

## Perspective

# Why We Like to Call Ourselves Latinas

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the complex and subtle reasons why many people of Spanish-speaking ancestry—both Latin Americans and Spaniards—like to call themselves “Latinos.” Among other things, this word, coined by the Mediterranean countries to resist Anglo dominance in the 19th century, is currently being used by people of Spanish-speaking ancestry in the United States to express ethnic pride. Thus, the choice of the term “Latinos” over “Hispanics” moves the focus from a pan-ethnic, historical identity to contemporary struggles for equality and the racialization of people of Spanish-speaking ancestry in the United States.

**Resumen:** Este manuscrito trata de las complejas y sutiles razones por las que muchos individuos con antepasados hispano parlantes (tanto de América Latina como de España) se complacen en llamarse “latinos.” Entre otras cosas, esta palabra acuñada por los países mediterráneos para resistir la dominación inglesa en el siglo XIX, es usada hoy por gente de origen hispano parlante para expresar orgullo étnico. Por lo tanto, la elección del término “latinos” sobre “hispanos” cambia la perspectiva desde una identidad histórica y pan-étnica, a las luchas contemporáneas por la igualdad y a la racialización de las personas con antepasados hispano parlantes en los Estados Unidos de América.

**Keywords:** Latino; Hispanic; racialization; Black Legend; manifest destiny

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**In an influential article**, the distinguished journalist Frank del Olmo (1985) criticized the use of the term “Hispanic,” which he found imprecise and ugly. He favored “Latino,” a term preferred by a considerable number of people of Spanish-speaking origin. Although the name controversy has quieted down somewhat since, del Olmo’s arguments are still being echoed today by such renowned writers as Sandra Cisneros, who believes that Latino connotes diversity, brownness, and Latin America, whereas “Hispanic,” a term coined by the Census Bureau, signifies uniformity, Whiteness, and Spain (see Fears, 2003). Where does this distinction come from, and why is

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the term “Latino” so favored, whereas the term “Hispanic” is considered imprecise and ugly?

“Hispanic” sounds like “hispánico,” defined by the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy as “pertaining or relative to Hispania” (the Latin name of the Iberian Peninsula and the source of “España,” the Spanish name for Spain or “pertaining or relative to the countries of Hispanic America” (*Real Academia Española, Diccionario de la Lengua Española*). “Hispánico” is usually applied to objects or to groups of people, not to individuals, who are called “hispanos.” We say “los pueblos hispánicos,” but we don’t say “Pedro y Lucía son hispánicos.” We say “Pedro y Lucía son hispanos.” We believe that the feeling of imprecision and ugliness identified by del Olmo (1985) is real and comes from the fact that “Hispanic” appears to be a translation, not of “hispano,” but of “hispánico,” which is not a word Spanish speakers normally associate with individual human beings; thus producing a sensation of uniformity and loss of personal identity. Using the Spanish term “hispano,” instead of a problematic English translation that sounds too much like “hispánico,” might have been a better choice for the Census Bureau.

Does “Hispanic” mean Spanish? No, it does not. Spaniards refer to themselves as “hispanos” only when they see themselves as belonging to a group bigger than Spain. Otherwise, they identify themselves as “españoles.” For example, we say “Pedro es mexicano, Lucía es española: Pedro y Lucía son hispanos.” The same can be said about the term “hispánico,” which is used to refer to entities not covered by “español.” For example, when we talk about “la literatura española,” we limit ourselves to the literature of Spain, whereas “la literatura hispánica” refers to the literature of all the Spanish-speaking countries. Thus, the terms “hispano” and “hispánico” mean people and things from countries that have Spanish as their official language.

Does “Latino” mean “Latin American”? No, it does not. In its broadest sense, “Latino” means a person from a country whose official language derives from Latin. This term was coined in 19th-century Europe when the rise of Northern European countries, in particular England, resulted in a defensive reaction on the part of Southern European nations, led by France, which conceptualized the difference between the two blocks in racial terms and created a pan-Latin movement designed to resist Anglo dominance. This movement extended to the Latin American countries, which were very concerned about the increasing importance of the United States. The term “America Latina,” created during that era with the clear political purpose of opposing Anglo power and influence, refers to those countries in the Americas whose official languages come from Latin. That includes not only Spanish and Portuguese but also French. Canada seems to be excluded from this group because it is primarily English speaking. Latin America, thus, means Mediterranean America, as opposed to Anglo-Saxon America. In that broad sense, Latin Americans, together with Spaniards, Portuguese, French, Ital-

ians, and so forth, are Latinos (Litvak, 1980). The most common use of the word "Latino," however, is considerably narrower, reflecting current political concerns. Although the old tensions between Anglos and Latinos in Europe have almost completely died out, they are still very much alive in the United States, where people of Spanish-speaking origin have adopted the name Latinos to assert themselves in their interactions with Anglos. Although "Latino" has narrowed its meaning from Mediterranean to "Hispanic," "Anglo" has expanded its meaning from Anglo-Saxon to non-Hispanic White, including people of Mediterranean origin, such as French Americans or Italian Americans who are not considered Latinos. The word "Latino" today, thus, means U.S. Hispanic. Brazilian or Haitian immigrants to the United States are not included in the category of Latinos because they do not come from Spanish-speaking countries. Conversely, Mexicans living in Mexico or Cubans living in Cuba are also not normally considered Latinos because they do not live in the United States. However, Spaniards living in the United States are usually included in the category of Latinos. For example, the series "Latinos in the Limelight" includes the Spanish entertainers Antonio Banderas and Enrique Iglesias, along with various stars of Latin American descent. The term "Latino," thus, is used to refer to a person of Hispanic ancestry who lives in the United States. As such, it is used synonymously with "Hispanic," although there is one important difference: Whereas all Latinos come from countries that have Spanish as their official language and, therefore, can be called Hispanics, only Hispanics living in the United States or seen from the perspective of their relationships with the United States are called Latinos. People of Hispanic ancestry become Latinos when they come into contact with the United States, thereby assuming the role of the "other" (see González, 2003).

