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—Angelo Falcon,

Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund

ED MORALES

# LIVING IN SPANGLISH

The Search for a Latino  
Identity in America



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN NEW YORK

LIVING IN SPANGLISH: THE SEARCH FOR LATINO IDENTITY IN AMERICA.  
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## INTRODUCTION

### What I'm Talking About When I Speak in Spanglish, or the Spanglish Manifesto

#### HISPANIC, LATINO, OR BOTH

As a journalist who has covered issues in the Latino/Hispanic community for fifteen years, I often wondered if it would be possible to locate the essence of what it is to be Latino/Hispanic. I've interviewed hundreds of people who all seem to have a different idea of what their ethnic identity is, and what seemed to emerge was a set of stereotypes that had to do with food, dancing, or sexuality. What's more, there is a great resistance to attempts to make our community monolithic. The idea of being Latino (or Hispanic) was further problematized by the multiplicity of our nationalities (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Colombian, Dominican, etc.).

This fruitless search almost caused me to admit that this was a problem that could not be solved in my lifetime. Like marketers who are still baffled about how to sell things to us, I could not come up with a definition narrow enough to be intelligible. Then one day, looking in the mirror, looking at the photos of my family, friends,

lovers, listening to the music, watching us on television and in movies, feeling the dance moving inside me, I realized that the working definition for Latinos (or Hispanics) should be "everything." All races, all creeds, all possible combinations. Then I thought we should call ourselves "Spanglish" because it was a word that expressed what we are doing, rather than where we came from. And the only way to get a real understanding of what I meant by Spanglish would be to dispense with this Latino (or Hispanic) thing.

What's in a name? A rose, no matter what name it goes by, will always smell just as sweet. For years the dispute between Latino and Hispanic as the proper term for those of us with Spanish surnames and varying degrees of South of the Border baggage has lingered like a bad hangover. Hispanic—a term invented by the Nixon administration, probably inspired by his friends in the Cuban exile community—was designed to allow the lighter-skinned to claim a European heritage. Latino—derived from Latin America, originally coined by Napoleon-era France as a public relations ploy to explain why a French emperor was installed in Mexico City—was a mid-'70s incarnation of the term meant to allude to a separate identity from Spain.

While Hispanic became the preferred term of assimilationists (although it is often used by working-class Latinos who identify less with their home countries than with the Spanish language they still speak), Latino became the preferred term of the intelligentsia, identity politicians, and young urbanites. Hispanic best describes a Republican politician in Florida, a CEO of a soft-drink company in Georgia, a lawyer in Texas; Latino, a professor in California, a musician in New York, and recent immigrants all over the U.S. Although Latino importantly alludes to an allegiance to, or at least a sympathy with, Latin America and the pseudo-Third World status that implies, its most significant implication is that Latinos are not just Spaniards, but a mixture of Spaniards, Africans, and indigenous people.

But until now, this idea that Latinos are a mixed-race people has

remained static. It merely states that, in fact, our genetic makeup is the product of a long-term racial miscegenation process. But it doesn't say anything about what that means. There is a need for a way to say something more about this idea than the word "Latino" expresses. So, for the moment, let's consider a new term for the discussion of what this aspect of Latino means—let us consider Spanglish.

Why Spanglish? There is no better metaphor for what a mixed-race culture means than a hybrid language, an informal code; the same sort of linguistic construction that defines different classes in a society can also come to define something outside it, a social construction with different rules. Spanglish is what we speak, but it is also who we Latinos are, and how we act, and how we perceive the world. It's also a way to avoid the sectarian nature of other labels that describe our condition, terms like Nuyorican, Chicano, Cuban American, Dominicanayork. It is an immediate declaration that translation is definition, that movement is status quo.

*To be Latino in the U.S. is rather to participate in a unique process of cultural syncretism that may become a transformativemotive template for the whole society.*

—MIKE DAVIS, *Magical Urbanism*

*Living in Spanglish* is an informal invitation to those who seek to end the tyranny of black and white. It's always been easy to see race in these terms, the terms of the opposite poles of the spectrum. It has even become a metaphor for truth in our society. As far as the reader's trust in veracity goes, these words, "in black and white," constitute truth. But, overhyped millennium celebrations aside, we are in a new age in America today. It is an age in which the nuances of brown, yellow, and red are as important, if not more so, than black and white.

When W. E. B. Dubois said that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, Americans never really

understood what he meant, nor committed to understanding it. But it seems clearer that in the twenty-first century, we're going to focus on the color line itself—what many observers call the border. The only problem is, as Jacques Derrida says, the closer we get to the border, the harder it gets to see it. Reality blurs. Uncertainty becomes a principle.

If you focus on that blurred border, you begin to understand that Spanglish is so much more than reading between the lines. There is, of course, *the border*, the literal region of the Rio Grande, where Mexico blurs into the United States and vice versa. At the border, an obvious and often awkward mixing of cultures takes place that makes up the superficial idea of Spanglish. But the border also exists deep within the territory of North America, now more than ever, in its major cities; it is an imported border that is expressed through a dynamic, continuing recombination of cultures. That is the Spanglish way.

*The most humanized human collectives always appear, in the last resort, to be the product not of segregation, but of synthesis.*

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN,  
*The Natural Limits of Humanity*

To almost everyone, Spanglish is an ugly word. In its most literal sense, Spanglish refers to a bastardized language, an orphan, a hybrid, a mule—in short a pathetic, clumsy creature incapable of producing viable offspring. During their reign as conquerors of Latin America, the Spanish referred to the child of an African and a European as a mulatto, a mule-ly being; it was a branding that made it almost impossible for someone to elevate their social status, except through intermarriage with a lighter-skinned partner. For centuries, many Latin Americans have been on a dreary quest to lighten the skin, better the race, *mejorar la raza*, to achieve social status. Unconsciously, it may have been my mother's goal; it

was the implied subtext of *West Side Story*. But the mule is the creature that does all the work—on its back rides the hopes of a new economy. I say the twenty-first century is time for Latinos (and anyone who wants to come along for the ride) to find their Spanglish soul, to deny racial purity, and find relief in the cool waters of miscegenation. Liberate yourself from the white/black dichotomy!

