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A Companion to Latina/o Studies

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Rosaldo: Ensayos en antropología crítica, was recently published in Mexico. He has edited a collection, Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia, and also co-edited collections, The Incas and the Aztecs, 1400–1800, Creativity/Anthropology, and The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader. Written in English and Spanish, his first collection of poetry, Prayer to Spider Woman/Rezo a la mujer araña, won an American Book Award, 2004. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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Elana Zilberg was born in Harare, Zimbabwe. She received her doctorate from the Anthropology Department at the University of Texas at Austin and joined the faculty of the Communication Department at the University of California-San Diego in 2002. She has published in Wide Angle, City and Society, Anthropological Theory, and American Quarterly. The latter article received an honorable mention from the Constance Rourke Prize Committee of the American Studies Association. She is completing a book manuscript entitled Transnational Geographies of Violence: An Inter-American Encounter from the Cold War to the War on Terror.
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Latina/o studies emerged from social movements and political struggles rather than from a purely cerebral rumination about what was needed in the academy. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a period of hunger strikes, farmworkers’ marches, student walkouts, and the wider context of the civil rights movement and protests against the war in Viet Nam. These struggles, their sheer presence and their specific demands, compelled a number of universities and colleges to establish programs and departments in Chicana/o studies and Puerto Rican studies. They also provided an agenda for the new field of study. And this tie to Latina/o communities with accountability to their social needs and struggles has remained a central philosophical tenet of the field to the present day.

Latina/o studies scholars in this early period saw themselves as committed and oppositional; they were doing engaged research and were committed to scholarship that was relevant not only to the academy but also, and particularly, to the barrio and to the comunidad outside the university. Key concerns that guided this work were empowerment, self-determination, and social justice. Scholarly research aspired to work in the service of the social movement.

In its initial years Latina/o studies, particularly Chicana/o studies, developed the concept of internal colonialism. This body of work viewed the westward expansion of the United States over the nineteenth century as a process of colonization over a region that until the War of 1848 had been Mexican territory. It also viewed the subsequent history of Mexicans in the United States as a process of incorporation of a colonized people. This perspective has enriched subsequent studies. On the one hand, historians of the western part of the United States have further refined the research questions first posed in Latina/o studies as they have explored the role of Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinas/os in the making of the West. On the other hand, the notion of internal colonialism subsequently developed into a series of studies in political economy with a historical perspective exemplified by the work of Mario Barrera and David Montejano.
Opposition to colonialism has also been the guiding impulse in Puerto Rican studies since the outset as independentista scholars from the Island and in the mainland contributed to set the early agenda. Emphasis was placed on the persistence of colonial relations in the history of Puerto Rico, before and after the turning point of 1898, while researchers in the diaspora analyzed subordination and rampant discrimination suffered by Puerto Ricans in the US. For many researchers and activists of the period, colonial oppression in Puerto Rican life constituted a single unified system spanning the divide between homeland and diaspora, and conditioning the migration experience as a totality. Political economy and history focusing on the migratory and community formation process were the central fields of social analysis, as is evident in the work of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at the City University of New York as well as in the studies of such scholars such as Clara Rodríguez, Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, and Edna Acosta-Belén in the diaspora and Manuel Maldonado Denis and José Luis González from the Island.

The concept of culture has been central to Latina/o studies, from the early critical assaults by Octavio Romano on an anthropological concept that he characterized as static and homogeneous. Founding scholar Américo Paredes assumed a more subtle critical stance toward the concept of culture in his research. His notion of culture encompassed historical change and inequalities of power as he explored jokes, sayings, legends, corridos, racial insults, and other central phenomena of folk culture in the geographical area he called Greater Mexico. The Puerto Rican writers and critics José Luis González and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones provided an early impetus for a more nuanced understanding of Puerto Rican cultural experience in the diaspora, but the outburst of Nuyorican poetry, Latin dance music, and the struggle over bilingualism were what set the distinctive parameters of a new cultural analysis.

In this period much research involved the creation of an archive. In literary and cultural studies, researchers often had to uncover the critical texts that they were going to analyze. This material had been passed over by previous investigators. Thus Latina/o scholars were compelled to be both archivist and critic, uncovering the text and offering an interpretation. A similar phenomenon occurred in historical studies. Because the basic spadework had not been done, Latina/o studies historians were pioneers who were working without precedent. In Puerto Rican studies, the early testimonial memoirs of Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón provided key insight into the course of community life in the early decades prior to the mass migration of the 1950s and 1960s, and have served as the main resource for scholars doing historical research on Puerto Ricans in the US. From the late 1980s to the present the Recovering the Hispanic Literary Heritage project continues to unearth and publish important literary and documentary texts from the earlier periods.

Applied research was also critical. People explored issues in education, such as the high drop-out rate of Latina/o students and the problem of school failure as well as the demand for bilingual education. The issues in healthcare had to do
with the exceptionally high rates of particular diseases and other indicators of neglect of Latinas/os by medical services, as well as excessive interventions such as involuntary sterilization programs. Inadequate housing and residential segregation were major foci of research. Researchers also attended to income disparities with Latinas/os being over-represented in low-income categories. These scholars also developed the notion of the segmentation of the labor force, in effect a form of apartheid in the distribution of jobs.

Despite the deep continuities between the early years and more recent scholarly concerns, there have been some significant shifts over the decades, which have brought new issues and challenges to the Latina/o studies agenda. Feminist scholarship entered Latina/o studies with a redefinition of identity and brought a realization that prior analyses often unconsciously assumed a male subject and thereby omitted half the population. The next phase in this process was the introduction of queer theory and the recognition of the necessity of taking into account the sexuality as well as the gender of the subject. Two books especially critical within and beyond Latina/o studies were Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Anzaldúa.

In the wider circles of feminist and queer studies Latina/o contributions have always underscored the centrality of race and the limitations of assuming a white middle-class subject. At the same time Latina/o studies has explored in historical and sociological ways how race operates within Latina/o communities and how their relations with other communities of color as well as the dominant white society are predicated on race.

If the early 1970s were predominantly nationalist in their orientation, later periods have added the dimension of transnationalism. In recent years the concept of transnational communities has underscored the sense in which family, kinship, and household can best be understood as sets of relations in the home country and in the United States. In addition, political and economic changes in one country can have deep consequences for people in the other country. At the same time historical research on Latina/o communities in the United States has explored settlements dating from the sixteenth century and thus show in detailed ways that by no means all Latinas/os are immigrants.

In the cultural realm there has been new emphasis on theories and practices of performance, increased attention to cultural representation, and consideration of the commodification of culture. In part these concerns grow from an analysis of how the Latina/o population explosion has led to marketing efforts to target Latinas/os for such matters as corporate sales and political campaigns. Indeed the very notion of a Latina/o population in the United States is in part an artifact of such corporate and voting efforts as well as a consequence of coalition politics.

Thus, while the issues surrounding Latina/o identity remain at the center of Latina/o studies research, those issues have become significantly complicated by the huge demographic increase and the dispersal and diversification of Latina/o
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communities. In addition to the traditional and growing Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, and Cuban groups, the present generation has seen the rapid and incremental presence of communities of immigrants from a wide range of Latin American and Caribbean nations, most notably Dominicans, Salvadorans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Nicaraguans. The idea of a pan-Latina/o identity has been the subject of lively and at times contentious debate in the Latina/o studies literature of the past fifteen or twenty years, as is evident in the writings of Suzanne Oboler, Martha Giménez, Carlos Muñoz, and others. Questions of language, religion, immigrant or resident minority experience, and the pressing issue of race have been at the heart of these debates.

Recent studies of how Latinas/os conceive of their racial identities and how other groups categorize them in racial terms (racialization and racism) have extended discussions of race in the United States beyond the dichotomy of black and white. Shades of difference marked by the category of mixedness and the poles of African origins as well as indigenous roots complicate what once seemed a settled picture, one in which Latinas/os often did not appear. As evident in some of the contributions to the present volume, recent writings on Latinas/os and race have often involved a critique of a celebratory *mestizaje* concept which can suggest a wishful racial harmony that conceals anti-black and anti-indigenous racism among Latinas/os.

A paramount fact of recent studies in literature and expressive culture has been the renaissance in Latina/o literary, performance, and visual arts. The explosion in the arts has been less widely noticed than the sudden growth in the Latina/o population in the United States. Scholars of Latina/o arts thus have a rich body of contemporary literary production to study. The talented and highly trained artists of the past twenty years include such writers as Cristina García, Sandra Cisneros, Julia Álvarez, Denise Chávez, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Helena María Viramontes, and Junot Díaz. Corresponding literary critics and scholars of expressive culture include José David Saldivar, Arturo Sánchez Sandoval, Paula Moya, Shifra Goldman, María Herrera-Sobek, Norma Alarcón; Ruth Glasser, José Limón, and José Muñoz.

Critical scholarly and creative work in Latina/o studies has contributed in crucial ways to the increase in social knowledge. US Latina/o experience has foregrounded the need for a transnational understanding of group experience, that is, the need to transcend and navigate political and other imposed borders of a national and geographic kind. Since its inception, Latina/o studies scholars and cultural workers have shown how understanding Chicana/o, Nuyorican, or other US-based Latina/o social life and culture necessitates a connection with traditions and practices in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and other countries of origin, as well as the migration process itself. Further, the trajectory of Latina/o studies as an area demonstrates the complex relationship between discretely demarcated ethnic or national groups and a composite, pan-ethnic construction, in this case “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Already in the earlier decades of the emergence of Latina/o studies, the salience and limitations of terms like “la raza” and “brown
people” drew the attention of students of the varied group experiences. In the present generation the broad currency of the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” has generated searching debate about the use and abuse of such labels. Although the potential for coalition politics and intergroup solidarity is strongly affirmed, suspicion is also voiced in the face of corporate and electoral strategies that spuriously advertise pan-Latino visions of unity and sameness.

Issues of bilingualism and immigration have also been at the heart of the Latina/o studies intellectual and political agenda, and here too the field has contributed significantly to broader social knowledge. Both as speech practice and as language policy, and even as regards poetic and literary voices, the lived reality of Latina/o bilingual expression, and more broadly of biculturalism, have provided a rich and dynamic case for incisive sociolinguistic and stylistic analysis by such authors as Ana Celia Zentella, Guadalupe Valdés, and Doris Sommer. The longstanding and increasingly heated debates over immigrant rights and policies center in our times on the example of Latinas/os, and attest to the structured relations of economic and political power in the hemisphere. From the perspective of Latina/o studies, these debates raise in a cogent way the question of who/what is an immigrant – given that many Latinas/os are actually not immigrants – as well as the question as to who/what is an American, that is, the meaning of citizenship.

With the proliferation of anthologies, readers, encyclopedias, edited volumes and the range of “recovery” work of compiling and making available historical documents, we are witnessing the burgeoning of a new field of intellectual endeavor which carries pressing social relevance to a broad US public. To mention a few, there are the helpful collections of key texts, such as The Latino Studies Reader, Barrios and Borderlands, The Latino/a Condition, Challenging Fronteras, Latino/a Thought, Latinos Remaking America, Growing Up Latino, and The Latino Reader, all published in the 1990s. A widely used volume like Challenging Fronteras is representative of this active anthological work in its careful selection of important essays on a wide range of Latino groups and experiences, and grouping them in major thematic areas, such as the conceptualization of Latinidad, the immigration process and its consequences, the issue of ethnic identity, and the experience of women in the labor force. The compilation offers the reader an array of different points of access to Latin life and struggles from a multidisciplinary and ideologically diverse perspective. The other anthologies mentioned above generally follow similar principles of organization and selection.

The present collection, A Companion to Latina/o Studies, offers a sampler of this rich output of new scholarship by some of the leading Latina/o scholars. In compiling this volume, we have asked contributors to reflect on their scholarly practice and contribution in short and in many cases more personal essays. We have turned to both established academics and some creative writers, some seasoned scholars and some relative newcomers, but in all cases we were interested in assembling a group that was representative of the diversity of the field as regards gender, region, intellectual discipline, and critical style. We have even
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included two poems with accompanying commentary, as well as several memoirs of an autobiographical nature.

The result – the harvest of our outreach effort – is what we hope is an exciting, consistently engaging, and highly varied group of writings that offer a sense of the range and complexity characteristic of our field. While some of the sections in this Companion remain thematic in conception, we have also sought to group some according to the kind of reflection they exemplify: Vidas, centered on the telling of life stories; Actos, advocating certain critical practices or methods; and En la Lucha, addressing institutional struggles in the production of knowledge. Our aim is to suggest new ways of thinking the field, by breaking out of the customary thematic clusters and juxtaposing seemingly unrelated intellectual exercises. With the dramatic changes in the very object of analysis of Latina/o studies in recent decades, it strikes us as timely to strike out in new directions and to be redefining our field as we carry on our collective research project.

Our fondest hope is that the present collection of recent Latina/o studies work may serve as a “companion,” as un/a compañera/o for scholars, students, and the general readership in the effort to advance the field and assure its ongoing tie to communities in struggles for justice and equality in challenging times. We think of the Companion to Latina/o Studies as an act of sharing, a gathering place of intellectual concerns and analysis that attest to our unbroken commitment to engaged critical inquiry as a guide to social action.
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We are also delighted to have been given permission by two poets to republish their much admired verse. “El Louie” by José Montoya is a canonical classic in Chicana/o literature and “I Wanted To Say Hello To The Salseros But My Hair Was A Mess” by New York Puerto Rican poet, Edwin Torres, uses humor to challenge an inherited self-image.

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PART ONE

Latinidades
Marks of the Chicana Corpus: An Intervention in the Universality Debate

Helena María Viramontes

Foreignness

The history of back when I was young and destined to be a foreigner in my own country, I was an innocent being in dire need of baptism in order to absolve the sins I had committed as a 10 month old; at least according to my father, who considered himself a man of great misfortune for having spawned eight females. Before then, my father’s father, a man who we respectfully referred to as Papa Félix, brought his wife, my grandmother who we called Mama Cuca, and five children from the greater canyons of Jerez, Zacatecas to the copper mining town of Metcalf, Arizona where my father was born in 1917. With two exceptions, my aunts and uncles prior to his birth were born and baptized in Mexico.

Papa Félix was a huge, tall man and in his photographs a handsome looking one with a whiskbroom mustache. Even as a copper miner, my grandfather felt the need for education and basically taught himself to read and write, and wrote and practiced verse on anything he could find: in discarded notebooks, behind a dictionary, in the preface of the family Bible. His script was beautifully rendered, exotic in the way it curved and swerved and belied the man whose huge hunchback frightened me so as a child, though my father explained that his hunchback was due to his hard work and thus didn’t deserve my fear.

On the other hand, my Mama Cuca was illiterate. I remember once, looking at some legal document shortly after my grandfather’s death, and being mesmerized by the “X” on the paper circled by I think, a lawyer, with the inscription that read “Her mark.” Even then, as a child who had discovered the printed word, and better yet, had discovered the public library, an entitlement which meant I owned every book in the reading room, even then I felt an incredible pang of
Helena María Viramontes

sorrow for my grandmother. I had realized that she had never had the ability to traverse to other worlds in books as I, nor had the opportunity to expand her imagination in the ways that I had been able to do by reading. Had her sisters suffered the same, I wondered? And what of her mother? I asked in disbelief. Even then I questioned why my grandfather’s script had flourished while she barely etched a feeble X.

I clearly remember the mark. Why would a document such as the one I had discovered feel so important to me in the first place? Documents like this, especially those relegated to the safest place in our house, under the feet of my mother’s statue of Jesus, implied legality, ultimate protection, of urgent importance. In my own family history, I realize now that mine was the generation in which sheets of paper took on great significance in immigrant survival, though none of us were immigrants. Before then, the weight and stamp of paper was inconsequential and many of my uncles and aunts born in Mexico simply did not have birth certificates or papeles, which indicated legal status, depending on the health of Mexican–US relationships.

The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe–Hildago, which ended the Mexican–American war in 1848, suddenly and sadly created the pueblo of my colonization, and created for generations to come what Lorna Dee Cervantes called “my excuse-me tongue.” Suddenly, in the Southwest, flags were changed, laws bent, rights exploited, and Mexicanos became what poet Jimmy Santiago Baca described as “immigrants in their own land.” With the shifting climates of US economy, mine was a generation in which paper played a crucial role in providing proof of legitimacy.

Thus, a piece of paper purposed to eliminate your feeling of feeling unwelcome in a section of a country that once belonged to Mexico. A mere sheet of words formed to accommodate citizenship in a country that desired to make you aware of how precarious this citizenship is. This weight of pulp on the palm of your hand should have delivered a freedom of walking in the neighborhood without feeling as if you’re wearing a bulls-eye target marked for extinction on your back.

It was little wonder to me now why I had read her mark with such astonishment, because it was then that I discovered mine.

Sameness

I had eight sisters. One had died before I was born, and another sister didn’t live with us, leaving behind the rest under domineering male rule. My father knew no better. Forced to leave elementary school to work in the fields, he never learned to read or write beyond the third grade, which made it difficult to support his increasingly large and parasitic female-heavy family. Whatever indignities he had been forced to suffer because of us, those that laborers are subjugated to by the harshness of their employers, or by their unstable position
as undocumented immigrants (though he was born in the US), he’d carry it home, his rage clinging to him like the white fine dust of cement.

What had once been a mood of contentment prevailing in the household, my older sisters listening to 45s of The Platters cooing “Only You” or “The Great Pretender” on their turntable, the younger ones like myself sitting on the porch steps and biting into freshly made, hot-off-the-comal tortillas, turned into stomach churning, belly aching silent gloom once my father’s car entered the drive way.

There was great preparation involved in making sure that we anticipated his every need. This was our job. My older sisters were there to hand him the bottle of vinegar he used in order to rid himself of the cement, while they took his boots and dusted them, and then poured his glass of cheaper-by-the-gallon burgundy wine. His change of clothes were handed to him, freshly washed and ironed with great care. Every move and action taken to care for my father was conducted without words, as if speech had the capacity to upset the already fragile situation in the house. As he performed his daily ritual of dusting himself off, I could hear the loud hum of his muscles vibrate the ache of a brutal song. Just as I would witness my mother’s Friday laundry days that began when I awoke before school to the bleach stink permeating from our washroom up until close to dinner – a full 10 hours of washing clothes – I was always grateful of my parent's dedicated hard work. Though my mother’s job was labor intensive, we women understood in no uncertain terms that my father's exhaustion, the weight of the wet cement he carried on the bridge of his back, kept a roof over our head, kept food in our mouths. We were all made to feel indebted to him and treated him thus so. Whereas in the public sector he must have suffered a sense of profound humiliation, in his private household he ruled, and did so with an iron fist.

He had steadfast rules, all of which were directed at his females, as my three brothers could come and go as they pleased. These were the rules set before us to protect the virgins and thus our virginity my father believed needed to be protected:

• No phone calls anytime: he placed a lock on the rotary telephone dial to insure this.
• No dating: loud and clear and punishable by more not dating.
• Lights out at nine: which meant he literally turned off the fuse box, leaving us without electricity.

Until they moved out or married, my older sisters survived his tyranny with good humor and ingenuity. They learned to read their environment carefully and find holes in this thick fabric of masculine discipline. For example, after the fuse box was turned off and my father went to bed, my sisters resurrected themselves from the darkness and made makeshift torches out of tightly wrapped newspapers. As for the phone usage, my older sister Mary Ann discovered that if she kept playing with the rotary dial, eventually an operator would come on
the line. However, dating was much harder to negotiate without a co-conspirator like my mother. If my sisters were not allowed to date, my mother allowed the dates to come to my sisters, late at night. They parked in front of the house, waiting patiently, while my sisters changed out of their nighties and into street clothes and talked quietly in full view of my mother who sat in the kitchen, not to watch over them, but to stand guard in case my father woke.

Every so often, when the late night proved too much for my mother, I was awakened at her request to go out to the front yard and become the ultimate pest. There were actually times when it became a challenge for my sisters to return to the house, and my mother would put on my father’s boots and stomp around while I recited my scripted line – “MaryannBeckyFrances,” I whispered loudly, “Apa’s wake, get in FAST!”

But for me, the greatest victory my sisters pulled off was the invention of a language in which they could communicate while my father was present. A remarkable accomplished resourcefulness. By placing extra syllables in strategic places of every word, their sentences sounded like water whipping across rapids. Being able to understand them while my father sat with a bewildered look on his face made me feel so much a part of their mysterious trickstering.

It was only later that I realized how subversive these covert activities were. How, being forced to subject themselves to docile female training, created in them stunning intrigues, resistance of the best kind. They took what was handed to them and turned it inside out, creating a clarity in their goals and aspirations, allowing them a control, however small, of their own lives. I learned a very hard lesson well. An embracing imagination is effective in combating repression.

If I felt foreign as a child who spoke Spanish and was thrust into an English-only school, if I felt foreign because in the schools we were led to believe that our culture and our language were the biggest stumbling blocks against practicing as a full US citizen; if I felt foreign because I was born female in a culture which immediately reduced my value as a human being; if I felt foreign, invisible, alien because I was born into a dominant Anglo culture, which seemed to disembowel my gut and mangle my tongue, at least with my sisters, I belonged. I belonged to their country of femaleness and I knew, in this particular territory, I didn’t need no stinking papeles. As a strategy for survival then, all I had to do was invent.

Humanness

In my own country, we were reduced to bodies. We became commodities, all of us; imprisoned bodies of labor, holding together a patriarchal and capitalist currency so strong, it cannibalized us.

My father watched over us with a stern, cold eye, making sure he was doing what he believed fathers needed to do – which was to keep his daughters chaste and honorable long enough for our husbands to take over the control. In my country, he felt so threatened by the thin line of hunger, the gut of responsibility,
the uncertainty of his livelihood that his topsy turvy perception of safety, our safety, became closely tied to chastity. Thus, chastity became a valuable currency for success in this country.

It would have been impossible for my father to treat his women folk as such if he didn’t believe that somehow, because of our femaleness, we were inherently in danger of being devoured by our sexuality. He thought that the force of our sexuality was so mighty he had to protect us from ourselves. We became objects impersonating potential evil just as this country made him an object.

In a labor market that capitalized on the muscles of his back unmercifully, my father showed up for work every day. At the risk of losing his job, he kept silent, and so his employers profited by his silence almost gleefully, without fearing any source of punishment. It would have been impossible for employers to treat my father as such if they didn’t believe that he was less than human. I doubt they hated him; hatred is an invested and engaged emotion and I know for a fact that they never invested in people like my father. However, hostility is another matter and is inherently more complicated. To feel hostility, one must have an enemy and ultimately the making of an enemy is easy when that person is different, of another race and class. Although my father’s will to work could not be easily replaced, his body was, and since there were so many like him on any given day, on any given corner, his body became meaningless, an object like a Styrofoam cup – functional up to a point, useless and tossed in the trash in a minute.

The danger of this objectifying, the danger of considering someone less than human, is that inevitably both victims and perpetrators become dehumanized. Such dehumanization substantiated US slavery and the forced containment of indigenous nations. If we are at a junction in cultural studies where we are attempting to philosophically reconcile what “humanity” is by mediating between cultural particularity and universality (which seems to be gaining importance, according to Claes Ryn, as our world becomes more and more globally multicultural and as people from different cultures and landscapes begin to have much greater contact with one another), at least we may agree that morality or the breaking down of morality can suggest a unifying human experience.

Such moral breakdown was currently uncovered at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In the photos of detainee abuse, US Reserve Military Police who are 19 and 20 – our children – look on with thrilled smiles over the tortured bodies of Iraqi detainees. If torture was not enough, the detainees suffered humiliation as well, an incensed Senator John McCain added soon after the photos were leaked to the press. A former five-year POW himself, a relatively conservative McCain uncharacteristically broke away from his Republican colleagues in his outspoken outrage at the torture and humiliation of other POWs.

In scrutinizing the photos, Luc Sante, a professor of photography at Bard University, writes in his essay “Tourist and Torturers” that the last time he recognized these smiles were in photographs of lynchings. He writes in a stunning recognition of our dehumanity:
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In photographs that were taken and often printed as postcards in the American heartland in the first four decades of the twentieth century, black men are shown hanging from trees or light fixtures or maybe being burned alive while below them white people are laughing and pointing for the benefit of the camera . . . Before seeing such pictures you might expect the faces in them to express some kind of collective rage; instead the mood is giddy, often verging on hysterical.

Sante argues that photography as a communicative medium is inclined to tell us more about ourselves than we care to know. Or it reveals an image that transcends the moment and becomes connective to a larger history. Unfortunately, the image remains intact, transcending time and place because it reveals a truth we are forced to acknowledge. There is one photo in particular from the Abu Ghraib prison which resonates for me a horrific reminder, just as the lynching photos raised such ethical questions for Luc Sante. A naked Iraqi is terrified as two US soldiers in full war gear are struggling to hold back two snarling German Shepherd dogs with taut leashes. Using dogs to terrify is an old colonizing torture trick and the history of colonialism is filled with such images. In fact, I chose dogs as a metaphor and symbolic framework for my new novel Their Dogs Came With Them, first to conjure the historical and sexualized ramifications of having historically endured the Spanish Conquest of Mexico; secondly of having to suffer the racialized, sexualized, and economic effects of the annexation of the Southwest by the US government after the US–Mexican War. And, finally, for having suffered a third conquest, and one I focus on in my novel: the dislocation of my community by the coming of the freeways in Southern California: “The earthmovers had anchored, their tarps whipping like banging sails, their bellies petroleum-readied to bite trenches wider than rivers . . .”

