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## Latining America

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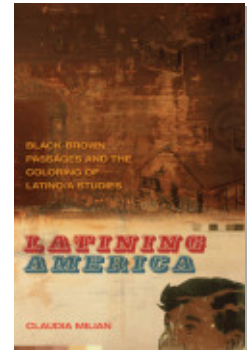
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## EPILOGUE

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We all know what happened next. The @ became a supernova of the digital age and part of our daily lives.

— ALICE RAWSTHORN (2010)

*Latinizing America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* has endeavored through the economies of blackness, brownness, and dark brownness. These colorings have marked the necessity for an au courant set of questions and language, as these interrelated Latinities have resonances within and beyond Latino, Latina, and African American domains. Latinoness, Latinaness, and African Americanness are not for “members of the club” only. Their residues and sojourns provide a critical energy for new articulations, signs, color lines, and assemblages of bodies that pass through the apodictic character of U.S. Latino and Latina brownness and dark brownness as well as U.S. African American blackness. Through Latinities, this monograph worked toward a distinct paradigm for Latino/a studies, one that continually seeks to make meaning out of Latino and Latina deletions and oversights. Latinoness, Latinaness, and Latin-Americanness are being positioned and repositioned differently, particularly through the mobility of subjects as well as these categorical designations. And so I conclude not with a complete Latino and Latina picture. My closing observations are put in an open-ended way that is receptive to the incertitude of Latin@ — Latin-at, let us call it — futures. But this Latin@ hereafter is not as far down the road as we might think. It is living here and now.

Perhaps no contemporary cultural production encapsulates the vagueness and instability of Latino and Latina futurity better than Nickelodeon’s

animated television series, *Dora the Explorer*.<sup>1</sup> Much like its Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) predecessor, *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?*, *Dora* familiarizes children with language, geography, history, and global cultures.<sup>2</sup> My course here is not to analytically rehearse how “Nick” gets U.S. Latinidad wrong through this cable show because the character is a corporate construction and worldwide commodity that enacts the market’s perceptions about Latinos and Latinas.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I want to rethink Dora Márquez, the protagonist whose surname is an homage to Gabriel García Márquez, as a developing *idea* that harbors Latino and Latina entanglements and out-of-placeness. Latinos and Latinas are a Latin surplus of transitory action and mutability, reflecting new worlds and discoveries outside the Latin milieu of Latin America. Dora is at the cusp of old and new worlds. Like Latinos and Latinas, Dora, the Latin@ explorer who is exploring the globe, is an embryonic reflection of what up-and-coming Latinoness and Latinaness entail. She presents an active world of passages, where her Latin-at-ness (Latin@ness) has to be located in different forms and with new peer groups along the way. Dora’s national composition is vague, as her deracination ought to be. The issue is not what type of Latina Dora is (as in where she is from) but rather, as Paul Gilroy would say, where she is *at* (1991).<sup>4</sup> As an animated figure, is Dora a “real” Latina or a signifier of indefiniteness and obscurity of what, in effect, Latinness in the United States fundamentally encompasses?

Thus, my question is about not only where the mercurial Dora is but also where do we conclusively find Latinos and Latinas? Semiotically, perhaps the closest yet unintended written Latinity I have seen — one that is, in many cases, facilely inserted within Latino/a studies to signify gender inclusion — is the collective, millennial-friendly moniker “Latin@” and its nascent ilk: Chican@, mestiz@, and Afro-Latin@.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary uses of Latin@ can be assessed through a number of published endeavors evoking these terms. Witness, as examples, Sandra Soto’s *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (2010); the edited volumes *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Jiménez Román and Flores, 2010); *Latin@s in the World System: Decolonization Struggles in the 21st Century U.S. Empire* (Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres, and Saldívar, 2005); and Damián Baca’s *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing* (2008). When I first encountered this cryptic term, I found it unbecoming and too digital in its stylistic awkwardness and stuttering unpronounceability. Latin@ also

seemed poorly suggestive of a networked social space that duplicated the real world's Latinidad to cyberspace, albeit with the same Latino/a tendencies involving a homogenous brown identification and established group hierarchies.

But the “at,” or the approximation sign behind Latin@ — Latin-at — pushed me to seriously interrogate where the Latins were really *at* in U.S. Latinness and Latinaness and in other ambits.<sup>6</sup> I initially deliberated if there were actual beings behind that symbol and waited, with bated breath, for a Latin@ movement with subjects politically claiming *Latin@ rights*, Latin-*at*-ness, or such Latinities as the ones attended to herewith. The working parameters of *Latin@ America* have pushed me to revisit and reappraise my initial impressions. Latin@, I would now like to proffer, inadvertently keys into my aims, submitting Latin as the bodily and cultural space of the “at.” To rephrase: the Latin behind Latin@ stands for a three-dimensional space where the @ — at — is being activated in a myriad of ways in our daily lives. Latin@ can also exercise, to make use of Antonio Viego’s insight, a resignification of “temporality, not just race and ethnicity; it should affect how we will tell the time and the history of the Americas in the future” (2007: 121).<sup>7</sup>

