*Social Semiotics,* 2015
Vol. 25, No. 2, 142–150, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2015.1010320

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

## RESEARCH NOTE

# The Latino-ness of type: making design identities socially significant

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To reflect on current Latino-themed typography in built environments and marketing venues, this paper examines the early 1990s, *barrio*-inspired typographic design of Pablo Medina, a Cuban-Colombian-American award-winning designer currently working in NYC, in relation to two diverse socio-aesthetic value systems. The first value system is a modernist ideology, which insists that language and expression can be universal and communicate across racial, ethnic, and cultural differences without carrying any particular meaning, bias, or identity. In contrast, Medina's *Cuba* typeface is in conversation with an ethnic place approach to cultural production that has its origins in 1960s Latino social movements that sought to affirm the cultural value of barrios. This design approach is often associated with postmodern socio-aesthetic preferences that "localize" culture. I argue that this type's articulation with the urban requires rethinking its postmodern categorization. This short article offers a window into new ways of thinking about hand-painted lettering – produced by designers and sign artists – that indexes barrio landscapes.

**Keywords:** lettering; barrio; design; Latino urban culture

## Introduction

A cursory look at past and contemporary billboards, posters, packaging, menus, and magazines throughout the USA indicates the importance of lettering in indexing Latino culture in the commercial sphere. This brightly colored, bold-faced, gyrating typography with a hand-made quality of imperfection bears three primary characteristics: inlaid chevron and dot cut-outs that often lead to the designation "fiesta" lettering; bold, italicized script; and hand-painted or hand-cut bold lettering reminiscent of wood-block type (Figure 1). Yet, as conspicuous as these letterforms and their Latino association may be, this lettering is not unique to Latino culture, nor is it exclusively found in Latino places of origin throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, the hand-painted bold lettering, which this article particularly focuses on, was used in newspaper advertisements, wanted ads, and storefronts of the Wild West of the US Southwest as early as the 1880s. It can be found in the 1930s Western movie posters, and today wherever digital lettering is too expensive or when a nonmechanical style is preferred to convey trendiness. In any case, in recent decades, this type has come to be closely associated with "Latino-ness," a sense of Latino identity, in the USA. Resisting the compelling urge to denounce such connections to type as ethno-centric essentialism, this short article comments on the possible sources and reflects on some of the consequences of invoking Latino cultural specificity in the typography of built environments and

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Figure 1. A new Mexican restaurant in West New York, NJ, that uses the "fiesta" typeface ubiquitously used in Mexican restaurants to promote authentic cuisine, especially to non-Latino consumers.

marketing venues. To do so, I analyze the early 1990s typographic design of Pablo Medina, a Cuban-Colombian-American award-winning designer currently working in NYC. In particular, I position his *Cuba* typeface, a type that was inspired by barrio signage and follows the genre of hand-painted bold lettering, in relation to two socio-aesthetic value systems that dominate design history: modernism and postmodernism (Londoño 2010). Simply put, while the aesthetic tenets of modernist design stress universal applicability and communication, postmodernism disrupted a straightforward trajectory of meaning from producer to reader by making typography into an artistic medium whose meaning was expressive and variously interpretable. Because Medina's approach to creative production emphasizes cultural identity and his subject position, it is frequently labeled as "postmodern," but locating it in postmodernist culture is not sufficient for understanding the lettering's socio-aesthetic and political significance, and in particular that of its vernacular antecedent in low-income Latino-majority urban clusters or *barrios*.[1] Indeed, discussing *Cuba* offers a window into new ways of thinking about hand-painted lettering – produced by designers and sign artists – that indexes barrio landscapes.

This article follows Stuart Hall's description of a discursive analysis that:

> examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied. (Hall, Evans, and Nixon [1997] 2013, xxii)

In other words, this article seeks to unpack the regimes of representation that indicate the association between Latinidad and lettering and the socio-aesthetic values and contexts upon which this association depends to create ethnic meaning. Indebted to Foucauldian literature about regimes of representation and their workings of power, the purpose here is

to expose the ideological, cultural politics that shape what is and is not categorized as Latino-type design and why (Hall, Evans, and Nixon [1997] 2013, 27–28).