In any event, it brings me full circle to the epigraph I use for my novel. It was taken from Miguel Portillo’s The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico. It reads:

They came in battle array, as conquerors, and the dust rose in whirlwinds on the roads. Their spears glinted in the sun, and their pennons fluttered like bats. They made a loud clamor as they marched, for their coats of mail and their weapons clashed and rattled. Some of them were dressed in glistening iron from head to foot; they terrified everyone who saw them.

Their dogs came with them running ahead of the column. They raised their muzzles high; they lifted their muzzles to the wind. They raced on before with saliva dripping from their jaws.

In these photographs, it is hard to face our complicit smiles without trying to hold someone accountable. In Bush’s illegal war on Iraq, we must hold his cabinet accountable for the murders of innocent civilian men, women, and children. In the case of Iraqi prisoner abuses, we must hold our so-called leaders accountable and finally, we must hold them accountable for turning our 19- and 20-year-old, poor, young, enlisted men and women from the heartlands of the
Marks of the Chicana Corpus

Americas into terrorists par excellence. Susan Sontag best said it when she wrote: “The terrorist is us.” This is cannibalizing of the worst kind.

Universality

In 2000 I wrote an essay titled “Four Guiding Principles of a Lived Experience,” which I presented at Cornell University’s “Future of Minority Studies Conference.” In the essay I detailed an episode that continues to haunt me to this day. Allow me to repeat the narrative in an abbreviated form here.

In September of 1979, I was accepted into a MFA program at a highly ranked and prestigious creative writing program in California. I entered the creative writing program as the first Chicana admitted into fiction and thus became an instant anomaly. I had a great desire to strengthen my craft, and like most writing students, I had a fragile ego wrapped around in that desire. Though my fellow Anglo peers reached out to me, they seemed as foreign to me as I to them.

Vocal in my community (I had been co-coordinator of the Latina/o Writer’s Association, literary editor of XhismeArte magazine, organizer of readings), I was suddenly silenced by the sheer awkwardness of our encounters, which were contained primarily in the classroom. We had little, if any, points of reference needed to create shared experiences. If I wrote about a piñata, they found it a useful metaphor for an exploding uterus. If I wrote about a coal mining Mexican hunchback (my grandfather), they found the image exotic and uncanny. But when they wrote of things, I was familiar with their worlds because of my ability to read and my curiosity to apprehend. Because of my public library card, I became acquainted with their world through the books I read and loved. However, they knew next to nothing about mine.

If my peers knew little of my own experiences, my advisor knew nothing. He seemed sometimes baffled, sometimes amused by me. He would ask me questions in a way that led me to believe by his detached prodding that he was somehow acquiring data. Our conversations always left me in a state of confusion. An after-taste not pleasant. He was not without kindness, but slowly grew tired of my subject matter, and in the ways of teachers who feel increasingly frustrated, he began to get impatient and cranky.

Our last conversation happened one afternoon close to dusk and right before our writing workshop. I went to his office to discuss my stories. I was beginning my series, which became my first collection, The Moths. Although he liked the initial story “The Moths,” he disliked “Reconciliation” and he hated my coming-of-age story, “Growing.”

His desk was as wide as the cultural gap between us. He was well organized, a confused, insular, lanky man sitting in front of his window. There was still enough daylight in the room without the use of ceiling lights and so I remember a certain dimness hovering over us. His growing concerns of my work continued to tax his suspension of disbelief. Are these characters really that poor? his tone
would suggest. Either I was not persuasive or he was not convinced. At this particular meeting, in his comment about my story “Growing,” he began to explain why he thought I was a cheap imitation of Gabriel García Márquez. I listened suspiciously. I was only offended by the word “cheap.” Maybe he was right, I thought. “Okay,” I said, “what should I do now?”

“The trouble with your work,” he replied, leaning his bald head back into the graying light of dusk, “the trouble with your work is that you write about Chicanos. You should be writing about people.”

Twenty-five years later I still repeat the narrative in my head over and over again so that it remains as fresh as if it happened yesterday. What was he trying to tell me? Truly, what was it? One could argue that his remark was downright racist. But to be satisfied with this explanation would eliminate potentially complicated questions. At first I thought that perhaps he objected to the cultural particularities of my work – and I assume this is what he meant by saying that I wrote “about Chicanos.” And perhaps he felt it obstructed my ability to be “universal,” an enduring quality in a literary work that transcends a particular place or time. As a privileged white male with a predefined cultural script (read: his own culturally specific “reality”), he immediately felt a disconnection and thus dismissed my Chicano characters “as people.” Since they were seemingly too foreign to him, he simply couldn’t relate with them empathetically and readily put the blame on my characters. Of course, at that time, I had no idea that this episode in my life would reflect the larger philosophical debates regarding the concept of universality and cultural particularity.

Because I am neither a scholar of cultural studies nor literary studies, I do not pretend to be well versed in these debates. Nor do I hope to reduce these issues by the very nature of my limited discussion of them. What I do hope to accomplish is some type of personal understanding of my advisor’s comment because it is a reoccurring predicament: how can culturally specific work be universal? Need I divorce my characters from his or her culture and social location for the sake of achieving “universality”? Like most – if not all – writers of fiction, I conjure the concrete details of a character’s life and it is through these details that the character’s story slowly but truthfully emerges into material knowledge. This knowledge stems from active engagement with the world around me and this emergence brings to light eagerness in this writer to understand, to comprehend something about the human condition. In my desire to capture humanness and foreignness, to celebrate it in such dehumanizing times, I became accountable in the valuable way of paying attention. Thus, the search to understand is motivated by what Juan Mah y Busch describes as a “loving truth-seeking project,” and the creative communication I am married to is the oldest human invention in the world: storytelling.

I knew, even as a child, that I was different – I could hear perhaps, see perhaps, feel perhaps, the emotional mystery beneath the things that others could not. And I learned to pay attention to the unfolding of our lives, both intrigued by its mystery and the adhesive impact it had on me. What my family
of women offered me was the hope by resistance, strength by imagination, and love of meaningful life that led me to reconfigure their and my experiences from translatable personal metaphors to a larger, truer understanding.

The love for family of sisters forced me to push my writing beyond recording experiences of our lives into a work in which the reader would feel and breathe and hear their humanness, just as I would hear the hum of my father’s muscles or smell the stink of my mother’s bleach when so many others did not. I pursued a profound sense of honoring. I aimed at making their lives the center of a narrative universe. These people included my family of women who worked so hard, sacrificed so much that I felt it my utter duty to offer gratitude by way of recognition. When social structures dehumanized them, I wanted to shout their names, give them names. I also didn’t want to romanticize them, for to do so would be to romanticize their sacrifices, which were very real. And so, with spiral notebooks, on library and kitchen tables, I wrote urgently of their flaws and heroics.

Let us now reconsider the question of cultural particularity and universality by first considering what “universal” is not. Chicana feminist María Herrera-Sobek argues that there are already problems inherent in the usage of the term “universal.” The term itself has been deconstructed, unwrapped, pulled apart, and demasked to reveal that “the universal” does not exist in the first place. The master-narrative-produced notions of universality have never acknowledged the sheer colonizing force of eurocentrism behind it. Thus, master narratives privilege those who have the power to define it and neatly eliminates the countless other “universals” of the colonized worlds.

On the other hand, political scientist and philosopher Claes G. Ryn in his collection of essays titled *A Common Human Ground* writes that because cultural particularity and universality do exist but are always presented as a binary of either/or, there is little to no space for negotiating between the two. The oppositions are such: universality generalizes all aspects of human life or intellectual discourse and ignores the culturally and historically specific, while cultural particularity leaves no room for difference. According to Ryn, cultural particularity and universalities are, in fact, ideologies and not necessarily self-evident truths, we should be able to navigate and negotiate to theorize how the two are inseparable.

Ryn argues that universal ideologies like beauty, truth, and goodness can transcend the cultural particularity of a story well told and become a shared human universal experience. However, Herrera-Sobek’s notion of the non-existent “universal” is based on the assumption that colonizers continue to hold the position of defining notions of beauty, truth, and goodness. With the global community now more in contact with one another than ever before, this writer only hopes that the notion of “universal” is becoming obsolete. The continued publication of literature by and about Chicanas/os and Latinas/os, as well as those from other cultures not included in the eurocentric master narratives for hundreds of years, presently imposes a challenge to the comfortable status quo.
Are definitions of universality and cultural specificity ultimately monolithic and immobile? Or, as Ryn claims, are they fluid and negotiable spaces calling for new reimagining of language? If we do not continue to seek out language with which to answer these questions, we Chicana and Latina writers will suffer another conquest. Like the conquerors that understood little of the ancient Aztec codices, and so tried to destroy them – a massive book-burning of monstrous proportions – so too, our humanity will go up in flames.

Coda: Questions for Reading

Of the women “X”-ed out of history, of the marks that bear no signatures, I can only hope that my remarks find some resonance in this quiet place after the body of an essay. Consequently, the coda becomes the space of an insistent questioning, beginning with: How can we read her mark?

The plurality of positions endorsed in this coda emerged from the ongoing discussions between us on the subjects of universal and particularistic cultural effects in the face of Latina/o literature. As our voices converged and overflowed one another, at times clashing and resisting the other’s persistence, we could not but be affected by the last remainder my great grandmother had given us: a pen mark, an ink(ling).

Can two strokes be “her,” where she might “be,” or is her mark illegible until circumscribed, encircled by the legible frame of the lawyer’s signature, signifying nothing until decreed “her mark” by the representative of the law? Can this particular woman, my great-grandmother, be remembered in all her multiple figures, gestures, voices, and forms only by the intelligibility secured by means of the language of the prevailing signature? Can the practice of her illiteracy amount to more than an enforced duty and performance to a law whose suffocating pronouncements in the first place ensured her non-existence?

To write out Mama Cuca, Viramontes gives breath to illiteracy, an impossible task. Although the unreadability of her mark continues to be a space carefully guarded and hedged by the domain of the contract and the signatory – the lawyer’s circle – it was, at the time of its inscription, also her only way of re-marking a social language that excluded my great-grandmother. Within the eccentricities of the law, within the loops of legal and contractual binds, those indelible markings endure. The law might enclose, affect, retrace, or define in its own terms the significance of her mark, but this system or structure caught under the name “law” cannot imprint it. Viramontes makes clear that she, in no way, believes in the romantic reading that may be implied here, that Cuca’s “X” subverts the very system to which it pays penance to. It remains clear that the “X” only comes into existence by the requirements of the matrix of social power that obligates this woman, on this paper, to indicate her agreement to a contract and bill. There is no spontaneous creative will here, and Viramontes has not suggested that it is necessary that her “X” be read in such a liberatory manner.
Instead, Viramontes is perhaps attempting to retrieve Cuca’s particularity from the silent shuffle of X’s that have constituted the micro-history of those who have signed without names. In order to accomplish this, she locates my great-grandmother in the context of the very vivid oral language shared among the Viramontes family. Now, for Viramontes to write of her mark, to rewrite into a general and gendered legibility a mark that was thought to be illegible, untrustworthy, “unreadable,” is to write to her mark, to re-mark upon her mark, investing her X with the distinct signature that is her own.

If this essay has, in broad strokes, indicated in a certain way how Viramontes became a Chicana writing Chicanas – having been inspired by the languages that have motivated and engaged her – this coda, as a final murmur, directs us to what it means to read, to be readers, to read the marks of the other. To continue to refuse the hastiness of directives and programs of “immediate reading,” at the very least, is to offer an explicit wording of the questions that have been perhaps latently informing this essay.

That there is no homogeneous reading experience remains obvious, but I still feel obliged to also assert that no author is able to construct a world that is inhabitable by all its readers. What to do, then, with the possibility that the opening of a book might not contain a reflective surface? That the clean skin of a page abounds in the marks, textual and typographic, interpretive and structural, that betray facile identification? The narrative as a collection of marks is also a body, a corpus of figures that responds sensitively and gives endlessly. But is every answer cherished within its folds? Must the reader always find what he or she would like to see consummated? Does the sheer possibility that the reader might not recognize the characters or “life” of a given narrative demand an ignorance of that text, or a refraining from noticing the perhaps uncomfortable distance they might feel? Viramontes seems to suggest that the mark of the other cannot but be read, its beguiling unreadability the very necessity for its reading.

In a different vein, perhaps trying to posit universal categories of what constitutes “the beautiful, the true, and the good” is less productive than a reevaluation of how to engage with these always already manifest categories. Might a proliferation of strategies of reading, that note the limitations of the desires of the reader – what they would and would not like the text to “speak” – be a negotiation appropriate to the task of reading the text of the socially non-dominant? It remains baffling the extent to which the privilege of certain Anglo-American audiences assume that unless a text panders to their (specific) experience it is to be denied aesthetic (universal?) consideration. Might the elision of the gap of this alienation only be a facile recuperation and salvation of a text that means to suspend the specific and the universal?

It is important, of course, that the tension between the specific and the universal, that uncomforting and uncomfortable space, be Salvaged. As Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau have proposed, the irreducible antagonism between the universal and the specific is what enables a radical democratic politics. These theorists of “hegemony” would like to make the claim that the inevitable
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failure of any social body to constitute itself fully and in whole, its inevitable internal deficit, is the continual rearticulation of the political structure. In the current location of this essay, which writes itself cautiously into the ongoing debate between culturally posited universality and its opposite, particularistic heterogeneity, perhaps it is to remain undecided whether universality itself is to be denied but instead to deny its affirmation. If on the one hand it remains necessary to invoke the universal categories of “humanity” and “non-violence” when speaking about, as Viramontes has mentioned above, the US army prison abuses, does that, on the other hand, commit us to reading them to the letter? Could negotiating with the universal and the particular in socially specific narratives mean a refusal to read any “universality” universally?

If there are multiple and “competing universalities,” as Judith Butler has asserted, our task is to read their intersection between one another, and the conflict their interplay produces. The contest between universalities is a problematic of competing readings staked out in the field of literature. It is comprehending which universalities, when posited, exterminate the particular in such a way as to effectuate social injustice or literary monology, that obliges a call for ad hoc multiple ways of critical reading. To give ourselves, our bodies on the line, to the marks that remain unwritten in the social text.

Note

The New Latin Nation: Immigration and the Hispanic Population of the United States

Alejandro Portes

As of 2000, the Hispanic population of the United States reached 35.3 million (excluding the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico), representing 12.5 percent of the total. Hispanics grew in numbers by 57.9 percent in the last intercensal period, as compared with 13.2 percent for the national population (US Bureau of the Census 2001). Without its Hispanic component, the growth of the national population would have fallen into the single digits and a number of cities and states would have actually lost population. These facts are well known, as is the source of this rapid growth: sustained immigration.

I will revisit in the next section the numbers behind this massive demographic trend, but it is appropriate first to place it in context by noting five basic facts:

1. Immigrants from Mexico and Latin America, in general, have become a national presence and not one limited to certain states or regions.
2. During the last decade, Latin America in general and Mexico in particular consolidated their role as the principal reservoir of low-wage labor for the American economy.
3. Efforts to deter this inflow through new legislation and various new enforcement programs have consistently failed, indicating the flawed character of the theories underlying these policies.
4. Latin American immigrant communities have evolved from a barely noticed presence to a major structural factor in the economic and political development of their sending countries.
5. The Latin immigrant population is having a profound influence on the culture and the politics of the cities and regions where it concentrates. However, neither the culture nor the political orientations that these immigrants bring is incompatible with integration into American society.
Alejandro Portes

National Reach

While Latin immigrants and the Hispanic population in general remain concentrated in the South and West, where three fourths of them still live, they have started to move out of their traditional areas of settlement to increase their presence in other areas. In 1990, eleven states had less than 1 percent Hispanic population; by 2000, the figure had dropped to just three. A state like Georgia, for example, went from 1.7 percent Hispanic in 1990 to 5.3 percent in 2000, a 312 percent increase due to an inflow of over 300,000 persons. Although just two states, Texas and California, continue to concentrate half of the Hispanic population, it is clear that new clusters are being created continuously by two forces: the gradual expansion of Mexican labor migration eastward and the settlement of immigrants from Central and South America in new areas of the country. Driven, in part, by the rigors of tighter border enforcement that has made more difficult the traditional cyclical migrant flow, Mexican laborers have become more settled and have trekked east attracted by new and better employment. New York, Florida, and the Carolinas have been principal targets of this eastward flow, which has turned Mexican labor migration into a national phenomenon (Massey et al. 2002; Smith 1992, 1998).

At the same time, Central and South Americans which comprise just 8.6 percent of the Hispanic population, but are its fastest growing components, have spread around the country, targeting both traditional and new areas of settlement. There are, for example, large concentrations of Dominicans in Providence, Rhode Island and in Boston; of Colombians in New Jersey and Los Angeles; of Salvadorans in Washington, DC and in Los Angeles; and of Brazilians in Massachusetts (Guarnizo et al. 1999; Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Landolt 2000; Levitt 1997). Such movements have also contributed to turn Hispanics into a truly national presence.

Hispanic Immigrants as Manual Labor

The most potent factor accounting for the surge in Latin American immigration, aside from the consolidation of social networks across national borders, has been the labor needs of the American economy. This huge economy, surpassing 10 trillion dollars of GDP in 2000, generates a vast demand for foreign labor at both the high-end of professional and technical occupations and the low-end of low-paid manual jobs (Bean and Stevens 2003; US Bureau of the Census 2000: 451). While Mexican, Argentine, and Colombian engineers are found in Silicon Valley and other areas of high-tech industrial concentration, the bulk of Latin and especially Mexican migrant labor comes to fill labor needs at the bottom of the American labor market. At just 31 percent of high school graduates and 5 percent of college graduates, the Mexican immigrant population of the United
The New Latin Nation

States ranks dead last in human capital among major foreign nationalities and is separated by a vast gap from the average education of the native-born population, 84 percent of whom have a high school diploma and 24 percent a college degree. Central Americans, especially Salvadoreans and Guatemalans, are not in a much better position (US Bureau of the Census 1999).

The overwhelming weight of Mexican immigration, its human capital characteristics and its continuation over time, reinforced now by large Central American contingents, have given the Hispanic population its dominant economic and occupational profile. A clear bifurcation is currently taking place between the two main components of US-bound immigration: with a high proportion of well-educated professionals and entrepreneurs, immigrants from Asia are poised to occupy positions of increasing advantage in the American economy and society. Driven by a sustained low-wage manual labor flow, Hispanics will have to climb their way up over several generations. Even those groups with higher levels of human capital and entrepreneurial prowess cannot escape the dominant characterization of Hispanics, defined by continuing low-wage immigration.

Enforcement Policies

Although couched in general language, all legislative and police efforts at controlling unauthorized immigration have been directed mainly at one region, Latin America, and at one country, Mexico, for it is there where over 90 percent of the “problem” originates. Take Mexico and Latin America off the map and all the threats allegedly posed by illegal immigration to American society would instantly go away. Efforts to achieve the goal of stopping the flow, implemented after endless select commissions, study groups, and congressional hearings have come to naught and have, in many instances, backfired, leading to the consolidation and growth of the unauthorized population (Massey et al. 2002).

The principal reason why border control policies have failed so resoundingly, turning unauthorized immigration into a national rather than a regional phenomenon, is that they clash directly with the structural demands of the economy, described previously. The same unauthorized worker caught and turned back at the border is the one for whom a number of American employers – ranchers, farmers, landscapers, construction crew bosses, restaurant owners – are clamoring.

The second reason why the flow is unstoppable is the consolidation of social networks between places of origin and destination. These networks include not only the migrants themselves and their kin left behind, but also their US employers, and the vast number of subcontractors that have emerged to sidestep restrictive provisions of the immigration law.

For the existing Hispanic population of the United States, the continuation of the unauthorized inflow has three major consequences. First, the relentless expansion of its numbers, easily outstripping in relative and even absolute terms
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that of any other segment of the American population. Second, the consolidation of its objective position and public perception at the bottom of the American labor market and the national hierarchies of education and social status. The third consequence is the growth of a second generation growing up in conditions of severe disadvantage. Because workers without papers find it more and more difficult to maintain their traditional commuting pattern across the border, they opt to bring their families and settle them permanently in the US side. This leads, in turn, to the rapid growth of an infant population which, under normal conditions, would have grown up in Mexico or Central America. Instead, they grow up in America – a second generation subject to the challenges of poverty, feeble communities, and generalized prejudice.

The Rise of Transnational Communities

There was a time when Mexican immigrants who left their country to settle in the United States were regarded as little more than defectors. If they became American citizens, they lost all rights to their Mexican nationality, and their children were derisively referred to as pochos (Barrera 1980; Grebler and Moore 1970). How times have changed. Today, Mexico’s president refers to his nationals abroad as VIPs (very important paisanos). For no less than two decades now, the Mexican federal and state governments have devised a series of measures to court their emigrant population and retain its loyalty. Such measures have culminated in laws allowing Mexicans abroad to vote in national and state elections and permitting them to become US citizens while retaining dual nationality (Goldring 2002; Smith 1998).

In every case, the consolidation of communities straddling national borders has resulted from the combination of two sets of forces. First, migrants themselves have sought to preserve these ties through remittances to family and kin, periodic visits home, and the creation of philanthropic and civic committees to help improve public services and opportunities in their places of origin (Levitt 2001; Vertovec 1999).

Second, new communications and transportation technologies have greatly facilitated these movements, transforming what originally were scattered individual initiatives into a social phenomenon of massive, regular, and predictable dimensions. Today, remittances sent by Latin American expatriates far exceed the foreign aid received by the region and rival in size the sum total of foreign direct investments (Latin American Weekly Report 2003). In countries like El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and even Mexico, expatriate remittances figure among the top three sources of foreign exchange, often exceeding the combined total of the country’s traditional exports (Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Landolt 2001).

There is a great deal of diversity by national origin and generation in the population classified as “Hispanic.” Contemporary immigrants from Latin America
who replenish and add to this population are themselves different in terms of human capital, modes of incorporation, patterns of settlement, levels of transnationalism, and political orientation. Table 2.1 presents data on the five largest Hispanic immigrant nationalities in 2000 and the respective legal immigrant flows in 2001. Three things are immediately apparent from these figures. First, the enormous disparity in size, with Mexicans eclipsing all other groups. Mexicans are almost twenty times more numerous than Cubans, the next largest nationality, and they outnumber all other legal immigrants from Latin America by a factor of ten to one.

Second, the very different spatial settlement patterns of these five nationalities. Cubans are, by far, the most concentrated, with two-thirds settling in Miami and its environs. They are followed by Dominicans, who cluster heavily in New York City and its surroundings. The Mexican and Salvadoran flows resemble, being more dispersed and featuring their largest concentrations in Los Angeles. The principal secondary cluster of Mexican immigrants is, however, Chicago, while that of Salvadorans is Washington, DC. Finally, Colombians are also dispersed, featuring smaller concentrations in Miami and New York City and environs.

Third, the table also makes apparent the significant differences in the human capital composition of each immigrant nationality. Professionals and administrators represented 62 per thousand of all Colombian immigrants in 2001 (38 percent among those declaring an occupation). The figure drops to less than 50 per thousand among Cubans and Dominicans and then to less than 10 per thousand among Mexicans and Salvadorans (approximately 10 percent of those declaring an occupation). The size of these last two groups combined dominates the averages, reinforcing the characterization of the Latin immigrant population as, overwhelmingly, a low-skill flow.

Despite numerous differences among Latin groups, there are also signs of convergence. The emergence of a unified Hispanic population out of these very diverse origins and patterns of settlement is promoted by four mutually reinforcing forces. First, there is a common culture, grounded on language and religion. Unlike groups classified as “Asian” who cannot understand each other, all Latin American immigrants share the same language – Spanish (or in the case of Brazilians, the closely related Portuguese). While a rising number of these immigrants have converted to Protestantism, they all share a common religious background as Catholics. Despite the inroads made by Protestant sects, the Catholic Church is still paramount in the daily lives of most Latin immigrants in the United States (Hirschman 2003; Levitt 2003).

