the study of design. Design is contemporary global capitalism's dominant cultural production of space and the visual, and therefore the crucial work that lies before researchers, and that American studies

scholars are especially equipped to do, is to examine how the barrio affinities of designers actually represent for the marginalized populations that make up the barrio. How does design reimagine the visuality and spatiality of marginalized subjects and places for the market? Indeed, as design sparks a global stage in barrio cultural production, it behooves researchers of this phenomenon to maintain the class critique that enabled early Latino scholarship to positively change the discourse on barrios and imagine possibilities for a more economically just and culturally welcoming space for marginalized barrio communities.

Notes

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1. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Roland Barthes*, ed. Graham Allen (New York: Routledge, 2003), 63–78. Some architects, such as Frank Gehry, have moved beyond this anonymity to become "starchitects."
 2. Raul Homero-Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). See also *El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education*, (Oakland, CA: La Causa Publications, 1969), www.nationalmecha.org/documents/EPSPB.pdf (accessed July 20, 2013).
 3. For more on casitas, see Luis Aponte-Pares, "What's Yellow and White and Has Land All Around It? Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios," *Centro Journal* 7.7 (1994–95). For more on Chicano murals, see Tim Drescher and Rupert Garcia, "Recent Raza Murals in the U.S.," *Radical America* 12.2 (1978): 15–32; and Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicano/Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).
 4. Philip B. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design* (1983; rpt. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992), 20–28. Recent compilations on Latin American graphic design and typography have been published, including TwoPoints.net, *Latino Grafico* (Berlin: Die Gestalten Verlag, 2010); Julius Wiedemann and Felipe Taborda, eds., *Latin American Graphic Design* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2008); and Jordi Villafranca, *Typo Latino* (Barcelona: Index Book, 2012).
 5. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980; rpt. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007).
 6. Graphic designers I interviewed in the late 2000s voiced an interest in a Latina/o design category to parallel the national categories listed above, though little has materialized. When constituted, a Latina/o category would surely need to include the rich history of graphic art and printmaking among Latinas/os, such as Chicano posters, and draw connections between the printing traditions of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, to name a few that have been understudied in design history. See Chon A. Noriega, *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California* (Santa Barbara, CA: University of Art Museum,

- University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002); Shifra M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
7. James Rojas, "Latino New Urbanism: Lessons from the Southwest," paper presented at "Latino New Urbanism: Lessons Learned from the Southwest," panel at the Congress for New Urbanism Conference, Austin, TX, April 4, 2008; James Rojas, "Latino Urbanism in Los Angeles: A Model for Urban Improvisation and Reinvention," in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, ed. Jeffrey Hou (New York: Routledge, 2010); Michael A. Mendez, "Latino New Urbanism: Building on Cultural Preferences," *Opolis: An International Journal of Suburban and Metropolitan Studies* 1.1 (2005): 33–48; "Mestizo Regionalism," *Muñoz Wigodsky Architects*, 1–19, Latino/Hispanic Archive, Smithsonian Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York.
 8. Villa, Barrio-Logos.
 9. Erualdo R. González and R. P. Lejano, "New Urbanism and the Barrio," *Environment and Planning* 41 (2009): 2946–63; Clara Irazábal, "Beyond 'Latino New Urbanism': Advocating Ethnurbanisms," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 5.2–3 (2012): 241–68; David Diaz, *Barrio Urbanism: Chicanos, Planning, and American Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
 10. Londoño, "Latino Design," 487–509.
 11. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and other Diatribes)* (New York: Verso, 2002).
 12. The designer category used in these tabulations is broad and may include graphic designers, commercial and industrial designers, fashion designers, floral designers, interior designers, merchandise displayers, set and exhibit designers, and other designers such as jewelry designers and memorial marker designers. The data chosen to represent architects appear on the census as "Architects, except naval." Also, the data shown are for employed populations. For more details, see the Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity from the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics from the Current Population Survey, www.bls.gov/cps/. Between 2007 and 2013 the overall employed design population decreased by sixty-eight thousand; besides Latina/os, Asians were the only others with an increase, from 5.6 to 6.9 percent. During this period Latina/o architects increased from 7 percent of total employed architects in 2007 to 7.9 percent in 2013, while non-Latina/o whites grew from 86.7 to 90.5 percent. Decreases during this period were seen among Asian (from 8.6 percent to 5.8 percent) and black architects (from 4.4 percent to 1.6 percent). Percentages for Latina/o urban planners are not regularly available in Census data because the total employed population is less than fifty thousand (in 2007 there were thirty thousand employed urban and regional planners; in 2013 there were twenty thousand).
 13. Pablo Medina, interview with author, New York City, September 3, 2008.
 14. William Bostwick, Design Journeys Archive, Pablo Medina, 2010, www.aiga.org/content.cfm/design-journeys-pablo-medina#8 (accessed July 15, 2010).
 15. On the use of a colorful aesthetic in the work of Latino designers, see Londoño, "Aesthetic Belonging."
 16. North Bergen is a city in northern New Jersey adjacent to Union City. Like the latter, North Bergen also has a large Latino community.
 17. Diane Goldsmith, "Design without Borders: A Cooper-Hewitt Museum Exhibit Looks at a New Style—the Hybridization of Architecture, Products, and Graphics—and What It Bodes for the Future," *Inquirer* (Philadelphia), March 10, 2000.
 18. A low 3.5 percent sales tax is one of the incentives UEZ provides local businesses. For more about the UEZ in New Jersey, see "Business Services: Business and Shopping in Union City," www.ucnj.com/services/business-services (accessed July 20, 2013).
 19. Arlene Dávila has shown this to be the case for East Harlem as well. See Dávila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
 20. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
 21. Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 13.
 22. Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
 23. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000; rpt. New York: Continuum, 2006).

