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Is Ariel Dorfman a Latino?: The Place of Alterlatinos in Latino Studies

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Abstract

This article asks whether the identity of the *alterlatino* puts pressure on the identity markers used to define Latino identity. It begins by suggesting a number of critical angles that could be pursued in order to reflect on how the study of *alterlatinos* might contribute to the work of Latino Studies. Thinking about the *alterlatino* helps to expose the limits and boundaries both artificially imposed and real that have shaped the idea of who is a member of this group and who has the right to represent it. The case of Ariel Dorfman is used to exemplify my points.

Keywords

Identity, Latino, alterlatino, groups, Ariel Dorfman

In an interview I conducted with Ariel Dorfman for *World Literature Today* he describes himself as an *alterlatino*: "I have a definition, by the way, that I am going to try to put into the language, the *alterlatino* -- these are Latinos who are not Cuban, Puerto Rican or Mexican. Well I'm an *alterlatino*. We have 'alter modernity,' 'alter globalization.' I like the idea of 'alter' and of course 'alter' has directly to do with the other, the double, etc." (67). In what follows I would like to explore the ways that *alterlatinos* can contribute to Latino Studies. How do these identities overlap and intersect? And are they radically different? Ultimately I am interested in asking how the identity of the *alterlatino* puts pressure on the identity markers used to define Latino identity. I begin by suggesting a number of critical angles that could be pursued in order to reflect on how the study of *alterlatinos* might contribute to the work of Latino Studies. In particular, I believe that

thinking about the *alterlatino* helps to expose the limits and boundaries both artificially imposed and real that have shaped the idea of who is a member of this group and who has the right to represent it. When we consider what can be gained by thinking of Latino Studies across borders and boundaries, such questions of membership and exclusion are essential.

Let's begin with the obvious question: Is Ariel Dorfman a Latino? I suspect that our instincts tend to answer the question of Dorfman's *latinidad* in the negative. He is white, has a flawless command of English, and has a middle class background. But, if Ariel Dorfman is not Latino for these reasons, does that suggest that we have an essentialist notion of *latinidad*? His ties to the US, which began with his father's exile from Argentina to the US in the mid-1940s to mid-1950s and were later paralleled by his own exile from Chile during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, are grounded in political exile and differentiate his experience from that of economic migrations. But, as evidenced by the culture of the *Californianos* in the 18th and 19th centuries, migration is not a necessary characteristic of *latinididad* and certainly many exiles such as Cuban exiles and Central American exiles have played a key role in defining Latino culture. So, if Dorfman's exile to the US isn't the reason why he doesn't fit the Latino profile, and if his class, race, and language skills are also markers that we are uncomfortable using such litmus tests for *latinidad*, then what is it that sets him, and others like him, apart? To ask whether Dorfman is a Latino allows us to test the limits of Latino identity politics.

Perhaps the question of whether Dorfman is Latino is best posed by turning to a consideration of his cultural production. Dorfman's memoir, *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey,* is a complex history of assimilation, dissimilation, and transculturation. Dorfman reveals his efforts to blend into US society, only to later reject the Unites States, and finally to come to terms with his bicultural identity, following a cultural trajectory that parallels much Latino life writing. What's more, Dorfman's memoir reveals language to be at the core of his identity and he describes his bilingualism as constitutive of his hybrid subjectivity. His narrative technique, which borrows from a combination of US and Latin American literary predecessors, is a further sign of the ways in which his writing is in synch with Latino literature. In his memoir, for instance, he intertwines a US-style confessional narrative with the story of a Latin American collective. Both the form of his writing, which includes

characteristic Latino code-switching, as well as the content of his memoir, which delves into the personal crises caused by biculturalism, can, in fact, be productively read as Latino. I want to stress that Dorfman is best read as *alterlatino* rather than Latino. Even though Dorfman's work provides us with an excellent example of how *alterlatinos* demand reassessment of the assumed boundaries of the Latino canon, I think it is more productive to consider his identity as akin to that of Latinos, neither entirely different nor identical. Moreover, to make the argument that writers like Dorfman should be added to the Latino cultural community would simply reiterate those made by many other scholars who have already stressed the necessary fluidity of the notion of *latinidad*.