Second, the power of the state is heavily aligned in the side of turning Hispanics into a “real” ethnic minority. Nagel (1986) demonstrated long ago that the state can manufacture ethnicities and even races by the simple expedient of cataloguing and treating people “as if” they belonged to the same group. The enormous power of the media has also been put behind the process of manufactured ethnicity, as press articles, television programs, and films regularly dismiss national differences.
Table 2.1  The Hispanic population of the United States – its five largest immigrant components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mexicans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size, 2000</td>
<td>20,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Hispanic population</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal immigrants, 2001</td>
<td>206,426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total immigration, 2001</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principal cities of destination:
- Bergen-Passaic, NJ
- Chicago, IL
  - 11,165 (5.3)
- Houston, TX
  - 9,447 (4.4)
- Los Angeles, CA
  - 33,427 (16.0)
- Miami, FL
  - 18,425 (66.5)
- New York, NY
  - 9,787 (45.9)
- San Diego, CA
  - 10,558 (4.8)
- Washington, DC
  - 5,045 (16.8)

Professional/executive occupations per thousand immigrants, 2001¹
- 7.4
- 47.2
- 41.6
- 9.2
- 62.0

¹ Puerto Ricans excluded.
² Figures in parentheses are the percent of total legal immigrants in 2001 going to each metropolitan area. Numbers representing less than 4 percent of each immigrant nationality are omitted.
³ Absolute number of immigrants declaring a professional or executive occupation per thousand legally admitted immigrants.

within the Spanish-speaking population, referring to its members by the same uniform term. There are increasingly frequent references to “Hispanic” music, films, literature, and sports, even if they originate in different countries and distinct national cultures.

A third reason for convergence is the absolute numerical dominance of Mexican immigrants and their descendants in the Hispanic population. Without Mexicans, all other Latin-origin groups would have no more than local significance. It is Mexican immigration and its aftermath that have turned Hispanics into a truly national presence. Thus, all other groups are driven by the Mexican population as cars by a locomotive. The homogenizing pressures of the state and the media are not applied to a set of numerically comparable nationalities, but to a population dominated by a single core group, with others as mostly local satellites.

The fourth reason for convergence is closely related to the last and has to do with self-interest and with strength in numbers. Despite all the differences, politicians, entrepreneurs, and professionals have a growing interest in a unified Hispanic population. For politicians, of Mexican and non-Mexican origin alike, it means more votes and greater clout. For entrepreneurs, it means a larger, richer market. For professionals, it means access to government and corporate jobs as representatives of a large minority population and access to a larger clientele, if in private practice. The growth of the Hispanic population and its public image as a unified entity thus offers opportunities and paths of mobility that would not exist if its component groups were dealt with as separate immigrant minorities.

The New Second Generation

Until recently, the study of contemporary immigration to the United States focused on the immigrants themselves, their reasons for coming, and their patterns of adaptation. It has only been in the last few years that this focus has shifted on the realization of the lasting importance of the second generation. First generation immigrants have always been a restless bunch, here today and gone tomorrow, in the country, but not yet of it. By contrast, their US-born and reared children are, for the most part, here to stay. As citizens, fully imbued with American culture and aspirations, this second generation and its patterns of adaptation will play the decisive role in the long-term fate of the ethnic groups created by contemporary immigration (Portes and Rumbaut 1996: ch. 7; Zhou 1997).

Today, one in five Americans under age 18 is an immigrant or a child of an immigrant. This proportion is growing fast, fueled by continuing immigration and the higher than average fertility of many immigrant groups. Although still young, a rising number of children of post-1960 immigrants is reaching adulthood; a majority of this emerging population is of Latin origin (Jensen 2001; Rumbaut 1994). At first glance, and based on the experience of descendants of earlier
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European immigrants, we may assume that the adaptation process of the new second generation would be relatively straightforward: children would gradually leave foreign languages and identities behind, embrace American culture, and claim and receive their rightful place in the economic and social mainstream (Alba and Nee 1997; Gordon 1964).

While there is some truth in this “straight line” assimilation story, there are important ways in which it does not fit reality well. There are groups among today’s second generation, slated for a smooth transition into the American middle and upper classes, riding on their parents’ human capital and material resources. Their ethnicity will become optional, displayed on occasion and when convenient. There are others who will claw their way upwards, despite poverty, based on family solidarity and the support of solidary co-ethnic communities. For them, ethnicity and the social networks linked to it will become a key resource and a strong basis for self-identity and pride. There are still others who are at risk of joining the underworld of gangs, drugs, prison, adolescent pregnancies, and early death that comprise the nightmare of American inner cities. For these youths, their ethnicity will be neither an option nor a badge of pride, but a sign of permanent subordination (Bourgois 1995; Vigil 2002).

Conclusion

The rapid growth of the Latin-origin population represents a phenomenon of momentous significance both for the United States and for the groups directly involved in the process. While the growing Hispanic presence is viewed with increasing alarm by some nativist organizations, there is no intrinsic reason why this population cannot integrate successfully into the American mainstream. Latin immigrants share the same Western and Christian traditions as the receiving population; and their work ethic, family values, and dreams for the future are the same. Spanish is a Western language with many affinities to English.

The barriers to successful integration are not cultural, but structural along the lines described in the preceding pages. The rapid growth of the Latin-origin population is fueled by the continuous arrival of immigrants of generally low human capital who come to fill a vast demand for menial labor in the American labor market. Their arrival not only drives down the averages in terms of education, occupational status, and income of the Hispanic population, but recreates anew the problems and the difficulties created by earlier arrivals.

Note

1 Puerto Ricans are excluded since they are not considered immigrants.
REFERENCES


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“Dime con quién hablas, y te diré quién eres”: Linguistic (In)security and Latina/o Unity

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“Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres” (“Tell me who you go about with and I’ll tell you who you are”) warns that we are judged by the company we keep. My adaptation, “Dime con quién hablas, y te diré quién eres” (“Tell me who you talk with and I’ll tell you who you are”) underscores the defining role of language networks in identity, i.e., “identity is defined as the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories” (Kroskrity 2001: 107). Latina/o identity in the USA is often linked to Spanish, presumed to be the heritage language of more than 40 million people with roots in 20 Spanish-speaking Latin American nations, including Puerto Rico. The term “Spanish speakers” is used interchangeably with “Hispanics” or “Latinas/os,” although numerous immigrants from Guatemala and Mexico speak an indigenous language, and most Mexicans and Puerto Ricans—the majority of Latinas/os—speak more English than Spanish because they were born in the USA. Understanding the crucial yet contradictory role of Spanish in Latina/o identity and its repercussions for Latina/o unity requires an anthropopolitical linguistic perspective, incorporating socioeconomic and political realities that determine how and why Latinas/os speak as members of different groups at different times, and even at the same time, and how they evaluate those differences (Zentella 1993, 1997a).

National varieties of Spanish sometimes emphasize regional borders, but those borders recede when the Spanish language is embraced as a common denominator. In addition, Latina/o bilinguals often blur the boundaries between Spanish and English in ways that reflect new ethnic and racial identities. Above all, distinct ways of being Latina/o are shaped by the dominant language ideology that equates working-class Spanish speakers with poverty and academic failure, and defines their bilingual children as linguistically deficient and cognitively
confused (Zentella 2002). The fate and form of the languages spoken by US Latinas/os will be determined in part by the ways in which they respond to the construction of their linguistic identities as a group and as members of distinct speech communities, and those responses in turn can have a significant impact on Latina/o unity.

Latina/o Linguistic Capital

Latinas/os in search of a better life necessarily pursue capital, in the form of well-paying jobs and other commodities that earn status and respect. Language is a major form of unequally distributed capital in society’s marketplace (Bourdieu 1991). Despite the “illusion of linguistic communism” (ibid: 43), not everyone learns the most marketable ways of speaking, and they are ridiculed for it. In the USA, where race has been remapped from biology onto language because public racist remarks are censored, comments about the inferiority and/or unintelligibility of regional, class, and racial dialects of Spanish and English substitute for abusive remarks about color, hair, lips, noses, and body parts, with the same effect. “Incorrect” aspects of grammar or pronunciation label their speakers as inferior, with an added injury not inflicted by racial comparisons, i.e., no one expects you to be able to change your color, but you are expected to change the way you speak radically to earn respect (Urciuoli 1996). Foreign languages are intrusive and Spanish, in particular, invades “white public space” (Hill 1999). In English, persistent foreign accents and non-standard verbs also signal an unwillingness to assimilate and a lack of discipline that requires external controls, more so when the speakers are poor immigrants defined as non-white. These attitudes are communicated in everyday conversations and promoted by the media and public institutions, but some groups of Latinas/os are more affected than others.

Whether dancing, cleaning, making love, stealing, shooting, or shooting up, and even when the character is admirable, Latinas/os are usually portrayed as speakers of disparaged dialects. In five films with a Mexican American focus (American Me, La Bamba, La Vida Loca, Born in East LA, and Boulevard Nights), only one character spoke Standard American English. Most spoke Chicano English (CE), Hispanized English (HE), i.e., English with a Spanish accent, or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and gang members engaged in exaggerated amounts of Spanish–English mixing (Fought 2003). Spanish television reinforces US race and class ideologies by hiring light skinned Latinas/os who speak la norma culta (‘the cultured norm’) – primarily Mexico City’s standard – because “white sells” (Zentella 1997b). Switching is off limits, e.g., on Cristina, a popular talk show, “Spanglish errors” are beeped, like obscenities (Dávila 2001). The message is clear: Latinas/os, especially poor youth or black immigrants, enjoy little linguistic capital whether they speak Spanish or English, and mixing languages is particularly devalued. But this message conflicts with
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the comfort, trust, solidarity, and affection generated by the sounds and styles of family and community.

Conflicting Norms and Linguistic (In)security

“Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres” has at least two interpretations. The first encapsulates a sociolinguistic truism, i.e., that regular face-to-face interaction among people who share the linguistic rules of their language(s) along with the social rules for the conduct of speech enforces the norms of the speech community, and those norms become identifying markers for its members. Accordingly, national varieties of Spanish are like linguistic flags, despite the fundamental unity of Spanish. In NYC, where diverse groups of Latinas/os are in close contact, 266 primarily first generation Latinas/os from four backgrounds (81 Puerto Ricans, 76 Dominicans, 72 Colombians, 37 Cubans) were in overwhelming agreement (92 percent) that they spoke the same language, albeit in different ways. Differences in “la pronunciación” (‘the pronunciation’) and “las palabras” (‘the words’) were mentioned most frequently. National pride was strong: most speakers were pleased to be identified as speakers of their country’s dialect, and few believed that Latinas/os should change the way they sound.

Latinas/os who live in enclaves with their compatriots form dense and multiplex social networks typical of working class communities (Milroy 1987). Those networks help maintain the ways of speaking of the homeland, as do frequent telephone calls, visits, and visitors. As immigrants and their children interact with other groups of Latinas/os and learn English, their linguistic repertoire expands. Although overt norms favor standard speech, powerful covert norms encourage group members to remain faithful to group codes, linguistic and otherwise. In NYC’s El Barrio, for example, the linguistic repertoire of the young dudes of el bloque (‘the block’) who often “broke night” with their African American “homeboys” included AAVE as well as Puerto Rican English (PRE), while older domino-playing men had a more extensive Spanish repertoire, including popular and standard Puerto Rican Spanish (Zentella 1997a). In Culver City, CA, where Mexican Americans encounter more Anglos than Blacks, high school networks determine the extent to which students of Mexican background unconsciously incorporate the fronted /u/ and backed /ae/ pronunciations typical of California’s Anglos, as in “dude” or “ask”; they are not heard in the Chicano English of gang-affiliated students (Fought 2003). In a northern California high school, oppositional female networks of Sureñas versus Norteñas (‘southerners v. northerners’), or mexicanas versus Chicanas, were distinguished by preferences in clothes and makeup styles, colors (blue v. red), numbers (XIII v. XIV), and languages (Spanish v. English) (Mendoza-Denton 1999). Guatemalans and other Central Americans with civil war experiences too painful to recall and feeling swamped in heavily Mexican communities suffer devoicing, “como hablar en
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"silencio" (‘like speaking in silence’) (Lavadenz 2005). Many learn to become American by first becoming Mexican in the ways they speak in public, although they may honor their voseo (2nd singular informal) verbs at home. Dominican teens in Providence, RI, on the other hand, play with stereotypical connections between race, nation, and language by shifting among dialects of Spanish and English and claiming Dominican, Haitian, or African American identity, much to the confusion of non-Dominicans (Bailey 2001). In all Latina/o communities there are subcommunities or networks that challenge hegemonic notions of “the Hispanic/Latina/o/Mexican/Puerto Rican/etc. community,” and language is central to the distinctions.

Another interpretation of “Dime con quién hablas y te diré quién eres” acknowledges the power of dominant definitions of linguistic capital. All talk, especially with outsiders, involves placing the interlocutor on a linguistic ladder with rungs linked to ethnic, racial, gender, and class status, and the values of insiders and outsiders often conflict. Networks “in the hood,” for example, “give props” to AAVE, CHE, or PRE, while gatekeepers in schools and other institutions associate those dialects with school failure and criminality. But conflict between in-group and out-group pressures does not begin in the United States. Immigrants arrive with Latin American notions of good and bad language that reflect the class, racial, and ethnic divides of their homelands, resulting in entrenched beliefs regarding:

1 the superiority of the Spanish of Spain and the local “norma culta,” particularly of highland South American dialects;
2 the destructive influence of English on Spanish and on Latin American national identity.

Not surprisingly, many Latinas/os demonstrate linguistic insecurity, i.e., they consider their dialect inferior to others.

The Superiority of the Spanish of Spain and the Local “Norma Culta”

Although no Latin American normally speaks like a Castilian, e.g., pronouncing the letters <c> and <z> like the <th> in ‘thing’, they may evaluate it as superior to their way of speaking because of centuries of Spanish rule. The majority of the Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Cubans, and Dominicans interviewed in NYC, all of whom sounded like members of their group, agreed “we should not learn to speak like Spaniards,” but with revealing differences. More Cubans (95 percent) were against speaking like Spaniards, and more Dominicans (32 percent) were in favor of it. Higher rates of linguistic insecurity among Dominicans and Puerto Ricans and lower rates among Colombians and Cubans occurred in several measures, and this pattern appeared related to lower or higher rates of education.
Approximately 95 percent of the Colombians, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans with higher education (college or graduate school) agreed that "we should not learn to speak like Spaniards," which was 10 percent more than their compatriots with less education. However, Labov (1966) and others have found that members of the striving lower middle class, anxious to join the upper class, often have the highest rates of linguistic insecurity. Among the Dominicans in the NYC study, for example, those with higher education were more in favor of learning to speak like Spaniards than those with elementary or secondary education (35 percent v. 29 percent, respectively). Dominicans demonstrated a higher level of linguistic insecurity than the other groups of Latinas/os, and at both educational levels.

One possible explanation is that Dominicans may be aware of the low status of their dialect. The majority (58 percent) of the Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Colombians in the NYC study made derogatory remarks about Dominican Spanish. Also, when asked whether they would consider it a compliment to be told they sounded like a member of another group, sounding like a Dominican was most vehemently rejected, e.g., 41 percent of Colombian rejections were because Dominicans “speak incorrectly” and “it’s an offense.” Not surprisingly, Dominicans have internalized disapproval of their dialect; 20 percent of them said they would not consider it a compliment to be identified as Dominican. Similarly, fewer Dominicans than Puerto Ricans, Cubans, or Colombians believed that their dialect should be the one taught in NYC schools, primarily because of their negative opinions of Dominican Spanish.

Perhaps the root of Dominican linguistic insecurity lies in their elevated use of a stigmatized variable, the deletion of syllable-final s, e.g., in la(s) casa(s) (‘the houses’), which was the only feature unanimously criticized. Final s deletion, typical of the Caribbean and other coastal regions, is most advanced in Dominican Spanish (Terrell 1982). But Cuban Spanish was not as condemned as Puerto Rican and Dominican Spanish, despite their linguistic similarities, and Colombians displayed the greatest linguistic security, despite their aspiration of syllable-medial s, e.g., in no(h)otros (nosotros, ‘we’) (Zentella 2004), indicating that socio-economic and racial factors can trump linguistic factors.

Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Colombians, and Cubans in the USA differ in population numbers, periods of and reasons for migration, location and type of neighborhoods, and in their racial, economic, and educational background. Colombians and Cubans have a higher labor force participation rate and median family income and more college graduates and managers or professionals than Puerto Ricans or Dominicans. Participants in the NYC study reflected the national patterns for their groups, e.g., most (69 percent) of the Dominicans had not completed high school, while the Cubans had the largest percent with graduate studies (24 percent). Another crucial contrast is racial composition, e.g., Dominican immigrants include the most Blacks, by US standards, and Colombians include the fewest. Consequently, Dominicans displayed the most linguistic insecurity and Colombians the least. Unlike the other groups, most
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(56 percent) of the Colombians were in favor of teaching their dialect in US schools, primarily because they held it in high esteem (49 percent) and believed it to be correct (37 percent). Evidently, linguistic reasons, i.e., the fact that Colombians from the interior retain syllable-final *s*, cannot be divorced from their privileged racial, educational, and class status in any explanation of their linguistic status. Equally important: groups continue to speak in stigmatized ways even when they express overt negative attitudes towards them, because of the trust and unity that the dialect of the homeland represents.

Prescriptivist Standards

The educated middle class usually views itself as the guardian of the language and its prescriptivism permeates schools, the media, and other institutions, often singling out features of working-class and/or rural dialects as markers of low status. In Spanish, these include non-standard verb forms like *haiga*, *semos*, *estábanos*, *pudistes* instead of *haya* (‘that there be’), *somos* (‘we are’), *estábamos* (‘we were’), *pudiste* (‘you [fam.] were able’); archaic words like *asina* (*así* ‘thus’); and metathesized pronunciations like *naide* (*nadie* ‘nobody’). Racial and ethnic subgroups are also favorite targets, e.g., “... he was criticized back in Puerto Rico for speaking *arrabal* (‘ghetto’) black Spanish” (Laviera 1988). While the Caribbean singles out Blacks, Mexicans pick on Indians: “... he says, I want a [masc.] onion [fem.]”, a busboy roared, ridiculing a Mexican Indian co-worker’s problems with gender agreement. Along the Tijuana–San Diego border, “*naco*,” from Totonaco, the name of an indigenous people, is a widely used pejorative for anything that is tasteless, stupid, or lower class. Recently, a mass email, meant as a joke, warned against using certain words, including anglicisms, and against certain behaviors:

*PARA NO QUEDAR COMO NACO CUIDESE DE DECIR* (*TO AVOID BEING TAKEN FOR A NACO TAKE CARE NOT TO SAY*:)

*diferencia* (for *diferencia* ‘difference’) *pior* (for *pior* ‘worse’), *munch* (for *munch* ‘much’) *mucha calor* (for *mucha calor* ‘very hot’), *confleis* (*cornflakes*) *lonche* (lunch) *hizistes*, *vistes*, *trajistes* (ending in *+s*). . .

*y EVITE . . . vestir los asientos del carro con camisetas . . . cantar canciones en inglés sin saber lo que está diciendo . . .

(‘and AVOID . . . covering your car seats with t-shirts . . . , singing songs in English without knowing what you’re saying’). . .

Most of these southwestern *nacadas* are familiar to Latinas/os from many nations, except that Mexicans stigmatize the **addition** of final *s* to preterite
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second-singular informal verbs, e.g., to *hiciste* (+s), *viste* (+s), *trajiste* (+s) (‘you did, you saw, you brought’), while Caribbeans stigmatize its deletion in present tense second-singular informal verbs, e.g., in *hace* (-s), *ve* (-s), *trae* (-s) (‘you do, you see, you bring’). Worries about committing errors are more likely to plague the middle class because they have been exposed to the rules in school and learned that following them can separate them from the lower working class. Another concern, obvious in the injunctions against *confleis* and *lonche*, is the negative impact of English, but it is more conflicted.

The Destructive Influence of English

Worries about the influence of English abound in countries whose émigrés to the USA return with desirable clothes, jewelry, money, and the ability to speak English. Often, a unique label distinguishes returnees in Latin America and the second generation of Latinas/os in the USA from natives or recent immigrants. Puerto Rico refers to them as “neorricans,” although the preferred term on the mainland is “nuyoricans”; Dominicans call them Dominican Yorks; and Mexicans use *Chicano*, *pocho*, and *cholo*, sometimes interchangeably, although *cholo* is linked to street toughs. The labels suggest a hybrid – and therefore presumably confused and incomplete – identity, reflected in linguistic deficiency. Latinas/os who speak a lot of English, mixed with Spanish or not, are likely to have their cultural authenticity challenged.

Extensive English in an individual or community’s repertoire is a sign of assimilation to US culture, casting doubt on the legitimacy of a Latin American identity. Those who claim to speak more or “better” Spanish may claim to be more or better representatives of the national culture, in a game of linguistic one-upmanship. A pecking order is evident in the comments heard in Latin America, where English is making inroads, about the extent of English influence in Puerto Rico as a result of more than 100 years of US rule. These are repeated in islander critiques of the Spanish spoken by their Nuyorican, Chicago-rican and other cousins in the USA. Similarly, *Tijuanenses* and other *norteños* on the Mexican side of the US–Mexico border are used to hearing negative comments about their English-influenced Spanish by residents of central Mexico, which *norteños* in turn make even more forcefully against the Spanish of *pochos* who live across the border (Zentella 2005b). The right to claim a legitimate Puerto Rican or Mexican identity is based partly on the extent to which your Spanish is free from English.

The truth is that English is part of daily life in Puerto Rico and on the US–Mexico border because of the penetration of television, movies, and music in English, US corporations, and the large number of Anglo tourists. For these same reasons, knowledge of English represents significant capital, and the outcry against English contamination does not drown out the contradictory murmurs of
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envy from those who do not speak it. As one border bilingual put it: “Hay gente que dice, ‘Ay qué ridículo,’ pero por dentro se están muriendo de envidia” (“There are those who say, “Oh how ridiculous” [when they hear him speak English in Tijuana], but inside they’re dying of jealousy’). In an apparent effort to draw on the capital that English enjoys without jeopardizing their claim to an authentic Mexican identity, 40 students, all US citizens who lived in Tijuana and crossed the border to study in San Diego for at least three years, employed contrasting code switching practices (Zentella 2005b). Those who identified strongly as Mexican, regardless of birthplace, preferred to switch between Spanish and English at the boundaries of sentences and not intra-sententially, for parts of a sentence, which was more common among those who identified equally or more with the USA. Full sentence code switching is also more prevalent than switching within the confines of a sentence among US born and raised Latinas/os (Zentella 1997a), but the transfronterizos (‘border crossers’) who believe they are distancing themselves from pochos by switching full sentences are unaware of that fact.

Spanish Accents

The linguistic (in)security that immigrants bring from Latin America is exacerbated by repeated critiques of what and how they speak in the USA, contributing to the “chiquita-ification,” i.e., the diminishment and disparagement, of Latina/o languages and identities (Zentella 1993). Damaging stereotypes include (1) a Spanish accent in English is laughable, (2) Latina/o bilinguals are incompetent in both English and Spanish, and (3) English monolinguals are inherently superior to Spanish monolinguals. The first is no news to anyone who has watched television or movies, beginning decades ago. Carmen Miranda’s chattering and heavy (Portuguese) accent were as comical as her fruit turban in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s, Bill Dana’s character was a ludicrous astronaut, José Jiménez, whose Spanish-accented English, e.g., “/mai ney hosey himenes/” was the butt of jokes. More recently, in an attempt to counter this stereotype, comedian Danny Hoch refused to play the part of “a clownish swimming pool attendant” with a Spanish accent for the Jerry Seinfeld show, and was fired (Brantley 1998). Latina/o comedians use the same ploy. George López has several routines that reflect the Mexican American attempt to distance itself from the first generation; for example, he repeatedly misunderstands an immigrant worker’s voice over the microphone at a Jack in the Box drive-in. In every case, it is not what Latinas/os say in their accented English that is funny, but how they say it. Lippi-Green (1997) has documented the negative impact of accent discrimination on children. Furthermore, linguistic profiling cases prove that discrimination based on accents is no laughing matter; it abrogates the rights of Latinas/os and others to housing and employment (Baugh 2003; Massey and Lundy 2001).
Linguistic (In)security and Latina/o Unity

Spanglish

Just as the English of Latina/o immigrants is cause for ridicule, the Spanish of those born and/or raised in the US is attacked by insiders and outsiders. Second generation bilinguals are accused of not knowing English or Spanish, i.e., of being semi-lingual or even a-lingual, and of contaminating the Spanish language by adapting or inserting words from English. The most widespread term for describing their speech is Spanglish, but Puerto Ricans also decry “hablar mata’o” (‘speaking killed’), while Mexicans use mocho (‘cropped’) and Tex Mex to describe the phenomenon, or claim that those who are pocho (US born/raised) speak pocho (the Spanish of US born/raised Mexicans).

Most definitions of Spanglish refer to the mixing of Spanish and English, as the conjoined name implies, and to Hispanized versions of English words, e.g, lonche (‘lunch’), which has appeared in lists since the early 1900s (McWilliams 1990). The compilation of loanwords has a long and varied history, including the classic study of New Mexico’s Spanish by Aurelio Espinosa in 1917, the “glosario de neoyorquismos” (‘glossary of Newyorkisms’, n = 80) at the end of Guillermo Cotto-Thorner’s 1951 novel about Puerto Rican life in Manhattan, a collection of 300 terms from Cuban Miami (Cruz and Teck 1998), and a recent volume by Stavans (2003) that contains many questionable items. He authorizes improbable or infrequent words, like loadear for ‘loiter’ and deservear ‘deserve’, includes legitimate Spanish words, e.g., fiesta, doña, and lengthens the inventory unnecessarily by listing variant spellings separately, e.g, four for parquear (‘to park’) occupy 12 lines.