## At the limits of design: from modernist to postmodernist regimes of representation

A modernist design ideology insists that visual expression can be universal and communicate across racial, ethnic, and cultural differences without carrying any particular bias or identity. This interest in universal meaning initially took shape in the 1910s and 1920s as a new era of aesthetic discourse and cultural production ushered in a break with traditional stylistic flourishes in type design created for elite classes. A wish to reflect social and political changes also set in, with new technology and machine-driven mass production inspiring many designers. For instance, in 1925, Herbert Bayer, of the German Bauhaus School of Art and Design, designed the path-breaking "universal" typeface without serifs and the hierarchy of capital letters – those "excesses" of lettering – that to him were out of place in an "age of science" (Bayer [1967] 2009, 45). In 1928, Jan Tschichold, also at the Bauhaus, published *The New Typography*, whose vast distribution succeeded at engraining in the minds of printers, typesetters, and designers the importance of organizing type on a page for maximizing communication to the reader. Simply described as "the grid," Tschichold's rules set a rigid standard for modern design layouts and type (Tschichold [1928] 1998). Like Bayer, Tschichold sought a modernist aesthetic to counter "degenerate," decorative typefaces, such as the medieval black letter type that in the early twentieth century Nazis preferred and tried to impose on the populations they controlled. This European avant-garde typography became a socio-aesthetic system that sustained, via letterform, the ideology of progress and equality central to the larger project of modernism.

The writings of early twentieth-century European artists and designers, including those listed above, and the subsequent professional literature on graphic design and typography that arose in the Global North further developed a historical narrative that equated modernist typography with a visual language legible to all. For some designers, underlying this purported equality of form was a rigidity that soon became oppressive, leading Tschichold himself after being held captive by armed Nazis to reject a modernist style as fascist (Armstrong 2009, 35). But, by and large, the universal ideals of modernist type lived on in the aptly named International Typographic Style of the 1950s. Also known as Swiss Design, this style gave birth to Helvetica and Univers typefaces in 1957 (Hollis 2006). Helvetica, especially, has been widely used in a vast array of commercial ephemera and corporate and public contexts. This wide commercialization of Helvetica across the Global North put into question the politics of early modernist type design (Meggs [1983] 1992, 347). The widespread use of modern design and type in a late twentieth-century graphic design industry intimately linked with advertisement made it obvious that whatever transformative intent modernist design could have would largely serve the economic imperatives of mass consumer culture.

The use of modernist aesthetics in various commercial and noncommercial realms created distinct parameters for evaluating "good" design. Legibility and aesthetic minimalism figured most prominently at the center, while the excessive, the disorganized, unruly, unordered, and colorful attributes frequently linked to racialized cultures, resided at the edge. This exclusion was a way to maintain the cohesion of the socio-aesthetic

system of modernism, but it eventually also proved to be modernism's very own undoing as primary aesthetic style.

By the end of the 1980s, postmodernism had grown out of a disillusion with universal modern design. The failure of modernism to truly democratize design's public and visual content put into question its formal rules and stoic clarity, and led instead to the popularity of visual hybridity, simulacra, kitsch, eclecticism, pastiche, embellishment, and rule breaking, or simply, *No More Rules* (2003), as design critic Rick Poynor declared in his book title. Just as modernism reacted to its social milieu, postmodernism was a response to deindustrialization and new technology, especially the advent of personal computers that made it easy to create several layers of text and image on paper (Poynor 2003, 99–100, 115). Such conditions opened the door for the cultural excesses, the vernacular and subjective expression of nondominant, non-European cultures that modern design's exclusive parameters had cast aside.

Postmodern design was particularly keen on learning from and applying vernacular street cultures to professional projects (Figure 2). This creative strategy of looking "downward to go upward" was celebrated in the now classic *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi et al., [1972] 2001) that encouraged architects to value the tastes of mass culture visible in the built environment of suburbs and sprawling areas. In the 1980s, Tibor Kalman and his graphic design company embraced this mode of appreciating and extracting aesthetic value from the bottom-up. More recently, AIGA's (American Institute for the Graphic Arts) pocketsize how-to book on culturally relevant design, *An Ethnography Primer* (circa 2007), reiterates and validates this same sensibility. These examples show that – at least from the perspective of the Global North – postmodernism differed from modernism's social populism in that it embraced a cultural populism that rested on the appropriation of non-European cultures, the validation of nonprofessional cultures, and the fostering of multiple interpretations of meaning. Postmodernists saw this as a way of valuing nonprofessional, nonskilled, nonexpert visuals that modernism's top-down mode disparaged.

This postmodern ideology strongly rejected modernism's metanarratives and utopian aesthetic politics, and overtly desired to appropriate and carnivalize postcolonial, ethnic cultural difference. Yet, as much as this discourse may mark postmodernism as a cohesive system apart from modernism, this periodization of design history is not neat or simple.


Figure 2. This hand-painted sign made by a local Cuban sign painter is similar to the signs that inspired Medina's Cuba typeface.

