

## Choosing “Hispanic/Latino”: The Hidden Battle between Multiple Labels

by Mary Jean Ulloa

“¡Mami, tengo que perder peso! Estoy tan cansada de mis enormes caderas y mis piernas gordas. ¿Sabes qué? ¡Que es tu culpa! ¡De tí heredé estas piernas!”

English translation: “Mom, I have to lose weight! I’m so tired of my enormous hips and these thick thighs. You know what? It’s your fault! I inherited these legs from you!”

“¡Ay ,Mary, cuánto the quejas! Pero, ¿qué quieres?... ¡Tú eres una mujer **Latina!**”

English translation: “Oh Mary, you complain so much. What do you expect? You are **Latina!**”<sup>1</sup>

*Latina? What does that mean exactly? It’s been twenty-one years of life and I have never heard my mami call me a Latina. A whole new category that I never actually identified with has been created. A new battle arose and now I must decide which best defines me. I had absolutely no response to my mom. I simply walked away with a thousand questions attacking my mind. Where did this come from? My newfound mission: Figure out the difference between the words Latino and Hispanic.*

Shortly thereafter, the issue became more than personal as it was crucial to the community-based research project in my Penn State Berks class that is now this book. Which of these terms would we use in the title and text of our book about the local community? Are the terms Latino and Hispanic just another way of grouping people for easier identification by the dominant culture? Throughout the creation of this book, our class discussed the terms and invited faculty and community members to help us figure it out, but I continuously challenged the terms within my own mind. The more we asked, the more complicated it became. Since more people in the community seemed to favor “Latino” over “Hispanic,” we chose this term.

The term “Latino” was chosen because many people said it was the most inclusive of both terms. First let us look at what “inclusive” means. According to the online dictionary, Merriam Webster, it is “broad in orientation or scope.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when used in the context of identifying a group of people, everyone under the assumed label ought to be able to directly classify themselves under the assigned category.

Well, the point is that everyone in the classroom agreed except for me. I already knew from my past experience of my mother calling me a “Latina” that some people preferred one over the other. I did some very brief research on the terms and learned that people had different interpretations of the meanings. The outcome is that some people categorize themselves under one and not the other, while some simply do not care. I didn’t like the idea of choosing one and I disliked my classmates (and myself) for not debating it further. I felt so alone with this inner battle of the identification.

*As the only Hispanic/Latino from the ciudad de Reading I felt like the only one to have a civil obligation. I wanted to reach out to my community by giving them significant control. I know my community doesn't want just Latino as their only identification. It's a controversial issue and it will be for a while, so let's put the words together and reach out to three communities within one...let's reach out to the Latino, Hispanic, and Hispanic/Latino community. I couldn't get my thoughts out. I felt so alone.*

I decided to start asking everyone around me about the terms. At this point, I really just wanted to know what people are thinking (I really wanted to bring peace to my inner battle) and I wanted to get to the core of the problem. I began by posting a status on Facebook (a social networking site) stating the following: "Attention FB (Facebook) friends: which one do you prefer to be called or identify your friend as...Latino and/or Hispanic (they both have different meanings but are used to identify the same group of people)? Maybe you use both...or prefer neither." Within six minutes I had the response of a dear friend of mine, who said, "I honestly use the two interchangeably and no one has thus far corrected me. I think I may have learned in class once in 6th grade that Latino is specific to those in the Latin Americas and Hispanic is designated to those of Spanish origin which is not necessarily all people in the Latin Americas." Someone else of Dominican descent also uses both terms interchangeably. Then I had another friend say that Latino is a category chosen by Americans to categorize anyone who speaks Spanish. He prefers to identify as Hispanic which, in his view, is more general and involves more cultural value than just language.

My Spanish professor leans more toward the Hispanic label: Dr. Rosario Torres, the assistant professor of Spanish at Penn State Berks, says that Hispanic is the most preferred and inclusive of both because Latino is a label for all persons whose language is a Romance Language, meaning that Portuguese, Italians, French, Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, and all Spanish speakers would fit under the Latino label.<sup>3</sup>

*Now I was really confused. Enough is enough. There's no way of satisfying everyone if we just use Latino. I made an appointment to meet with Dr. Grobman in order to discuss my standpoint. I informed her of my confusion and that while some people preferred Latino, others preferred Hispanic. First, we decided that I was going to be in charge of researching to see which is the most inclusive of the terms. I went along for a bit but realized that if I wanted to say what I really wanted to say, now was the time. "We need to use both terms together, not one or the other or both interchangeably, in order to accept and refer to everyone in the Hispanic/Latino community." I chose "Hispanic/Latino" based on alphabetical order.*

Dr. Grobman agreed with my suggestion to use the term *Hispanic/Latino* under two conditions: 1) I had to conduct some research about the overall debate, and 2) our partners at the Hispanic Center had to agree with the usage of this combined term.