Accuracy aside, Spanglish cannot be reduced to static dictionary entries; it is a creative and rule-governed way of speaking bilingually that is generated by and reflects living in two cultures. But even self-styled defenders of our cause can get it wrong. Stavans (2003), for example, claims that Spanglish represents “the making of a new American language” (the subtitle of his book), which contradicts the linguistic facts, since Spanglish speakers follow English rules in the English part of their sentences and Spanish rules in the Spanish part, and the number of Spanglish terms is no threat to the English or Spanish lexicon. And, further undermining his commendable attempt to legitimize Spanglish, Stavans goes to the extreme of “translating” the introductory chapter of El Quixote, violating the co-constructed, contemporary, and in-group essence of Spanglish. Also, he characterizes my allusion to “two monolinguals stuck at the neck” as “a haunting, beautiful image” (ibid: 54), although I use that image to discredit the view that bilinguals can be judged by monolingual norms. Spanglish speakers are members of communities that speak local dialects of distinct languages, and this principal marker of their identity links them to other Latinas/os who speak both and are both. The acts of bilingual identity they perform with each other by switching between Spanish and English accomplish more than two dozen discourse strategies, including topic and role shifting (Zentella 1997a). Some bilinguals acknowledge...
their formidable skills despite widespread condemnation, and they admit to being Spanglish speakers with pride, but Spanish is losing ground rapidly to English in every Latina/o community.

Superior English Monolinguals

The media, the justice system, and the federal government communicate the superiority of English monolinguals in the ways they mishandle speakers of languages other than English. Santa Ana (2002) analyzed the media metaphors related to Prop. 227, which virtually eliminated bilingual education in California in 1998, and found that newspaper reports on immigrants summoned up images of a deluge, floods, and “a brown tide rising,” non-English speakers were portrayed as shackled in a language prison, and languages other than English were referred to as ‘tongues’. In child custody cases, judges in Texas and Nebraska told the Latina/o parent to speak English to the child, not Spanish (New York Times 2003; Verhovek 1995). And in employment cases, employers who fire workers for speaking Spanish on the job find increasing support from judges. Ironically, some who hire workers for their ability to speak Spanish to customers then fire workers for speaking Spanish to co-workers (Zentella 1997c). Spanish has been banned even during lunch breaks, and at one store “bosses belittled [workers] for speaking Spanish although other store workers freely spoke French and Italian” (Lehman 2003).

On the federal level, special treatment for English monolinguals is evident in a US Census classification instituted in 1990, which defines a “linguistically isolated” household as

one in which no member 14 years old and over (1) speaks only English or (2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English “very well.” In other words, all members 14 years old and over have at least some difficulty with English. . . . All the members of a linguistically isolated household are tabulated as linguistically isolated, including members under 14 years old who may speak only English. (US Census Bureau, Census 2000)

Obviously, “linguistically isolated” is an inaccurate and discriminatory label, since it categorizes as “isolated” only the 45 percent of households in the USA where adults who speak another language have some difficulty with English (55 percent speak English very well), not the great majority of the US households (82 percent) in which no one speaks anything but English. The hegemony of English is also reflected in widespread efforts to make English the official language (now the law in 29 states), despite convincing evidence that English dominance is not threatened (Newmarker 2006). English-only laws purportedly target government business dealings, but they foment the kind of linguistic intolerance evident in the inflamed reaction against the Star Spangled Banner in
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Spanish, and against a human rights commissioner from Mexico who tried to lecture in Spanish at the University of Arizona. At the educational level, English hegemony makes it illegal to teach children in their home language even when they are also being taught English, e.g., in California and Arizona.

Reversing Linguistic Insecurity to Encourage Latina/o Unity

What is the Latina/o response to these violations? Recent mass demonstrations on behalf of undocumented immigrants are an encouraging sign of unity, but language rights are not central to that agenda. And few communities have the political and economic power to win out against wealthy individuals and organizations dedicated to eroding those rights. Even in Miami, where Cuban financial and political clout is undeniable and where some of the earliest bilingual programs were very successful, there are few publicly funded bilingual schools; the middle class supports private bilingual education that the working class cannot afford (Roca 2005). In California, middle-class Montebello supported legislation that denied non-citizens health and educational services, ended affirmative action, and eliminated bilingual education, at higher rates than voters in working-class East Los Angeles (García Bedolla 2003). In a few districts, Latinas/os have led the fight against bilingual education, unaware of the number of years that it takes to achieve the level of proficiency necessary to do academic work (Crawford 2000).

But the great majority of Latinas/os do want to raise bilingual children, and the need to accomplish this goal becomes more pressing every day. An extensive study concluded that “by the third generation, most descendants of immigrants are ‘linguistically dead’ in their mother tongue,” and even in the second generation Spanish is dying out (Newmarker 2006). Spanish survives a little longer in the Mexican Southwest, but Latina/o families everywhere are battling the reluctance of children to speak a low-status language, and children who are criticized for their weak Spanish may in turn be ashamed of their parents’ English (Zentella 2005a). Linguistic insecurity breeds rivalries based on who speaks Spanish or English more fluently, or which variety of Spanish or English is more correct, pitting generations, classes, and ethnic groups against each other. At its worst, not only the dialects are belittled, but the speakers and the communities they come from as well. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, Eastsider Hispanic teens who did not speak Spanish told me: “Mexico is gross,” “they eat dogs,” “they eat cat tamales,” and “I went to Juarez and there are little girls with babies begging.” Would they be any less disparaging if they knew Spanish? Perhaps not, but at this point they are unable to communicate with Mexicans. Similarly, Mexicans who cannot get to know pochos in English may end up fearing or insulting them. Nor is bilingualism a guaranteed remedy; those with advanced degrees who speak both languages with ease can do more damage than good by prescribing
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“the right way” to speak, drawing boundaries between themselves and lower working class Spanish-speaking immigrants on the one hand and their English-dominant second generation children on the other.

The obvious conclusion is that bilingualism is a laudable goal, but language is not the fundamental solution because it is not the fundamental problem. Anthropological linguistics pierces the language smokescreen that relies on insidious linguistic hierarchies which obscure ideological, structural, and political impediments to unity and equity. As Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 55) point out, focusing on ideology reminds us “that cultural frames have social histories, and it signals a commitment to address the relevance of power relations to the nature of cultural forms and ask how essential meanings about language are socially produced as effective and powerful.” It is in the dismantling of critiques of our English, our Spanish, and our Spanglish, and in an understanding of who benefits from the diminishment of our linguistic repertoires, that a powerful Latina/o unity can be rooted. Fortunately, many Latinas/os are fashioning alternative conceptualizations of the linkages between language, nation, race, and ethnicity that contest dominant discourses (González 2005), and in embracing hybrid linguistic and cultural creations they unite with other Latinas/os and hermanas/os everywhere.

Notes

1 A Rockefeller Foundation grant supported interviews conducted by the author and research assistants between 1986 and 1990 (Zentella 1990).
2 Although the linguistic details remain to be studied, these varieties borrow some features from immigrant Spanish and others from local working-class white and black dialects, contributing to their low status (Bayley and Santa Ana 2004; Fought 2003; Urciuoli 1996).
3 The data for this question come from 194 interviews with Puerto Ricans (n = 73), Colombians (n = 51), Dominicans (n = 50), and Cubans (n = 20), a subset of the larger group of 266 interviews.
4 The principal and indefatigable interviewers for this research, supported by a UC-MEXUS grant, were María Balandrán, Ana María Relaño, and Cristina Pérez. Un millón de gracias.
5 UCSD students in my 2005 seminar on Spanglish found that 60 self-defined Spanglish speakers rejected approximately 50 percent of the words listed in the Stavans dictionary.

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Linguistic (In)security and Latina/o Unity


Ana Celia Zentella


Who is a Latina/o?

One evening last year in Chicago, I attended a Latino concert at a local music venue downtown with some friends and colleagues. Around the table we were all Latino, yet each of us embodied very different social, class, cultural, linguistic, gendered, and racial experiences. We were all of Latin American descent; some were born and raised in Chicago, others were more recent immigrants, having arrived to the US five years ago, and others, like me, had been in the United States for most of their lives as adults. Most outsiders would have grouped us all together as Latinas/os, minorities, foreigners, and Spanish-speaking. But a closer look at the complex and contradictory identities and experiences among us all reveals a much more complicated picture about Latino America. This is, indeed, one of the most central challenges that Latina/o studies faces as a field of study.

Who is a Latina/o? What constitutes a Latina/o identity? When does a Latin American become a US Latina/o? How do regional, national, and political identities – Chicano, Boricua, Tejano, Central American – intersect with the larger rubric of “Latino”? How do we account for socioeconomic, linguistic, racial, generational, and gender differences? How can we explore the mutual interactions, transculturations, conflicts, and power struggles among the 38 million Latinas/os in the United States, not to mention the power asymmetries between Latinas/os and dominant society? As a multi- and interdisciplinary site of academic inquiry, Latina/o studies examines the multiple factors that affect the everyday lives of US Latinas/os. Such heterogeneity challenges scholars to find new, interdisciplinary approaches that can address our multiple and shifting realities.
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Since the early 1990s, Latina/o studies has produced cutting-edge knowledge that responds to the historical shifts witnessed by our communities: colonialism and subordination, border crossing and transnationalism, racism and racialization, gendered identities and sexualities, stereotypes and representations, and the constitution of hybrid identities. These areas of inquiry are also located at the intersections between individual selves, collective groups, and the institutions of civil society, the media and the state. If identity is defined by the dialogic struggles between notions of the self and the constructions imposed from the outside (other individuals, institutions, and discourses), then Latina/o identities need to be understood at the interstices of both.

Scholars have debated the usefulness of the term “Latino” as a rubric that incorporates or fails to account for the heterogeneous experiences of US Latinas/os. Because it is an umbrella term that erases our cultural specificities, or that mostly foregrounds the conflicts and segmentations among the various national groups – what has been called the “Latino Cultural Wars” (Kugel 2002) – the term itself has been the object of suspicion and debate within the field. Yet now it is becoming a site from and around which to discuss the implications of the demographic diversification of the Latina/o population in the United States. Let us go back to the circle of my Latina/o friends in Chicago in order to explore the complexities behind Latina/o identities.

A middle-class immigrant from Venezuela, Sarita came to the US to study English originally in the late 1990s, but decided to stay in Chicago and brought her children over at the beginnings of the Hugo Chávez turmoils. Yet she also stayed because she fell in love with a Chilean man. Sarita and her children are undocumented, but their lives are informed by the middle-class values and aspirations that were part of her life in Venezuelan society. Their preoccupations range from being deported any day to maintaining their social status through consumerism and social circles. José, a gay, Puerto Rican professor, has been in the United States since he was a graduate student, yet he is still very connected to Puerto Rican Island culture, to Spanish, and to Latin America. His long-term partner is an Anglo man who doesn’t speak Spanish. They live in the suburbs and attend the Chicago opera and theater after work when they can. José grew up very poor on the Island, yet he is perceived as an Anglo because of his light skin color and blond hair. His gay identity, however, makes him vulnerable to homophobia and exclusion. Rosario, a Mexican woman in her fifties, a single mother of two young men, has not found full-time employment in years because she does not have a degree, yet she doesn’t have enough money to pay for her tuition to complete her bachelor’s degree in a continuing education program in the city. She is a citizen, but she cannot afford to pay her gas bills. She has no medical insurance, but she owns a small home in the south side of the city. Her car is always breaking down, and she is constantly struggling to make ends meet. Yet her cultural life is very rich. She has been an active participant of various Latino arts and theater organizations in the city for more than twenty years and she possesses a particular social capital in terms of her knowledge about the
community. Dave (for David), half Puerto Rican, half Mexican, was born in Chicago but raised in the suburbs by his Mexican mother, who wanted to escape life in the inner city after her divorce. Despite his suburban identity, he grew up poor, lacking any sort of luxury and having to work since he was a child. Like many native-born Latinas/os, he speaks English and feels uncomfortable speaking Spanish. Many of his acquaintances assume he is privileged and assimilated because of his suburban, Anglophone identity. Yet he is deeply connected to his biological father and his family, who live in a very poor area of the city. His identity integrates the suburbs and the inner city, for he has been a part of these two worlds, cultures, and families. He knows about gang violence, about inner city high schools, and about unemployment through the experiences of his half brothers. He also knows about middle-class lifestyles, an individualist work ethos, and Anglo families and neighbors. And myself, a Puerto Rican blanquita who has lived in the United States for thirty years, been married to two working-class Chicanos, and have felt less and less connected to the Island as the years go by. A single mother of two Puerto Rican/Mexican daughters, and having lived in most regions of the United States, my own experience has connected me to both US Puerto Rican and Chicano/Mexicano cultures. I have in-laws in El Paso, Texas, and sisters in Boston and New York. Chicago is now my home. I call my girls niñas (the Mexican term) instead of nenas (the Puerto Rican term), I spend more time with my Mexican mother in law than with my own mother, but I definitely love to dance salsa and merengue more than cumbias or nortenas. In my case, class, gender, and cultural identities have all been marked by my personal connections to the Mexican American community.

This small group of individuals represents a small slice of the heterogeneous identities and experiences that constitute today what we call Latino. First, the different experiences among economic immigrants, political refugees, exiles, and native-born historical and racial minorities structure Latino lives, yet they do not determine them. Indeed, the contradictions in the lives of Sarita, Rocío, José, David, and myself reveal that individuals’ multiple and contradictory identities unfold differently and lead to divergent results in terms of material and social survival. Sarita’s undocumented status has made it very difficult for her to purchase a home, while Rocío’s citizenship has not significantly improved her living conditions. Yet this past summer Rocío was able to travel to Mexico with a school tour and Sarita and her daughter were not able to go. While David’s suburban upbringing may be seen as the most privileged experience in the group, this has not shielded him from poverty nor from witnessing the challenges and social problems of the inner city. In turn, José and I have been in the United States as part of the brain drain that has significantly robbed the Island of the talents and resources of young professionals. Yet gender issues, more than salaries, have kept José and I from returning to the Island.

Despite the fact that Spanish has been repeatedly hailed as the common denominator among Latinas/os, the linguistic diversity within this sector continues to be hybrid, fluid, and politically contingent. That evening, José refused...
to speak in English to David, asserting the dominance of Spanish at the table. If David has been privileged socially and in educational institutions for his knowledge of English and for not having an accent, contrary to José’s heavily accented English despite his many years in the US, that evening David became a linguistic minority, silenced by the dominance of Spanish among the group, an experience of exclusion that he has faced multiple times. This moment of linguistic conflict represented the inverse of language politics in the United States, whereby Spanish is usually subordinated and racialized. In this case, José’s Latin American subjectivity and linguistic power exerted dominance over a US-born Latino.

Elements of socioeconomic status and class also become significant in accounting for the Latino experience. While most US Latinas/os are working class or working poor, there is an emerging middle class and professional sector that has become an intermediary between institutions and those with less power and social capital. The case of Rocío is interesting in this regard. While she considers herself an upper-class venezolana, in the United States she has been struggling to maintain that lifestyle while earning much less than what she made in her country. Simultaneous to this shift in her own class experience, she has become an activist and advocate for immigrant and refugee rights. She has used her skills in networking, communications, media, and marketing to speak publicly for the undocumented. This differs from the more common phenomenon of middle-class Latin American immigrants being privileged over US Latinas/os in the workplace, given their levels of education in their home countries and their native skills in Spanish. In Chicago, for instance, the Spanish-language media – television and newspapers – recruit professionals directly from Latin America rather than US Latinas/os because of a perceived deficiency in the use of Spanish among the latter. It is not a coincidence that Rosario, despite her citizenship, has not found a decent, full-time job in the city. While Latin American professionals are displacing US Latinas/os from particular jobs, some, like Sarita, are also using their skills and resources to advocate for the larger community.

The term “Latino” carries with it internal semantic tensions that reflect the multiple sites from which it has emerged. Most scholars and many community members have embraced the term because it has represented a more organic alternative to the government-imposed term “Hispanic,” coined and used since the 1970s (Oboler 1995). Yet this acceptance has not precluded the recognition that the term itself homogenizes the diverse power locations among US Latinas/os. As an umbrella term, it can be used strategically to indicate the oppositional location of Latinas/os versus, or outside of, dominant society. Likewise, it can be used to erase the specificities of the various national groups and historical experiences outlined above. Many second-generation Latinas/os use the term to identify themselves vis-à-vis Anglos (Flores-González 1999), yet they also use their national identity to identify themselves in relation to other Latino groups. It is also increasingly common for hybrid Latinas/os, that is, those who are descendants of two national groups, to use the label Latino in order not to erase either of their identities. Thus, the use of labels is contingent, fluid, and relational, used
(Re)constructing Latinidad

strategically and structurally depending on the context. I define myself as a Puerto Rican professor among other Latina/o colleagues, but I also define myself as a Latina cultural critic in the larger context of my university colleagues. The term “Latino” then does not necessarily displace the significance of the national identifiers, but is used to signal the multiple and relational selves of colonized subjects.

Many Latina/o scholars have argued against the use of the term “Latino” because the media has deployed it historically to homogenize and lump us all together as one undifferentiated mass. This media discourse has had egregious consequences for the communities involved. For instance, the literary market sells Latin American literature as part of their Latino market. This conflation has less to do with the mutual influences or literary continuities between these two canons than with the economic benefit of attracting additional readers and buyers. The Puerto Rican feminist writer Rosario Ferré acknowledged some years ago that she wrote her last two novels in English because she wanted to be part of the very visible group of Latina writers in the United States. This controversial posturing triggered not only an attack against her by the purists and linguistic nationalists on the Island, but also a debate about the more delicate and fragile issue of who can be identified as a Latina writer and who cannot. The experience of confronting racial, cultural, and linguistic marginalization and subordination in the United States as a result of the colonized status of our communities is a strong argument that distinguishes US Latino writers from their Latin American counterparts. Yet, what about the literature written by the Cuban exiles during the 1960s and 1970s? What about the literature that is now being produced in Spanish by Latin American émigrés and recent immigrants? Do we consider these texts a part of the Latino canon? Do we read them as a displaced national literature or as the literature of an ethnic, historical minority? In the musical sphere, Shakira’s relocation from being a Colombian rock singer to a US-based Latina rock/pop singer has been achieved not only through marketing but also through her stage performances, musical arrangements, the interpellation of audiences, and use of English (Cepeda 2003). These are all questions that arise as we continue to witness the diversification of the identities and historical experiences of our writers, artists, and entertainment figures.

Redefining Latinidad

In Chicago, as in the other major Latino urban centers in the United States, communities from all Latin American countries live, work, dance, and interact throughout the cities that they are also transforming. Chicago is the third largest city in the US and home to the second largest Mexican and Puerto Rican communities nationwide. It is also home to a growing Guatemalan sector that has become the third largest Latino group in this urban area. As of the 2000 Census, Latinas/os constitute 26 percent of Chicago’s total population. Of that, Mexicans
constitute 70.4 percent, Puerto Ricans 15 percent, Guatemalans 1.8 percent, Ecuadorians 1.2 percent, and Cubans 1.1 percent. The fact that the Guatemalans and Ecuadorians have outnumbered the Cubans suggests that the traditional trinity of the three major historical minorities – Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American – is shifting, creating a much more complex mosaic of Latin American national encounters. Indeed, recent Census figures show that Chicago ranks ninth in the metropolitan areas receiving large numbers of South American immigrants. Certainly, Peruvians have long made Chicago their home. In addition, the so-called “new Latinas/os” – Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and other South and Central Americans – are all represented in the growing Latino demographics of the city.

As Juan Flores has stated, the demographic shifts since the 1990s have created urban spaces in which Latinas/os of various nationalities will interact with each other. Flores (1996) points to the increasing presence of Mexicans in New York City, a new sector that is growing as the numbers of Puerto Ricans, historically the predominant group, decrease or remain the same. This social mosaic leads to new forms of interaction, affinities, and power dynamics between and among Latinas/os from various national groups. It is interesting that media and journalism seem to zero in on the ensuing cultural conflicts and national tensions that have arisen from these new social spaces.

Yet we are also witnessing different forms of affiliations, solidarity, identifications, desire, and intermarriage among Latinas/os. This is not necessarily new, for Chicago and the Midwest witnessed similar interactions between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, particularly since the 1940s. Yet the growing numbers and the dimensions of this demographic revolution call for a recognition that the term “Latino” is a real thing, an emerging social and cultural experience and experiment, and not just a label or construction imposed from the outside. If in the past decades, paradigms of national identity served to understand and produce a sense of collectivity grounded in particular geocultural locations and regions – the Chicanos in the West and Southwest, the Puerto Ricans in New York and the Northeast, the Cuban Americans in Miami – nowadays national identities are still significant, but they are not the exclusive axis of reference from which to understand Latino lives. In fact, national identities are restructured and reorganized as a result of these increasingly hybrid spaces. New interlatino subjectivities are emerging and we need to examine them at various levels.

Angie Chabrán Dernesesian coined the term “domestic transnationalism” to refer to the multiple power dynamics that emerge as a result of interlatino interactions. First, there are myriad examples of mutual transculturations among different Latino nationals. From the impact of Afro-Caribbean music in Mexican culture (Carlos Santana’s music), to the linguistic borrowings and influences, let’s say, between Cubans and Nicaraguans in Miami, to the ways in which new Latino cuisine fuses Mexican ingredients with Caribbean ones, Latinas/os from various nationalities are creating new cultural objects and practices that are the result
of two or more national influences. (The combined Puerto Rican and Mexican hanging flags for the car sold in Chicago is another evidence of these transculturations). Secondly, there are outright cultural conflicts among Latinas/os, most of which stem from the ways in which we racialize each other. These negative constructions of the national Other are usually fueled and informed by stereotypes and racializations that have been historically shared and internalized, but that also point out differences in behavior that may result from gender and racial subordination and from the larger forces of colonization. For instance, for some Mexican women, Puerto Rican women are “rencorosas” and aggressive; from the perspective of the latter, the Mexicanas seem too submissive and “sufridas” (Pérez 2003). There are also instances in which perceived differences of power inform the disidentification or the gesture toward differentiation from our national others. For instance, public figures in the Cuban American community have rejected any comparisons or analogies to Mexican economic immigrants. This is partly a way of protecting the privileges that the Cuban exile generation has held as political refugees escaping a communist regime. In their case there are also racial (white) and class identities (middle-class, professional sector) that need to be protected and reclaimed. For undocumented Latinas/os, Puerto Rican US citizenship is seen as a privilege, while many Puerto Ricans consider it another reminder of their colonial and second-class status within the United States. At the same time, Puerto Ricans are continuously racialized by many other Latinas/os for their Caribbean Spanish, for their darker skin color, and for their high poverty rates. Many Latinas/os also refuse to be confused for a “Mexican,” an attitude that reveals their fear of being racialized themselves as much as their internalization of that very same dominant discourse. Many of these disavowals and discourses of subordination, then, are rooted in larger structural forces rather than in individual prejudices.

The term “domestic transnationalism” can also refer to the hybrid Latino subjects who are the offspring of Latinas/os of two different national groups. These hybrid Latino subjects, who populate our classes at UIC, De Paul, and Northeastern in Chicago, negotiate their identities in ways that differ from the Anglo-Latino power dyad that has structured most of our understandings about Latinas/os in the United States. These younger Latinas/os may identify with each national culture in more relational ways and in more specific contexts, rather than in the linear ways in which we tend to think about national awareness or cultural reaffirmation. Mérida Rúa’s (2001) research about the MexiRicans and PortoMex subjects in Chicago suggests that, in fact, hybrid Latinas/os make strategic decisions about national differentiation based on a variety of contextual, family, and social factors. Thus, their identity constructions tend to be more concentric, multiple, and diffused than what we are accustomed to. Rúa proposes the term “colando-ing” to refer to the negotiations that interlatino subjects make in specific social contexts, in family, neighborhood, or with friends. Colando can mean passing for one identity while erasing the other; choosing from a
repertoire of transculturated elements; or making oneself part of a larger group, by either cutting in line or with the assistance of others.

Like interlatino racializations, these forms of passing for a national other are likewise informed structurally by the political positions and cultural presence of specific nationalities. For instance, factors such as the power and visibility of each group in relation to the others, or the mainstream acceptance of some identities over others, or the political rights and citizenship accorded to some, have an impact on the ways in which hybrid Latinas/os foreground one identity over another. For David, who is half Puerto Rican and half Mexican, it is easier to identify with the Mexican culture, partly because he was raised by his Mexican mother, but also because, according to him, he has been keenly aware of the fact that Mexico and Mexican history – iconized through its pyramids and the epic grandeur of its Aztec culture – have been much more visible in the US imaginary than its Puerto Rican counterpart. This canonization of particular national groups reveals the uneven ways in which our specific histories have been integrated as part of the US official knowledge. Given his suburban upbringing and his US citizenship by birth, David has not had to take into account the racialization of Mexicans in the context of US labor and immigration policy, nor the privilege of Puerto Rican citizenship. In general, the need to avoid racialization, to be perceived as an agent with social power or cultural capital, and to belong, definitely influence the forms of strategic essentialism that hybrid Latinas/os perform when choosing one identity over another. While these forms of passing are strategic and relational, hybrid Latinas/os can never totally avoid or erase the subordinated identities that they embody in each of their nationalities. Colas identities transcend the national/regional segmentation of our fields as well as of the identity paradigms that have traditionally informed our way of thinking. Because our fields of study have developed in such segmented ways and because cultural nationalism and Cuban exceptionalism have informed the boundaries of our research and thinking, this epistemological segmentation has prevented us from exploring these other very significant hybrid Latino sites, moments, and identities.