Questioning the actual distinctions in these two isms' regimes of representation is generative for understanding how twentieth-century design visualized cultural difference. While postmodernism conceptually upheld "lowbrow" tastes, the actors involved in this approach continued to rely on design experts as mediators of culture and gatekeepers of aesthetic value. Moreover, as design critics, as well as prominent literary, architecture, and fine art scholars have noted, postmodernist and modernist differences in style and cultural politics may be overstated (Poynor 2003; Williams [1989] 2007; Appiah 1991, 356). Additionally, and perhaps most relevant here, the marginalization of the other in early modernism was still apparent in late twentieth-century design culture; contrary to postmodern rhetoric, cultural difference was not at center or of equal value to dominant design culture. After all, this postmodernism was defined within the metropoles of the Global North, not by a Latin American *avant la lettre* postmodernism with a hybrid constitution (Yudice 1992).

Similar to Euro-dominated modernism, in early US postmodern design, a Latino design category, Latino designers, or design work addressing a Latino audience barely existed. Latino-made vernacular design, however, was present during this time, and it is likely that Latino designers and Latino-themed design, sans ethnic descriptors, were contained under other categories, as in the case of Latin American design bracketed under a "Third World Posters" section in Philip B. Meggs' 1983 graphic design textbook. At the end of the twentieth century, during a later stage of postmodernism, such lack began to fill with the addition of Latino ethnic or national qualifiers in design production. This era coincided with the rise of a diverse Latino population and its increasing presence in the US national imaginary, consequence of the 1960s civil rights and radical activist movements, deindustrialization of the nation's urban landscape that showed deep racial inequities and its cultures, and entrenchment of pan-ethnic labels of "Latino" and "Hispanic" in everyday and institutional multicultural discourses (Oboler 1995).[2] By 1995, the Smithsonian, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum began the first "Latino/Hispanic Design Archive." In the early 2000s, nation-based books documenting anonymous ephemera from Cuba and street art from Mexico appeared, and in recent years, a regional Latin American design compilation with designer information was published (Heller and Levi 2002; Mena 2002; Paoli 2006; Wiedemann and Taborda 2008). Much of what this literature encompasses is made by Latin American sign artists and designers without design school training and rarely made by racialized Latino subjects in the USA. Latino-associated design production continues to be underexplored in design studies literature; what does exist is evidence that the Latino identity label that surfaced to make sense of Latin American immigration and internal Chicano and Puerto Rican colonies in the USA still straddles the limits of design culture as vernacular or street culture, occasionally existing as such in the realm of postmodern design.

## Categorizing Latino type in a regime of urban representation

Medina's *Cuba*, a typeface he designed as a graduate student in New York City inspired by lettering he found while walking through northern New Jersey *barrios*, is a design example that is frequently read within the categories of "postmodern" and "Latino." Included in the first National Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt in 2000, *Cuba* was placed under sections such as, "local" and "reclaimed," postmodern catchwords that defined Medina's design as nonmodernist, and implied that his particular typographic

expression was recovered from precarious, even insalubrious, settings (Goldsmith 2000). Moreover, as the exhibit catalog suggests, this type carried a specific Latino-ness tamed for reproduction: "Medina has reclaimed aspects of his own cultural history and made it available for use within modern forms of media and reproduction" (Albrecht, Lupton, Skov Holt 2000, 145). Medina himself reinforced the ethnic identity of his design by including in the catalog photographs of neon and hand-painted lettering under the title "Latin typography." The type's Latino-ness is further inscribed in a recent edited volume on Latino typography and in salsa packaging for the fast food chain Wendy's (Villafranca 2012). In the multiple design materials in which it has appeared, *Cuba* is often included as display type with big letters and small amounts of copy, furthering stereotypes of Latino culture as loud, spectacular, and therefore incompatible with modernist typographic values of crisp legibility and order.[3] Unlike Helvetica, for instance, which although eponymous with Switzerland's official name is considered a universal typeface, *Cuba* is discursively formed to carry an indelible ethnic particularity. This despite the fact that lettering similar to *Cuba* is found in the influential *American Wood Type 1828–1900* (1969) book on type "specimens of pure Americana" seen in the nineteenth-century USA and still produced by non-Latino sign painters throughout the USA. For this reason, it may be most accurate to consider *Cuba* as a contemporary designed manifestation of vernacular lettering born of a nascent consumer culture of the nineteenth century. *Cuba*'s vernacular simulacrum perdures in white-majority spaces of the Global North as a quirky relic, but is most prevalent in low-income consumer spaces of the Global South where printing technologies remain prohibitive to small businesses, and in US barrios where late twentieth-century Latin American immigrants restamped the urban landscape with this lettering tradition.