24. Londoño, "Latino Design."
25. "A Conversation between Pablo A. Medina and William Morrissey," poster, New York City, February 28, 2005.
26. Pablo Medina, interview with author, New York City, September 18, 2008.
27. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: Revisited* (2002; rpt. New York: Basic Books, 2012); and Arlene Davila, *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
28. Joseph B. Treaster, "Dominicans Await Sale by G. & W.," *New York Times*, July 4, 1984, www.centralromana.com.do/hist_galfotos.php; Fred Goff, "Fruits of the Invasion: U.S. Interests in the Dominican Republic Ten Years Later," "Smoldering Conflict: Dominican Republic 1965–75," special issue, *North American Congress on Latin America, Latin America and Empire Report* 4.3 (1975): 3–12; and Central Romana Corporation, "History and Photo Gallery," www.centralromana.com.do/hist_galfotos.php (accessed July 19, 2013).
29. Correspondence between David C. Levy and Dominique Bluhdorn and Stephen D. Kaplan, May 28, 1981, New School Archives and Special Collections, The New School, New York (hereafter cited as NSASC).
30. Altos de Chavon catalog for 1983–84 academic year, New School course catalogs, bulletins, curricula, NSASC.
31. Correspondence between David C. Levy and D. Bluhdorn and S. D. Kaplan, August 31, 1981, NSASC.
32. Ibid.
33. Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (2000): 533–80.
34. More recently, Parsons also influenced the formation of the new Program in Communication Design at La Universidad el Bosque de Bogotá, a private university in the Colombian city that attracts design students from low-income and middle-class families ("Diseño de la comunicación: Entrevista con Juan Pablo Salcedo," *Proyecto Diseño*, February 11, 2014, www.proyectod.com/2014/02/11/disenocomunicacion/).
35. Altos de Chavon catalog for 1986–87 academic year, New School course catalogs, bulletins, curricula, NSASC.
36. Ibid.
37. Reinking Harte and Associates, "Y que tal si nos globalizamos?," *Boletín Quorum* 3.10 (1992): 15, Publications Box: The Latino/Hispanic Design Archive, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York; my translation.
38. Medina, interview.
39. Ibid.
40. I am indebted to Professor Welby Ings of Auckland University of Technology and Professor Sydney Shep of Victoria University of Wellington for making this observation during the Typography Symposium at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, June 2013.
41. Elsewhere I have described how Medina's design connotes a class-conscious modernism that parallels the architectural minimalisms of recent Latin American architects working with impoverished communities. See Londoño, "Latino Design," 503.
42. On scopic regimes, see Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay, 1988).
43. For an example of an outdoor shopping plaza and its cultural representations, see Clara Irazabal and Macarena Gómez-Barris, "Bounded Tourism: Immigrant Politics, Consumption, and Traditions at Plaza Mexico," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 5.3 (2007): 186–228.
44. This use of a Latino spatial imaginary could be compared to the "white spatial imaginary" and "black spatial imaginary" that George Lipsitz describes in his account of racial segregation in varied geographic spaces across the United States. See Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
45. The geopolitical framework relevant to Latin/o American design inspiration across the Americas moves beyond the purview of political science and foreign policy to also encompass geographic and political dimensions of global cultural production and representation. My use of geopolitics echoes that of cultural critics such as Fredric Jameson and cultural geographers such as Gerard Toal and John Agnew, in that it points to the relation between place and culture. See Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World-System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and Toal and Agnew, "Introduction: Political Geographies, Geopolitics and Culture," in *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, ed. Kay Anderson and Mona Domosh (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 456.
46. Gina M. Pérez, Frank A. Guridy, and Adrian Burgos Jr., eds., *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).