Spanglish is the state of perpetual, chameleonlike flux. There is a regional tendency for certain Latinos to call themselves "brown," but while this is an interesting metaphor, it defeats the purpose of calling for the withering away of race. To become brown would be to become a third wheel, constantly fighting for turf with the more established "black" and "white." Moreover, although brown describes perhaps a majority of Latinos, it leaves out a huge number of us who are actually black and white. Spanglish is about not having to identify with either black or white, while at the same time having the capacity to "be" both. We can even be both Hispanic and Latino.

#### SPANGLISH, THE "LANGUAGE"

Unfortunate numbers of uptight Spanish speakers with a Latin American colonial mindset find it unsettling and distasteful that in the U.S.'s inner cities, Latinos are substituting English words liberally. English speakers flinch at anything that isn't in their native tongue. The Spanglish that permeates the everyday culture of Puerto Rico can become a maddening drivel of advertising speak. Spanglish's harshest critics feel that its practitioners are in danger of becoming illiterate, much the way Marshall McLuhan once predicted rock and roll would destroy literacy. Surf any Spanish-language Internet site and you'll find this phrase: Click *el mouse aquí*.

The task of understanding and evaluating Spanglish, the meta-language, has been taken up by the academic establishment of Spanish-speaking countries, since Spanglish still represents Spanish under siege from an external invader. They argue over the diminution of Spanish because of the introduction of new Spanish

words that are literal translations of English ones—*parquear*, the cognate of “park,” takes the place of the more elegant *estacionar*, which could be literally translated as “stationing.” “Marketing,” spoken in a Spanish accent, is absorbed into the language, replacing the more elegant *mercado tecnica*, or “market technology.” Undoubtedly, the Spanish words tell us more about the human condition, but isn’t this just an arcane exercise in preserving European flourishes in an American hemisphere that is moving quickly into the future? The fetishizing of pure Spanish only serves a colonial mindset, preventing Latinos from participating in the more dynamic, adaptable world of English. Spanglish is Spanish adapting the crazy rhythms of English, and English inheriting the multicultural content of Latin America.

But Spanglish is altogether something else—it expresses something much broader and interesting than just a glitch in language. Spoken Spanglish is only a verbal manifestation of a powerful force that has been incubating in America since the beginning of the postwar era, and will almost surely be a powerful determinant of U.S. culture in the twenty-first century. The simple utterances “*Yo quiero Taco Bell*” and “*Hasta la vista, baby*,” do not in themselves pose a major challenge to what we know as postindustrial America. They are merely the iconographic residue of a society in transition, like rock and roll, Andy Warhol, or phone sex.

Spanglish the movement, Spanglish the message, Spanglish the party happening next door right now is the active state of cultural mixing, the endless pursuit of resolving contradictions in politics and art, the upside-down overhaul of class structure, the carnival of multinational culture. Spanglish happens when you go to see a bossa nova or a jazz quintet and you don’t notice that half the band is black and the other half is white, or brown, or Asian. Spanglish is when the role of race is played by such skilled actors that you don’t notice they belong to a particular race.

When I speak of Spanglish I’m talking about a fertile terrain for negotiating a new identity. I’m feeling excited, as Gloria

Anzaldua did in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, about “participating in the creation of another culture/in a state of perpetual transition/with a tolerance for ambiguity.” Gloria sees us as reincarnated Quetzalcoatl, becoming “the quickening serpent movement.”

I am my language, and it is continually in the process of being born. I’m affirming my own existence while at the same time demystifying the mainstream, distancing myself from the monocultural other. Identifying the monocultural is a revolutionary flipping of the script because the prevailing discourse identifies *us* (and others) as the other, keeping intact the narrative of self-pity and victimization that casts us in the role of schizophrenic signifying monkey, which is nice work if you can find it, but is rapidly becoming obsolete. Identifying the monocultural other should be a brief process for defining purposes only; the mere act of identifying “others” is a Eurocentric act that is antithetical to practicing Spanglish.

#### SPANGLISH THE PHENOMENON

This is an open challenge to previously established conventions of categorization, it is a Hegelian rejoinder to a Kantian world, it’s a playful variation of Marx’s unlucky eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways. The point is, however, to change it.” Okay, so it seems that material efforts to change the world have failed; in retrospect it seems so quaint to think we could have changed it by a crude stab at overturning power relations. But this is not “the end of history”—that remains to be written by the language inside us, and the metaphoric language of the future is Spanglish.

At the root of Spanglish is a very universal state of being. It is a displacement from one place, home, to another place, home, in which one feels at home in both places, yet at home in neither place. It is a kind of banging-one’s-head-against-the-wall state, and the only choice you have left is to embrace the transitory (read transnational) state of in-between.

Spanglish is that thing you haven't quite figured out yet about where we're going. It's a kind of new romantic thing, where we are liberated from previously existing structures and allowed to breathe. Spanglish is the state of belonging to at least two identities at the same time, and not being confused or hurt by it. It's a new blow against the tyranny of outward appearances, a personal map of demographic possibilities. It's kind of like what Antonio Gramsci called the taking of an exhaustive inventory of the self. It's an overtly sexy decapitation of the subject.

