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## Pop in Spanish in the U.S.: A Space to Articulate the Latino Identity

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**Abstract:** Spanish has been fundamental to the definition of *Latin music* in the U.S. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this catchall term has been used to describe a heterogeneous catalogue of musical styles that has evolved over time, adapting to the reality of the Hispanic community of each moment. This category's collective imagination, subject matter, and musical practices are in a state of constant transformation, contributing to the rearticulation of the Latino identity for each historic period.

This study analyzes the evolution of Latin music from its conception as a category through the current moment. It begins with the pan-Latino context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and pays particular attention to the emergence of pop in the past few decades, including the 'Latino Boom' of the 1990s and through the present day, when a new generation of Latino artists has prompted a number of musical developments broadly referred to as 'urban music.' In this overview, we see how Latin music and its use of the Spanish language have adapted in line with the political, economic, and social status of the Hispanic community in the U.S.

**Keywords:** Latino pop, identity, music industry, Hispanic music

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## 1. Introduction

It may seem paradoxical, but it is quite common for an element that, *senso stricto*, we would consider extra-musical, such as the language in which a song is sung, to define a repertoire. Although rap, heavy metal, and punk are identified according to musical parameters with easily distinguishable characteristics, other repertoires defy stylistic logic, and their identity is underpinned by the language in which their songs are sung, giving rise to categories that, though hard to explain, work well enough when it comes to categorizing musicians and music. This is true in the case of ‘World Music,’ an undeniable hodgepodge of artists from various genres who generally do not sing in English, or ‘Latin music,’ the subject of this article, which lumps together rock, pop, ballads, and reggaetón, which are mostly sung in Spanish. One need look no further than a music catalogue or a U.S. record store to see how the language in which an artist sings is critical to being included in these sections.

That said, music is not an aseptic system of intra-textual relationships, but rather a language, a tool for communication, and, as such, it helps build social identities (Rice, 2010). Despite the importance of language in defining certain kinds of music as ‘Latin,’ we cannot ignore this label’s complexity as a dynamic construct over one hundred years in the making, a construct with a discourse, a collective imagination, and roots in the romantic postulating of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, we must pay attention to several tropes linked to popular culture that affect expressions of

*Latinidad* (passion, affection, viscosity, etc.) and which, in music, are easy to observe in many of the expressions that accompany this repertoire, such as the word *azúcar*, which is ubiquitous in salsa music, or the titles of several histories of Latin music, such as *¡Caliente! Una historia del jazz latino* (Delannoy, 2001) and *American sabor: Latinos and Latinas in US Popular Music* (Berrios-Miranda, Dudley, & Habell-Pallan, 2018). These works often use adjectives and the names of spices or other culinary allusions as metaphors for that musical characteristic or trope that underpins the music's identity and emphasizes the distinct 'touch' that gives this kind of music its particular 'flavor.'

We cannot talk about Latin music as a repertoire that only exists on the margins because, as we will see, it has had a place in the U.S. mainstream since at least the beginnings of the pop culture industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. But despite its popularity, it has always had an air of the exotic about it, a feeling of otherness that awakens curiosity and fascination, and its meaning has always been negotiated through this prism. This exoticism has not diminished with the years; rather, it has been reinvented with every passing generation, up through the present day. Nor has the cultural closeness of this music's artists—many of whom were born in the U.S.—made the music itself feel closer or integrated, since, as Jonathan Bellman notes, “exotic does not mean merely distant (indeed, distance is not even a necessary prerequisite)” (1998, p. xii), but rather, it reacts to cultural connections and tensions within a society and to the associations that we establish between a musical repertoire and a social group. Thus, it is impossible to untether the social status of Latin music in the U.S. music industry from the political status of the Latino population, nor from the tensions between English and Spanish within the country (Negus, 2005, p. 249).

At the same time, Latin music's 'exotic' personality has increased its ability to integrate musical expressions from outside cultures and traditions that are also seen as Other. One paradigmatic example is Santana's classic “Black Magic Woman,” a

Latin-rock cover of Fleetwood Mac that also incorporates fragments of “Gypsy Queen” by Gábor Szabó, an instrumental piece that combines Hungarian gypsy music and Latin rhythms. The resulting Latin blues-rock hit reached number four on the *Billboard Hot 100* in January 1971, but what most interests us is how Santana’s Afro-Cuban polyrhythms and performance of gypsy guitar melodies transformed Fleetwood Mac’s canonical blues rock into Latin rock. At the same time, all of the words in the title of the two songs (‘black magic woman’ and ‘gypsy queen’) deepen the song’s exoticism and otherness even as the lyrics describe an archetypical Carmen-esque *femme fatale*. Thus, it is not hard to see how Latin music fits perfectly under the umbrella of ‘World Music,’<sup>2</sup> a phenomenon linked to the globalization process of the 1980s, which implemented deterritorialization strategies in numerous distinct musical traditions (García Canclini, 1999).