The history of interlatino relations in Chicago dates back at least to the 1940s when, as Elena Padilla (1947) documented, Puerto Rican newcomers were welcomed, housed, and offered social and economic support by the Mexican community. Given this social history, Puerto Rican/Mexican marriages, like marriages between Latinas/os of various nationalities, are quite common in this Midwest city. While the diversification and increasing internal hybridity of the Latino communities is now coming to the fore as a result of the great migration of the 1980s, the fact is that this hybridity is not altogether new, but rather increasing as a result of these demographic changes. Yet these sites of Latinidad do not necessarily imply a utopian, egalitarian dynamic, nor do they suggest altogether that power differentials are decreasing, but rather, that new power relations emerge from these encounters.
Conclusion

What are the implications of this increasing Latinidad for Latina/o studies as a field of study? Rather than reproducing the national and geographical segmentation that has structured the way we organize knowledge in teaching and research, Latina/o studies can become the space in which these diverse experiences, identities, and power dynamics can be accounted for in the construction of a new social imaginary that transcends the old paradigms and nationality based conflicts. By studying and reflecting on interlatino dynamics through interdisciplinary approaches we can produce more nuanced knowledge that moves even beyond comparative studies. The demographic changes also call for the establishment of new programs in areas where Latinas/os are new communities in the making. For instance, the Southeast faces new challenges in terms of incorporating Latino communities in discussions about race, culture, language, and labor that have been historically informed by Anglo–Black relations. At the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, a new Latina/o studies minor has been initiated precisely to prepare students for this task. Likewise, approaches to Latinidad will enhance current discussions about internal diversity and power differentials within national groups. The increasing hybridity of younger Latina/o subjects who embody and constitute two national groups, or a Latino and other racial group, will inevitably force us to transform the existing identity paradigms that still inform our thinking. PortoMexes, Cubolivians, Mexistanis (Mexican and Pakistani) are but a few of the possible hybrid identities that populate our urban centers. Will a new Latino melting pot develop as a result of this internal mestizaje, or will we continue to use national identities as the dominant criterion for exclusion and inclusion in the community? Redefining Latinidad from this point of view, rather than rejecting it altogether, will yield meaningful knowledge for the future of both Latino and non-Latino sectors in the United States.

References

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Is there any such thing as Latino popular music in the United States, and if so, what is it? What is its relationship to “Latin music”? To address these questions one must begin by unpacking the terms themselves. In the United States, “Latino” (and the similar but more controversial term “Hispanic”) refers specifically to people with some degree of Latin American ancestry, but whose most important distinction is that they reside permanently in the US. Both “Latino” and “Hispanic” have been criticized for effacing the differences among the various national communities (see other entries in this volume), but nonetheless they properly distinguish people and communities inevitably transformed to some degree by their interactions with the host US culture, in which they are positioned as a racial/ethnic and cultural minority. As for the term “Latin,” it predates the contemporary construction of the term “Latino.” Originally coined by the French in the nineteenth century to distinguish Romance language-speaking America from Anglophone America, the division of the Americas into regions categorized by language (and, by implication, culture) persisted, and until a few decades ago the term “Latin” was employed in the US to refer generically to anybody of Latin American, Spanish, or Italian descent; Hollywood’s famous “Latin lovers,” for example, included the Italian-born Rudolph Valentino, the Mexican Ramón Novarro, and the Spaniard Antonio Moreno. “Latin music,” on the other hand, was a construct defined by musical aesthetics presumed to be of Latin American origin (for example, instrumentation such as use of horns, or rhythms such as cha cha), so it did not matter who played it nor what language it was in. The
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Spaniard Xavier Cugat, the Cubans Damáso Pérez Prado and Desi Arnaz, and the Brazilian Carmen Miranda were all Latin music stars, but so-called Latin music was also popularized by the likes of the Andrews Sisters and Dinah Shore.

Up until the end of the 1950s New York City had a vibrant Latin music scene composed of (mostly) Puerto Rican and Cuban bands playing a range of Latin American genres for Latino as well as non-Latino audiences. These musicians incorporated Mexican, Brazilian, Argentine, and other Latin American influences into their performances, but their musical aesthetics were primarily Spanish Caribbean. Since New York was also the capital of the US music industry that disseminated Latin and non-Latin music worldwide, it is not surprising that Spanish Caribbean styles became synonymous with the “hot” rhythmic sounds that indexed Latin music in the popular imagination. Even the widespread popularity of Herb Alpert’s Mexican-influenced music and the Brazilian bossa nova craze stimulated by Astrud Gilberto’s “Girl From Ipanema” in the 1960s did not disrupt this imagined construction.

Nowadays, most English speakers in the US tend not to use the term “Latin” when referring to people, but the term “Latin music” continues to be used – by the music industry as well as in common parlance – as a catch-all phrase to describe all Spanish and Portuguese-language popular music regardless of genre, or where and by whom it is produced and consumed – including musics from Spain (and, at least in principle if not in practice, from Portugal as well). In addition to effacing differences between Latin American and US Latino musical practices, the catch-all Latin music category also erases the profound differences among the different regional styles falling under that umbrella term – and by extension, ignores the cultural specificity and lived experiences of the communities that produce and consume them. In the Northeast (especially New York), where the Latino population – Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans – is primarily of Spanish Caribbean origins, Latin music continues to refer to Spanish Caribbean musics such as *salsa*, *merengue*, and *bachata*, although newer Latin American immigrant communities such as Colombians and Salvadorans have diversified the region’s cultural landscape with their preferences for musics such as *vallenatos* and *cumbias*. Younger east coast Latinas/os from all backgrounds, but especially the US-born, also produce and consume rap, as well as fusions of rap and Latin American rhythms with reggae, dancehall, and house music – the most recent expression of which is Puerto Rican *reggaetón*. The rapid Mexicanization of New York over the past decade has added another layer of complexity to the composition and musical practices of New York’s Latinas/os – although Mexican and Mexican-influenced styles have yet to make much of a dent in New York’s predominantly Spanish Caribbean Latino soundscape.

In Texas, the Southwest, and California, in contrast, where most Latinas/os are of Mexican descent, musical preferences and practices are aesthetically very different from their east coast counterparts, primarily because they lack the strong African influences characterizing Spanish Caribbean musics. In Texas, the Latino popular music landscape is dominated by accordion-based *conjunto*...
music, a musical style firmly rooted in rural Mexican American communities, and the slicker, urban sounds of tejano, whose influences include rock, country, and pop. More recent Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles, on the other hand – of whom there are millions – tend to prefer more “traditional” musics from rural Mexico, such as the brass band-based banda and the corrido song style – although often these have been modernized by changes in instrumentation and performance styles. Banda’s popularity is centered in Los Angeles and southern California, but the corrido, a musical form characterized by its lengthy narratives of heroic exploits and passionate love, has become immensely popular throughout the Southwest, Texas, and northern Mexico, in large part thanks to brazen lyrics by groups such as Los Tigres del Norte celebrating drug traffickers’ astuteness in outwitting the authorities. These contemporary corridos are distinguished from their less controversial antecedents with the term narcocorridos.

These musics, which have clear and unambiguous Mexican aesthetics, are lumped by the Latin music industry into a marketing category known as “regional Mexican,” to distinguish them from Spanish Caribbean musics popular with east coast Latinas/os, which are collectively referred to as “tropical music.” Additionally, Mexican Americans (to a much greater degree than their Spanish Caribbean counterparts) have for decades also been listening to straight up, electric guitar-driven rock and roll, and subsequently rap, either in English, Spanish, or Spanglish; because their aesthetics have been considered “American,” these musics have typically been excluded from the Latin music category.

In summary, the differences in musical preferences and practices between Latinas/os residing in the various regions of the US (and hailing from different regions of Latin America), between longtime residents and newer immigrants, as well as between young and old, are profound indeed, and express in powerful ways unique to the different communities how Latinas/os perceive themselves in relation to their sending societies in Latin America, to other Latino communities, and to the larger US society of which they are now constituent parts. Thus, even if the term “Latino popular music” effaces the same internal differences as the term “Latino,” the term “Latin” is even more problematic. By lumping the diverse musics made in the US with musics produced and consumed within Latin America as well as in the Iberian peninsula into a single category, Latinas/os are equated with Latin Americans and Spaniards, thus perpetuating the exclusion of US Latinas/os from US cultural citizenship; the implicit message is that those who perform and consume “Latin” music are foreign, and therefore not “American.”

Until the early 1960s it was fairly easy to maintain the fictive construct “Latin music” and its association with a single group of geographically and culturally undifferentiated Spanish and Portuguese-speaking producers and consumers. Within the US, Latinas/os were marginalized and contained within ethnic enclaves, and most of them continued to listen to music with Spanish lyrics and Latin American musical aesthetics, so distinguishing their musical practices from Latin Americans’ was not an issue for either the music industry or the
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communities themselves. During the Chicano and Puerto Rican civil rights movements, however, politicized second and third generation Latino youth inspired by the Black civil rights movement began demanding full rights to legal and cultural citizenship. No longer necessarily fluent in Spanish or personally familiar with their Latin American country of origin, they nevertheless rejected the idea that they must assimilate in order to claim their rights as citizens, and insisted on being recognized as domestic minorities – not foreign immigrants – who had been unjustly excluded from full participation in US economic, civic, and cultural life. On the west coast, the term “Chicano” emerged for individuals of Mexican descent who wanted to present themselves not as Mexican immigrants but as an ethnic group with deep roots in territory within US borders.

For Puerto Ricans born and raised on the US mainland (mostly New York City), their island homeland’s status as a Spanish-speaking semi-autonomous US colony whose population are US citizens made the task of distinguishing themselves from their Latin American counterparts significantly more complicated – as evidenced by splits in some New York-based political organizations over whether to define themselves as a domestic minority and demand full civic participation, or as members of a colonized nation whose primary goal should be the independence of the island. Ultimately, most mainland Puerto Ricans came to the conclusion that identifying strongly with the island’s culture and struggles for full autonomy did not preclude acknowledging US influence on their cultural practices (even if their island counterparts have not always agreed).

Thus, while the term Nuyorican remains far more problematic and controversial than the term “Chicano,” both terms convey an awareness that while individuals might retain strong cultural and/or linguistic affiliations with the Latin American sending country, the experience of living biculturally and/or bilingually as a racial/ethnic minority within the English-speaking Eurocentric US distinguishes them from their Latin American counterparts. It is also important to note that in the wake of the Chicano and Puerto Rican civil rights movements’ insistence on self-definition, the term “Hispanic,” which had been adopted by the US Census in 1970, was rejected by political activists as an unwanted imposition – one made worse by the fact that by referencing Spain, the term ignored the multiracial character of the communities it supposedly described. The alternative term “Latino” did not resolve these problems, but was considered more acceptable because it eliminated the linguistic link to Spain, and henceforth became the term of choice for individuals conscious of the political and symbolic importance of self-definition.

These struggles for recognition as domestic minorities entitled to equality and inclusion took place in the expected arenas, such as politics, education, and housing, but also in popular music, where Latino musicians sought access to the more lucrative mainstream arena, but without having to sacrifice their ethnic musical roots – or, just as importantly, being limited to playing Latin music. As it happened, these struggles coincided with a decline in the mainstream popularity of Latin music in the wake of both the Cuban Revolution, which eliminated US
consumers’ interest in Cuban culture, and the explosion of rock and roll. The idea of Latin music remained, but the sounds of Latin music largely disappeared from the mainstream media.

Within Latino communities throughout the US, of course, music of Latin American origins continued to be heard, but increasingly these musics were being transformed by young musicians experimenting with combinations of their parents’ music and the African American and mainstream musical aesthetics that surrounded them on a daily basis. In the 1960s and 1970s, some young Puerto Ricans created the boogaloo (whose language was bilingual), while others reinterpreted older Cuban and Puerto Rican genres into a decidedly New York-flavored salsa (whose language was Spanish). On the west coast, Chicanos added politicized lyrics and incorporated Mexican or Caribbean aesthetics to rock and roll (whose language was primarily but not exclusively English). In Texas, conjunto music continued to thrive with lyrics in Spanish, although young musicians such as Little Joe Hernández similarly infused tejano aesthetics with rock and roll. By the 1980s, Latino musicians and fans throughout the US were routinely venturing beyond the boundaries of ethnically defined musical practices, producing and consuming rock, rap, and other fusions in some combination of English, Spanish, and Spanglish.

These new musical forms did not replace more traditional Latin musics; rather, they simply expanded the range of musics in US Latinas/os’ mental jukeboxes. They did, however, disrupt the facile correlation between US Latinas/os and what had long been imagined as Latin music. Of the newer hybrid musical forms, all of which were “made in the USA,” only salsa – whose aesthetics more closely resembled the antecedent Cuban and Puerto Rican musics that had always been the mainstay of “Latin music” and whose lyrics were in Spanish – fit within the boundaries of what, in the mainstream popular imagination, had been considered “Latin music.”

Latinas/os born and raised in the US have also participated in mainstream popular musics of all sorts, especially rock and roll (and later, rap). Mexican Americans have been particularly active in rock – from Ritchie Valens in the 1950s, Cannibal and the Headhunters in the 1960s, Carlos Santana in the 1970s, Los Lobos in the 1980s, Rage Against the Machine’s Zack de la Rocha in the 1990s, to the eclectic Afro-Latin/hip hop band Ozomatli in the 2000s. Indeed, so much rock and roll was produced in Los Angeles that in retrospect it has been recognized as a distinct style of rock and roll, the so-called East Side Sound. Even with the rise of Chicano cultural nationalism during the 1970s, the rock and roll idiom was never rejected as something alien to Chicanos’ cultural identity; instead, rock and roll was placed in the service of strengthening Chicano pride and self-empowerment via a variety of performance strategies, such as politicized lyrics (in both Spanish and English), and/or band names referring to Mexican or Mexican American culture (e.g., Azteca, El Chicano). In the 1990s, even as the phenomenal surge in popularity of banda was re-Mexicanizing Los Angeles’ Latino popular music landscape, many US-born Chicanos continued to
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perform and consume rock and roll and rap. Interestingly, the same increase of immigration from rural Mexico that stimulated the banda explosion also invigorated Los Angeles' older Chicano rock music scene. Some of the new immigrants relocating in Los Angeles hailed from urban Mexico, and the musical preferences they brought from Mexico were for rock en español being produced in Mexico as well as in other Latin American countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Colombia. The sheer numbers of rock fans of Latin American origins residing in Los Angeles made it not only culturally acceptable but economically viable to make rock music in a language other than English. This encouraged young US-born bilingual Chicanos to begin producing rock in Spanish as well as English; the group Voodoo Glow Skulls, for example, released both English and Spanish versions of their CD *Firme.*

Spanish Caribbean Latinas/os were much less active in guitar-centered rock than their west coast counterparts, but they were significant contributors to the development in hip hop, since its origins in the South Bronx in the 1970s. Because rock – and later rap – were not considered to be “Latin” in either musical aesthetics or language, Latino rockers were excluded from officially recognized categories of Latin music until 1997, when NARAS (the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences) added a Best Latin Rock/Alternative category to the Grammys. While this can be considered progress, it underscores the fact that rock produced by Latinas/os, if in Spanish, is imagined as distinct from mainstream rock.

As US Latino musical practices evolved and continued to engage with mainstream styles, extant musical categories and the terms used to refer to them – which were always problematic – became increasingly untenable. Even strongly rural-oriented regional Mexican musics were being fused with rap and rock and incorporating English, spawning a new term: “urban regional Mexican.” When the mainstream entertainment corporation Clear Channel began flipping formerly English-language radio stations over to Spanish in 2004 in order to tap into the US Latino market, those targeting bicultural urban Latino youth – whose musical tastes included bilingual hip hop, reggaetón, and pop/dance music – began describing their lineups as “hurban top 40” (a contraction of “Hispanic” and “urban”). Clearly, the language-based constructions of Latinidad by both the Latin and mainstream music industries were inadequate to describe the multidimensional experiences of US Latinas/os.

In the wake of record levels of immigration from Latin America stimulated by changes to immigration policy in 1965, the Latin music construct, once defined by perceived Latin American musical aesthetics, began to privilege language, and to a lesser extent, nationality, over aesthetics. When the US Census Bureau reported in 2002 that the Latino population had reached 38.8 million (a figure which did not count undocumented immigrants, then estimated at 10.3 million), nearly 8.5 million of them were immigrants born in Latin America, and half of these had arrived after 1990. The newcomers hailed from almost every Latin American country, although over 60 percent were Mexican. In contrast
to US-born and raised Latinas/os whose identities have been shaped by their bicultural, bilingual experiences as US minorities, the new arrivals from Latin America have been more likely to retain their Latin American identities and cultural preferences than their predecessors. Immigration opponents have criticized this adherence to the language and culture of the sending nation as a refusal to assimilate, but they can more accurately be interpreted as the consequence of structural obstacles to incorporation, as well as new social conditions created by globalization: improvements in telecommunications, travel, and for sending remittances have greatly facilitated immigrants’ ability to maintain links with home and to create social and cultural fields spanning both the sending and the receiving countries. Other contributing factors include new concepts of citizenship as a legal, pragmatic device that does not necessarily imply a shift in allegiance from the country and culture of origin; as the Mexican-born LA-based group Los Tigres del Norte explain in their song “Mis Dos Patrias” (My Two Homelands), Pero que importa si soy nuevo ciudadano, sigo siendo Mexicano como el pulque y el nogal (“It doesn’t matter if I’m a new citizen, I’m still as Mexican as pulque and nogal” – an iconic Mexican beverage and plant, respectively).

While to some extent adherence to the home language and culture has always characterized first generation immigrants, what makes this immigrant cohort particularly significant is its sheer size, which has energized – and transformed – the US-based Latin music industry. The Latin music market remains much smaller than the mainstream US market – in 2004 it represented only 4.8 percent of total album sales – but the impact of its rapid growth has been noted by the music industry. In effect, the immigrants’ presence reemphasized the Latin American-ness of the category of Latin music, complicating the efforts of US Latino musicians and fans to be acknowledged as domestic rather than as foreigners.

Recognizing the potential of the growing US Latino market, in the early 1990s the major recording companies – Sony, Warners, Universal, EMI, and BMG – began establishing Latin music divisions. All of these were based in the US and designed to simultaneously promote “Latin music” domestically (within the US), south into Latin America, as well as to other regions of the globe, especially wealthy ones such as Western Europe and Japan. Interestingly, the names given to these divisions sometimes employed the English term “Latin” – as in EMI Latin or BMG US Latin – and sometimes its Spanish equivalent, latino, as in WEA Latina and Universal Music Latino. The Latin music handled by these divisions included a wide range of styles, from genres such as merengue, tango, samba, and mariachi identified as the “national” musics of the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, respectively; to newer styles developed by Latinas/os within the US, such as New York salsa, tejano, and conjunto, as well as older styles such as corridos and banda; to international styles not connected to any particular place of origin, such as salsa romántica, balada, Latin pop, and more recently, rock en español. The only thing these “Latin” musics – including rock – have in common is that their lyrics are in Spanish or Portuguese.
This construction of Latinidad defined by language effectively excludes US Latinas/os who cannot or choose not to sing in Spanish from what is promoted as latino.

In response to the steady growth in sales and the increasing internal complexity of the Latin music business, a new organization complementary to NARAS was formed in 1997: the Latin Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, LARAS (whose name illuminates the absurdity of the term “Latin”). While the US-based NARAS recognized only recordings released in the US, and included seven Latin music categories, LARAS is an international organization that recognizes recordings released not only in the US but also in any Spanish or Portuguese-speaking market, which meant that US Latinas/os (if their music was in Spanish) would henceforth be competing for Latin Grammies with major Latin American and Spanish artists such as Alejandro Sanz, who sell millions of records abroad. Some US Latino observers worried that the stand-alone Latin Grammy ceremony perpetuated the segregation of Latin music from the mainstream industry; as journalist Fernando González asked, “will Latin music in the US gain visibility in exchange for a separate-but-equal arrangement?”

The Latin music industry, which has been growing hand in hand with Spanish-language television, radio, and advertising industries, has been increasingly promoting products and images reflecting the tastes and attitudes more characteristic of recent immigrants, whose language and cultural preferences are not identical to those of US-born Latinas/os. The most significant of these industry players – Univision – is, in fact, a Mexican company, and its record label Fonovisa, which specializes in Mexican and Mexican regional music, is now the top selling Latin music label in the US. These changes raise new questions about how the term “Latin music” correlates with the diverse musical practices and cultural identities of communities whose musics are corralled within this term, particularly because of the entertainment industry’s immense influence over how people – especially but not exclusively non-Latinas/os – conceptualize not only Latinidad (i.e., what it is that makes someone or something “Latino”) but also how lo latino should be positioned vis-à-vis the broader US cultural landscape.

The foregrounding of the Latin American dimensions of the Latin music category has also resulted in the relocation of the industry’s former epicenters in New York and Los Angeles to Miami, marginalizing regionally oriented ethnic music businesses remaining in New York and Los Angeles, and increasing the influence of Miami-based Cuban Americans, who had previously not been major players in the Latin music arena. As the primary power brokers in Miami’s powerful Spanish-language entertainment and communication industries, Cuban American music industry personnel have acquired the ability to define and project Latin music to the world. Their conceptions of what Latin music is, and what should be prioritized in production and promotion efforts have not necessarily been shared by other US Latinas/os: after the 2000 Latin Grammy ceremony, both Mexican American and Puerto Rican producers and musicians
complained that their communities’ musics were not adequately represented in the on-air television extravaganza, and they accused the Cuban American organizers of using the event to promote their own products. Willie Colón went further, charging producers Gloria and Emilio Estefan with usurping the very definition of Latin music itself: *La nueva moda era redefinir todo lo latino como cubano. . . . Por el derecho de poder controlar todo lo que sea Latino, una vez mas nos han convertido en botín para la mafia de Miami.* (“The new trend was to define everything Latin as Cuban. . . . Just to be able to control everything that is Latin/o, once again we have been plundered by the Miami mafia.”)

Criticism of the Latin music construct has come from Latin American sources as well. Colombian musicologist Jairo Moreno, for example, has argued that the concept of Latin music, which originates in the US, not Latin America, reflects “the process of imagining Latin America from the particular perspective afforded and dictated by [the] condition [of being] an immigrant to the US.” Moreno argues that in the 1970s US-based companies, particularly Fania and its mostly Puerto Rican participants, were responsible for defining the concept of “Latin music,” and designating a particular type of music – New York-based salsa – as the quintessential symbol of Latin American identity, and then exporting it back into Latin America for consumption as a hemispheric symbol of Latin unity and solidarity.

If 40 percent of Latinas/os are foreign born, the majority – 60 percent – are US born, and much more likely to be bicultural and bilingual than the newcomers. Given the international orientation of the Latin music industry, however, bicultural, bilingual Latino musicians and fans will continue to be confused with their Latin American counterparts, and continue to find themselves located on the faultlines between the Latin and mainstream markets – and the cultural assumptions associated with each of them. The music industry is not unaware of this predicament: in 1999 the mainstream Recording Industry Association of America commissioned a study of Hispanic music consumers (interestingly using the term “Hispanic” in order to differentiate them from Latin American Latinas/os) “because our Latin labels wanted a meticulous profile of Hispanic consumers of music.” The study concluded: “Not surprisingly, Hispanic consumers are also purchasers of English language music,” and that while their favorite genre was Latin, they also consumed rap/hip hop, pop, and R&B.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this essay – is there a Latino popular music and if so, what is it? – it might, at first glance, appear to be analogous to another that has provoked considerable debate in popular music studies: should African American music be defined as a music of the African American experience no matter who plays it, or as music played and consumed by African Americans no matter what it sounds like? Attempting to define US Latino popular music turns out to be much more complicated than this, because of the continuing infusion and influence of people and music from Latin America coupled with a Latin music category that lumps Latinas/os in with Spanish and Portuguese-speaking musicians around the world – neither of which
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corresponds to the case of African Americans and their music. Moreover, the poor “fit” between the term “Latin music” and the different social groups – US Latinas/os and non-immigrant Latin Americans – and the musical genres associated with them, make unpacking the relationship between these terms necessary not only for conceptual clarity, but to expose the problematic and often unexamined assumptions underpinning them.

