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Ricardo L. Ortiz

# Latinx Literature Now

Between Evanescence and Event

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Literatures of the Americas

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*This book, like everything else about my life, is dedicated to the memory of my parents and of my brother José Esteban Muñoz, and to the proofs of hope, and resiliency, and love, I need, and get, every day from my sisters and my nephews.*

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the Provost, the Dean of Georgetown College, and Mission and Ministry. Beyond Georgetown, I have counted myself lucky to belong to the DC-area Queer Studies Reading Group, the national MLA-led and Mellon-funded Connected Academics project, and the community of colleagues centrally involved in the work of the Latino Studies Association, especially those directly responsible for organizing the 2018 LSA conference in Washington, DC.

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## PRAISE FOR *LATINX LITERATURE NOW*

“I read Ricardo Ortiz’s *Latinx Literature Now* and fell in love. Writing with grace and uncanny theoretical wisdom, Ortiz deftly demonstrates we are at a new moment in Latinx literary studies, one that finds scholars wrestling with the relationship between the epistemological claims of literature, theory and history and the ontological dimensions of what we call Latinx literature. The evanescence and event of this literature bubbles up in the unique pairings and stunning interpretations Ortiz offers—Jacques Derrida and Edwidge Danticat; Julia Alvarez and Hayden White; John Beverly, Rigoberta Menchú, and Reinaldo Arenas, among others. A first-rate intellectual achievement!”

—Ralph E. Rodriguez, *author of Latinx Literature Unbound and Brown Gumshoes*

“Ricardo Ortiz’s concise and rich study is a *tour de force* that incisively explains the unfolding of contemporary US Latinx literature. Latinx writing itself becomes a historical act capable of making valid and productive claims to knowledge and truth. Incisive and theoretically capacious, this bold book offers a timely analysis that is necessary reading for anyone wanting to understand what Latinx literature does.”

—Rafael Pérez-Torres, *UCLA, US*

“Don’t let the brevity of this project fool you. This *tour de force* is an extended rumination that unfolds beautifully and provocatively through a number of untried questions that have too long been dormant

in Latinx literary studies. In characteristic fashion—and in ways that mirror the very arguments he makes for the way we might approach/read/collaborate/activate the afterlives of Latinx literary texts themselves—Ortiz treats his reader with generosity, inviting us to participate in this unfolding with him, to think deeply and slowly and in new ways about the relationship between history and literature, between diaspora and nation, between Latinx, Hispaniolan, and Caribbean literature.”

—Sandra K. Soto, *University of Arizona, USA*

# CONTENTS

1	The Trouble(s) with Unity: Performative Latinidades Between Culture and Politics	1
2	Reiterating Performatives: The Writer, the Reader and the Risks of Literary Action	13
3	Archive and Diaspora: Julia Alvarez as Poet, Novelist, and Historian	23
4	Against <i>Against Literature</i> : Histories of Fiction, Fictions of History	35
5	The Testimonial Imagination or, Literary Practice “After” Testimonio	49
6	Un-Homey States: Econo-Mimetics of Homelessness in US Latinx Poetry	59
7	(Latinx) Literature’s Work: Between Being and Becoming, Product and Practice	73

<b>Bibliography</b>	87
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<b>Index</b>	91
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## INTRODUCTION

This essay offers itself as an opportunity to reflect on, and to make some claims concerning, a set of expressive cultural practices, primarily organized around whatever might qualify them as acts of Latinx literature, and a set of critical and scholarly practices, especially those which, like literary studies, cultural studies, history, American studies, Latin American studies and US Latinx studies, might avow a set of discipline- and field-specific interests in accounting for how some rough concatenation of US Latinx literary production, and a corresponding concatenation of US Latinx literary studies, might be said to have done (and to continue to be doing) whatever work defines them in their respective spaces and modes of practice, and how that work in turn self-collates, not only into a process, or a practice, or even a *project*, but as something ineluctably either still-just happening, or not-yet happening, or about-to happen, but always in some still-current state of immanent emergence and evanescence that allows us to find ourselves (still!) just-hailing the event we will have come to have known to have been “US Latinx Literature.”<sup>1</sup> This discussion will in its long course turn to work in both the philosophy of literature and the philosophy of history to articulate more clearly how such claims about an object or event we could call “literature” can only come from the para-practical space outside of literature itself,<sup>2</sup> that even when a literary text avows itself *as* literature, it can only do so by miming extra-literary discourses, like history or philosophy or criticism or theory, in order to enact that self-naming, that claim to self-knowledge.<sup>3</sup> As it moves forward, this discussion will try to fashion a sense of the event

that alternates between the persistence of its ineluctability and its equally persistent evanescence, where the very appearance of a formation like US *latinidad* (not to mention US Latinx *literature*) only ever makes itself available through the threat or the risk of its vanishing, of its immediate re/dis/appearance, back into marginalization, oblivion, and silence. This sense of the evanescent “event-ness” of US Latinx/literature will, therefore, refuse to decide between its (their) potential momentousness and its (their) equally potential momentariness. And while this essay leans heavily in the direction of a plausible construction of *latinidad* as itinerant, evanescent and precarious (thus suggesting an emphasis on aspects of it tied closely to direct experiences of immigration, non-documentation, non-enfranchisement, and extreme necro-/bio-/political vulnerability), it does not at all mean to imply that such a construction should absolutely trump existing and well-established accounts of more stably nationalist and historic constructions, some of them extending back to the early nineteenth and covering all of the twentieth century, of Chican@/x, mainland Puerto Rican, Cuban-American, Dominican-American, etc., identity and community emanating from those various (sub-)fields.<sup>4</sup>