In this article, we will discuss Latin music as a category in a state of constant revision that has responded, in every era, to the articulation of the U.S. Hispanic community’s identity. We begin with the role of music in the construction of *Latinidad* since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and we focus in particular on the evolution of Latin pop in the past thirty years, from the so-called ‘Latino Boom’ through today, to examine how demographic, political, and cultural shifts within this community have gone hand-in-hand with a shift in Latin pop music’s status in the U.S. market.

## 2. Popular music in the construction of the U.S. Latino identity

The process of articulating identities is always dynamic and complex, but it is even more challenging when a territory’s demographic composition and political geography is in a constant state of transformation. This is certainly true of the U.S., whose territory was not fully defined until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which has continually

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘World Music’ has been criticized for reinforcing Western (and particularly English language) hegemony in the music world and for homogenizing repertoires from different cultures based on Western aesthetic patterns.

assimilated populations from different parts of the world. In this context, we can assume that the different categories of identities that live and interact in this country are the product of tensions and hierarchies between communities sharing the territory. Consequently, these identities are a response not so much to a given set of cultural practices, but rather to political issues that delineate different population groups. Cultural hybridity has been a constant in the U.S., but it has existed alongside processes of folklorism and regionalism (Martí, 1996) that extol the act of distinguishing between cultural phenomena, ascribe expressions and practices to certain communities, and establish a dynamic of hegemony and subordination. Thus, although the Latino identity has always been part of the U.S. identity, it has been situated in a lower position relative to the Anglo-Saxon hegemony.

The music industry has not been immune to these dynamics; thus, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tin Pan Alley<sup>3</sup> used the umbrella term ‘foreign records’ to classify the non-English-language repertoire that was intended for consumption by the considerable group of immigrants living in the country at that time (Mora, 2018, p. 25). Spanish-language music was mainly sent to countries like Mexico and Cuba, but also intended for Mexican immigrants and the Spanish-speaking population in the southwestern U.S. (Mora, 2018, p. 26). Interestingly, that body of Spanish-language music was mostly written by Latin American and Spanish composers, and mostly recorded by Cuban and Mexican performers in New York City (Mora, 2018, p. 114). This only confirms that Spanish-language music in North America dates back to colonial times, and that, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish-language music was part of the large-scale performances that helped create an incipient Latino identity, an identity that was strengthened by a sense of pan-Hispanism. This fraternity among the ‘Latino nations’ in the face of growing U.S. dominance only reinforced a Latino identity in which the

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<sup>3</sup> Tin Pan Alley refers to the collection of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century New York City publishers, producers, and songwriters who controlled much of the music industry until the 1930s.

Spanish language was an integral part of being a Hispanic American (Alonso et al., 2010, 97).

Music helped shape this Latino identity in many ways, but two key milestones may stand out above the rest. First, across the Western world, the popularity of the character of Carmen in Georges Bizet's internationally acclaimed opera prompted countless shows featuring references to this archetypical woman; in the U.S., this archetype transformed into an icon of the Latina woman that is still used today (Viñuela, 2020). The second milestone was the Habanera, that 'roundtrip song'<sup>4</sup> that symbolizes the musical meeting point of pan-Hispanism and which, beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, represented Spanish culture outside of Spain while also "characterizing a parodic view of American characters [...] or evoking nostalgia for the tropics and the sensuality of mixed-race women" (Alonso et al., 2010, p. 98). The Habanera was a vehicle of *Latinidad* that permeated English-speaking U.S. culture; specifically, Kiko Mora notes that Sebastián Iradier's "La Paloma" enjoyed enormous popularity in the U.S. beginning in the 1870s; it was one of the most recorded pop songs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was covered by artists as diverse as Jerry Roll Morton, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley, Perry Como, Bing Crosby, and Charlie Parker (2015, p. 291). Tracing the evolution of the Habanera is not easy, and its origins were quickly watered down. This was clearly the case by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Rhythm & Blues and Rock & Roll music, in which the Habanera had a notable presence. As Roy Brewer argues, "many rockabilly musicians were not aware of the Habanera's Afro-Cuban heritage or its proper definition, but rather associated it with exotic and erotic striptease acts" (Brewer, 1999, p. 303).

The exotification of Latino culture was already fully normalized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this exotification touched every form of cultural expression. In mid-century

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<sup>4</sup> In Spanish 'cante/canto de ida y vuelta'. It refers to the musical forms and repertoires that merge in the interaction between two different cultures –Spanish and Cuban, in the case of Habanera.

music, "it mattered little whether the beat was Brazilian, Spanish, Argentinian, or Afro-Cuban, and in fact they all blurred together in the American public perception" (Goldberg, 2013, p. 80). Everything fit within the broad category of Latino otherness (samba, conga, mambo), which musicians such as Xavier Cugat transformed into massive success in their albums and in Hollywood film soundtracks. At the same time, Puerto Rican youths who had moved to New York (*nuyorriqueños*), like Ray Barretto and Richie Ray, combined Caribbean and African-American rhythms to shape Boogaloo music (Berrios-Miranda et al., 2018, p. 22).