*To become "Hispanic" is to turn the idea of an ethnic identity inside out, because it is ultimately to shed any specific identity in the hope of participating in this life as an American.*

—GERALD TORRES, "LEGACY OF CONQUEST  
AND DISCOVERY"

The old-school idea of being an American leads many of us to say things like, "Why can't we just be considered *American*, like everybody else?" Maybe it's because we're already American. The *raison d'être* of Spanglish is to revise the entire idea of being American. Most Americans don't know that an entire continent directly to the south of us considers itself part of America as well. To these people, who are essential to the phenomenon of Spanglish, these United States, (along with Canada, and maybe, Mexico) is called "North America." This is how Guillermo Gómez-Peña, that madcap, deeply feeling, *border-line* genius performance artist puts it: "Let's get it straight: America is a continent, not a country. Latin America encompasses more than half of America. Quechuas, Mixtecos, Yaquis, and Iroquois are American. Chicano, Nuyorican, Cajun, Afro-Caribbean, and Quebeccois are American as well." So instead of asking why we can't be considered American like everyone else, let's ask, why can't everyone else be more like us?

To the vast Spanglish world to the south, multiracialism is a

widespread, if often imperfectly realized, norm that is hardly the subject of inquiry. Because as U.S. Latinos, we are descended from a multicultural, that is, a large group of mixed-race people, we are positioned to be the primary proponents of multiracial America's future. The 2000 census shows a blip of an increase in the number of Americans who consider themselves "multiracial." America is in its infancy, at the one-cell organism stage, in terms of understanding what it means to be multiracial. But there is no prescribed form, no cultural norms involved in being Spanglish—the world of Spanglish is the world of the multiracial individual. We live in a crowded universe of multiracial *I*s. In order to understand what that future is, indulge me in trying to figure out what I am. I've spent my whole life trying to figure out what I am, what Latino is. It's the food, it's the sex, it's the music, it's the dance, it's the brownish skin, it's the whatever. So we have no fear when we speak a crazy bastardization of language called *yo no se que (je ne sais se quois)*, Spanglish.

Spanglish, like everything else, could not exist outside the forces of history. The phenomenon of Spanglish was born as a result of the emigration of Latin American people to North America, which naturally flowed from the penetration of the south by the north. It is a wave of immigration that was made necessary by economic forces that the U.S. participated in very actively since its inception. As Juan Gonzalez describes in excruciating detail in his book *Harvest of Empire*, the conditions for this immigration are the direct result of the activity of U.S. and European ventures in Latin America, and the foreign policy pursued by the State Department in the defense of that activity. If you like polemic, there's Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*, a relentless indictment of the forces that undermined Latin America's economies. If you like real-life stories, just talk to anyone working as a busboy at your favorite restaurant or stockboy at your local greengrocer, or the guy who delivers your take-out vegetarian ramen.

So we came here, tired, poor, hungry, and the reception we got was for the most part extremely hostile, and when it wasn't, that lack



of hostility was predicated on our ability to present ourselves in the most passive, nonthreatening way. It can be argued that it was the same way for Irish, Italians, Jews, Poles, and so forth, all those European ethnic groups that make up the melting pot of TV culture. The classic mode of assimilation for most immigrant groups to the U.S. involves the insertion of a hyphen between their original culture and their acquired one. Becoming a hyphenated American entailed little more than adopting a version of American identity popularized in post-World War II culture, with a fleeting reference to a European culture, preferably one on the side of the Allies.

But the original culture of the Latin American, although giving Europe its due, is divergent from the Eurocentric north. Because of widespread miscegenation between Europeans, indigenous people, and Africans, as well as the existence of towns established by escaped slaves of both indigenous and African origin, and the fact that Spain was Europe's dark cousin, Latin culture has a decidedly different racial feel. The Roman Catholic Church, which, in its small way, harbored thinkers who objected to outright slaughter, did more to tolerate African and indigenous religions in the hope that they would link to Christianity somehow. Whether it was because of a few compassionate priests or the feudal incompetence of the Spanish crown, African tribes and their customs were left more intact in Latin America. Dominican writer Juan Bosch said, "Economic conditions in Santa Domingo may have produced the defacto, if not de jure, liberation of slaves to the extent that they might already have behaved as free men in 1659, although they were not free legally." And sometimes countries like Mexico actually exalted and celebrated indigenous culture to make it part of the twentieth-century idea of nationalism.

Vast regional differences create nuances and wide variations from country to country in Latin America, which inhibits the creation of a monolithic Latino identity. Latinos cannot consider themselves an intact "European" culture; we cannot resort to being a convenient, added-on hyphenated identity, a couple of hand ges-

tures or reference to an ethnic cuisine. We are so close to our point of origin, so under the influence of our American hemisphere, that an amalgam, "Hispanic" or "Latino" must be used to describe our passage to the north. Latino or Hispanic is a state that one must choose, and actively cultivate, to achieve. It is the process of North Americanization. That's where Spanglish comes in.

Spanglish can be something you are and feel all along, in the barrio, on the streetcorner, in the bodega, on the dance floor. Most of us go through life this way. I, however, am a freak of nature. Classically sheltered Project Boy of the North Bronx—where even white people lived in public housing—I lived a deluded dream of class transition. First I imagined myself as hyphenated, something that for Puerto Ricans is a state of redundancy. (Puerto Rican—American is saying the same thing twice because of the 1917 Jones Act, passed by Congress, which made all of us American citizens even if we never left the island.) Then, in the attempt to consider myself "American," my identity evaporated completely, like liquid sizzling into nothingness on a hot grill. When I became aware of the mistake that I had made, the way I had been removed from the bosom of Latino-ness, I knew that somehow I had to spend the rest of my life making up for my error.

I didn't make the mistake, as Richard Rodriguez described he did in *Hunger for Memory*, of subscribing to a self-serving fantasy of my miraculous transformation from working-class Puerto Rican given the privilege of attending an elite Northeastern private university to public intellectual. I did not reserve my culture to myself, relegate it to a private sphere that would prevent me from taking my place in American society. I did not try to shave my skin away. I began a long struggle to understand the necessity of creating my new Spanglish identity, without leaving behind the architecture, the latticework provided by my indoctrination into the private club of liberal arts education.