Focusing on Dorfman's relationship to *latinidad* by exploring the ways that his memoir describes how he was seduced as a young boy by US pop culture provides scholars with yet another opportunity to trace the ties between Latino identities and mainstream US culture. Dorfman's yearning for assimilation comes at an especially important historical moment. His first exile to the US during the period 1945-1954 coincides with an intense moment of US nation-building. He admits to readers: "I wanted to melt and dissolve […] into the gigantic melting pot of America" (78). As Arlene Dávila aptly explores in *Latinos, Inc*. the messy borders of any sort of pan-*latinidad* force us to recognize that the very notion of Latino culture has always been linked to capitalist commodification. Latino culture has been constructed, according to Davila, as "a static and marketable vision of what is, in fact, a fluid and heterogeneous population" (24). Dorfman's story of alternating desire for and disgust of US cultural products pushes on the boundaries and political implications of the Latino as consumer and commodity. This treatment of *latinidad* as consumer category is made all the more complex by the fact that the term *alterlatino* was not coined by Dorfman and does not necessarily disengage Latino culture from the marketplace because the term *alterlatino* has been used in the past to market alternative Latin music by groups like Manu Chao and Café Tacuba. This connection might lead us to wonder whether we should parallel the Latin music scene with a literary *alterlatino* movement that would include writers like Dorfman, Alberto Fuguet, and Edmundo Paz Soldan, who the literary market suggests as hip, diasporic, worldly alternatives to the standard themes of Latino writing. To take this view means inevitably confronting the fact that the work of these fringe Latinos

has also been coopted by the marketplace. Consequently, the commercial and consumer relationship between *alterlatino*s and Latinos is intertwined. Asking how *alterlatino* writers relate to the history of both ideological seduction and commodification in the Latino community might enhance the work of Latino Studies.

A further potentially productive avenue between *alterlatino* and Latino Studies relates to the politics of the academy. How are *alterlatino*s read and how do these readings connect with those of other Latino writers? It is worth noting that Dorfman rarely, if ever, appears on syllabi for courses on Latino culture and that his work tends to appear mainly in courses dedicated to the study of human rights, cultural criticism, and Latin American literature. Jane Juffer has argued that recently the academic study of Latinos has been driven by market forces. She writes:

> Chicano studies and Puerto Rican studies grew out of the nationalist movements of the 1960s; movement leaders were skeptical of the university as an institution but also hopeful that it would serve as a space of critique of the military-industrial complex as well as a site of knowledge production that would benefit local Latino communities. Now it would seem, however, that the university — given its increasing alliances, even conflation, with big business and government — is no longer really available as a site of critique" (266).

Juffer goes on to argue that "Latino cultural studies must try to define and develop spaces where questions of community are constantly raised but never definitively answered, and where the role of culture in community and subject formation cannot be *assumed* to be central" (289). Writers like Dorfman draw attention to the messiness inherent in efforts to define Latino communities and subjectivities so that they conform to academic structures. Considering how texts by writers like Dorfman resist the corporate model of what Michael Berube calls the "multiversity" (68) -- that is the university as it is shaped by multinational corporate interests, suggests another angle where attention to the cultural production of *alterlatino*s like Dorfman could contribute to Latino Studies. Are writers like

Dorfman absent from Latino Studies syllabi because their work frustrates university curricula aimed at supporting the goals of big business?

All of these are important points when considering Dorfman's potential contribution as an *alterlatino* to Latino Studies, but adding the *alterlatino* to the study of Latinos returns to the question of how and to what ends we define *latinidad*. And, while it may be true that these definitions need constant reassessment, it is important to recognize that arguments in favor of fluid identities have, indeed, already been made. The larger problem with these arguments is that they can ultimately be reduced to a fairly predictable claim that a marginalized group of a marginalized group should not be marginalized. These critical interventions tend to concentrate on which identity markers constitute legitimate group participation and they often lead to the suggestion that the characteristics used to define the group should be more fluid and open but not so fluid and open as to eradicate the original notion of the group itself — an argument that borders on the illogical. I depart from the first part of Dorfman's description of the *alterlatino* — where the term refers to the other, alter Latinos who hail from cultural backgrounds that don't fit the primary Latino profile of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans — in order to focus instead on the second part of his definition, that of the *alterlatino* as double and other. Here I take Dorfman's statement even further by asking how the notion of the *alterlatino* can put pressure on the traditional ways that Latino Studies has grappled with the notion of the self, the social agent, and the pubic subject in terms of a corresponding ethics and politics. What I consider is how Dorfman's work suggests a model for disentangling a theory of the Latino subject from a commitment to Latino ethico-politics. How can the *alterlatino*, a figure who might be understood as a fellow traveler to *latinidad*, ask us to reconsider the parameters that have been used to shape the Latino subject? How can the *alterlatino* provide us with an *other* way of thinking about the core struggles at the center of Latino Studies? If we understand Dorfman to be a writer who is deeply committed to many of the political struggles at the core of Latino life, then how does it then become necessary to understand the ways that his work illuminates the tensions between identity politics and social struggle? Is it necessary to be Latino in order to be committed to Latinos? Writers like Dorfman, who are committed to Latino politics, but who resist Latino identity markers, who are committed to Latino ethics, but not to a uniquely Latino ontology, facilitate investigation into the