Several styles developed under the umbrella category of Latin music in the U.S. Some were the product of many decades of border dialogues, like *Norteño* and *Tejano* music, while others were transnational expressions that sprang from the boundary between Mexico and the U.S. (Madrid, 2011). However, there can be no doubt that the emergence of salsa in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s bound together different strains of music and created a powerful music scene capable of articulating a pan-Latino identity that extended to major metropolises not only in the U.S., but also throughout the Caribbean, as an expression of Latinos' marginalization within globalization's ever-broadening expansion (Llano-Camacho, 2018, p. 32).

Salsa is not a well-defined musical genre; while the foundations of the sound are Cuban, it brings together several different Caribbean repertoires. The genre's commercial success in the seventies, prompted in part by Fania Records, facilitated its international expansion and, consequently, its contact with other Latin musics: hence, its contact with the ballad in the 1980s gave rise to the birth of so-called *salsa romántica*. Keith Negus noted that within this evolution of salsa, there were new practices and new kinds of relationships between producers, musicians, and Latino audiences in the U.S., who lived in a bicultural reality and, therefore, experienced greater social integration (2005, p. 237).

As this overview has shown, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of Latin music has been constructed in opposition to the hegemonic English-language repertoire, and, since that time, it has acted as one of the cultural stages on which demographic and social tensions in the U.S. have played out. In this process, Latin music has been situated as an exotic Other, shaping a collective imagination that features tropes, archetypes, and practices that are easy for the general public to identify. However, as Deborah Pacini-Hernández noted in 2001, “it is inevitable that the ever-widening cultural flows producing Latin/o musical hybrids, characterized by multiple sources and multiple performance locations, are going to destabilize the categories of ‘Latin music’ and ‘American’ music as they have been traditionally imagined” (p. 70). Much has undoubtedly changed since that time, as we will see in the following sections.

### 3. The ‘Latino Boom’ and the dynamics of cultural segregation/integration

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The nineties saw a spectacular surge in Latino culture in U.S. media. While this was true across many cultural sectors, it was most visible in pop music, where artists like Gloria Estefan, Ricky Martin, and Marc Anthony reached extraordinary levels of success. Thus, music led the charge in the so-called ‘Latino Boom,’ in which Hispanic artists performing a Latino repertoire—and in many instances singing in Spanish—entered the mainstream market. This milestone has been considered from several different perspectives, with some asserting that this breakthrough was the result of a marketing strategy that sought, first, to sell Latin music as something new (ignoring Latinos’ longstanding presence in U.S. music) and, second, to establish a Latino niche in the English-language mainstream and thereby buttress its status as a foreign repertoire (Cepeda, 2000). It is no coincidence that this phenomenon’s explosive name suggests novelty and unexpected interruption while simultaneously distancing itself from earlier periods, preferring to sell itself as a rupture in the genealogy of U.S. Latin music.

We cannot ignore that there were those who stood to benefit economically from this ‘boom’; however, it seems unfairly reductive to describe this phenomenon as nothing more than an opportunistic marketing strategy when there are, in fact, several other circumstances that prompted this explosion of Latino culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, there were demographic factors: the 2002 Census recorded 38.8 million Hispanics in the U.S. (13.3% of the total population), placing them ahead of African Americans as the largest ‘minority’ group in the country. In the nineties, the Hispanic population had grown 60% faster than the general population, and one in every five children born in the U.S. had a Hispanic background (Pereira, 2004, p. 16). Furthermore, according to that same Census, the Hispanic population was uniquely young, with an average age of 24; these young people were mostly second-generation immigrants who had grown up immersed in U.S. culture, developing consumer tendencies that were similar to those of other U.S. teenagers. Hispanic families’ purchasing power had doubled since the early eighties; Spanish remained young Hispanics’ first language, and the language that they most used in family contexts. Consequently, Spanish-language media (TV channels, radio stations, press, etc.) had seen exponential growth (Pereira, 2004, p. 26), Latin music was increasingly featured in TV ads and content, and Latino artists occupied more space in teen magazines and music stations, including those that catered to an English-speaking audience. The distribution of this content through major Spanish-language media outlets was critical to homogenizing Latino culture throughout the country; the TV shows, telenovelas, films, and music that appeared, especially in TV shows, were consumed by a large number of Hispanic immigrants with different backgrounds and from different generations, which transformed this content into a vehicle for negotiating their identity as Latinos in the U.S. (Negus, 2005, p. 232).