Not unlike the perplexing presence of Latinos and Latinas in the United States, “No one knows for sure” when the @ “first appeared,” as the *New York Times* reports. The @’s origins are equally nebulous (Rawsthorn, 2010). But my evocation of Latin at-ness is not about flexible, interminable movement or the quest for authentic roots. Neither is it about Nick’s little bibliophage, Dora; her best friend, Boots; and her talking backpack, unfaillingly luring us into her worldly plans with the travel song, “Come on, vámonos. Everybody let’s go.” Dora is certainly a starting point for the American conflation of Latin-America and the massive cornucopia of Latin@s (Latin-ats). The looseness of Dora’s worldly minded “@-ness” allows us to see imperfections and contradictions beyond Nickelodeon’s conjuration. The topic for debate is not so much how the network profits from Dora merchandise. What is at issue is the exploration of the hidden stories of Latinness and Latinaness and how their forgotten lives must come into play within the playful theming of Dora.

Seen from Izel Vargas’s iconological approach, the scattered pieces of this Latin@ness fall under the *Business of Illusion* (2008), as his painting’s title emblemizes. The mixed media collage invites purposeful queries: What are the costs of accessing such illusions in the Global North? And who pays for

Izel Vargas, *Business of Illusion* (2008). Photo by Benjamin Berry. Used by permission of the artist and photographer.



these costs? The pop iconography advancing Vargas's composition is commanding in its palimpsestic palate. His visual art portrays mundane manifestations of life, physical vulnerability, and cultural consumption: a Dora popsicle, a comic book/graphic novel snapshot, an armless border patrol agent, coyote/teeth/walking tracks, and a black backdrop somberly taking us to what exiled Cuban writer Zoé Valdés so keenly attempted to capture under the literary heading *El dolor del dólar* (The Pain of the Dollar).<sup>8</sup> What might this pain in dolorous dollars be under this gendered representation? The asymmetrical "partnership" between developed nation and underdeveloped migrant is produced by three different experiences of ensnared, or even cornered, "realities": innocence (i.e., Dora), fantasy (i.e., a pop nugget somewhat akin to a *fotonovela* image), and cruelty of civil society (i.e., border patrol agent). They signal selfhoods demarcated by capitalism. Unfulfilled childhoods and adulthoods become the price and pain of personal progress. This dollarized price plays out every industrialized moment of our lives.

Yet it is the seeming omission of violence that grabs one's attention, exposed through torn, bloodied arms. How were the Customs and Border Protection officer's arms cut off? This unexplained affliction also infers social trauma, physical force and laws that limit crossings, and the illusion of almost being. CBP's guardian of American borders meets head-on with *embajaDora*, a new envoy confronting and negotiating the U.S. American @-ness that eludes so many Latinos and Latinas.<sup>9</sup> This Dora has a covered but mobile face. She accords Latinos and Latinas the multisited @s and Latin dispersals that are already upon us. Vargas's accredited agent, *emba-jaDora*, moves imperfectly and dolorously in the existential sense. But the artist's lens allows us to be moved by this Dora that may one day decompose too, since popsicles, after all, dissolve. The public body of the Vargasian Dora follows a different script than Nick's inner workings of her @-ness in the world. The plurality and multidimensionality of *embajaDora* go where Nickelodeon's "perfect" Latina is not supposed to travel. She is the restless spirit of Latin@ effusion of people making mobile "homes" of belonging through the circulation of ideas, different geographies, and new social contexts.

If we care to look at things differently, we may take up the substratum of Dora and the possibilities of the @ in Latino and Latina daily lives. They direct us on how to think about where Latino/a discourse is *at* as well as how to dwell in the scholarly terrain currently dubbed "Latino/a studies." Latino/a studies in the U.S. Global South augments the struggles of naming and narration. The observant reader may have heard so far a consistent (and inconsistent) phraseology in my referencing throughout this project of the umbrella panethnic terms — or the rugged and ubiquitous panorama of the unequal articulatory balance of — Latino and Latina, Latino/a, Latin@, and Other Latino. Each September, during Hispanic Heritage Month, an array of articles surfaces in the popular press about which U.S. ethnoracial term is the most appropriate to use: Hispanic or Latino. The divergence in these labels is so great that even Wikipedia has a cursory entry about the "Hispanic/Latino naming dispute." I will refrain from contributing my proverbial two cents to the endless flow of processual explanations found in this tireless debate seeking a solidifying truth about — and yet another standardization for — who "those" people are. I briefly allude to it because as these pages come to a close, we must take to task the discursive form that Latinos and

Latinas acquire within academic inquiries framed under what is being called either Latino/a — or Latina/o — studies.