Indeed, those who seek to define Latino musical practices – Latinas/os and non-Latinas/os alike – commonly and uncritically assume correspondences between ethnicity, language, and musical aesthetics. These correspondences break down easily when the actual musical practices of Latinas/os are examined. Those wishing to define US Latino music by giving most weight to musical aesthetics must confront with the reality that much of the popular musics played and consumed by US Latinas/os are still being produced in Latin America, and even those produced in the US often sound identical to their Latin American counterparts. If the ethnicity of performers and consumers becomes the marker, then Latino music is that made by and for Latinas/os regardless of musical aesthetics and genre. If language is adopted as a marker, as the Latin music industry has done, musics made by and for US Latinas/os that are sung in English are eliminated from the category, effectively negating the musical practices of millions of US Latino youth whose primary (and often only) language is English. These various, seemingly incompatible positions concerning the relationship between musical practices, language, and ethnicity have fueled one controversy after another about what “authentic” Latino musical practices are or should be: for example, why Ricky Martin was excoriated by many Latinas/os when he released recordings in English; whether Cristina Aguilera is really a Latina and whether she has the cultural authority and competence to make “real” Latino music; whether Jennifer Lopez should properly be considered part of the so-called “Latin music boom” since her music is not Latin; and the seemingly never-ending debate about whether salsa is Cuban, because its musical structures are Cuban; or Puerto Rican, because it has been transformed and performed primarily by and for Puerto Ricans; or a New York Latino music, because it was popularized in the US by (mostly Puerto Rican) Latinas/os in New York in the 1970s.

For purposes of consistency, it might make most sense to use the same criteria to define Latino musical practices that we use for defining Latino individuals: Latino popular music would be musics with some degree of Latin American ancestry played by individuals with some degree of Latin American ancestry, but whose most important distinction is that their music is performed and consumed in the US. This definition recognizes the importance of musical aesthetics but gives more weight to the specificity of lived cultural experience. Unfortunately, this definition is also imperfect. It works best for particular genres of music, such as mambo, boogaloo, salsa, or conjunto, whose musical roots are embedded in Latin American aesthetics, but which have been developed and transformed by musicians of Latin American origins living in the US. More recent manifestations
of these transformative processes can be seen in contemporary hybrids created by musicians such as the Dominican bachata group Aventura and the banda/rap group Akwid, who add English lyrics and rock/pop/R&B or hip hop aesthetics to styles originating in Latin America. It works less well capturing the transnational realities of musical production and consumption when musics such as bachata, banda, or norteño are still being produced simultaneously in the US and in the country of origin (sometimes by the same border-crossing musicians) and are essentially indistinguishable from each other. It also fails to account for Chicano rock and Nuyorican rap, whose aesthetic roots in Latin America are tenuous at best.

On the other hand, some might disagree with the attempt to distinguish between Latinas/os and Latin Americans, arguing that conflating Latino and Latin American musical practices under the umbrella term “Latin” is actually appropriate within the current context of high rates of immigration from Latin America and the degree to which they are maintaining their links and cultural affiliations with Latin America: trying to draw lines between what is Latino and what is Latin American may simply be an impossible task, not to mention one whose goal – exceptionalizing the US experience – is intellectually if not morally suspect. While the arguments about these terms, their definitions, and the musics and communities that should be associated with each term will inevitably continue, from a US Latino perspective one thing is clear: as long as the term “Latin music” continues to be used as it has historically been used – to locate US Latinas/os as foreign – outside the boundaries of what is considered to be “American” – it will continue to be problematic.

Notes

1 “America” and “Americans,” I should note, are terms whose original intent was to refer to the entire hemisphere and its peoples, but they have been co-opted by Anglocentric United Statians as national, English-only categories.
2 Epitaph 86465-2.
3 Billboard, December 25, 2005, 60.
8 Billboard, December 25, 2005, 34.
Several years ago I gave a visiting lecture entitled “The Sense and Nonsense of Latina/o Studies” in a class on Latina/o studies at Harvard University. The good senses of Latina/o studies were obvious – the new ethnographies, stimulating publications, degree programs, disciplinary orientations, and new critical and creative Latino voices that had been occluded for so long in the academy and society at large. But I was obliged to note that the course’s Latino studies “reader” had titles with the words immigration (8 times), gender (6 times), class (5 times), Latino (10 times), and race (15 times), but not a single article had a title or topic related to religion or theology among Latinas/os. I noted that this lack of any engagement with the religious dimensions of Latino history, in this springtime of Latina/o studies, was the “nonsense” of Latina/o studies. How could a field of scholarship that emerged from the “oro del barrio,” the “fight in the fields,” the civil rights era, critical epistemologies about the “pueblo/pueblo” and which claimed new knowledge about the social realities and dignity of Latinas/os isolate itself from religious practices and realities in Latino lives? How could a field of study which worked to illuminate the “historical continuum” of various Latino cultural projects, that prided itself on being of the people, for the people and by the Latino peoples, so successfully ignore the religious dimensions of Latino life?

So it was with gratitude and hope that I responded to the invitation to contribute an essay to this volume on the theme of Latinas/os and religion. In what follows I will discuss three powerful religious dimensions in Latino life that invite Latina/o studies scholarship to pay more attention to the religious practices and imaginations of Latinas/os. I will also make references to and use some outstanding scholarly exceptions to this nonsense of Latina/o studies. Knowing that this...
Between Religious Powers and Social Thought

Reader is designed as a pedagogical tool for teaching and further learning, I will structure the essay by combining three scholarly issues with three existential moments in my life. They are:

1. The enigma of anteriority and indigenous cultures and my scholarly and personal repeated encounters with the Aztec gods and myths in Mexico. This enigma raises the issue of the complex origins and nature of Latino identities and the role of indigenous cultures and myth in Latino lives and culture.

2. The allure of sacred places and center/periphery dynamics in Latino society and history. By sacred places I mean the ways that cities and local neighborhoods but also the borderlands as geography and imagination provide Latinas/os with a sense of ultimate orientation. As we will see in references to San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, these sacred places become powerful resources for knowledge about social cosmology.

3. Redressive actions and the problem of religious mixtures and asymmetrical hybridity in Latino history and my encounter with the espiritista Niño Fidencio Constantino while a graduate student in Chicago. This raises the problem of understanding religious change, multiple identities, and diverse religious orientations of Latinas/os. In this section I will focus, in part, on the importance of flexible healing practices in our communities.

Throughout the essay I will refer to John Phillip Santos’ *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation.*

My essay draws from Charles H. Long’s definition of religion to help Latina/o studies to more fully wake up to the religiosity of Latino lives, dreams, bodies, and places. Long, working with African American evidence, notes: “As an historian of religions I have not defined religion in conventional terms. To be sure, the church is one place one looks for religion . . . the church was not the only context for the meaning of religion. For my purposes religion will mean orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.”

In what follows we will see a variety of ways (inside and outside of churches) that Latinas/os religiously come to terms and orient themselves in indigenous meanings, complex mixtures and in negotiating the center and the periphery. My approach as a historian of religions is to take seriously both sides of the equation quoted in the title “Cuando Dios y Usted Quiere,” a statement made to me about death just before I met the Niño Fidencio for the first time. I see the pronoun “Usted” as a marker of social agency in religion and in the study of religion, and want to pay attention to how religions are socially constructed traditions of ideas and ritual practices. As a scholar I also acknowledge the power and role of “Dios,” “dioses,” saints, and religious experiences in Latino communities and remain open to the claims that God, the gods, ancestors, and spirits are more than social constructions. The meaning of the words “Dios,” “dioses,” “espiritu,” and many more need to be understood by scholars in the ways that lay people understand...
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them – as living subjects working in the lives of humans and challenging scholars into dialogue. Both the religious “Dios” and the social “Usted” and the relationships between them deserve our scholarly respect and study. This is the approach I take into the study of enigmatic origins, the allure of sacred places, and redressive actions in the face of asymmetrical hybridities in Latino life.

The Enigma of Anteriority

Finally, after exteriority and superiority, one runs up against the enigma of anteriority; before the moral law, there is always a moral law, just as before Caesar, there is always another Caesar; before the Mosaic law, there are Mesopotamian laws, and before these are yet others, and so on. Here we find a sort of always-already-present which causes any effort to discover a dated beginning to fail as it encounters the perspective of the origin. It is as though there were a dialectic of the origin and the beginning; the beginning should be able to be dated in a chronology, but the origin always slips away, at the same time as it surges up in the present under the enigma of the always-already-there. (Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*)

These words from Paul Ricoeur remind me of Latino fascinations with the dynamic between our identity and the issue of our indigenous origins, our mythical and historical beginnings. This enigma is reflected in that marvelous statement from John Santos’ *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation* where he writes, “It sometimes seems as if Mexicans are to forgetting what the Jews are to remembering. We have made selective forgetting a sacramental obligation. Leave it all in the past, all that you were, and all that could not be. There is pain enough in the present to go around.”

The contemporary pain that goes around, however, does not deter Latinas/os from discovering and reimagining the indigenous gods, myths, and symbols associated with Anáhuac, Aztlán, Borinquen, and African homelands. The indigenous dimensions of Latino life, in spite of powerful psychological pulls to assimilate to the mainstream US historical narrative, or construct alternative narratives entirely rooted in the crisis of the modern world (both of which tend to nullify indigenous history and myth), reassert themselves as “always-already-there” in many ways. As I heard one Latin American historian say about Mexican diasporas, “One continuous social practice of immigrants is that they always refer back to the places they come from.” My point is that this practice of referring back to the places they come from often points way back to a primordial place and time that gives a religious tinge to identity constructions.

My First Aztec Moment

I remember what I call my first “Aztec Moment,” my first encounter with this enigma of anteriority and how it had a deep impact on my life and scholarly
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career. I was 15 years old, living in Mexico City with my parents while my father was assisting the Confederación Deportiva Mexicana train its Mexican coaches in preparation for international competition. My tía Milena had taken me to the Museum of Anthropology on Moneda Street and I found myself wide eyed at my first encounter with actual Maya jade, Maya writing, the treasures of Monte Albán, the Aztec Calendar Stone, the giant statue of Coatlicue, the imitation penacho of Moctezuma, and the many ritual objects in the Salón de Monolitos. Strong and strange sensations welled up in me. I wandered out onto the street and over to the grand Zócalo and I became aware of a sharp ambivalence. I was feeling both intense pride and a cutting shame at my Mexican ancestry.

I remembered how I had been encouraged in US schools, TV, and films to identify with negative US images of Mexico with its thirst for blood, its weakness before Cortes and the Spaniards, Moctezuma’s revenge, its “halls of Montezuma” where US Marines always fought victorious battles against Mexicans. I had been taught that Mexico was a country valued only for its defeats, jokes, and folklore, not for its civilization – a word that was to be located primarily in Greek, Egyptian, or Roman cultures. The power of this indoctrination began to come clear to me only on that Mexican afternoon.

At the same moment I was aware that this story of Aztec inferiority and European superiority was a terrible distortion and my own orientation began to deepen and change. I saw that there were deep intellectual, artistic, and religious issues and powers to be understood from knowing the Aztecs and their neighbors. I was learning that ingenious human beings had lived here, occupied this very place, developed complex calendars and mythologies, worshipped gods of prodigious powers, grew and distributed life-giving plants and foods by the thousands, built a magnificent city with monumental and domestic architecture, and decorated it with arresting images of deities with names like Quetzalcoatl, Huitzilopochtli, Xochiquetzal. These Aztecs were as interesting to study, as important to know about, as significant to understand as the Romans and Greeks. This “Aztec Moment,” complex in its discovery, percolated within me for years and is tinged with a religious quality that I was gaining a different quality of knowledge about knowledge, about Mexicans and about Mexican Americans in the United States.9

Aztlán as Plan, Empowerment, and Heart

Nowhere is the meaning of indigenous signs, symbols, and myths as a form of orientation clearer than in the history of the use of the Aztlán mythology in Mexican American politics and art. The political philosophy of Chicanismo,10 central to the identity politics of Chicanos, derives in part from the “Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.” The opening paragraph in this 1968 manifesto announced a new geographical and political orientation for Mexican Americans:
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We, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility and our inevitable destiny.

These lines show that the authors are reworking Aztec sacred history, as they learned about it in bits and pieces, in the following ways. First, Chicanos are descendents of the ancestors who left Aztlán, which is a northern territory. Consequently, they became the people of the sun (the title of a book about the Aztecs by Mexico’s Alfonso Caso) who, because of a “call” in the blood, have an inevitable destiny. If there is one dimension of the human body associated with the Mexicans it is surely blood, because the Aztec believed that prodigious supernatural powers resided in human and animal blood. Further, Aztec theology is reflected in the claim of “inevitable destiny,” which refers to the cosmic renewal found in the Aztec stories about the five cosmic suns of the universe. The destiny of the Aztecs, depicted for instance in the central section of the misnamed “Aztec Calendar Stone,” tells of an inevitable cosmic pattern of birth, stability, collapse, and rebirth. Some Chicanos believed their movement for political liberation represented the final stage of rebirth out of the years of suffering in fields, jails, borderlands, and cities. I have written extensively about this pattern elsewhere, so suffice it to note here that the leading Mexican American journal, published continually since 1970, is called Aztlán. Since that time, a number of influential books exploring the widespread uses of the Aztec myth of origins in Chicano politics and art have appeared, including Aztlan Y México: Perfiles Literarios E Históricos by Luis Leal, Aztlan: Essays on a Chicano Homeland by Rodolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomeli, and the more recent spectacular Road to Aztlan: Art from a Mythic Homeland. In the latter work the editors make the huge claim that “Aztlan – as symbol, as allegory, and as real and invented tradition – served as a cultural and spiritual framework that gave Chicanos/as a sense of belonging and a link to a rich and extensive history . . . ethos and foundation.” The claim is that the enigma of Chicano anteriority leads us to Aztlan.

Santos puts it this way: “Los Muertos do not give up their homelands. We call it Texas. Some of them knew it as Tejas or part of La Nueva Extremadura of New Spain. Others refer to it secretly as Aztlan, the mythical birthplace of the nomadic Mexican people.” As a sign that engagements with the enigmas of our past histories and cultures will continue, Raphael Pérez Torres, in his outstanding essay “Refiguring Aztlan,” tells us “we cannot abandon Aztlan, precisely because it serves to name that space of liberation so fondly yearned for . . . Aztlan is our start and end point of empowerment.”

Luis Leal, both kind in heart and wise in mind, respects the search for the “historical Aztlan” but comes also to recognize the term “spiritual” in the spiritual plan of Aztlan: “whosoever wants to find Aztlan, let him look for it, not on the maps, but in the most intimate part of his being.”
Sacred Place and Center/Periphery Dynamics

The spirits stand dazed in front of the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe inside the door of the San Fernando Cathedral, exhausted and dirty from a long day of picking tomatoes. (Santos, Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation)

Throughout Mesoamerican and Latino history, places filled with sacred meaning, mystery, energy, and story play major roles in how human beings orient themselves in space, time, daily life, and the imagination. Given all the Latina/o scholarship on territory, Greater Mexico, the Greater Southwest, Aztlán, Borinquen, barrios, cities, and now transnational relations, it is important that more attention be given to the power and meaning of sacred places – altars, churches, cemeteries, monuments, rivers, deserts, casitas, islands, neighborhoods, fields, the human body, the family, and even the borderlands as a sacred landscape and ritual theater – in Latina/o studies. An ample study of Latino history and religion would reveal that there is hardly any aspect of Latino life, place, and space that has not been considered by Latinas/os themselves, at one time or another, as a sacred place. By “sacred place” I mean a locus where human beings experience the presence of supernatural, divine, ancestral, demonic, or numinous powers. These powers which can take the forms of angels, animals, humans, enemies, ancestors, spirits, sounds, lights, water, stones, symbols of identity, and voices appear to communicate that a specific location is an opening to another world, another time (past or future) and these places become the site for the human production of story/myth, ritual/pilgrimage, memory/imagination. They may also be sites of proud ethnic identity, architectural tradition, or a deeply valued sense of community.

One of the most significant places of orientation and sacrality throughout human history has been the city, that great social and cultural urban center with extraordinary centripetal powers to attract people, ideas, agricultural and manufactured goods, foreign and local gods, and cultural expressions. However, a closer look at the role of cities and especially sacred cities in Mesoamerican and Latino history reveals two powerful patterns: (1) the sacrality of cities is expressed through monumental and miniature ceremonial centers in the form of pyramids, temples, cathedrals, altars, shrines, cemeteries, and churches; (2) the sacrality of the city is ironically the result of a fascinating and potent relationship between sacred “centers” and sacred “peripheries” or borderland places and people. Thick descriptions of Latino social history show not only the power of cities and their ceremonial centers to attract people, ideas, and goods, but also the dexterity of creative struggle that Latinas/os express from marginal landscapes on the edges of urban networks. Even more, Latino social history reveals a profound dynamism between centers and peripheries. Often, people from the social, economic, and cultural periphery bring new stories, goods, skills, objects, and ideas into the central landscape, resulting in significant changes at the axis mundi.
These important peripheral places and powers are sometimes expressed in rela-
tionships to geographical forms, including sacred hills outside of cities or other
potent geographical features on the edges of cities or pilgrimage networks. On
One outstanding example of this center/periphery dynamic in the form of
place and theology is the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas where
Father Virgilio Elizondo, along with others, has generated Latino Liberation
Theology and ritual practices. In San Fernando Cathedral: Soul of the City,
James Wind illustrates the dynamic social power of this Mexican American
sacred building:

I will never forget my first visit to San Fernando Cathedral. Colleagues had told
me about the old adobe and stone church building, about its distinctive Mexican-
American history, about its special public role in the city of San Antonio, about its
deeply faithful people . . . From the moment in December 1992 when I stepped in
the nave of this, the oldest cathedral in the United States, I was encountering a
reality that, for me at least, was very new. San Fernando was a cathedral unlike any
other I had seen. It was smaller, simpler, and older than all of North America’s
cathedral churches. This was a place where a different language prevailed, where a
different history lived, where different saints and different celebrations shaped the
daily lives of people. It was a place where above all, a special kind of hospitality was
offered to all . . . I also recognized that I had entered a living mystery that would
not let go of my imagination.

Here we see that this building is both center and periphery in American and
Mexican American religions. It is in a city that is peripheral to US history –
seemingly a latecomer to the national story where Boston, New York, Philadelphia,
and other eastern US cities serve to situate the origins and center of the religious
narrative in North America. It is a place where Mexican Americans have placed
a series of differences in the church: a different language (Spanish); different saints
(Virgen de Guadalupe, Cristo Negro de Esquipulas); different celebrations. In
the master religious narrative of the US, San Fernando is a marginal, outsider
church. But this cathedral is also “central” in the sense that it is the oldest (i.e.,
the first cathedral in the United States) and therefore has the prestige of the
 beginnings also symbolized in its combination of adobe (an indigenous material)
and stone. It is also a center in the sense that through its rich historical traditions
and liturgical innovations it transmits its religious difference in the form of La
Virgen de Guadalupe around the world to many other centers and peripheries.
Its “centeredness” is also temporal, for as Wind notes, San Fernando Cathedral
was “both part of the great past of American religion and part of its great
future”: it stands at the center of religious history and one imbued with a “living
mystery that would not let go of my imagination.” For Wind, the Mexican
American cathedral is alive in the middle of his mind.

A more local sense of center/periphery dynamics is provided by Elizondo, who
grew up in one of San Antonio’s barrios, located geographically, economically,
and politically outside of the “center” of the city’s life. In his local barrio church
he learned and absorbed what he calls mestizo Christianity. He writes that when he became rector of the cathedral:

I made a conscious decision to reclaim and recreate the religious traditions of my childhood and my barrio as the basis for the pastoral life of the cathedral. This was not because of nostalgia but out of a conviction that these sacred traditions were not only the basis of our faith experience as Latinas/os and our innermost identity as a people but they were desperately needed for the spiritual health and salvation of the United States.24

Elizondo sees Latino sacred traditions as entertaining what I have called the enigma of anteriority and mixtures of religious complexity. He brings indigenous religiosity (in this case the Aztecs) back to us this way:

As I celebrated the early pre-dawn daily Mass during any given day of the week, I felt always that we were energizing the entire city of San Antonio for one more day. As I offered the Holy Sacrifice, I felt that I was in continuity with Jesus who sacrificed himself to give us life, and with our Aztec ancestors who offered pre-dawn sacrifices to ensure that the sun would rise another day. I was in continuity with the generations from time immemorial . . . It was like “fueling up” the spiritual engines that give life to our city.25

One of the most powerful ways that this “center” fuels up other parts of the city is in the truly remarkable Semana Santa celebrations that take place within, emerge from, and return to the cathedral. Having participated in these festivals I have come to refer to Semana Santa at and beyond the cathedral as a “sacred metamorphosis of center and periphery.” In a bold series of public rituals, designed in part by Elizondo and his colleagues, a sacred remapping of the central part of the city takes place through processions, rituals, street performances, prayers, and blessings.26

Asymmetrical Hybridity and Healing Strategies

Students of syncretism in Europe have understood more clearly that a given combination of Christian and “pagan” elements was inherently transitional and incomplete, a mixture or combination more than a fusion. It was not, in itself, a synthesis of religions or a selective assimilation of one religion by another, but part of an incomplete process that might be reversed or redirected and could not be measured by traits added or subtracted. (William B. Taylor)27

But the past can be difficult to conjure again when so little has been left behind. A few photographs, a golden medal, a pair of eyeglasses as delicate as eggshells, an old Bible, a letter or two . . . the Santos traveled light through time. (John Phillip Santos)
I sometimes wonder why Latina/o studies has been tone deaf about the religiosity that is pervasive in Latino history and homes. Is it because many of us who become scholars had negative feelings and experiences in the churches and synagogues of our childhoods? Is it because our embrace of the social sciences turned us into atheists – at least, intellectual or methodological atheists? Is it because the stereotype that Latinas/os are Catholic occluded acknowledgment of the wide variety of religious orientations in Latino communities and inhibited scholars from disclosing them? Is it because we, like most scholars of religion, are ill-equipped by imagination and education to confront and interpret the social dynamism, mixtures, cultural incompleteness, and power of local histories highlighted by William Taylor’s summary statement above? Of course, this eclipsing of Latino religiosity has not been the case for scholars like Alberto Pulido, Laura Pérez, Ana María Díaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, Gastón Espinosa, Luis Leén, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Laura Medina, Virgilio Elizondo, Ines Hernández Ávila, Timothy Matovina, Gary Riebe-Estrella, Chris Tirres, Roberto Goizueta, Orlando Espin, and many others. And Gloria Anzaldúa writes about the profound role that the religious imagination played in her life in the highly influential *La Frontera/Borderlands*. The potent combination of the “nonsense” of Latina/o studies and the growing scholarship in Latino religions gives future researchers a rich opening.

One of the deep concerns in John Santos’ memoir is healing practices and physical and mental health in Latino communities. His drive for understanding his family loss stems, in part, from his awareness that physical illnesses and disease, as well as social oppression and mental depression, have been constant forces in Latino communities. Immigration, deportation, loss of lands, illegal status, job losses, family separations, and language loss and acquisition often lead to internal sufferings and social instabilities that reach into the individual, family, and collective body and spirit of Latinas/os and call out for many types of healing responses. Carlos Vélez Ibañez refers to this history of suffering as the “distribution of sadness” and shows this sadness to be a prevalent social and psychological dimension of life in Greater Mexico. We can say that Latinas/os are “magically enchanted,” not only by the indigenous past but also by these physical and mental sufferings, and have positioned themselves in never-ending ritual negotiations with these accumulated sadnesses and historical losses.

Latinas/os have developed a rich array of what Victor Turner calls “redressive actions” to deal with the suffering and crises that accompany daily life in Latino communities. While traditional forms of Catholicism have indeed defined and nurtured many daily lives and social realities of Latinas/os, recent research in Latin America and Latino communities in the US has shown very diverse religious responses, including the appeal of Protestant churches, Pentecostal movements, Afro-Caribbean practices, and Jewish as well as indigenous and espiritista religiosities. Following William Taylor’s words above, Latino religiosities are important to study because of the alternatives they present in terms of ritual
mixtures, transitional theologies, and the many variations coming out of local social and geographical settings. New research shows that Latino communities and daily life are, in part, animated by not only Catholic Church practices, but also by significant hybrid religious practices such as Espiritualismo, Santería, Candomble, Regla Ocha, and many others. It is not just that Latinas/os occupy the borderlands or carry a sense of critical and creative marginality with them; it’s that their religious practices are often mixtures and borderlands themselves, combining beliefs, practices, symbols, and images from various and diverse traditions and often combining the sacred and secular within a religious performance. For some time now these combinations and mixtures have been interpreted from within the emerging model of “hybridity.” This model (which has begun to displace the more traditional models of conquest and resistance) argues that ritual participants faced with different religious traditions, say Catholicism and African or Indian traditions, “pick and choose” elements of each and create (i.e., hybridize) an emerging religious worldview and practice which, in the words of Elizabeth Wilder Weismann, produce “something new and different from anything else in the world.”