Since the question of the status of *literature* will take up the bulk of this essay’s work, the related question for us of the status of *latinidad* will take up some detailed attention in the following section, if only to clear some fertile historical and conceptual ground, to introduce the work of two scholars who will both explicitly and implicitly inform the rest of this discussion, and to take some early steps in the process of bringing our two key terms into active, productive dialectical engagement. The rest of the succeeding sections below can be read as a series of congruent but also independent attempts to describe the behaviors of Latinx literary textuality, as simultaneously historical processes of production and reception, and across a collection of writers, texts, and theories that all lay compelling claims to touchstone status in the work of Latinx literary practice, and Latinx literary criticism, as the second decade of the twenty-first century turns toward the third. For reasons that the following sections make clear, this project draws more from Latin American rather than US Latinx literary studies scholarship, but it also draws amply from both, and along the way it engages work by a variety of mostly non-Latinx figures (including Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, Hayden White, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot) from critical theory that touches language, literature, and history, as well as tracing

a genealogy of literary texts, mostly produced in the quarter century following nineteen ninety-two, the fifth centennial of the New World's collision with the Columbus expedition, and proceeding from work produced by writers in the larger US Caribbean diaspora to work originating in Central American and Chicanx America. Readers will also note a set of strategic pairings along the way, from John Beverley with Cristina Beltrán, to Edwidge Danticat with Jacques Derrida, to Reinaldo Arenas with Rigoberta Menchú, pairings that hopefully trouble productively the logics of genre, discourse, and discipline along the way, troubling the conventions of those logics of categorization enough to allow us to read, and to know, US Latinx literature differently than we have yet historically, and perhaps therefore, actually, to see it for the first time.

## NOTES

1. This essay takes its cues for its own characterization of a mostly potentialized construction of *latinidad* from José Esteban Muñoz's analogous construction of queerness as future utopian projection and wish in *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009). For this reason, it understands *latinidad's* own current and ongoing potentialization as all promise and no guarantees; rather than serving as an ontological or epistemological ground for the basis of any claim, therefore, we will only project a *latinidad* as desire, as wish, and as *project*: that is, as a not-yet-realized occasion for the production of resources for survival and cultivation, resources to be shared, and enjoyed, in (what José had begun to call a brown) common(s). This essay, and any related future work from its writer, is dedicated to José's memory, and to a deep hope for all the possible afterlives of his work.
2. In the last section we will lean toward Terry Eagleton's characterization of the ontological performativity of the literary act and/or literary event (in 2010's *The Event of Literature*, Yale University Press), which explicitly reaches back as far as Austin's work in *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1962) and at least implicitly runs through rather than around Jacques Derrida's deconstructive engagement with speech-act-school performativity in and out of literary contexts, from 1972's "Signature, Event, Context" in *Limited Inc* (trans. Samuel Weber, Northwestern University Press, 1988), through his 1991 collaboration with Derek Attridge on the collection *Acts of Literature* (Routledge, 1992). It will also trace aspects of Judith Butler's primarily post-structural, de-ontological critique of gender identity/subjectivity as performative, especially as it influences related work, like Cristina Beltrán's strategic

re-eventuation of a political US Latin@ identity as itself analogously performative. It will, however, and mostly due to restrictions of space, only briefly glance at the recent post-post-structural “return” of a philosophical ontology in work like Alain Badiou’s. At best here we can cite other scholars who, like John Beverley in *Latinamericanism After 9/11*, mention Badiou for their own purposes (7). But I suspect that some threads within Latinx studies, like Lázaro Lima’s characterization in *The Latino Body* (2007) of the “becoming-historical” of a visible, legible, effective Latinx subjectivity in the US American context, have been anticipating this return to ontology before Badiou’s work became better known in the Anglophone world; and, in fact, applications of Badiou’s work in corresponding fields (like James Tweedie’s work in film studies: “The Event of Cinema,” *Cultural Critique*, Fall 2012) also suggest ways in which he may have positive contributions to make across all fields beholden in part to politically engaged post-structural cultural studies methodologies.

3. See, for example, how both the passage from Junot Díaz discussed in our last section, and a text as literary-historical as Julia Alvarez’s novel *In the Name of Salomé* (also discussed in detail below) both operate simultaneously as acts of literary, literary-historical, and literary-critical, practice.
4. Work certainly remains to be done on the various intellectual, institutional and ideological rationales for how any and all of these various fields should interact and inter-implicate one another.