ways that intellectual debates about the struggles of ethnic communities have often conflated ethics with identity, history with being, community struggle with community essence. I am using the term "ontology" to mean the investigation of the fundamental categories of being. Ontologically-driven Latino Studies, then, is principally preoccupied with considering the attributes that define Latino existence. In contrast, ethico-politically driven Latino Studies would be dedicated to understanding Latino history and culture from a perspective committed to rectifying material inequities and historical injustices. I would like to suggest that *alterlatino*s like Dorfman facilitate a critique of how identity politics has increasingly abandoned the political in favor of the ontological. It is worth asking how the political activism that sparked the early struggles of identity politics have been overshadowed by a relentless and time consuming effort to define, deconstruct, and redefine what it means to be a Latino. This anxiety over the contours of Latino identity has become a major distraction and most importantly has resulted in a critical conceptual error that has privileged the ontological over the ethical. Moreover, the focus on the ontological over the political has led Latino Studies to retain and revive Enlightenment perspectives that Latino Studies has attempted to refute. *Alterlatino* writers like Dorfman who stress political commitment over cultural essentialism suggest ways that Latino Studies can return the politics to identity politics and escape the conceptual flaws of Enlightenment thinking.

In a well-known exchange that took place in 1996, Earl Shorris, Cornel West, and Jorge Klor de Alva discussed the intersections of race and ethnicity and raised some of these same issues. Most poignantly, Klor de Alva refused to consider West as an African American despite West's repeated affirmations of his racially marked identity. What began as a dialogue about the uneasy relationship between African Americans and Latinos became instead a discussion of whether it is necessary for a marginalized and socially oppressed group to posit a counter-ontology that challenges the mainstream version of universal subjectivity. The key issue is the degree to which this counter-ontology continues to depend on a description of the self that is exclusive of other groups. This leads me to wonder whether such an exclusive notion of identity can productively shape political and ethical commitment dedicated to challenging social oppression. Over the course of the conversation between West and Klor de Alva it became clear that the two scholars present radically distinct ways of approaching the problem: West believes that a commitment to

blackness is at the core of the struggles of the black community, while Klor de Alva believes that preserving racial and ethnic identity markers in order to challenge racism prolongs racism. In an exchange that exemplifies these opposing views West claims: "I am a black man trying to be an American citizen" and Klor de Alva counters: "I am an American citizen trying to get rid of as many categories as possible that classify people in ways that make it easy for them to be oppressed, isolated, marginalized" (185). For West the way to subjectivity based on common humanity is through a revalorization of blackness and for Klor de Alva it is through the destruction of the ideological scaffolding that has constructed subjectivity in terms of race and ethnicity.

This debate and Klor de Alva's work on "Aztlan, Borinquen and Hispanic Nationalism" provide a key map of the ways that ontology has overtaken ethics in many scholarly approaches to Latino Studies. Briefly we might sum up the history this way: US identity is founded on a false notion of universal humanity most manifestly visible in the chasm between the rhetoric of universal equality and freedom found in the Declaration of Independence and the practice which excluded vast sectors of society from participating in the "pursuit of happiness." With well-founded skepticism towards such a notion of universal humanity, Chicano, Black, Native American, and feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s (among others) attacked these so-called Enlightenment principles and exposed the ways that they were actually based on a hegemonic logic of inclusion and exclusion, where only certain humans could be counted as part of "universal humanity. Their critique of the universal subject of the Enlightenment centered on two main observations—one ontological and one ethical. The ontological critique focused on how the notion of universal humanity had conceptual flaws. The ethical critique attacked its hegemonic consequences. These two critiques, though, were often merged, as seen, for instance, in Frederick Douglass's speech from 5 July 1852 where he asked "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; […] There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the US, at this very hour.[1]