I am interested in how the field calls and accounts for its @-ness through the rubric of the slash found — and the new world conveyed — in Latina/o or Latino/a.<sup>10</sup> As unfolding in the U.S. academy, the term Latino/a breaks with the public and political tradition of the Hispanic/Latino split. The general story of how Latino and Latina is being mapped and theorized within Latino/a studies is forming a new space, a distinct subject, a “Latino/a” that moves differently than the previous Hispanic or Latino characterizations. Throughout *Latining America*, my enunciation of Latino and Latina attempts to point to the labor of attending to the complexities of both gendered categories and experiences. My use of Latinos *and* Latinas strives to show how they are historically inhabited and how they negotiate spaces for a collective cause or singularity. In this manner, I remove the elision of the semiotic slash of Latino/a and shift to the labor signified by the constant practice of the conjunction and — bringing the ardor, agony, and perseverance of theoretical emancipatory work to the fore. I put forth the qualifier Latino and Latina when I refer to individuals and apply Latino/a studies when citing the academic field and its articulation of Latinos/as.

Still, a theoretical undertaking of the topos and praxis of the *meaning* of the slash has been relatively missing in Latino/a studies. I bring it up because I find it compelling as an occupant of the *Latina* space to know not so much *what* to call myself within this political membership but also *how* to call myself. It is imperative to grapple with how to pronounce a cultural and analytic term advancing a scholarly field that also looks unreadable in written form: Latino/a. Let me be clear. I do not turn against the use of Latino/a. I am fully cognizant of the pressing necessity of the ethical inclusion of gender and of the emergence of denominations like Latino/a, Chicano/a, and mestizo/a.<sup>11</sup> But it is important to critically evaluate what is actually included or omitted through the slash — or the process of “o/a-ness.” Consult the various essays in Latino/a and Chicano/a readers. There is a body of scholarship that includes these very terms, but that does not give careful and sustained attention to gender analysis. The result is the reification of a Latino subjectivity that often leaves masculinity unquestioned, but what happened to the expressive and relational “a” in Latino/a? Latina, as a category and mode of experience, is erased, and the gendering process of the Latino male is not con-

sidered either. In all likelihood, a reader who wishes to learn and peruse more about *Latinas* will have to turn to a Latina reader. We paradoxically return to the name “Latino” and the “unknowing” of Latinas — even as Latino/a-ness is evoked.

The ostensibly equitable inclusion of gendered Latino and Latina bodies appears, on the surface, to resolve the other discursive erasures and marginalizations of Latino/a studies. To understand the possibilities, transiency, and routes of Latinoness and Latinaness, one needs to labor through the signification of Latino/a studies and where it is (or is not) going. The realm of language raises some significant propositions with serious implications concerning the idea of Latino and Latina authenticity. If the common historical background of Latinos and Latinas is channeled and contained within the parameters of “Latino/a,” we must also reflect on its cognitive function. It is rare to come across, programmatically speaking, gender-inclusive names of institutional departments in the United States akin to the designative purpose of the “Latino/a” in Latino/a studies. To illustrate: official departmental qualifiers, in English, like “African American men and women’s studies” or “history and herstory” are uncommon. I turn to these descriptors because they suggest a tension in what is becoming a canonical institutional vocabulary for the status of subjects whose being, although written in equalizing slashes, provides an enunciatory challenge insofar as such words and subjects do not exist. A Latina would call herself as such, not “Latino/a.” Latino/a is disembodied. The term pushes the slashed identities toward ideological terrains that render these Latino/a “bodies” as dislocatable and unmappable to both the U.S. and Latin American landscape. This compressed structuring of Latino and Latina reveals itself as antithetical to the Latino/a project.

We are witnessing the birth of cross-cultural, worldly Latin@ subjects that are constantly and unevenly in flux. Latino/a is at the interstices of national and continental distress. Latin@s allow for new mappings — Latinities — that are not always cohesive and that are oftentimes blurred. There is more than one Latin representation and Latinness at work. Latin@ness repeatedly calls additional Latins in Latined patterns and locations, disrupting the brown borders of Latinidad. The @ engendering Latinness, coupled with a sustained interrogation of the unnamable or linguistically clumsy paths Latinos and Latinas are taking, form part of my vision for molding the new directions of Latino/a studies in the Global South. Equally important, too, is a query about



what to do with slashes, *at* signs, and degrees of otherness within a rigid ethnoracial classification, especially as a multitude of Latins pass through it.

Latino/a studies in the Global South is coming into being in fragmented and, at times, unpronounceable forms. The slash, the *at*, and the *this* and *that* of the other demonstrate that this is a field that is in-the-making, much like the Latino and Latina subject that is not fixed or settled. We must acknowledge this, and as the @ in *Latinat* invites, we must not be paralyzed by it. Slashes and *at* signs are far from trivial. These symbols communicate a genealogical trajectory of the field—an intellectual history. They should be treated as spaces of inquiry, possibility, and reconfiguration. The @, above all, is a Latin router, haltingly enunciating yet transporting us to a panoply of fragmented Latined lives.