Spanglish describes a feeling, an attitude that is quintessentially American, but it is both older and newer. It is a culture with one



foot in the medieval and the other in the next century; we straddle a broad swath of human history. Spanglish is a catchy catapult for the imaginary proliferation of everything. The Spaniard, a slippery soul already a pastiche of Visigothic, Gallic, North African Islamic Jew, comes to the Antilles and beyond to enact slave plantation sitcom allegories. There are guest stars from Yoruba, Benin, Congo, Angola, and special appearances by the quickly exterminated Taino, the emasculated Aztecs, and the conquered Maya and Inca, whose Asian essence is preserved from the tribes who slouched toward Oregon across the Bering Strait. These wildly different elements have produced a multisubjective, all-taxes-included new jack identity that may soon serve to explain the crazy polyglot chaos that is growing by leaps and bounds in the North.

### THE COSMIC RACE

Our Spanglishness is based on the multitude of racial memory that we carry inside. *Living in Spanglish* takes comfort in the pseudoscientific notions of José Vasconcelos in his famous 1925 essay, "La Raza cósmica." Vasconcelos's work has been denounced as racialism and racist, variously by late twentieth-century interpreters. The first criticism can be tempered by the fact that Vasconcelos was trying to debunk the fascist strain of Darwinists who felt that natural selection was a rational explanation of the dominance of Western European cultures over the rest of the world. "La Raza cósmica" argued that all races would disappear in one massive "fifth" race (the "final race") created by a flurry of race-mixing.

Vasconcelos was denounced as a racist because he implied that the Hispanic or Iberian aspect of Latin culture was the guiding light, and that indigenous cultures gained by mixing with Europeans while offering little in the transaction save for an exotic skin tone, some mysticism, and sensuality. There is no doubt that this argument is racist, but we'll give Vasconcelos a pass because he had trouble freeing himself from his Eurocentricity—he was purport-

edly of Spanish-Italian-Sephardic extraction, a first-generation Mexican. His idealism, if sometimes misplaced, helped Mexico create a uniquely compassionate rhetoric about its indigenous constituency, one that is still in effect even now as pro-corporate president Vicente Fox delicately negotiates with the Zapatistas. Installed as the chancellor of education almost immediately after the Mexican Revolution, Vasconcelos did much to institutionalize Mexico's indigenous culture as an essential part of that nation's postrevolution identity. Vasconcelos was almost singlehandedly responsible for the Mexican Muralist school of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco.

*It is necessary for us to remain nationalist until we are able to achieve a true internationalism, that is, as soon as the dangers of the many imperialisms that attempt to subjugate, not to civilize, disappear.*

— JOSÉ VASCONCELOS

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Vasconcelos's argument is his prediction that humanity was going to enter a new age of the spiritual and the aesthetic, and that the miscegenated fifth race, so well characterized by Latinos, would be the one to lead us from the impersonal material world. There is no shortage of hand-wringing in our elite journals of opinion that American culture, never much to speak of in the first place—many Africanists would argue that most of its energy is black-inspired—is in crisis, has gone flat as a pancake. And there is ample evidence that in fields like popular music and film, Latinos have become flashpoints for cultural revival. So Vasconcelos's bizarre fantasy may be closer to the truth than he could have imagined. How romantic, you might say, and you're correct, but in that sliver of utopian realism I see that overlap of modernism that we still need before we go on into the post-modern world of no nations. It's that almost naïve notion of being attached to an idea of nationhood that is beyond nations that sets us

up for the twenty-first century. It is the triumph of the spirit. One of Vasconcelos's most affecting statements, which became the motto of Mexico's National University says, with haunting prescience, "*Por mi raza hablará mi espíritu* (The Spirit shall speak through my race).

In *Living in Spanglish* I posit the coming of existence of this forward-looking race that obliterates all races, stripping away Vasconcelos's petty resentment of Anglo culture and patronizing Eurocentrism, and acknowledging a cultural-economic inevitability that is hemispheric convergence. To paraphrase a Latino saying (which is possibly ultimately from the Arabic tradition), "*Mi raza es tu raza*." So *Living in Spanglish* is not a racist text. It is a call for the end of race. But in order to face down race, we must first immerse ourselves in it. In all of them. It's a contradictory thing, you will understand. There is still plenty of time for everyone to learn to speak Spanglish.

The spirit of Spanglish embarks on the migratory journey to the north, already loaded with the possibility of infinite subjectivity, multiple personality. When the Latino pulls up stakes in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, or Houston, for example, he/she becomes Spanglish—a north/south creature that many of his/her forebears can hardly recognize and often come to reject. This is the Chicano, or the Nuyorican, or the Miami Cuban—still largely Latino, but recombined again, with North American influences, although never really becoming what most people imagine as American. These days Latinos are coming north from places like Puebla, Mexico, or San Salvador, places where urban culture is not unknown. Many people in Latin America have already been exposed to rap music in their own language before they even come to New York or Los Angeles; they become Spanglish even faster than their predecessors.

The cosmic race is not a race per se, it's just the idea of a large group of miscegenated people with a more or less shared culture that has been in development for five hundred years. (Even my

roots as a writer go back to the first printing press of the Americas, brought from Spain to Mexico in 1535.) The cosmic race is the end of race, because race becomes a multiple factor, not a defining category. Since its first articulation, the essay by Vasconcelos, the idea of *raza* has been most developed in Mexico, with one major flaw—the African component of Mexico, which has a major Caribbean capital city in Veracruz, is muted. But when *raza* is used by Chicano student groups in California, or by Saul Hernández, lead singer of the Mexican rock group Jaguares, it is a powerful call to unity, an abstract nationhood divorced from European nationalism.