The growing demand for Latin music was a reality, and this market’s potential was not lost on record labels and major media conglomerates. But there were also other indicators that suggest a growing interest in Latino culture that began in the

eighties and crystallized in the nineties with the recognition of figures such as Frida Kahlo, whose work was reappraised, and Eva Perón, whose life was brought to the silver screen in the musical *Evita* (1996), starring Madonna. Both figures were treated as Latina icons and, in a sense, mythologized through this revival.

In the field of popular music, Deborah Paredez uses the term ‘Selenidad’ to describe the phenomenon that gripped the U.S. Hispanic community following the 1995 murder of the singer Selena, age 23. The Queen of Tejano Music’s tragic end transformed her into a myth, though by that point she was already a runaway star, with millions of Spanish-language albums sold in the U.S. and her own fashion and cosmetic lines. Comparisons with Madonna were the order of the day in the media (which called her the ‘Mexican Madonna’), and her fans’ grief strengthened the bonds among the Latino community and prompted extensive media coverage of her death. Selena came a few years before the Latino Boom, and many Latino artists would follow in her footsteps in the years to come. It is no coincidence that Jennifer López was given the lead in the 1997 biopic about the singer. As a figure, Selena marks a before and after for Latin pop in the U.S.; as Paredez points out, “U.S. entertainment industries—before Selena—historically ignored U.S.-born Latinas in favor of the exotic appeal of foreign-born Latin stars in the manufacturing of such cultural icons as Dolores del Río and Carmen Miranda” (2009, p. 9).

In fact, in the 1990s, the U.S. cultural industry created the necessary infrastructure for the development of a Latino niche. In the music sector, the major record labels created Latin music departments. Although these initiatives encountered numerous obstacles, including high rates of piracy and difficulty obtaining reliable data on the number of albums sold (Negus, 2005, 243), there was growth, and the labels’ investment led to Latinos being recognized at the various music awards. Significantly, there was not a Latin music category at the Grammy Awards until 1975, even though, as a repertoire, it had long been outselling jazz and classical music in the U.S., both of which had their own category. Latin music remained within the category of ethnic and

traditional music. The first Latin Grammys were held in 2000, with the specific mission of honoring artists in the Latino market, and they have been held every year since. Regarding the establishment of a separate award for Latino artists, Deborah Pacini-Hernández shows the same caution as María Elena Cepeda: “while, in some respects, this represents progress, it also runs the danger of perpetuating the segregation of Latin music from the industry mainstream” (2000, p. 64).

Fashion and news magazines were also eager to expand this market and began marketing to Hispanic readers. *Hispanic*, created in 1988, was one of the first magazines aimed at this audience. 1996 saw the launch of *People en Español*—whose cover featured Gloria Estefan, Thalía, Jennifer López, Marc Anthony, and Enrique Iglesias—and of the magazine *Latina*, with Jennifer López on the cover of the first issue, highlighting pop artists’ prominence among Latino celebrities at that time. Another important milestone was the creation of MTV Latino in 1993, which promoted the production of videos related to Latin music and, consequently, increased Latino artists’ advertising budgets. MTV Latino was especially relevant because of the connection it fostered with the era’s young Hispanics, because it offered content and spoke a language very different from what they would see and hear on the main Hispanic channels, Telemundo and Univision (Hanke, 1998, p. 234). Just as MTV had been for English-speaking young people when it was launched in 1981, MTV Latino became a cultural touchstone for members of a generation with very different baggage and life perspectives than their parents.

MTV Latino was based in Miami, far from the U.S.’ most important media production hub, Los Angeles, and also far from the major Hispanic communities that had been leading the charge in the development of Latin music since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, New York and San Antonio. The Latino Boom staging area was Miami, which had been known as the ‘Latino Hollywood’ since the late nineties; it was a city with a large anti-Castro immigrant community, at a time when the U.S. embargo on Cuba

prompted the country's so-called 'Special Period.' Miami also had a high concentration of studios and TV production enterprises thanks to the main Spanish-language TV channels (Telemundo and Univision), and, at the turn of the century, the city became one of the world's leading producers of telenovelas.

In terms of the music sector, Miami was home to the main recording studios and Latin music departments for the major record labels. Emilio Estefan, a founding member of the Latino music group Miami Sound Machine (which had significant success in the eighties), was a core figure in this scene, where he produced many of the biggest hits of the Latino Boom. From his recording studios, Crescent Moon Studios, he was the producer for such artists as Ricky Martin, Alejandro Fernández, Thalía, Paulina Rubio, and his own wife, Gloria Estefan, prompting many to consider him the creator of Latin pop's musical aesthetic at that time. Daniel Party points out that regardless of the artist, all of the music Estefan produced sounded similar, a homogenization that facilitated the label 'the Miami sound' (2008, p. 69). Even so, that sound is not easy to define in stylistic terms. Party describes a *Miamization* of the artists who came through Estefan's studios or through studios belonging to other Miami-sound producers, in a sort of crossover that was able to neutralize the regional traits of both Spanish- and English-language singers so that they fit within the Miami aesthetic.