1 The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro.

In response to this history of privileged inclusion and massive exclusion from US nationalism, the social movements from the 1960s tended to create counter-nationalisms such as that found in the Plan Espiritual de Aztlan (1969): "In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal 'gringo' invasion of our territories, *we,* the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, *declare* that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny." The text puts the word "declare" in italics in a direct effort to challenge the Declaration of Independence and as Klor de Alva points out such cultural nationalism was a "vibrant force for social change" (77). The problem with cultural nationalism, though, is that it depends on the same ontology of inclusion and exclusion as hegemonic nationalism. The only key differences are who is included, who is excluded, and who has more power. Even though cultural nationalism can be a powerful tool for change, it ultimately leads to drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders at the expense of developing a notion of subjectivity that could potentially include everyone. It is because of the legacy of cultural nationalism and its corresponding insistence on divisive notions of the self that we worry about what to do with the *alterlatinos*, how to unite different Latino communities, and how to link the struggles of other socially marginalized groups, like African Americans, to that of Latinos. I suggest that cultural nationalism favors ontology over ethics and that the subject created by cultural nationalism is fundamentally similar to the flawed Enlightenment version of universal humanity.

Dorfman offers another way of understanding politics and identity in his memoir. He asks: What are the boundaries between the story of a life, a community in struggle, and humanity? How do these narratives intertwine and unravel and what political work needs to be done to bring them into better dialogue? His memoir traces equally the story of his life and that of the community involved in the Chilean revolution. He takes great pains to register the loss and suffering of the coup as a collective as well as a personal tragedy, but he also makes it clear that this story is not only about Ariel Dorfman, nor is it about Chile — it is about humanity. The complex ways that he blends a collective and an individual subjectivity

at the service of political and ethical commitment provides a useful model for ways to overcome the ethical limits of nationalism and identity politics.

To give one example from his memoir, Dorfman writes of his fear and depression after Pinochet's coup when he was in hiding from the secret police. On one of the few days that he ventured to walk the streets in Santiago he had a brief encounter with another man that lifted his spirits. Unknown to each other but bound by their common sense of loss, they walked past each other and the man winked at Dorfman -- a gesture that reminded Dorfman of why they had fought to change Chile: "he spoke my language, and that language was not Spanish and of course not English but the unspoken language of solidarity" (136). Dorfman underscores that the Chilean revolution was not grounded in nationalism, that it did not lay claim to a particular language, but that it was the struggle of solidarity, of humanity versus inhuman social structures. Dorfman's memoir simultaneously preserves the concrete history of the Chilean struggle while refusing to define the self according to the dominant ontological parameters that depend on a logic of inclusion and exclusion. As a model for an *alterlatino* studies it suggests a way to layer concern for attending to Latino history and to personal struggles of Latinos -- both as they have been shaped by dominant culture and by resistance movements — with that of social struggle in general.

Another example of the ways that Dorfman's work intersects with Latino cultural issues within a framework of a commitment to humanity can be found in his adaptation of the short story "A la escondida" written originally while he was in exile in Amsterdam in the mid-1970s, translated into English in 1990 as "My House is on Fire," and then adapted into a short film in collaboration with his son, Rodrigo, in 1997. The original story, set during a dictatorship, centers on two children playing a game of "waiting for the enemy." Once an unknown man appears at the door, the children are put to a test when they are forced to decide whether they should tell the man where their father is. The original version of the story questioned what happens to childhood and to innocence during dictatorship when children are forced to play games that simulate their need to protect their parents from violent abduction. When Dorfman worked with George Shivers to translate the story into English he made two crucial changes: he changed the epigraph and the title became "My House is on Fire" in reference to the new epigraph. The original epigraph to the Spanish version comes from a children's song about the loss of war:

Mambrú se fue a la guerra,
¡qué dolor, qué dolor, qué pena!
Mambrú se fue a la guerra
no sé cuando vendrá,[2]

The song, sung throughout the Spanish-speaking world, actually originated in French and was sung by French soldiers and patriots who wished for the death of Sir John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough during the war of Spanish Succession (1701-14). In the cultural translation from English to French to Spanish Marlborough becomes Mambru. The song in its Latin American relocation has tended to be sung as a lament of war. It is unsurprising that Dorfman decided that the reference would be lost on an English speaking audience and changed the epigraph in the translation. In the English version of Dorfman's story, he opens with the Mother Goose rhyme: "Lady bug, Lady bug, Fly away home. Your house is on fire. Your children will burn." This new choice of epigraph, while equally part of an oral tradition, marks the text's movement away from the context of war towards a more general sense of danger and threat. Consequently the English version of the story forces Dorfman to reconsider his audience. As he moves away from the historical particularity of Chile, he widens the resonance of the story.