#### NORMALIZING THE IDEA OF RACE-MIXING

The Spanglish phenomenon is key to understanding or at least reevaluating the increasing debate over mixed-race Americans. There is a great fascination of late with the new biracial North America. While the average American has always been of mixed race to some extent, before the civil rights era, the country was largely segregated by race. But with growing attitudes of tolerance and the liberation movements of the '60s, intermarriage increased, and now we are confronting a new generation of biracial youth, with many clamoring for a separate census category. The experiences of this new multiracial generation are presented as revelations of our country's future.

The irony in all this is that just to the south, and increasingly within the U.S.'s own borders, there is a huge multinational tribe of bi- and triracial people. While Latinos are largely categorized as a single brown mass whose common denominator is the use of Spanish, we are actually an astonishingly intricate mix of racial and cultural heritage. In any Spanglish family, one can find a black person, a white person, an Asian person, a Semitic person, or an indigenous person. The crucial difference, in perhaps oversimplified terms, is that here in North America, one drop of black blood makes you black, while in Latin America, one drop of white blood makes you white.

The Spanish conquistadores and rulers of Latin America had a slightly different approach from their Anglo counterparts. Rather than pursue an assiduous form of segregation between the races, the Spaniards, who brought few of their own women to the New World, decided to mix with their conquered out of lust and necessity. Still, the Spaniards were always careful not to let race-mixing impede their racial superiority. It has been said that the son born to Mexico's conquerer Cortés and La Malinche was sent to Spain to marry into the noble Castilian line in exchange for a vow never to lead an Aztec uprising. As the Spanish presence in the New World dragged on, several hierarchies of racially mixed "castes" were established, with different names for the various combinations between European, indigenous, African, and even Asian used to describe the shades and facial characteristics of each combination. By the early twentieth century, Vasconcelos was proclaiming the great potential and eventual dominance of the *mestizaje*. We are a miscegenation-happy people.

But even though we are hyper-miscegenated, our biggest divisions occur between nations, usually no more than subtle differences in intonations in language, varying degrees of connection to Spain, coastal versus mountain cultures, and the relative amount of African and/or indigenous blood in certain cultures. The failure of Simón Bolívar's dream of Latin American unity has resulted in a constellation of catty rivalries between regional cultures that have more in common than they realize. But now, in Anglo North America, we are forced to make alliances despite our differences, and speaking a new language, we are slowly putting the pieces back together to the Bolivarian dream of Latin American unity. This despite findings by some historians that Bolívarism, and many Latin American independence movements, rose in fear of escaped slave revolts.

The new American biracial individual is often portrayed as someone plagued by an unpleasant reality: whether to choose "white," "black," and, to a lesser extent, "Asian" culture as a domi-

nant form of identification. Star golfer Tiger Woods calls himself "cabinasian," truncating caucasian, black, Indian, and Asian. With higher rates of intermarriage occurring of late between whites and Asians or light-skinned Hispanics, some now theorize that the color line of the future will be beige and black. But Latino culture, particularly our Spanglish American variation, has never been about choosing affiliation with a particular race—it is a space where multiple levels of identification are possible. It may be what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopic space—"a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." It is a Spanglish space. If the postmodern era is characterized by unprecedented heterogeneity and randomness, then Latinos are well prepared to take advantage of it. We have spent the last several centuries preparing for our role as the first wholly postmodern culture.

Although Simón Bolívar was greatly disappointed with Latin America's failure to unite politically as North America did, his disaffection with Europe was primal, and by century's end, a consciousness of a distinctly non-European, non-North American entity began to take hold. Spurred on by Cuban essayist José Martí's signature essay of 1898, "Nuestra América" ("Our America"), Latin Americans began to recognize their "own Greece," the pre-Hispanic cultures of Meso-America and Africa. Ironically, as writers like Samir Amin and Martin Bernal have theorized, it is the fallacy of a "white" Greece that is the central flaw of Eurocentrism. If, as these writers claim, the Greece of antiquity had crucial inputs from Egyptian and Phoenician cultures, and these tendencies traveled to Spain during the Moorish occupation, Latin America's heritage may be closer to Greece's than North America's. But taking Martí at his word, most Latin American cultures have made great strides to at least partially recognize indigenous American history as integral to the idea of a Latino.

Some parts of Latin America—particularly Southern Cone countries like Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay—overtly reject indige-

nous and African influences. But the heart of Latin America—Mexico, the Caribbean, and northern South America—developed cultures that, despite being headed by white elites, pursued a national identity that in some way acknowledged the darker-skinned, lower classes of the society. (It can be argued that indigenous and African cultures have been more relentlessly oppressed in economic terms in Latin America than in North America; witness the Zapatista rebellion and the struggle of indigenous tribes in Colombia against multinational oil companies. But that is probably more of a function of the much smaller aggregate wealth of the region. The constricted and underdeveloped Latin American economies provide no real safety net for the poor, and the amount of unassimilated indigenous people is much higher proportionately.)

Worship of whiteness is perhaps more insidious in Latin America—some of the most dramatic instances occur in the Caribbean. In the Dominican Republic, political leaders have denied African influence despite its obviously darker-skinned population, and in Puerto Rico a recent poll revealed that over 80 percent of Island Puerto Ricans believe themselves to be “white.” Again, whiteness in Latin America often means “not black” rather than “pure white.”

#### MULTINATIONAL MULTIPLICITY

But Latino culture has not been developing in a hermetically sealed area South of the Border, where air quality and water purity cannot be guaranteed. It has been evolving directly in conjunction with North American culture through massive migrations, which energize Latino populations that have already been living in the U.S. and Canada. It is for this reason that many Latinos refer to two sites of experience: *aquí* and *allá* (here and there). The rapid transfer of information via commodities and media images, and the back-and-forth lifestyle of transnational Latinos are central to the postmodern experience. *Aquí* and *allá* is a people-based echo of the activity of multinational capital.