This crossover strategy could guarantee any artist international reach and enable them to expand throughout the Latin American and European markets (especially Spain) and access the growing sector of young, second-generation Hispanics living in the U.S. Thus, Miami became a Mecca of mainstream music at the turn of the century, a place where artists of different nationalities converged in search of a global hit that would launch their careers into new markets. For example, Mexican singer Alejandro Fernández left mariachi music behind and came to Miami to record ballads and pop for his album *Me estoy enamorando* (1997), and the Colombian

Shakira recorded *Servicio de lavandería* (2002) in Spanish and English, setting aside the rock feel of her earlier work in favor of Latino pop.

However, this strategy for U.S. success wasn't employed by only Latin American artists; numerous English-language artists, including several who were already well positioned in the mainstream, came to Miami to launch Spanish versions of their songs and court Latino audiences. This was certainly true for Christina Aguilera, whose second album, *Mi reflejo* (2000), consisted of Spanish-language songs (several were versions of earlier English songs) that strengthened her status as an artist in the Spanish-speaking world. Beyoncé, too, recorded a Spanish version of her second solo album, *Irremplazable* (2007). Looking back, it may seem strange that an artist with roots in soul, R&B, and African American music would decide to explore the Latino market, but the potential benefits from such a crossover at a moment when the music industry was immersed in a profound crisis justified the decision (Viñuela, 2020).

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We would be remiss not to mention the song “La isla bonita” (1987), by Madonna, which features several of the resources that, a decade later, would come to define many English-language artists’ Latino crossovers. The instrumentation includes Spanish guitar, Cuban drums, and castanets; the English lyrics describe a passionate love story in an exotic location (the *isla bonita*) with the occasional Spanish phrase inserted, often whispered rather than sung to give the song a more sensual, passionate tone. The music video embraces this fantasy and depicts Madonna praying before a Catholic altar and dancing in a red polka-dot dress among Hispanic musicians and dancers. The result is an unsustainable pastiche that encompasses everything from Spain to Latin America, but it works within the English-speaking U.S. mainstream as a representation of otherness shaped through an amalgamation of deterritorialized clichés. The combination of Flamenco and Romany music in Jennifer López’s “Ain’t It Funny” (2000), the use of Andean instruments (quena, siku, charango) in Shakira’s “Whenever, Wherever” (2001), or the Middle-Eastern melodic lines in Ricky Martin’s

“Jaleo” (2003) are a few more examples that confirm this kind of strategy in the turn-of-the-century Latin crossover.

These examples demonstrate how in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Latino pop and English-language pop drew a great deal closer to one another through imaginaries and musical techniques (instruments, rhythms, dances, etc.) as well as through the increasingly complementary and recurrent use of English and Spanish. Keith Negus points out that, in the mid-nineties, the heads of the major record labels had reservations about investing in artists who sang in Spanish, despite the demonstrated demand in the Spanish-language market (2005, p. 248). A few years later, as we have seen, bilingual songs and albums and the incorporation of Spanish-language terms within mainstream English-language artists’ repertoires were the order of the day. This process has continued through to the present day, as is clear from this comment from Íñigo Zabala, President of Warner Music Latin America & Iberia:

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One of the things that makes Latin music so popular is that we take onboard the influence of what is happening around the world and we Latinize it: we Latinize hip-hop; we Latinize trap; we Latinize pop; we Latinize rock (...). That makes Latin music something very unique, distinctive and authentic, while at the same time having a global appeal. (IFPI, 2020, p. 25)

This strategy of ‘Latinizing’ every kind of English-language musical genre reveals that these deterritorialization processes are still in vogue and continue to yield good economic results. This also indicates that something is changing in the public, because the music Zabala is referring to do has nothing to do with the ‘World Music’ of the eighties, nor is it a knowing, exotifying wink at the English-speaking public; rather, Zabala is describing new musical phenomena that are consumed by Hispanics and that evince the narrowing gap between English- and Spanish-speaking artists and audiences.

#### 4. The Boom backlash: Towards the normalization of Latino pop in the U.S.

In the previous section, we saw how the turn of the century coincided with a ‘Latino Boom’ in popular culture, and particularly in popular music. Since the initial impact, this phenomenon has continued gaining strength, to the point that a Latino presence in any mainstream expression has been normalized; this assimilation is not a coincidence, but rather the product of the U.S.’s demographic, economic, political, and social reality, and it has everything to do with Hispanics’ increased presence and agency in present-day U.S. society. There was enormous growth in the Hispanic population in the first twelve years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, around 50%, though growth has slowed in the past decade. Furthermore, a trend within this demographic has stabilized: “the constant growth of the Hispanic population is driven mainly by the number of Hispanics born within the country” (Hernández-Nieto, Gutiérrez y Moreno-Fernández, 2017, p. 10), which reduces the weight of immigration and centers second- and third-generation immigrants in this sector of the population. Obviously, the growth of the U.S. Hispanic population, and the fact that this demographic is relatively young compared to other groups, suggests that this growth will continue in the coming years.