Asymmetrical hybridity

I assent to this historical and dynamic view. But my reading of both Mexican colonial “hybridities” and Mexican American religious expressions leads me to insist on the persistence of an “asymmetrical hybridity.” By this I mean that encoded in – and sometimes concealed within – Latino religious expressions is the legacy of and protest against the devastating social, political, and ideological abuses that formed the relationships between triumphant European church traditions and African and indigenous symbols and practices which were always under assault. In my view of asymmetrical hybridity, the productions of numerous Latin American religious practices that were “new and different from anything else in the world” were also living memorials to the ways local peoples negotiated from and resisted socially degraded positions. When we participate in Día de los Muertos or the anniversary of the apparition of the Virgen de Guadalupe there is more at work than creative hybridities of Spanish and indigenous mourning rituals or comfortable unions of the Spanish Virgen de Guadalupe with the traces of an Aztec goddess cult. These and many ritual practices seek access to the spiritual power of Spanish invaders while also reviving access to indigenous traditions (from Africa or the Americas) and creating new forms of religiosity. Embedded in some of these rites of passage is the memory of asymmetrical suffering as well as critical and creative responses to the conquest and death of millions of Indians, the complex forces that led to mestizaje and mulataz, the introduction of new diseases, and the cultivation of myriad forms of social and physical suffering such as slavery. The asymmetries of conquest and colonial Mariology, among many others, are what are hybridized.
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My time with the Niño Fidencio

I witnessed an example of asymmetrical hybridity and ritual renovation during my graduate school days at the University of Chicago when I worked at Centro de la Causa in an educational program for mental health paraprofessionals. I was invited by a friend named Porfirio to meet someone who “does beautiful things with the spirits – but don’t worry, it’s not black magic.” He opened the door for me to learn first hand about Mexico’s most famous folk saint, El Niño Fidencio Constantino. When I met Porfirio at the appointed street corner in Little Village and asked for some clues on what was going to happen when I met the espiritista, he said only two things: “Don’t worry, you’ll be safe. Don’t cross your legs, arms, or hands at any time during the ceremony. Oh, yes and if someone asks you ‘cuando se muere?’ just answer ‘Cuando Dios y Usted quiere.’” While this did not fill me with high reassurance, I accompanied Porfirio down a street in the Latino neighborhood, around the back of a house, up the back stairs of three flights, and into a small attic room. There was no furniture except for a table with a bowl of murky water, eggs, some flowers, and a picture of a saintly man holding a large white cat. I was quietly told that this was the Niño Fidencio Constantino, the famous Mexican healer/espiritista.

During the two years that I participated in the Little Village based “mission” of El Niño Fidencio I witnessed a rich series of potent redressive healing rituals that combined Catholic symbolism (one picture of Niño Fidencio depicted him dressed as the Virgin of Guadalupe) and rites (reciting the Ave María was the ritual trigger for the descent of Niño Fidencio’s spirit into the body/materia/caja who carried out the healing rites) with indigenous Mexican figures (the Pluma Roja’s spirit also descended into the materia’s body for especially aggressive healings). There was also a set of shamanic gestures and rituals, including cleaning with eggs, use of various incenses like pungent chili smoke, collective chanting, massage, and body manipulations. The materia always faced us with his eyes rolled nearly completely up into his head, and announced that he was the Santo Niño Fidencio Constantino who had come from God in the house of light in heaven and he had now descended to our earthly realm to bring love, health, and healing. He spoke to us in a falsetto voice of his mission on earth, his knowledge of our sufferings, his powers to love and to heal.

Referring to my insistence on asymmetrical hybridity it was clear that while traditional Catholic symbols and rites structured the healing ceremonies, it was also clear that by themselves they were inadequate to meet the health, employment, and relational needs of the members of the “mission.” Each of us was assigned a specific saint (mine was Santo Judas, the saint of desperate and lost causes!) and asked to bring his or her image for the altar that grew in size and complexity (it eventually included a samurai sword, an image of Santa Claus, and twinkling lights). But we were also periodically sent to local botanicas to acquire combinations of herbs for teas, baths, and ritual prayers that were addressed to Niño Fidencio when we were in trouble. Most impressive to me
were the intense devotions, admiration, and spiritual dependency that the people felt for Niño Fidencio.  

There is much more to say about my two years with Niño Fidencio, but this experience opened me to the breadth of alternative Latino religiosities and healing practices, and showed me that hybrid religious practices were powerful, asymmetrical, living social and spiritual forces in Latino lives.

In this springtime of Latina/o studies it is crucial that all the religious dimensions of Latino communities find narrative space and interpretive attention. Among those religious dimensions are enigmas of anteriorities, sacred places, and ritual healings.

_Si Dios y Usted Quiere._

**Notes**

1 A similar occluding of religious dimensions in Latino history appears in Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres (eds.), _The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy and Society_ (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), and slightly less so in Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco andMariela M. Páez (eds.), _Latinos Remaking America_ (David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University and the University of California Press, 2002). The latter does have a fine essay by Peggy Levitt on Latino religious life in the United States, focusing on the reworking of America’s civil religion by Latinos. These lacunae reflect “phenomenological distress.” The phenomenon of Latino religiosity (and its powerful role in all areas of Latino life) is nearly everywhere in the ethnographic record, but religion and religious studies are herded into the corners of the academic disciplines responsible for understanding and interpreting Latino history and culture.

2 Dore Gardner writes about Mexico’s most famous folk saint: “Jose Fidencio Sintora Constantino was born in Guanajuato 1898 and lived in Espinazo, Nuevo León in northeastern Mexico. He worked in the ways of the traditional healers, preparing medicines from herbs and plants, and in mysterious ways with the supernatural. By his mid-twenties thousands of people were coming to Espinazo. There they would camp out awaiting his attention and hoping to be touched by him. At the time of his death in 1938, he was Mexico’s most famous curandero (folk healer). Today there are countless curanderos who serve as mediums for the Niño Fidencio on both sides of the Rio Grande. The mediums are referred to as _materias_ or _cajones_ and act as _cajitas_ (little boxes) for Niño Fidencio’s spirit. During the healing rituals they are endowed with the Niño’s healing powers.” See her website at www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/dore/default.html.


4 Reading the works of Emile Durkheim, Peter Berger, and Jonathan Z. Smith illuminates this approach for Latina/o studies.

5 Reading the works of Rudolph Otto, Kimberley Patton, Lawrence Sullivan, and Mircea Eliade will illuminate this dimension for Latina/o studies.


7 Latinas/os, at least since the late 1960s, are more and more fascinated by the indigenous “places” they come from, whether it is Mesoamerican myth, the caves and mountains of the Tainos, African homelands, or the many Aztláns. In another part of his memoir John Santos says these ancient places have an “invisible enchantment” which takes the forms of “a fine rain of
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voices, images and stories” that reassert their powers in contemporary life. Visitors to Latino barrios will see colorful evidence of attention to indigenous voices, images and stories in murals, sometimes covering large parts of buildings, in the names of community centers as well as the names given to children. The more Latinos explore and embrace their mestizaje and mullatez, the more these indigenous anteriorities reassert themselves – sometimes overtly and sometimes secretly.

8 In my essay “Aztec Moments and Chicano Cosmovision: Aztlan Recalled to Life” I discuss “Aztec Moment,” quoting a dinner companion: “‘Chicanos don’t just have ‘senior moments,’ those moments of forgetting the details of one’s memory or some recent event,’ she said. ‘We have Aztec moments when we realize que los Indios de Mexico, los Aztecas, los Toltecas y los Mayas are part of our histories, who we are. We are not Españoles, we’re mestizos and proud of our indigenista parts.’ The four of us recalled conversations with our parents and grandparents, as well as childhood journeys to Mexico, where we discovered our names and faces and family stories in Mexican museums, parks, villages, churches, mining towns, myths, and histories. In each of our families there was an ‘Indio’ in appearance or in lineage. My father was called ‘el Indio’ in his family because, like his mother Carlota Carranza Carrasco, he had what was perceived as the physiognomy of a Mexican Indian. In those days it wasn’t a sign of pride. But for us around the table, having an ‘Aztec Moment’ meant that Chicanos are able to re-member their native roots, to expand their sense of identity beyond either Anglo definitions or the black–white dichotomy that animates so much of race discourse in the US. And we felt pride in this remembering and were coming to realize that our mestizaje was both a complex social location but also a symbolic meaning from which we viewed the world with complex eyes.”

9 Later, when I was studying the history of religions at the University of Chicago, it resurfaced and egged me on to choose the myths of Aztlan, the Feathered Serpent, and Mesoamerican cities and symbols as the main focus of my career. I had received the “invisible enchantment” of indigenous Mexico.


11 Central to this vision is the lineage which Chicanos claim goes back to the “northern land of Aztlan,” meaning the place of emergence of the Aztec ancestors. For the Chicanos who wrote and believed in this document, that northern land is not Guanajuato or Zacatecas, but Arizona, New Mexico, California, and Texas.


13 “Aztlan: Destination and Point of Departure,” in Virginia Fields and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (eds.), Road to Aztlan: Art from a Mythic Homeland (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001), p. 64. These are very strong terms – “central image,” “cultural and spiritual framework” – and big claims – “belonging . . . foundation” – that put layers of symbolic weight onto Aztlan. As a historian of religions I am struck by the similarity of this language to the religious category of a “cosmovision” because it communicates aspects of a worldview and shows how the Chicano movement attempted to stimulate a renovation deep inside Chicano communities.

14 Though it is not a widespread movement in Latino communities, there are an increasing number of community centers, schools, websites, and social groups and movements that study, appreciate, and elevate the indigenous dimensions of Latinos. A quick tour through Google’s Aztlan references reveals how widely and often superficially this indigenous marker
is used to identify parts of Latino culture and experience. I will leave open the question as to how “authentic,” “imagined,” or “postmodern” these cultural forms are, while insisting that they raise complex questions about the ways Latinos come to terms with the ultimate significance of their lives and culture through an attachment to a primordial world—an alternative Edenic beginning. There is growing evidence that within the immigration streams from Latin America into the United States there are increasing numbers of peoples who are importing indigenous myths, rituals, aesthetics, and languages into the social and imaginary “fields” where Latino studies works. In recent months news reports tell of Latin American immigrants who bring not Spanish but indigenous languages into the US that cause problems for everyone involved in the new dialogues.


Aztlán was, in a sense, our collective *milpa*, the agricultural hearth where Mexican laborers went back into the land, into the dirt, the soil, the plants, the fruits, and the waters of the Southwest. Aztlán of this abundance stimulated Chicanos to always look for signs in the desert, or names on obscure maps, or caves on islands—dreaming they would find the “original” Aztlán, as though it were another Garden of Eden, only this time capable of scientific and pedestrian discovery.


17 See Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultimate* (Clayton, Victoria: Warner Books, 1994) for a rich series of examples of sacred places. For the child Antonio, a fish or golden carp becomes a locus for the sacred that is part of his relationship with the healer Ultima. See my essay “*Bless Me, Ultimate* as a Religious Text” in *The Chicano Studies Reader* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Publications, UCLA, 2001).


19 See Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1971) for an ample description of how cities and especially their grand ceremonial precincts serve as style centers for all-important social institutions. See also my *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, Niwot, 2000).

20 At the level of social thought, “peripheral” ideas may challenge and invigorate a tradition and take the form of an alternative worldview, as in the case of alternative theologies like Latino Liberation Theology. Alternative worldviews lay out new or different complex cosmologies that often affirm the importance of the city with its abundance and authority, but also insist on an inclusive future where peripheries and peripheral people are protected, nurtured, and sometimes identified as the living purpose for which the city came into being.


22 See Carl S. Dudley, Jackson W. Carroll, and James P. Wind (eds.), *San Fernando Cathedral: Soul of the City* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998). In a series of publications and ritual innovations, Elizondo and colleagues have shown how this Mexican American church has become the “soul of the city,” i.e., how its work as a “ceremonial center” has served as home, hearth, and place of revelation. Like many churches, community centers, and altars in Latino communities, it provides a deep sense of beginning and story, a sense of sacred rootedness
and narrative, and acts as a stage (and staging) for rituals/performances that memorialize/celebrate the agony, ecstasy, comedy, and tragedies of the local people.

24 Ibid, p. 11.
25 Ibid, p. 12. Elsewhere Elizondo writes about “Mestizo Christianity,” which contains three mestizajes: the mestizaje of the anthropological birth of mestizo America in the meeting of Europeans and Indians, the mestizaje of Catholic Mexicans meeting Protestant Anglo-Saxons and the European Catholics who settled in Texas, and the encounter of modernity and fundamentalism. Yet, he writes, “throughout all these mestizajes, our original Indian roots continue to inform and influence our identity and core values” (p. 83).

26 The function of these rites is to sacralize a significant portion of the downtown area of San Antonio and the people who participate. This ritual mapping links the cathedral to the streets and sidewalks leading to the Mercado, the old Market Square of San Antonio, then to Soledad Street and Dolorosa Street, to the Justice Center, and to local restaurants and businesses which become, symbolically, part of the topography of the Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and resurrected. At the Market Square participants and passersby witness Pilate and Herod trying Jesus through recitation of passages from the gospel accounts of the Passion. After the trial, Jesus with his crown of thorns carries the cross through downtown streets of San Antonio that have been completely shut off from traffic (i.e., changed from secular space into spaces momentarily sacralized by these rites). In front of La Margarita, one of San Antonio’s favorite restaurants, Jesus falls for the first time. Then the “way to Calvary” proceeds up Dolorosa Street when the Archbishop takes over for Jesus and carries the heavy cross, watched by thousands of people, several blocks. When the ancient and contemporary entourage passes by the Justice Center, ironic comments can sometimes be heard in the crowd comparing contemporary Mexican American legal struggles to those of Jesus. The Passion play eventually arrives at the Main Plaza of the city. There, in front of thousands of people from San Antonio and around the world, the crucifixion is acted out to tremendous emotional effect.

28 An important exception to social science research that ignores the religiosity of Latinos is found in George J. Sánchez, Becoming Mexican American (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 7, “The Sacred and the Profane: Religious Adaptations.”
29 It will help the reader to understand that Latino religious practices, like all religious practices, provide at least two powerful and highly valued strategies for dealing with daily life. They provide (1) appealing cosmologies/worldviews that posit social and spiritual order, limit, and security for believers; and (2) ritual strategies for directly addressing life-cycle and calendrical changes, as well as bodily and spiritual suffering. Cosmologies/worldviews provide a cognitive map and ritual strategies provide a sense of legitimate spiritual agency.
35 For an insightful discussion on the psychological pull of colonialism and the ways it forces its victims to fight back in terms defined by the colonizers, see Nandy, The Intimate Enemy.


38 The most productive center for the study of religion among Latinos is the Program for Analysis of Religion Among Latinos (PARAL), which functions as a network of scholars committed to a comparative study of religion among the people of Latin American heritage living in the United States. PARAL’s website will guide the reader to important recent publications showing the dynamics and diversities in religious beliefs and practices among Latinos.

39 For instance, see the images of diversity of religious practices among Latinos in Americans: Latino Life in the United States (Boston: Little, Brown, 1999).

40 One event that changed the view that Catholicism completely dominated Latino life was Pope John Paul’s visit to Cuba in 1997. While on the one hand there was an outpouring of Catholic devotion, on the other hand, Santería rituals, music, dances, and symbols surfaced with great intensity, revealing that Cuban religiosity was a powerful mixture of European, colonial, indigenous, and African traditions and not a selective assimilation of one religion by another, but part of an incomplete process.


42 With the insistence on asymmetry I am following Mary Louise Pratt’s cogent writing about the “Contact Zone” and how colonial settings always place colonizer and colonized in asymmetrical relations.

43 I could not help noticing the flame coming out of St. Jude's head and thought that the Niño Fidencio had made a link between my intense intellectual life and the need to combine it with the flames of the spirit. The playfulness of Niño Fidencio came to me on several occasions when we would stand back to back and then he would grab my arms, bend my back over his back, and then bounce me up and down, stretching out my spine and muscles, joking: “Hermanito David, mi mas pequeño de todos, te vas a caer, te vas a caer . . . no, no te dejo caer, hermanito David.” Since I was by far the tallest person in the group, this joking brought mirth to the others. These séances would last from 7 p.m. to the early morning hours and were primarily dedicated to healing us of our various physical and spiritual maladies.

44 People spoke feelingly of their cancers, diabetes, and injuries, as well as their need for jobs and help with social authorities, marriage, and pareja struggles. Outside of the growing circle of devotees, when we saw each other on the street, in classes, or at social events in the barrio, there was a strong, secret sense of loyalty to our shared rituals and devotions for El Niño Fidencio. And I learned that there were many other misiones devoted to El Niño around the country, including a second one in South Chicago where twin 10-year-olds served together as materias for El Niño Fidencio.

45 For an excellent summary of his life and death and the mystery of his reappearance in other materias like the one I came to know in Chicago's Chicano community, see Luis León’s chapter “El Don: The Gift of Healing from Mesoamerica to the Borderlands” in his La Llorona’s Children (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Scholars from many disciplines are paying attention to the ways that religious mixtures in the worlds of the penitentes, Santería, Candomble, curanderismo, pentacostal, and espiritista traditions have been embraced and practiced by Latinos at increasing rates. See, for example, Harvey Cox, Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentacostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995). Alberto Pulido, The Sacred
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Discussions about the cultural production of Latinas/os in the United States unavoidably imply deconstructing the rather contested panethnic label used by the US Census and other government agencies to identify a population that encompasses twenty different Latin American and Caribbean nationalities. This means a recognition that we are dealing with a wide range of differences in historical, social, and cultural experiences, including the particular factors that account for each group’s presence in US society. Bearing in mind the contested nature of the term Latina/o and the caveats that exist between panethnic approaches or those that focus on individual nationalities in studying the diverse population behind the collective Latina/o/Hispanic rubric, obvious commonalities are found in their cultural expressions. Nonetheless, these cultural expressions also reflect historical and cultural traits that are intrinsic to the different individual groups, and the sense of being Mexican/Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, or of any other Latina/o national origin.

Paradoxically, while US Latinas/os continue to assert their respective national identities, there is a combination of social and political forces at play in US society that promote a sense of homogeneity and unity that is far from reflecting the myriad of historical, social, and cultural experiences and conditions that are particular to each nationality. That this is so, is due in part to the substantial and unprecedented growth of the US Latina/o population, a pattern that began in the 1970s and is projected to continue well into the twenty-first century. With a population that stands at 41.3 million in 2006, over 40 percent higher than a decade ago, this demographic explosion reinforces the notion of a Latina/o literature, art, and music, and is making many writers, artists, and performers quite visible and financially successful.
Generalizing about cultural phenomena always entails many qualifications and pitfalls and Latina/o cultural production is not any different. But if there are underlying characteristics to point out, an important one is how writers and artists take a fundamentally critical stance regarding what it means to be culturally different and grow up in a society that has pushed a white Anglo conformity “melting pot” assimilation model that tends to undervalue other cultural and linguistic differences. As a general pattern, immigrants have been expected to relinquish their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and assimilate into the dominant Anglo American mainstream. Despite this prevalent ideology, historically ethnoracial minorities, such as African and Native Americans, and Latinas/os remained excluded or marginal to the professed mainstream of what was considered to be the real “American” cultural experience. The marginal position occupied by these groups in US history has been particularly obvious, and it was not until the advent of the civil rights struggles that inspired the ethnic revitalization and multiculturalist movements of the 1960s and beyond, that important paradigm shifts occurred in the cultural realm aimed at decentering the dominant Anglo American model, and validating their presence and contributions to the building of US society. At the same time, US society was now being scrutinized by disenfranchised minorities striving to be heard. Quite often these movements tended to overcompensate for the initial exclusion of certain groups, but they were crucial for making their historical and cultural experiences and contributions more visible to their respective communities and the wider society. In the specific case of Latinas/os, these movements were instrumental in increasing cultural and social consciousness within the individual nationalities, as well as a collective panethnic sense of being part of a wider Latina/o constituency.¹

Just as it happened in the broader hemispheric context of Latin America and the Caribbean where definitions of both national and continental identities have been historically central to cultural production, there is a confluence of forces within US society that promote notions of a homogenous Latina/o panethnic identity along with those asserting the identities of individual ethnicities or nationalities. The interaction of both the panethnic notions of latinidad or hispanismo (sense of being Latina/o or Hispanic), and those based on national origin (e.g., being Mexican/Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican) play a role in shaping cultural production. Images promoted by the media and government agencies, for instance, tend to reinforce the notion of a unified Latina/o identity which often serves important social, political, psychological, and cultural functions, while expressions of cultural nationalism are fostered by the individual groups. Mindful of these initial considerations, this essay attempts to focus more on commonalities without losing track of individual group differences, in its analysis of the various social and political factors that shape Latina/o cultural production in the United States.

Postcolonial and feminist theories with their emphasis on the subaltern subject, issues of power relations, and the intersectionality of ethnicity/nationality, race, class, gender, and sexuality in the construction of identities are particularly
useful in understanding the fundamentally critical stance with respect to US society reflected in a substantial portion of Latina/o cultural production. Crucial questions, such as the one posed by Spivak as to whether or not the subaltern can truly speak or have a voice; or Bhabha’s notion of “a Third Space of enunciation” where marginalized minorities articulate their cultural differences, transform the meanings of their colonial legacies, and construct new liberating identities rooted in cultural straddling and hybridity, are central to the work of many Latina/o writers and artists. In matters of choosing and constructing identities, Song’s notion of “skilled cultural navigators” can well be applied to Latinas/os, since from their “in-between” cultural location, they straddle the cultural legacies of their ancestry and those of the Anglo American mainstream, and are also often influenced by the cultures of other oppressed minorities. And, unquestionably, there is both an expressive and instrumental character to Latina/o cultural production, where issues of resistance and empowerment are part of a wider agenda for the pursuit of social justice and social change. This social consciousness captures the interplay of national/ethnic, panethnic, racial, gender, class, and sexuality-based factors that account for these groups’ subaltern condition. Through their creative imagination, Latina/o writers and artists assert their differences and reveal an awareness of their role as collective voices of a particular community, and as the bearers of survival and resistance struggles against the forces of racism and cultural obliteration. Thus the ethnic political edge attributed to their creative works is for the most part unavoidable, and quite often detracts critics from analyzing this cultural production in relation to the wider contexts and evolution of US and/or Latin American and Caribbean literary, artistic, or musical traditions. Transcending these traditional boundaries and monolithic notions of cultural “purity” or “authenticity” is also key to the Latina/o creative drive, since through the construction and assertion of hybrid identities different nationalities are rejecting debasing dominant discourses about who they are both in relation to US society and their countries of ancestry.

There is no doubt that the bourgeoning of a panethnic Latina/o consciousness of recent decades is being manifested and disseminated in more vigorous ways than in the past, but one should not ignore the presence of a widespread sense of latinidad or hispanismo in many communities throughout the United States in earlier periods. The early 1800s witnessed the decline of the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas and the birth of the new Latin American nations increasing the contact between émigrés, exiles, and sojourners from these countries and the United States. Moreover, up to 1848, almost half of the territory that is now part of the United States belonged to the nation of Mexico. Thus, there is a rich legacy of oral traditions and Spanish-language newspapers in some of these communities that gives testimony to the national and panethnic concerns of these populations at different historical periods. Numerous writings found in these newspapers capture snippets of the complex relationship between the diverse nationalities, their respective countries of origin, and the wider Latin American and the Anglo American contexts. There is a clear perception from
these writings that they often saw themselves as outsiders to the US mainstream, struggling to fit in, denouncing injustices and asserting their rights, and conscious of the presence of other Latinas/os throughout the country enduring similar experiences. Among their major concerns were specific issues related to the welfare of the various communities and violations of their civil rights; the displacement from their lands – as was the case with the Spanish and Mexican settlers in the West and Southwest; their defense of their cultural heritage and the Spanish language; their denouncing racism and the exploitation of migrant labor; and the cultural and linguistic clashes with the dominant Anglo American society. Overall, the fictional and essay writings found in many of these early Spanish-language newspapers, which in some ways can be construed as the literature of the time, have been crucial in recovering and reinforcing a substantial literary legacy and influencing canonical definitions of what constitutes US Latina/o literature. They also are making accessible a myriad of discourses about cultural identity that reflect important class, racial, gender, and ethnic/national differences within the various Latina/o communities, and the interplay and functions of nationalist and panethnic affiliations and forms of identification at a particular historical moment.

When considering the different times in which Latinas/os of diverse national origins have come together around common issues and how this shaped their cultural endeavors, three main examples come to the fore. First, there is a strong US-based nineteenth-century émigré Antillean separatist movement that enlisted the support primarily of Cubans and Puerto Ricans, but also other Latin Americans, to free the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico from Spanish colonial rule. These two island colonies were unable to become independent countries in the early decades of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that Spain lost most of its New World empire during those years. Some of the émigrés saw the United States as a potential ally in the struggle against Spanish rule and even dreamed of the islands’ possible annexation by the United States, while others were fiercely committed to their independence and foresaw the potential dangers of US intervention in the ongoing Spanish–Cuban War (1895–8). The dreaded intervention became a reality when the United States declared war on Spain and took possession of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898.