Latino culture, which is constantly evolving both north and south of the border, involves an increasing, if nonsystemic, proliferation of identities that allow us to choose from an array of guises, accents, class mannerisms, and racial solidarities. Martí, whose roots were in Spain and the Canary Islands, but who ultimately became one of the champions for Cuban independence in 1898, insisted in his famous essay that “we feel the inflamed blood of Tamancao and Paramaconi coursing through our veins.” Referring to rebellious indigenous tribes from Venezuela, Martí is establishing a principle of Latino culture—allowing all of us to recognize the varied nature of our genetic information and cross-identify with a particular ancestry for political or aesthetic reasons. This is the same principle that, in a country like Cuba, allows for an apparently light-skinned man to become a leader of a religion like Santería, an African religion masked by Christian artifice roughly parallel to Haiti’s voodoo.

So if Spanglish culture is characterized by the multiplicity of its racial and class identifications, then its implications for identity politics in the U.S. are enormous. Growing out of the liberation movements of the ’60s and ’70s, identity politics has been widely criticized by both the American right and left, and the varying neoconservative writers of color like Stanley Crouch, Dinesh D’Souza, and Richard Rodriguez. At the dawn of the George W. Bush administration, a new “multicultural right” ideology is coming into focus in which a conservative “minority” elite are the role models for a new assimilation process. The neoconservative stance has made it widely acceptable that identity politics is divisive and encourages self-victimization and lack of taking responsibility. On the other hand veteran ’60s liberals like Todd Gitlin and Jim Sleeper argue similar points that follow from the right wing, but believe that the divisiveness caused by identity politics weakens the general left cause, taking away the focus from class politics.

But since class is so closely associated with race in both North and Latin America, the muddling of race becomes an antidote to class prejudice. More importantly, the infusion of Latino-ness, the con-

sciousness of Latin America, into North American discourse introduces another level of class analysis. The hemispheric class structure introduces a vast underclass, the army of workers (along with workers in Asia and other parts of the Third World) that has made the so-called Clintonian era of prosperity possible. The working-class dream of Americans is based on the nightmare of the underclass of Latin America. The new immigrants from Latin America never quite lose touch with their homelands; in fact, they are often actively engaged in transferring wealth to the families they have left behind. They are transcending the post-colonial, semi-European class stasis of Latin America and engaging in North American class mobility. Through Latinos, America's domestic policy becomes foreign policy. The same kinds of forces, that is, the direct cultural identification with outside countries that led America into World Wars I and II, will eventually lead it to confront the economic destruction it is visiting upon the south.

*The making of an American begins at that point where he himself rejects all other ties, any other history, and himself adopts the vesture of his adopted land.*

— JAMES BALDWIN

*Living in Spanglish* argues that we are already American. The Chicano says, "We didn't cross the border. The border crossed us." There is a trauma involved in trying to make sense of life on the border, on the hyphen. But the mistake many writers and observers have made is the demonization of the hyphen, the self-negation of being on the border. Neither white nor black, we are, poor Latinos, wallowing in a pool of nothingness. We will never be anything until we're somebody else's idea of what it means to be an American. But we are not defined by negation, we are the celebrators of contradictions, the revelers in the thorniness of the human condition, the slayers of category.

In this book, I'd like to argue that Latinos give the chance for.

America to move beyond identity politics, although not quite in the way the neoconservative (or, neoliberal, if you must) consensus would like them to. The Latino cultural "style" has the potential to free everyone from the guilt of having to reconcile with a strict definition of identity. For every biracial or middle-class black kid who comes home from school crying because street kids think he/she speaks too white, the Latino model offers a chance for that speck of whiteness to be part of a spectrum of behaviors and identities that are all "American." For every white person who thinks he/she is devoid of rhythm, incapable of dunking a basketball, or dancing a mambo, there is a chance to "feel the blood" of our "own Greece." America will finally become a total hemispheric concept. *Mi raza es tu raza.*

#### EL PLOT THICKENS

*Living in Spanglish* will seek to analyze the emergence of Spanglish from its origins in Latin America, when the Bolivarian dream of independence failed because of individual countries' inability to transcend almost feudal, postcolonial rivalries. Already at a trade disadvantage with North America and Europe, Latin America has an inability to accumulate capital and world market leverage that has left it unable to establish its countries as world powers. The migration to the U.S. by Latinos, then, became an involuntary spasm of people unable to control economic forces.

Spanglish becomes a protective reflex exercised by Latinos, in a way parallel to the one pioneered by postslavery African Americans, as a mode of survival in a hostile environment. Incubated in the Southwest borderlands by Mexicans from California to Texas who suddenly found themselves living under the U.S. flag as a result of the war with Mexico, Spanglish manifests itself culturally in the twentieth century. Mambo becomes all the rage in Manhattan and parts beyond, but sometime after the JFK assassination and the emergence of the Beatles, our emerging Spanglish reality was

blunted by the coolness and ironic detachment of the hipster era. The musical hybrids of the '50s and '60s like cha-cha and bossa nova had been championed by the heroes of the dying Brat Pack era, and were dismissed as inconsequential, nihilistic, and anti-intellectual by the scions of the counterculture. Spanglish is forced underground by a realigned post-Vietnam culture, engaging in the radical politics pioneered by the African-American civil rights movement.

In the '60s and '70s, Latino nationalism not only entailed a revival of interest in Latin American culture, but perhaps more importantly, incubated the first fully developed Spanglish cultures in New York, Chicago, and Miami, and much of Texas, Florida, and California. Latinos were feeling their oats as Americans, but many did not choose to cooperate with the melting-pot consensus, which mandated that American culture be considered superior to all foreign cultures. Spanglish was developing a new way of being American, one that will be increasingly important in the coming century. *Living in Spanglish* discusses the culmination of this process—how Latin America itself is gravitating toward North American culture in a process that hints at a convergence between North and South.