As Cisneros's comments indicate, "Latino" is perceived as connoting racial difference, whereas "Hispanic" is seen as race neutral. Indeed, the opposite of "Latino" is "Anglo," whereas the opposite of "Hispanic" is "non-Hispanic." "Hispanic," however, is not free of political connotations. "Hispanic" alludes to the people from the countries that comprised the old Spanish empire. Most people who react negatively to the term "Hispanic" do so, at least in part, because they do not like to be reminded of the colonial past. The academy has played an important role in the controversy on nomenclature, as, until recently, it heavily favored European culture over that of other parts of the world. In that context, Spanish culture was seen as somewhat superior to Latin American culture because the Iberian Peninsula is, after all, located in Europe. As a result, the term "Hispanic" came to be seen with suspicion by many people of Spanish-speaking origin who thought that by highlighting their connection with the Iberian Peninsula, it undermined the non-European components of their culture. Another reason for disliking the term "Hispanic" has to do with the fact that by alluding to the old Spanish

empire, it ignores the present colonial relations between the United States and Latin America and the subordinate position of people of Spanish-speaking origin in the United States. Thus, the choice of the term “Latino” over “Hispanic” moves the focus from ancient history to current events, from the old Spanish empire to contemporary United States, where people of Hispanic ancestry are seen as racially distinct.

The origins of this process of racialization have been traced to the conflict between the old Spanish and English empires, which started when Henry VIII of England divorced the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragón, daughter of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, to marry Anne Boleyn. After this divorce, the English began to demonize the Spaniards through the so-called “Black Legend,” according to which the Spaniards were unusually brutal and avaricious barbarians of a mixed race, a combination of African and European, Muslim and Christian, and Jew and Gentile, who then went on to mix with the Native Americans and other non-European peoples in the New World. The English, in contrast, saw themselves as a civilized and uncontaminated race. English violence and greed were glossed over, whereas Spanish atrocities were highlighted and considered racial features: Brutality was associated with Muslims and avarice with Jews. Spaniards, thus, assumed the mantle of people of color in 16th-century England, and they never relinquished that role, which was inherited by Latin Americans. Indeed, the Black Legend was used by the United States to justify its forcible acquisition of a large part of Mexico in 1848 and of Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and Guam from Spain in 1898. There is a very extensive bibliography about the Black Legend and the tensions between Anglos and Latinos throughout the centuries. Our historical outline draws most heavily on the works of Arnoldsson, Fernández-Retamar, Griffin, Juderías, Litvak, Maltby, Powell, and Sánchez, as well as on a previous article by González. According to this way of thinking, neither Spaniards nor Latin Americans were considered White but rather of a mixed and inferior race, which was used as a reason to take their territories. The founding myth of the United States, the manifest destiny doctrine, explicitly asserts the superiority of English culture over Hispanic traditions, which it seeks to eradicate. That is one reason why Spanish and English bilingual educational programs are so controversial in the United States. It is also why, regardless of the color of their skin or their national origin, people of Spanish-speaking origin are considered people of color when they come in contact with this country. We believe that people of Hispanic ancestry call themselves Latinos as a way of asserting their ethnic identity.

The difference between the words “Hispanic” and “Latino” does not lie in geography and culture but in history and politics. Whereas the term “Hispanic” refers to the people from countries that comprised the old Spanish empire, the term “Latino” has to do with the clash between the old Spanish and English empires in the New World, which resulted in the rise of the

United States, the demise of Spain, the subordination of Latin America, and the marginalization of U.S. Hispanics. Although both terms refer to the same people, they view them from very different perspectives. "Hispanic" emphasizes historical connections among people of Spanish-speaking origin, whereas "Latino" points to political differences between these people and the Anglo population.

A very important distinction between the two names is their origin: "Hispanic" was an imposition from above, an invention of the Census Bureau, whereas "Latino" was an autonomous alternative to the official nomenclature. Most Latinos see themselves primarily in terms of nationalities—Mexican, Cuban, and so forth. To be classified according to membership in the old Spanish empire did not go over well with many people of Spanish-speaking origin, some of whom, however, quickly concluded that making common cause by taking a common name was in fact quite desirable. The adoption of the Spanish word "Latino," which had been used to express resistance to Anglo dominance for decades, was a political statement.

Personally, we don't believe that there is anything seriously wrong with the term "Hispanic," which is a practical, if inelegant, word, and we use it freely. However, we are particularly fond of the term "Latino," which is full of interesting connotations and has a potency that the other word lacks. When people of Spanish-speaking origin call themselves Latinos, they remind their listeners of their marginal position with respect to Anglos as well as of the subordination of Latin America. Although "Latino" does not mean "Latin American," it evokes Latin America, the place where the mixing of races that started in medieval Spain reached its highest point—the brownest part of the Hispanic world. Latin America is also much bigger and much closer to the United States than Spain is. Thus, this evocation points to proximity and size and, ultimately, to power. "Latino" looks to the future whereas "Hispanic" signifies the past. When people of Spanish-speaking origin call themselves Latinos, they acknowledge their non-European heritage while affirming their dignity and expressing confidence in their growing political importance. We believe that is why many people of Hispanic ancestry like to call themselves Latinos. At least, that is certainly why we—a Chicana born and raised in California and a Spanish immigrant who has spent more than half of her life in the United States—like to call ourselves Latinas: because we feel proud to be part of the Hispanic community in the United States and because we have faith in its future.<sup>1</sup>

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