Setting aside population growth, Hispanics in the U.S. have also seen an increase in social position: “The percentage of Hispanics that have completed secondary education has increased from 59% in 1990 to 88% in 2015” (Hernández and Moreno-Fernández, 2018, p. 20), and their purchasing power has increased considerably, by 203% since 2000 (Hernández and Moreno-Fernández, 2018, p. 28). But perhaps the most important factor for the U.S. culture sector is the Hispanic population’s consumer patterns: Hispanics make up a significant percentage of the audience for traditional communications media, such as radio (González Tosat, 2017, p. 3) and film—in fact, they make up 20% of the country’s moviegoers (Hernández and Moreno-Fernández, 2018, p. 34). Additionally, they consume more content through new technologies than other demographics, in terms of both social media usage

(especially on Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp) and subscriptions to entertainment platforms such as Netflix, to which 73% of Hispanics subscribe (Hernández and Moreno-Fernández, 2018, p. 52).

At first, all this data may seem of little relevance to the music world, as none relates to album or ticket sales. However, when we consider the ways that music consumption has dematerialized in this century, and the fact that, today, the main music distribution media are streaming platforms and social networks, it becomes clear that we cannot ignore these technologies. Even more to the point, in the past several years there has been a proliferation of transmedia strategies through which mainstream artists attempt to create metanarratives, tying together content from their social networks, music videos, appearances in traditional media, etc. in order to forge a closer relationship with their community of fans (Viñuela, 2019). In this context, YouTube and Facebook are extremely relevant spaces for music consumption. A similar phenomenon is occurring with Netflix, which has been producing a growing number of movies and documentaries about the music world in the past several years. Recently, the company has invested in producing shows about the lives of musicians, and it is in that niche that the Latino presence is hard to miss, with titles such as *Nicky Jam: El ganador* (2018), *Luis Miguel: la serie* (2018), and one of the streaming service's most important releases this year, *Selena* (2020). On YouTube, too, there are titles such as *El Influence[R]* (2019), about the life of René Pérez, head of the group Calle 13, and *Casa Montaner* (2019), a reality show-style series about the Montaner music dynasty.

For the past several years, Latin music has also been amply featured in numerous Netflix and Amazon productions intended for Hispanic audiences. This includes films and series with storylines based mainly in Latin American countries, in which popular music is used to evoke the physical setting (to allude to the country in which the plot takes place) and the temporal setting (to indicate the film or show's period). This opens the door to the synchronization or 'sync' market, a sector of the

music industry that has been steadily growing for several years (IFPI, 2020), since it not only expands the space in which current artists can be featured, but also derives profits from record labels' back-catalogues and promotes musical genres to new audiences. In the words of Jamar Chess, co-founder of Sunflower Entertainment/Spirit Music Latino (USA), “thanks to *Narcos*, we have people in the U.S. listening to cumbia for the first time, and it’s interesting to think that it’s thanks to Netflix” (Hernández-Ruza, 2019).

It is hard to untangle this proliferation of content about Latino musicians in recent years from the U.S. Hispanic population’s cultural consumer patterns. The data confirm that in the U.S., Hispanics are the “racial and ethnic group that spends the most time on social media, owns the most smartphones, and most depends on their phones to access the internet” (Hernández-Nieto et al., 2017, p. 96). These facts are directly related to one another, and they augur an uptick in cultural consumption among the Latino population, considering that the amount of content accessed on smartphones has only continued to grow in the past several years; this content consists mainly of social media and audiovisual content, which will constitute an estimated 75% of all internet data consumed on mobile phones in 2023 (Ditrendia, 2020). It is important to recognize mobility, portability, and ubiquity of access to online content as a critical part of why mobile phones encourage not just increased consumption of cultural products, but also a more continuous and intense connection with content through browsing that typically involves several different media (official websites, social media, streaming platforms, etc.) Whether they’re accessing shows, films, video games, or songs, internet users are increasingly trying to interact and connect with the protagonists of the content they are consuming (actors, characters, musicians) and with the follower communities surrounding that content. That said, the media’s investment in Latin music also includes traditional media such as television; thus, 2019 saw the U.S. launch of *Latido Music*, a channel dedicated entirely to Latino

music that takes MTV as its model, and which is aimed at Spanish-speaking millennials and members of Generation Z.