To understand why type such as *Cuba* and its corresponding vernacular is recognized as "Latino" despite its wide distribution across time and space, it is crucial to move beyond postmodernism and highlight Latino population growth and visibility in the socio-aesthetic value hierarchies of late twentieth-century US cities. The barrios that influenced Medina, for example, are part of a regime of urban representation in which urban progress is predicated on sanitizing cities and ridding them of vernacular lettering deemed blight and unfit for gentrification. I propose that, because of this type's marginal status in geographies where people of color reside, it is racialized into categories of "Latino," or specifically "Mexican" or "Cuban" lettering. This categorization stems from the same physically determined cultural logic that – steeped in a racialized metropolitan spatial order of the mid- to late twentieth century – equates suburbs with whites and "being street" or "urban music" with poor blacks and Latinos. The existence of vernacular lettering in low-income barrios, and its stylized representation in Latino-themed commercial settings, cultivates an ideological system of ethnic recognition that depends on marginalized, racialized spaces of cities, and the people who inhabit them, for their referent.

In what follows, I argue that this type's articulation with the urban requires rethinking its postmodern categorization. Postmodernism is too mired in the politics of co-optation, appropriation, or "reclamation," to offer a nuanced analysis of the socio-aesthetic and political significance of this type for low-income urban communities. Rather than following the isms of design history, a strategic essentialism, to borrow from Gayatri Spivak, that renders *Cuba* and its vernacular precedent a specific Latino product of socio-spatial relations is a categorization that may carve out a position of empowerment in a

regime of urban representation. Understood in this way, the urban specificity of type can operate dually to stereotype and produce social agency.

As Medina noted in an interview, the social meanings of type are of interest to him (Medina, 2009, personal communication). *Cuba*, he told me, was in part meant to preserve the culture he admired in the *barrios* of northern Jersey where thousands of Cubans came to reside after the revolution and various low-income Latin American immigrants thereafter. *How* this lettering might be preserved to benefit these barrios is unclear, but certainly urgent today as this Jersey area undergoes facade and street revitalization projects to further the gentrification supported by policy-makers, business owners, landlords, and aspirational elite residents. Pro-gentrification actors believe this lettering reflects negatively on low-income Latino communities and is thus counterproductive to the socioeconomic class objectives of gentrification. In trying to attract wealthier clientele and residents to the area, vinyl and monotonous dark-colored signage is gradually replacing hand-lettering, much of it, including the lettering that enchanted Medina, created by Cuban


Figure 3. The hand-painted signage on the exterior of these two businesses in Union City, NJ – "El Rincon Español" (at top) and "La Cachita" (at bottom) – was recently replaced with digitally made, muted-colored signage. This transformation coincides with years of municipal-driven mainstreaming of business facades.

sign painters (Figure 3). Moving away from hand-painted lettering symbolizes Latino residential and commercial displacement and reveals that the vernacular lettering, of which *Cuba* is a trace, is a contested representation in cities.

As hand-painted lettering of barrio streetscapes is erased, there is an ideological purchase to categorizing it as "Latino." Upholding the Latino-ness of this type can serve as a potent public reminder of the demographic and cultural changes that gentrification brings to low-income Latino communities and the socio-aesthetic values on which these changes are premised. Of course, this type can be used as a trend in storefronts to lure gentrifiers, and so it is necessary to underscore that this category of ethnic difference only works as a contestation to the regime of urban representation if its value is politicized and augmented for the benefit of low-income barrios and their businesses. If in performing a Latino identity and being erased this type acts as a bellwether of urban displacement, it may encourage a politics parallel to that of early twentieth-century modernism. It may promote the redistribution of aesthetic value – to channel Ranciere – away from regimes of urban representation that seek to normalize street landscapes (Ranciere [2004] 2013). Advocating for a strategic essentialism of Latino type and its continued visibility in public spaces counters the bourgeoisie design tastes that during processes of gentrification underpin the reconfiguration of cities for wealthier, disproportionately non-Latino populations.

Latinos are increasingly altering the cultures of commercial landscapes of the USA just as gentrification forces intensify and reconfigure these landscapes. In this contested environment, it is ever more important to understand the cultural logic that informs ethnic associations with visuals, including typography. Such cultural meanings tell us about the visual distribution of power, how visuals break with or reproduce dominant characterizations of a group and the social implications of doing so.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes**

1. My use of vernacular is meant to highlight the hand-painted lettering that professional discourse and design literature differentiates from professionally designed objects.
2. Latino is used sparingly in the 1960s and 1970s. It has become most popular in the past two decades. Today the term is used concurrently with Hispanic, the latter which is most found in the social sciences, policy, and mainstream press.
3. Professor Welby Ings of Auckland University of Technology and Professor Sydney Shep of Victoria University of Wellington offered helpful feedback and critical analysis of the uses of this typeface during the Typographic Landscaping Symposium at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, June 2013.

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She has also written on the topic of Latino design, Latino urbanism, and the Latino-majority places of Union City, NJ and Santa Ana, CA.

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