So began my more intensive academic research. Interestingly, the Pew Hispanic Center, a Pew Research Center Project, uses the term Latino.<sup>4</sup> With so many controversial definitions and arguments of one person claiming this and the other claiming that, there's no way of advancing and coming to a solid conclusion for the terms.

Evelyn G. Alemán, a graduate student who wrote “The Term ‘Latino’ Describes No One,” speaks for many when saying, “Latino can be as complex as defining what it means to be an American.”<sup>5</sup> She questions the term as perhaps being a way to disassociate a past life, a way of bringing unity of Latin Americans, or just being a simple benefit of the census. Alemán says that the term seems to fulfill “a desire to associate and accept the Latin American culture while creating an identity rooted in common language—Spanish—within the amalgamation of diverse cultures found in the United States.” She views the term as being temporarily satisfactory to identify a different group of people; however, as Americans accept and embrace the Latino culture, the term will become more problematic.

The strong-minded journalist, Raoul Lowery Contreras, has attacked the term Latino for being an easy way of cluttering a diverse group of people. He is known for campaigning against the *Los Angeles Times* for using the term and for forming a path for other newspapers to follow with the practice of the term Latino. His argument is that “Latino” was simply a replacement for the word “Chicano,” which he has interpreted as “a less than well-educated person, less than well-employed, if employed at all, more dependent on government and a tendency to blame others for their lot.” In contrast, he argues, “Hispanic” meant “educated middle-class people who work hard, yearn to live in good neighborhoods, want their children well-educated, and depend less on government than the working or non-working poor.”<sup>6</sup>

Rodolfo Acuña introduces his book, *U.S. Latino Issues*, by bringing the identity of Latino to the table. Acuña says that the census just “lumps” everyone together without realizing the different nationalities that Latinos represent. This term is now used widely by the media, politicians and marketers because it’s much easier to identify people under one umbrella. Acuña goes on to say that some critics argue that “the Latino identity was artificially constructed by the U.S. government” and that their purpose was simply “to erase the historical memory of the various Spanish-speaking groups.” Other critics say that Latino identity omits the reality that these people are of mixed-race backgrounds. Supporters of the term argue that times have changed and that “clinging on to national identities promotes nationalism, factionalism, and thus division. They argue that the term Latino is more inclusive.”<sup>7</sup>

As I continued my research, I came upon several articles that used the term “Latino/Hispanic” or “Hispanic/Latino,” but most used it intermittently, and none that I found gave any explanation for doing so.

Michael Toledo, the executive Director of the Hispanic Center, agrees to use the term “Hispanic/Latino” throughout the book. After consulting with Toledo, Mariela Jurado, the Special Projects Coordinator at the Centro Hispano Daniel Torres, wrote in an email to Dr. Grobman: “Regarding your question on the use of ‘Latino’ or ‘Hispanic,’ we would recommend you to use both terms as your student suggested, as people from different generational backgrounds identify with one term but not necessarily the other. In terms of accuracy and uniformity, it would be a good idea using Hispanic/Latino in each article.”<sup>8</sup>

As you read this book, you will notice the use of Hispanic/Latino in the students’ chapters. We did not make any changes to quotes of people interviewed or cited through secondary sources, nor did we change titles of organizations or articles. With this term, we are identifying the people that connect with both terms, and we are also including the

people that identify with just one of the two while still considering that both terms may or may not mean the same to everyone.

## Notes

1. Note: This is a short conversation between the author, Mary Ulloa, and her mother Maria Ulloa sometime in the Fall of 2009.
2. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, “inclusive,” 2010, Merriam-Webster Online, March 9, 2010 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inclusive>>.
3. Dr. Rosario Torres, interviewed by author, 2009.
4. Note: <http://pewhispanic.org/>. Notice the following language of “The Mission of the Pew Hispanic Center”: “Founded in 2001, the Pew Hispanic Center is a nonpartisan research organization that seeks to improve understanding of the U.S. Hispanic population and to chronicle Latinos’ growing impact on the nation. The Center does not take positions on policy issues. It is a project of the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan “fact tank” in Washington, DC that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, a public charity based in Philadelphia.” It seems clear that the Pew Center uses these terms interchangeably.
5. Evelyn G. Aleman, “The Term ‘Latino’ Describes No One,” *Los Angeles Times*, Retrieved March 9, 2010.
6. Raoul Lowery Contreras, “A Hispanic View: American Politics and the Politics of Immigration,” 7.
7. Rodolfo Acuña, “Introduction,” *U.S. Latino issues*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003, 1.
8. Mariela Jurado, “Hispanic/Latino,” Retrieved from an e-mail, March 11, 2010.