Given these circumstances, it is not hard to understand new Latino artists' success in the past several years. In the music world, several outlets have called this new generation of Latin American artists' success the 'Despacito Effect.' In 2017, Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee's song 'Despacito' became the most-listened-to song of the year on music streaming platforms and the most-viewed video in the history of YouTube. Rather than treating this as an isolated phenomenon, we can talk about a second wave of Latino pop, with artists who combine Caribbean rhythms such as reggaetón, dance hall, and cumbia with pop, hip hop, or trap, creating songs that have often been broadly referred to as 'urban music.' Consumption of this kind of music has grown exponentially since 2017, with artists like Bad Bunny, Maluma, Nicky Jam, Ozuna, J. Balvin and Rosalía, to name only a few of the most notable successes. Their videos are among the most-viewed of the year on YouTube, and their singles often top the charts on platforms like Spotify. Outside of 'urban music,' there are also versatile figures with tremendous international reach, such as Nella, from Venezuela, or Camila Cabello, from Cuba (both of whom were honored at the most recent Latin Grammy Awards), who incorporate different styles into their repertoires.

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Latin music's success translates into a significant gain in market share. A report from the Recording Industry Association of American (RIAA) notes that in 2019, this repertoire grew 28% in the U.S., doubling the country's average market growth. Furthermore, 95% of this music was consumed through audio and video streaming platforms (RIAA, 2020), proof that this market is fully integrated in the ruling consumer dynamics in the current culture market.

It is not just a question of market share, but also of consumer practices and habits. Music is a key part of the Hispanic population's everyday life and leisure, as is clear from the fact that this sector of the population spends "nearly 30% more on

music every year than other racial and ethnic groups” (Hernández-Nieto et al., 2017, p. 92). One particularly symbolic result of this is that, in 2018, Latin music overtook country on BuzzAngle’s annual report on the U.S. market.

However, the increased integration of Hispanics in present-day U.S. society has led to a decreased use of Spanish, especially among second- and third-generation immigrants. This is also reflected in the kind of cultural content they consume; thus, by 2015, it was clear that in terms of online media, “there is some preference for English over Spanish among younger Hispanic readers” (González Tosat, 2015, p. 49), the largest sector within the demographic. In terms of music consumption, it has been demonstrated that second- and third-generation immigrants listen to more music in English than in Spanish (Hernández-Nieto et al., 2017, p. 93). U.S. Hispanics are increasingly bilingual, and language is less relevant to the articulation of identity than it was at the beginning of the century. In fact, a survey carried out by the Pew Research Center indicates that 73% of U.S. Hispanics do not consider speaking Spanish as necessary to be considered Latino (2015), though they do believe it is important for future generations to learn the language.

The narrowing gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanic, English-speaking U.S. Americans has also prompted the creation of new models in the realm of artists and celebrities and male and female icons, none of whom are immune from controversy. In a study that is already fifteen years old, Angharad N. Valdivia considered Jennifer López and Penélope Cruz, two of the most famous Latina artists in the U.S. at that time, and pointed out that both

share a thinning out of their bodies and straightening of their hair as they get closer to the U.S. mainstream (older photographs show much fuller bodies and hair); López and Cruz both somatically fit the stereotype of Latinas in U.S. popular culture – that is, nearly white but brown enough to count as different. (2005, p. 67)

There is no doubt that the image of these two artists has little to do with the icons who immediately preceded them, like Selena. Valdivia interprets this new Latino aesthetic as an accommodation of the hegemonic norms that betrays Hispanic physiognomic features; however, this transformation of the Latino aesthetic could also be viewed as one more facet of Hispanics' gradual integration within U.S. society, a process that requires new patterns and models that adapt to the needs of new generations of Hispanics.

Bilingualism also prevails in Latin music. As we saw, during the 'Latino Boom,' recording the same song or album in Spanish and in English was commonplace, with the separate versions marketed towards different audiences. Today, however, there is no shortage of artists who choose to use both languages in the same song, rather than release two versions; this is true, for example, of Becky G, Bad Bunny, and Camila Cabello. Furthermore, the proliferation of featuring strategies<sup>5</sup> within the last decade has prompted many English-speaking, non-Hispanic artists to occasionally collaborate with Latino artists, using Spanish, as was the case when Cardi B sang with Ozuna in "La modelo" (2017) or when Travis Scott recorded with Rosalía on "Tkn" (2020).

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## 5. Conclusion

Latin music in the U.S. has always featured Spanish, which has acted as a distinctive element in this otherwise heterogeneous musical repertoire since its inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This particular feature of Latin music makes it even more of a language, more of a tool for communication among the Hispanic community, which found this repertoire to be a powerful instrument for articulating its identity. In this article, we have begun to trace the configuration of Latin music as a process that responds to a

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<sup>5</sup> This is a marketing strategy that aims to establish collaborations between artists in order to reach a larger number of consumers and reach new audiences.

set of political, social, and economic determinants. We have addressed *Latinidad* as a construct that, through its collective imagination and tropes, speaks to the notion of a pan-Latino identity, expressing itself through numerous cultural forms. Latino music has its origins in a category weighted with an exoticism that bound together distinct forms of otherness from Spain and Latin America, and it is precisely this ability to connect groups and repertoires that has empowered Latin music to continually reinvent itself and adapt to the circumstances of communities who view this music as their own.