America is moving. Intracontinental jets whiz back and forth between New York and L.A., jobs move from Michigan to Mexico, as Mexicans migrate to Michigan, and suburban SUVs make tracks for Blockbuster evenings of video rapture north and south of the border. Almost imperceptibly, silent brown faces make their way to the north, and maybe even south again, moving toward the beacon of light that promises a better life. Latinos are the masters of motion. Migrating between countries, languages, races, becoming everything and everyone as a means for survival.

This is the story of a migration for survival, of a people struggling to find a sense of themselves in an increasingly complex world. As America enters a new millennium, its fastest-growing minority, Latinos, is enjoying a level of visibility unparalleled since the days of

the mambo fads of the mid-'50s. In urban centers like New York and Los Angeles, youth of all cultures are scurrying to take salsa-dancing lessons; film actors like Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek are starring in mainstream roles. In mid-'99, the Puerto Rican singer Ricky Martin broke through into the mainstream with a song called "Livin' La Vida Loca," instantly creating a Spanglish cliché, appropriating a phrase that was used to describe Chicano gang life first in a book by Luis Rodriguez and a movie by Allison Anders. The title also had a strange double meaning because Martin has long been rumored as being gay—"loca," (crazy, feminine usage) is a currently favored term of self-description for Latin gay men.

But while the '50s fixation with Latin culture—which culminated with the enormous popularity of *I Love Lucy*, the sitcom that virtually invented the standard conventions of the genre—was a passing fancy, today's Latino mania is rooted in a demographic phenomenon. It is widely predicted that within twenty years Latinos will surpass African Americans as the country's largest minority, mostly due to an unprecedented wave of immigration that began in the '70s. These new tired, huddled masses are adding a numerical weight to the continual evolution of Latino culture within the U.S., which is entering its fourth and fifth generations.

So at the same time recent arrivals are changing the landscape from the lowest levels of the class structure (the greengrocer, the gardener, the domestic servant), new generations of English, Spanish, and Spanglish-speaking Americans are transforming U.S. society with their subversive, off-center point of view. A few years ago, an article appeared in the Sunday *New York Times* that attempted to explain why so many successful comedians come to the U.S. from Canada. Since the vast majority of Canadians live close to the border and grow up watching American TV, they develop an intimate knowledge of the culture without being part of it, thereby putting an automatic ironic distance on their interpretation of it. Imagine this seemingly isolated sociological quirk happening en masse, within the borders of the U.S., affecting a huge bilingual



population that has lived in the New World for longer than Americans have!

More importantly, the continuing migration of Latinos to the north has the effect of reinforcing the Latin culture that we otherwise would have lost. Central to the process of "Americanization" is the loss of contact with people from the "old country." The U.S.'s Latin barrios are constantly being replenished by new immigrants, who bring with them the latest mores from their home countries, the latest music and dancing, reminding us what we are on the verge of losing, of the language and movement of our ancestors. Still, these immigrants are constantly striving to survive in an American landscape, adjusting to life here. The interaction between U.S. Latinos reaching back to their past and new immigrants grasping for their future is the central dynamic of Spanglish America.

Latinos have always been Americans in the sense that Europeans, Africans, and indigenous people are our ancestors. Both societies were created by explorers and frontier seekers that exploited people of color and imposed a European way of life on a continent far from home. Both democratized their societies in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, and their struggle for an identity involved rejecting the Old World and embracing the capitalism and mysticism of the new one. Most of Latinos' "American" ancestors go back as far, if not further, than North American blue-bloods—we share with old-line Protestants a lack of affinity for the Ellis Island experience. So it follows that if America asked the European immigrants of the twentieth century to sublimate their old identities into an American one, Latinos would be much more likely to resist such a notion.

The problem for Latinos is that we are neither viewed as Americans—being consigned to a South of the Border ethos and all the foreign-tongued otherness that it implies—nor are we viewed as white, black, or even Asian in the American race hierarchy. Even now, as bipartisan politics recognize that the country must confront

its racial divide, Latinos are made invisible through negation. *Neither black nor white*, says the discourse on race—a perspective some Latinos take as a positive assertion that they lack the historical baggage of either group. This blessing or burden of cultural multiplicity is one of the main reasons Latinos find it difficult to be represented by the mass media. In a society in which the lowest common denominator is favored, where the consumer profile—regardless of the proliferation of niche marketing through cable television or the Internet—needs to be as narrow and definable as possible, Latinos become indistinct blurs in the media mirror.

Many Latino icons in mainstream entertainment and the media are hidden and under-acknowledged. Actors like Martin Sheen, the late Anthony Quinn, and Jimmy Smits, while never denying their Latino-ness, are rendered shadow Hispanics by non-Spanish surnames and creative hair coloring. The most visible Latinos in America are the heroes of Spanish-language showbiz, like the late Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Gloria Estefan, Julio Iglesias, and Ricky Martin. But while these cultural figures have great resonance for Latin America and the Latin American sensibility in the U.S., they are only predecessors to a new aesthetic that fuses the north with the south.

Spanglish is something birthed out of necessity. There is a need for Latinos to assimilate in the U.S., but we have always searched for a way to do that without losing what we are. In fact, generations of living in el Norte have allowed Latinos the space to begin to create a hybrid American culture that reflects the flexibility and absorptive ability of Latin America's. We do this when we speak Spanglish, which allows Anglo consonants to flirt endlessly with Iberian vowels (our fondness for vowels is also augmented by the African and indigenous languages that are uttered in our ancestral memory). We do it when we dress up to go dancing even though we are overbearingly down to earth. We feel it when our most profane sexuality takes us closest to our most sacred spirituality.