The film adaptation further translates the setting to the US South and now the children's enemy is not the secret police but the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service). Before we see any credits the film opens with a message to the viewer: "There are 5.3 million illegal immigrants in the US of America today. The Immigration and Naturalization Service says they are looking for them." We then hear the voices of a boy and a girl: Pablo, the boy, says: "They're coming for us" and his sister, Veronica, answers "Who Pablo?" Pablo responds "The enemy." Then Veronica replies "Is that the Migra? I don't like the migra. Why do they want to take me away? Why do they want to take daddy away?" After this exchange we hear Veronica sing the Mother Goose rhyme. So, when Dorfman and his son translated the story to film, they decided to address another situation where children live in constant fear, thereby linking the children living under Pinochet to the children of illegal immigrants in the US.

2 The original song is sung throughout the Spanish-speaking world and it has its origins in the bellicose history of Sir John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough, whose name is changed to Mambru. The song was originally in French and came into the Spanish language through the Bourbon Kings.

The ending of the film signals other key changes. The man who has come to visit, who may or may not be migra, is revealed finally as a friend of the family who will help them relocate to a safer house. After the children's father tells them to begin packing, the man sings, "No one knows the trouble I've seen. No one knows my sorrows." The insertion of an African American spiritual song into this story suggests an even broader cultural significance that spills well beyond Latino identity. What began as a story about families hiding from Latin American dictators and next was translated to refer to illegal Latino immigrants in the US, now suggests the flight of fugitive slaves.

It is highly significant that Dorfman links these circumstances through music and oral traditions that suggest cultural flows across communities. The end of the film completes the cultural circle and returns to the Southern Cone as we hear a typical Andean song performed by Inti-Illimani that evokes the struggles of the Native Americans in the south. This last song ties all of these musical versions of social suffering to structures of domination that depend on massive exclusion and privileged inclusion. Now we are prepared to reread the title of the film. What began as a story about hiding -- "*a la escondida*" -- has now become a story about social violence that is transhistorical and transnational in scope. The title "My House is on Fire" forces us to see the house not only as the place where illegal immigrants or political dissidents hide, but also as a metaphor for social groupings that are not easily contained by definitions of community, national, or ethnic identity. What all of these groups share is their vulnerability and it is that sense of constant threat that leads Dorfman to consider them as interrelated. It is telling that Dorfman alters the Mother Goose line from "your house is on fire" to "my house is on fire." The possessive "my" in its blatant reversal of the "your" found in Mother Goose pushes us to reflect on who is responsible for those that live in the house. It further suggests that the assumption that the house is only the concern of certain social groups will have grave consequences. The house, therefore, cannot symbolize the space of only one group. It cannot refer to the territory of one community. Instead, as Dorfman translates his story, he uses the metaphor of the house as a reference to the globe. Dorfman asks how the suffering of those that died under Pinochet relates to the suffering of undocumented immigrants, slaves, and Native Americans. And he forces us to consider that the power struggles of the Americas spill beyond the

confines of the nation-state and identity politics. Moreover, by tracing the ties between these examples of social oppression through music Dorfman reminds his audience of the ways that music builds bridges across nations, communities, and other forms of social division.

Both versions of the story and the film create an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and authoritarianism. The ease with which the story of these frightened children can be adapted from the context of a Latin American dictatorship to that of illegal immigrants living in the US is testimony to the common concerns that face communities across the globe. Dorfman's work reinfuses subjectivity with a notion of the universal that is simultaneously mindful of the ways that such categories have been used to erase history, to exclude substantial segments of the population, and to oppress social struggle. Dorfman's work, as it alternates between a concern for concrete particular struggles and a concern for human rights, grapples with the thorny problem of how to hold on to history and to protect diversity without overemphasizing subjectivity at the expense of politics and without sacrificing solidarity for difference. He exemplifies how *alterlatinos*, with their alternative description of otherness, can add to the political project of Latino Studies.

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