The confusion when filling out the *ethnicity* category, the dilemma people face when having to choose between *White* and *Black*, the different conceptualization of ‘blackness,’ as well as the association between blackness and the U.S. and, therefore, the ‘conversion’ of an Afro-Latino into an African American because she is black and was born in the U.S., demonstrate the complex identity issues that Afro-Latinos face in the U.S.

There is no doubt that the logic of hegemony versus subalternity has impacted the evolution of Latin music in the U.S., and on more than a few occasions Spanish and Hispanic artists have led the charge in their own self-exotification. Perhaps what has most changed over the years is the position from which this repertoire has been interpreted. We have seen how Latino artists have gradually gained greater agency, and how repertoires such as salsa have advanced beyond mere entertainment and gone on to play an important role in gaining recognition of the Hispanic community. In this sense, the Latino pride implicit in the ‘Boom’ of the nineties marks a turning point in the history of this music, at which point it becomes an expression of a more integrated Hispanic community that is better positioned within U.S. society. This ‘Latino Boom’ is typically associated with the Hispanic community’s demographic growth and increased purchasing power, but it is also impossible to separate it from the

aspirations and calls for recognition from second-generation immigrants, who at that time were the youth component of this population group.

After the eighties, with the evolution of salsa, we saw the gradual incorporation of Latin music in the non-Hispanic mainstream in ways that were not always immune from controversy. Movements within the industry aimed to segregate Latin music, with all of the niche's infrastructure concentrated in the newly-formed 'Latino Hollywood' of Miami, home of a new aesthetic built on deterritorialization practices. That said, under these circumstances, Latin music did gain presence and visibility in the U.S. market, and several mainstream English-language artists attempted to cross over to Hispanic audiences through Spanish versions of their songs.

Despite everything, we have seen how, in the past few years, the Spanish language has lost ground in Latin music and now shares space with English-language songs. This is in direct respond to the reality of third-generation Hispanics in the U.S., and it has prompted the creation of new spaces for Latino artists within so-called 'urban music.' For a few years now, we have been immersed in what we could consider a second wave of Latino pop, featuring bilingual songs and led by bilingual artists who continue to win over spaces traditionally occupied by English-language artists. There is no doubt that these gains come with the loss of some elements specific to Latin music, but they also signify a normalization of Latin music in a way that reflects the reality of third-generation Hispanics.

In addition to breaking records for most listens and most views on platforms like Spotify and YouTube, the newest generation of Latino musicians is being recognized at the Grammys, and being featured at major festivals, such as Coachella, or in important shows, such as the Super Bowl. It is significant that Latino artists began appearing in the game's halftime show in the nineties (with Arturo Sandoval and Gloria Estefan, who appeared twice). In the pregame show for the 2003 Super Bowl in San Diego, Carlos Santana acted as host; this move aimed to recognize the Hispanic

community and perfectly encompassed the reality of the ‘Latino Boom.’ Santana opened with “Black Magic Woman” and the show featured performances by Beyoncé (R&B, soul, hip hop) and Michelle Branch (pop, country, rock), two artists who sing in English and who, at that time, were immersed in efforts to reach Latino audiences. This was very different from the performance at the 2020 Super Bowl in Miami, starring Jennifer López and Shakira in collaboration with J. Balvin (reggaetón) and Bad Bunny (Latin trap). In both their lyrics and their interactions with the audience, these artists combined English with Spanish in a fully naturally way, and a celebration of *Latinidad* was a persistent theme throughout the performance.

It is difficult to predict how Latin music will evolve in the coming years, and what effect the bilingualism of second-wave Latino pop may have on the normalization or attenuation of Spanish among future generations of Latino musicians. What does seem clear is that any evolution within this repertoire will be conditioned by the status of the Hispanic community in the social context of the U.S. The music is a language, and as such, it is subject to the determinants of who uses it and feels that it is their own. Thus, the demographic shifts, social status, and consumer habits of Hispanics will affect Latin music’s trajectory, as happens with other cultural expressions that play a role in the articulation of an identity. In turn, it is difficult to assess Latino pop’s market penetration among English-speaking U.S. audiences; although it is increasingly visible in the media and at large events, such as festivals or the Super Bowl halftime show, there is no available data that would help us learn if there has been greater consumption of Latin music among the non-Hispanic population. This would require ethnographic research focused on music-consumption profiles and practices, which would enable us to assess whether Latino pop is encouraging social interaction and creating points of contact between Hispanics and non-Hispanics in the U.S.

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