If, as Frederic Jameson writes, postmodernism is characterized



by the loss of the modern subject, then Latin-ness has evolved from a culture where that subject, teetering on the edge of economic insecurity, has always been in doubt. To live in Spanglish is to engage in a radical doubt about North American existence, whose subject is a virtual consumer who is less concerned with worshipping the Judeo-Christian God than the profit-hungry machinations of multinational corporations. Many observers have noted that American culture is suffering from a fatal lack of originality—the superficial is on the verge of strangling what little literary and artistic tradition is left from the modern era. Latino culture is a much-needed infusion into a pop culture that has bogged down in its own market-driven formulas—it is a romantic return to a more organic sense of culture.

#### WITHIN YOU, WITHOUT YOU

Spanglish culture is not about segregation; its borders are permeable, but it has a strong core. If there is stability in the state of flux, it exists in a core that celebrates difference—permanently evolving, rapidly expanding difference. It's a dynamic, hyperactive state of absorption and re-creation that will inevitably change America from within. Within almost all Latinos is a dizzying array of genetic and cultural information. Every day I wake up and look in the mirror I see someone of a different race, a different social class, a different life philosophy. Sometimes I see an Egyptian, a fantasy brother to a seven-year-old boy I once sat next to on a flight from O'Hare to Kennedy. Another morning I see a high-yellow African American, wondering whether he's over the hill as a jazz saxophonist. Or sometimes, when I'm feeling really scattered, I see a Taino tribe member, ingesting the psychoactive drug called *coboba* in search of the vertical shaft that leads to the Fourth Dimension. When I was younger I was sometimes teased as "China boy," and was embraced by Italian Americans, Jews, and African Americans as one of their own.

In the Information Age, Latinos have begun to crystallize their living idea of multiplicity. It's the extreme melting pot at a level that North America has never known, where samba meets salsa meets punk meets rap meets tango meets grunge. El Internet allows for cyber-Spanglish to flourish, Peruvian encounters Salvadoran and Dominican, and the soccer rivalries are beginning to break down. The globalizing imperative begun by the Clinton administration is trying to turn El Sur into a massive free-trade zone just as the Euro takes flight in the Old World. But although the time for a monolithic idea of Latino identity may have arrived, it's just rearranging its variability. It's just another new day for resolving contradiction. Because that's what we do best; every day we confront our own negation. It's the product of the culture clash that exists in almost every Latino family, where skin tones range from black to white and everything in between. It's a culture where the lightest skinned can insist on African and indigenous identity as their birthright. If Bulworth, the lead character of Warren Beatty's film, suggests the answer is for Americans to keep fucking each other until they're the same color, then America should understand that Latinos have about a four-hundred-year head start on them in this process.

Latinos are united by language, but divided into wildly varying nationalities with often-conflicting agendas. There are several borderlines between us. One between first-generation immigrants and American citizens of varying levels of assimilation, and more between Caribbean Latinos, who are more influenced by African culture; Mexican/Central American Latinos, who are more influenced by indigenous Meso-American cultures; and South Americans, whose societies tend to be more Euro-colonial in tenor.

In the U.S., control over the Latino agenda has long been a competition between Puerto Ricans in the Northeast, Cubans in Miami, and Mexicans in Texas and California. Within New York City, rivalries between Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, and now Mexicans and Salvadorans are seemingly incessant. Among

the youth, there is a schism between hiphoppers, rockers, and *salseros*. It is a big mistake to lump Latinos together, but there are important ways we feel like one people. They have to do with physicality (dancing, body language, suspension of reserve) and spirituality (that strange syncretism between Catholicism and African and indigenous religions that allows us to be sacred and profane at the same time).

For the purposes of this book, I will be focusing most of my analysis on the big three Latino groups: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, primarily because of their longer and significant histories in the north. In the past ten years, the impact and accomplishments of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and other South American countries like Venezuela, Peru, and Argentina have become more important to the mix, as well as Central Americans from Guatemala to Panama.

While *Living in Spanglish* tries to cover the broad range of Latinos in the U.S., it can't begin to include all the varied contributions of all the Latinos who have made an impact. The construction of what I call Spanglish culture is not necessarily born out of a historian's impulse, but that of a sociocultural critic with a point of view that many may decide is coming from a left perspective. Certainly there are left themes in my analysis, including the basic assumptions that the European conquest of the Americas resulted in a grinding economic exploitation of the African and indigenous people that make up the majority population of the Americas. The seeds of Spanglish culture from Latin America to the north were carried primarily by the exploited, and the hybrid culture they created was a form of resistance against the dominant culture.

But the resistance to a certain prescribed form of assimilation that Spanglish symbolizes is not part of a culture of victimization—it is a needed counterbalance to the constricting monoculture of the north. It is a resistance that can only result in creating a new, united Americas that will finally fulfill the promise of human endeavor. The time for assimilation under duress is over. Toni

Morrison's famous statement about American assimilation being achieved on the backs of black people is undoubtedly a basis for this argument. The separatism of the African-American community to reinforce its sense of self was not only necessary, it was prescribed by the segregation that is imposed on Americans by social and economic forces.

The Spanglish idea rejects the halfhearted attempts by a litany of "multicultural conservatives" to promote assimilation as a way to enhance progress in society. Multicultural conservatives are multicultural only in name and not in practice—their goal is to reinforce the monocultural majority. *Living in Spanglish* does not promote assimilation, but rather suggests that North America begin its long-overdue process of assimilation into the greater American hemisphere. In tracing Spanglish from a proactive act between Spaniards and their exploited operatives, I embrace the contradiction of miscegenation as a potential solution. This miscegenation is the true embodiment of the revolutionary dream that has always been at the root of the American psyche. With this book, I invite America to envision its inevitable Spanglish future.

Play the role you never played before. Be the thing that is most opposite to your sense of self. Imagine that nothing is foreign, and everyone could be a cousin to you. Listen to the music that follows the path of the Gypsy from India to Andalucía to Havana to New York. And above all, dance, dance, dance.