The activities of Antillean separatists took place primarily in the cities of New York, Philadelphia, Tampa, and Key West. In these deterritorialized spaces, important social and political solidarity networks developed and were nourished by the commanding presence of the Cuban patriot José Martí, leader of the Antillean émigré separatist movement. But in general, this movement benefited from the combined efforts of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latin Americans at the time residing in the United States, or in other parts of the world. Martí coordinated political activities from New York, where he lived for 14 years (1881–5), engaged in a revolutionary struggle that according to him was meant to be “with all, and for the good of all,” and which stands as one of the best historical examples of different Latina/o nationalities working together to end
Spanish colonial rule in the Americas. Martí’s visionary writings captured a wide array of burning social and political issues, such as the exploitative nature of US capitalism, the injustice of the segregation experienced by Native and African Americans, and the imperialist ambitions of a US nation positioning itself to control the rest of the hemisphere. In many ways Martí’s ideas were also shaped by the contradictions he witnessed while living in the United States between Anglo American democratic values and individual rights, pervading social and racial inequalities, and the rapacious nature of capitalist expansion.6

The Antillean separatist movement’s official newspaper Patria, published in New York (1892–ca. 1900), exemplifies the important role of the Spanish-language press in the United States. This publication served as a creative outlet to express ideas about the future of the young Latin American and Caribbean nations, as well as everyday issues confronting the various US Latina/o communities. It was through Patria and other newspapers that Martí articulated his vision of continental unity of what he called “nuestra América” (our America), trying to capture the region’s defining cultural elements, and articulating his dream of color-blind and more equitable societies characterized not by the “struggle of races,” but by the “affirmation of rights.”

Other Antillean thinkers also relied on newspapers to spread their visions for nation building. In addition to Martí’s continental vision, specific ideas about an Antillean federation of independent republics and a unified struggle for freedom were reinforced in the essays and poems of several Puerto Rican writers, such as Ramón Emeterio Betances, Eugenio María de Hostos, and Lola Rodríguez de Tió. The writings of these nineteenth-century patriots corroborate that Cuban and Puerto Rican nationalism was flourishing in these émigré communities while it was being suppressed by Spanish colonial authorities back on the islands.

Some of the Antillean separatists came from their respective countries’ creole intellectual and political elites, but others were of working-class origin, especially from a progressive artisan sector. Artisan tabaqueros (cigar workers) and typesetters, in particular, participated in the founding of clubs and organizations that supported independence, and also wrote for the Spanish-language press. Thus there is an interesting body of working-class literature scattered in these newspapers that started during this period and continued through the early decades of the twentieth century.

A second illustration of the many instances of solidarity and activism influencing cultural production can be found among workers, professionals, and around numerous Hispanic community organizations established throughout the Northeast and the Southwest during the early part of the twentieth century, including the period from the Great Depression to the pre-civil rights years. It is important to point out that this happened despite the harsh economic conditions and acute prejudices and segregation that overwhelmed these communities during those years. Latinas/os from many different nationalities often came together to denounce civil rights violations, and the bleak socioeconomic and educational conditions of their communities.7
The Spanish Civil War (1934–7) and the subsequent takeover of the fascist Franco regime in Spain created a large exile of Spaniards to many countries. New York City was a preferred destination and a visible Spanish exile community developed there. They joined an increasing number of Puerto Ricans and Cubans arriving in New York during those years. Progressive New York’s Spanish-language newspapers such as Gráfico (Illustrated, 1927–31), Pueblos Hispanos (Hispanic Peoples, 1943–4), and Liberación (Liberation, 1946–9) capture some of the common social and political concerns of the time, and were important outlets for promoting creative writing and other cultural endeavors. Gráfico had a clear working-class orientation, while Pueblos Hispanos and Liberación also enlisted the collaboration of many prominent members of the intellectual and political elites. The Revista de Artes y Letras (Review of Arts and Letters, 1933–9) was a major promoter of hispanismo and with its wide international distribution developed a Spanish-language readership in the United States and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

A third instance of a panethnic Latina/o consciousness that shaped cultural production, and perhaps the one with the most wide-ranging impact and contemporary relevance, was impelled by the civil rights movement. The new legislation opened a wider arena to continue carrying out some of the past struggles, but new laws were passed ending the de facto apartheid system that until the 1960s was legally sanctioned in many parts of the United States. These new protective laws proclaimed equality of rights and opportunities for minorities and propelled an ethnic cultural revitalization movement that came to have a visible impact on the US cultural mainstream. Most of the official accounts of the civil rights movement, however, still tend to focus primarily on the efforts and contributions of African American leaders and their communities, and a lot more work needs to be done to document the specific struggles and accomplishments of different Latina/o groups in this movement.

Two artistic movements during this period are worthy of mention: the Teatro Campesino (farm workers’ theater) and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The first came about from the creative drive of Chicano playwright Luis Valdez and centered around the experiences of exploitation and racism endured by farm workers. The son of migrant workers himself, Valdez’s Teatro Campesino was inspired by César Chávez’s efforts to unionize farm workers. These efforts faced the virulent anti-unionist opposition from growers in California and other parts of the country. With considerable nationwide support, the farm workers movement resorted to strikes and consumer boycotts of lettuce and grapes in order to force growers to allow unionizing and improve wages and working conditions. The Teatro Campesino followed the model of the agit-prop working-class theater which has a long established tradition as an effective social and political consciousness-raising tool within the labor movement in the United States and internationally, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. The short plays of Teatro were performed by workers themselves rather than by trained actors and involved a great deal of improvisation. The staging and wardrobe relied on the use of the materials at
hand. Performances took place in public spaces, strike lines, community centers, and schools and universities. Eventually, the Teatro achieved international recognition and was invited to perform in many different countries. No other artistic movement has yet drawn as much attention to the US Puerto Rican experience than the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan – which was renamed Loisaida by these poets – the Cafe is the creative offspring of writer Miguel Algarín. He founded the Cafe in 1975 as a natural evolution of the frequent tertulias or gatherings of poets that took place at his home. To this day, the Cafe provides an alternative formative stage for unknown writers to introduce their work to the public. Many young writers are either praised or booed in their (in)famous poetry slams. The concepts of “street” or “outlaw” poetry were frequently used by the first wave of Nuyorican poets to describe an artistic movement that came from the margins to denounce the racism and inequalities of US society, and give a voice to the experiences of Puerto Ricans born or raised in the barrios of New York. The volume Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings (1975), edited by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, was an official introduction to the work of the Nuyorican poets to the reading public. Through their performances at the Cafe writers like Algarín, Piñero, Pedro Pietri, Sandra Maria Esteves, José Angel Figueroa, Tato Laviera, and a few others became some of the leading voices of the movement and later published many individually authored poetry collections. In the literary sphere, numerous Latina/o writers continue to make important contributions to the Bildungsroman genre. These narratives focus on either autobiographical or fictional coming of age experiences of the authors and their families, and the circumstances that brought them to the United States. They also document the trials and tribulations of mostly working-class families struggling to survive in a racist and alienating environment. Women and male authors from diverse national or ethnic origins are well represented in the Bildungsroman narratives. Through these narratives Latina/o authors have achieved recognition in the United States and in some Spanish-speaking countries. Several of the most accomplished names include Chicana(o) writers Sandra Cisneros and Víctor Villaseñor, Cuban writers Oscar Hijuelos and Cristina García, Dominican writers Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz, and Puerto Rican writers Judith Ortiz Cofer and Esmeralda Santiago, but this listing does not begin to do justice to the impressive proliferation of authors and titles that continue to be published under this particular genre. Latinas have played a prominent role in the booming creativity of their respective communities. The United Nation’s International Women’s Year (1975) and Decade for Women (1975–85), as well as the wider women’s liberation movement in the United States and other countries, were major catalysts in getting women to organize, denounce their many sources of oppression, and assert their claims for equality. But initially, Latinas and other women of color were largely excluded from the white middle-class women’s movement, and they had to carve out their own spaces in order to articulate their specific issues and experiences,
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and demonstrate that gender oppression was not necessarily the great equalizer among women. Latinas, especially, were confronted with the sexism or machismo found in their respective cultures, but also the same prejudices faced by ethnoracial minorities in general. The notion of “women of color” trying to “decolonize” their multiple sources of oppression became a useful tool of analysis. Despite its essentializing tendencies, the term drew attention to the variety of conditions and struggles faced by less privileged women, and the existing differences among white middle-class women and those from diverse social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in the United States and in Third World nations. Latinas saw themselves as part of these international struggles and played a crucial role in creating awareness about their conditions and needs, and those of other women of color.

In the process of underscoring the various sources of difference among women and diverse expressions of feminist struggle, the political stance and specificities of Chicana feminism was placed at the forefront, notably the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Ana Castillo, among a few others. Anzaldúa and Moraga’s pathbreaking anthology This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1981) defined an important space for Latinas and other women of color to debate their own issues and experiences, and expose some of the shortcomings of the white feminist movement. Anzaldúa developed her views about Chicana feminism in Borderlands: The New Mestiza (1987), a personal account of her psychological, cultural, and sexual journey of self-affirmation and liberation as a Chicana, a woman of color, and a lesbian. Along with Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga in Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios (1983), and Puerto Rican poet Luz María Umpierre in The Margarita Poems (1987) also established themselves at the vanguard of breaking down heterosexist barriers and affirming a lesbian identity within their own ethnic groups. Another Chicana author, Ana Castillo, introduced the term Xicanisma in Massacre of the Dreamers (1994) as an ideology that captures the specificities of a feminist nationalist movement and an oppositional discourse that strives for women’s liberation within both mainstream US society and Chicano culture, and promotes an interdependence and solidarity that reaches out to other women of color.

Transcending traditional cultural borders and defining new creative locations of cultural activity instills a particular character to the work of Latina/o writers and artists. Many have appropriated the term borderlands to define those deterritorialized marginal spaces of creativity that defy the confines of geography and of monolithic cultural conventions. These border crossings produce new transnational spaces of creativity shaped by all kinds of bidirectional interactions and exchanges between the Latin American and Caribbean countries of origin and their respective US Latina/o communities, and are also influenced by the contacts with Anglo American culture and the cultures of other minority groups. Gloria Anzaldúa sees this contact as a form of mestizaje that reflects the racial, cultural, and linguistic mixing found in these borderlands. Another leading performance artist of the Mexican/Chicano experience, Guillermo Gómez-Peña,
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conceptualizes this new cultural space in his poetic manifesto “The Border is . . .” (1993). Defined by this author as a “polysemantic term,” the border represents a creative location for “new hybrid identities and métiers constantly metamorphosizing.”

Latina/o writers and artists are not only having an impact in US society, they are also carving their own cultural spaces in their Latin American and Caribbean nations of origin. For a long time there was a generalized disregard among these countries’ intellectual elites for the cultural expressions of what they viewed as the poverty-stricken and disenfranchised working-class migrant populations from their countries living in the United States. Because of the linguistic and cultural mixing that characterizes Latina/o cultural expressions, these were not considered an “authentic” part of these countries’ national traditions. Now there is a more receptive audience in the native countries and growing interest in the ways in which US Latina/o writers and artists construct or reinforce their national identities, and in the reciprocal cultural and linguistic influences and exchanges that shape their overall cultural production.

The commuter or circular character of Puerto Rican migration between the island and the United States also contributes to the cultural straddling that is so characteristic of US Latina/o cultural production. Acclaimed author Luis Rafael Sánchez invented the metaphor of “la guagua aérea” (an airbus) to characterize this bidirectional flow and described Puerto Rico as “a nation floating between two ports where hopes are smuggled.”13 Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera mocks those who proclaim the assimilation of Puerto Ricans born or raised in the United States with his famous code-switching verses, “Qué assimilated, brother, yo soy asimilao” (No way assimilated, brother. I’m asimilao). Instead, he affirms a new hybrid “AmeRícan” cultural identity. Puerto Rican poet María Teresa (“Mariposa”) Fernández defines herself as a “Diasporican” and proudly declares: “No nací en Puerto Rico/Puerto Rico nació en mí” (I was not born in Puerto Rico/Puerto Rico was born in me), demonstrating how Puerto Ricans and other Latinas/os exercise their agency in choosing and asserting their ethnic identity when they are struggling with the forces of racism and cultural exclusion.14

The juxtaposition of images described above represents a challenge to the traditional melting pot assimilation ideology that strived to erase all cultural and linguistic differences outside of the Anglo American conformity model. This ideology is being replaced by an oppositional discourse that asserts cultural differences and celebrates racial, ethnic, and linguistic hybridity. Although these notions are not new to Latin American or Caribbean cultural discourses, they have been largely absent from US national narratives.

Music is also an important outlet for articulating some of the complexities of Latina/o identity construction. Under the all-encompassing and homogenizing label of salsa, different Caribbean and Latin American musical rhythms have converged.15 Initially used as a marketing strategy to promote interpreters and musicians affiliated with the Fania recording label, the so-called “Latin” music in general and salsa in particular are now an important segment of the international
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music market. More than half a century ago, the performers of the Mambo Kings era of the 1940s and 1950s had introduced the mambo, rumba, and cha cha cha dancing craze to North American audiences. They were followed in the 1960s and 1970s by other musical forms such as Latin Jazz, the pachanga, and the bugalu. The names of Damaso Pérez Prado, Xavier Cugat, Johnny Pacheco, Tito Puente, Héctor Lavoe, Ray Barreto, and Charlie and Eddie Palmieri were among the most prominent performers during those years. In the Southwest, corridos and Tex Mex music also developed a following. But few Latina/o artists were able to fulfill their crossover dreams until after the 1990s with the unprecedented popularity of pop music stars representing a wide diversity of national origins, such as Gloria Estefan, Selena, Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony, Jennifer López, Shakira, and Enrique Iglesias, who have released award-winning English albums in addition to their prior Spanish recordings.

Popular music has turned into an important promoter of a panethnic Latina/o identity. In the song “Latinas/os en Estados Unidos” (Latinas/os in the United States), the late Cuban diva Celia Cruz calls for unity and solidarity with the lyrics: “Latinas/os en Estados Unidos, ¡Vamos a unirnos, vamos a unirnos! (Latinas/os in the United States, let us unite, let us unite!). A similar appeal is made by Gloria Estefan through the lyrics of a song that calls for Latina/o unity: “Hablemos el mismo idioma, ¡dame la mano mi hermano! (Let’s speak the same language, give me your hand, my brother!). Salsa rhythms like those of Panamanian Rubén Blades in “Buscando América” (Searching for America) and Puerto Rican Willie Colón’s “Color americano” (American Color) expand upon the ordinary notion of what it means to be an American by attempting to endow the term with its original broader hemispheric connotation, and by propagating a new sense of being “Americano” based on a panethnic Latina/o identity. Columbian singer Carlos Vives provides another eloquent illustration of this trend when he rejoices in the distinctiveness of his Latina/o cultural essence by emphasizing “mi manera de amar latino, mi manera de ser latino” (my Latino way of loving, my Latino way of being). Examples are also found in the more recent Puerto Rican reggaetón musical craze. Songs such as “Oye mi canto” (Listen to my Call) celebrate an invigorated panethnic identity during the age of globalization that integrates the many different Latin American and Caribbean nationalities.

Latina/o visual arts are another sphere of cultural expression where one finds characteristics and trends similar to those found in literature and music. A commitment to bringing art to the masses is reflected in the many examples of “public art” produced by Latinas/os from all the different national origins. Murals, sculptures, posters, paintings, silkscreens, and mixed-media installations often recreate the indigenous or African roots of Latina/o cultures, or the specific landscapes, historical figures, and events of the countries of origin. Mexican muralists, initially a product of the cultural transformations that came out of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, provide the models for Chicanos and other Latina/o artists to bring art to their communities. Puerto Rican and Cubans have resorted
to the silkscreen poster for the same purposes. The notion of “public art” has been quite important to practitioners of the visual arts and many barrios of cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Miami, among many others, display murals, posters, sculptures, and other special installations that incorporate the particular history and cultural symbols of individual Latina/o nationalities.

A closing general reflection about Latina/o cultural expressions – whether one is referring to literature, music, or the visual arts – is that they are expressive of particular ethnic/national, racial, gender, and class concerns, but often promote panethnic unity and are endowed with a perceptible social and political edge. Nonetheless, as these works increasingly reach both minority and non-minority audiences, and draw the attention of critics, Latina/o writers and artists continue establishing themselves as an important component of the overall “American” cultural experience both within the United States and the rest of the hemisphere.

Notes

1 In their official definition of the Hispanic/Latino population, the US Census only includes twenty nationalities of origin representing the Spanish-speaking countries of the Latin American and Caribbean regions, and Spain.

2 For a discussion of the formation of ethnic consciousness among different groups of Latinos, see Félix Padilla, Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); and Juan Flores, From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).


4 For the most complete source on Spanish-language newspapers in the United States, see Nicolás Kanellos and Helvetia Martell, Hispanic Periodicals in the United States, Origins to 1960 (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2000). The volume Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), edited by Nicolás Kanellos, includes many writings from Spanish-language newspapers that illustrate some of the communities’ main concerns at different historical periods.


6 A detailed discussion of the Antillean separatist movement and Martí’s contributions can be found in Gerald E. Poyo, “With All, and for the Good of All”: The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1849–1898 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989); and Edgardo Meléndez, Puerto Rico on “Patria” (Río Piedras, PR: Editorial Cultural, 1996). For an English translation of Martí’s major essays, see Deborah Shnookal and Mirta Múñiz (eds.), José Martí Reader: Writings on the Americas (New York: Ocean Press, 1999).
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7 A well-documented summary of these struggles is provided by James D. Cockcroft, *The Hispanic Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1994).


13 See Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La guagua aérea* (San Juan: Editorial Cultural, 1994).


15 Some of the major studies on the historical origins and sociocultural context of *salsa* include Angel Quintero Rivera, *Salsa, sabor y control* and Frances Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Latin Popular Music and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).


Latina/o Cultural Expressions

PART TWO

Actos: Critical Practices
José Limón, the Devil and the Dance

José E. Limón

I have published three books and several essays in my career thus far, but my Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas is arguably my most extended theoretical and ethnographically grounded intervention in Latina/o cultural studies. In keeping with an older Birmingham-influenced tradition of cultural studies, the study focused on subaltern popular culture. Again, in the spirit of E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Paul Willis, and others associated with the Birmingham School, I brought to bear Marxist cultural theory, under the weighty influence of Antonio Gramsci, on this material. But, as many know, the Birmingham School was itself brought under critical review in the 1970s and 1980s for certain exclusions and problems in its theoretical formulations – chiefly, but not solely, its elision of the classical Marxist focus on political economy; its nation-centered focus; its antagonism toward continental structuralist and poststructuralist theory; its seeming disavowal of Freud; the relative neglect of race; and last but certainly not least, a less than full appreciation of women, gender, and sexuality. Thus Dancing with the Devil made some effort to practice classical cultural studies while also seeking to enlarge its conceptual grasp by also bringing to bear – no doubt with varying success – these post-Marxist emergent perspectives, in part through the synthesizing theoretical work of Fredric Jameson.

The study also brought a Mexican-origin racialized, subaltern sector within the ambit of a previously generally Anglo-American cultural studies, a sector rendered through field-based ethnography. Both approaches – ethnography and a non-Anglo population – were still relatively new to cultural studies. In terms of its data, the book also enlarged cultural studies by addressing not just popular culture but a particular and hitherto largely unexamined facet of it in cultural studies, namely dancing, especially popular, commercialized dancing, but also in its accompanying focus on a well-known folk legend concerning a devil-figure who haunts such popular dances.

Somewhat coincident with the advent of cultural studies, I had also begun to fashion the work at the moment when yet two other distinctive theoretical
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discussions were underway in the field of cultural anthropology: one keyed on the symbolic in culture; and the other, somewhat later, on the correlated issues of reflexivity and the socially contingent character of ethnographic writing. In keeping with these “turns” in anthropology, I also spoke of my own dancing with subaltern Mexican women in these commercial dance halls where the devil appears, even as I made some attempt to render this ethnography in something of a literary style. Most centrally, I tried to exploit the rich symbolic resonance and interpretive fluidity of such a devil-figure to speak of the ways that in the capitalist existence we live in, all of us in our cultural practices are always dancing with the devil.

In what follows I want to offer a continuing practice of cultural studies and reflexive anthropology, drawing on my past efforts while continuing the process of revision and enlargement. If my earlier effort attempted to ground cultural studies in anthropology and close-up, present-time ethnographic practice, my current exercise takes us in the direction of historical ethnography of a particularly intense period in US–Mexico relations following the Mexican Revolution. If a racialized subaltern and relatively undifferentiated subaltern Mexican-origin group was the focus of Dancing with the Devil, here I do return to Mexican identity, but through symbolic individual biography as it relates to collective existence even as I also turn our gaze to the upper and upper-middle class sectors. If popular dancing and collective folklore were my focal concern in my earlier work, here I turn to the elite cultural practice of modern dance. If southern Texas was the earlier locale for my previous work, a transnational circuit from California to New York to Mexico City is the site of my present remarks.

I propose to speak of an unlikely subject for classical and for that matter, contemporary cultural studies; he whose name I coincidentally carry: José Limón (1907–72) and who also did a bit of dancing. He was a Mexican American, subaltern in origin; born in Mexico and raised in the Mexican barrios of Los Angeles, California, but later a citizen of the relatively affluent New York–Connecticut suburban upper-middle class cultural circuit; conversant in his Mexican folk culture but also the greatest dancer in the history of modern dance between the 1930s and the 1960s; a man whose life and superb worldwide dancing career also took him back across the US–Mexico border several times.

We are grateful to José Limón that he had more than enough sense of his symbolic stake in life that he chose, toward the end of his life, to write his memoirs, although he did not finish the book before his death in 1972. It is a book and a life that permit us to see the class and cultural complexity that Mexican America has been and continues to be today; a complexity, however, still more than susceptible to a cultural studies approach, although one that now should take account of a greater class and cultural complexity than can easily be subsumed under the categories of “subaltern,” “ethnic,” the “popular,” and “nation-state.”

Limón began writing his autobiography in the 1960s and continued his writing to his death in 1972, the manuscript left unfinished until one of his dance
colleagues edited what there was and brought it to publication recently. In these memoirs, the modernist dancer now turned writer vividly describes a personal moment in the revolution recalled from age four with perhaps a bit of permissible embellished recollection. No true dancer exactly follows the choreographer and no choreographer expects it.

My . . . Uncle Manuel received a bullet in the head shortly after the opening of the battle of Cananea [1912]. It happened in the dining room of our house . . . bullets began to shatter the windowpanes and whistle into the room . . . everyone hit the floor, except my gallant young uncle. He had to see what was going on and looked out the window. He laughed, I remember, and then he was hit. He fell back and a pool of blood grew around him.

The revolution generally failed the Mexican people, in large part because of the government’s continuing economic complicity with the United States. Like so many of their compatriots, José Limón’s parents and their progeny, including José at age seven, emigrated to the United States in 1914 from Parral, Chihuahua. They came first to Texas, to El Paso and later to Arizona, and finally California. Young José recalled his entrance into a new racial climate as children and teachers in Texas schools made fun of his native Spanish—a psychic undoing of most ordinary Mexican children, but one that seemed to put a resolve into this young boy to learn English well and become an American not at any cost: “I was soon to learn,” he tells us, “that for the rest of my life, I was to be a translator and conciliator. It would be my task to translate perpetually, within myself the tongue of Castile into that of the Anglo-Saxon. To reconcile many disparate and contradictory cultural habits and ways of living, and to resolve hostilities within and around me.” Among and probably central to such hostilities was his relationship to the “norteamericano, the yanqui, the gringo,” who had “invaded our patria and inflicted a humiliating defeat on a weaker nation and imposed a peace of galling ignominy.”

Such hostilities appear to have been repressed and/or displaced into other, not unrelated struggles in Los Angeles. “As the family grew, the struggle to feed, clothe, and house us became ever more brutal. We were poor.” Yet against such social brutality, José had a potent cultural and familial resource: “Not once, living as we did in what would one day be referred to as the Mexican ghetto, did I see my father ever falter in his manners and his dignity. His clothes, worn and often threadbare, were always decent and in order. . . . he was a handsome and distinguished presence.” In such threatening social circumstances, Don Florencio Limón, a reasonably educated man and an orchestra musician, undoubtedly provided José with a source of strength, not to mention a likely artistic orientation. But such a man, the younger Limón tells us, could also be “my father, my enemy, a figure of fear, awe, contempt, hatred, and ultimately and too late, reverence and love.”

Through this paradoxical relationship to his father, Limón discovered he might be an artist and began to take compulsive pleasure in drawing and painting,
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a talent soon pressed into service in his struggles with his new country. “Besides the Catholic religion,” he tells us, “art . . . bridged the chasm separating the scared Mexican child from the slowly acclimatizing youth and adult. My accent may have been ridiculed, but my prowess as an artist was accepted with total and gratifying admiration.” Later, José found another artful countervailing source of strength in the Los Angeles of the 1920s: “In my last year of high school I became acquainted with another set of mentors . . . three young men, aspiring artists . . . aesthetes, bohemians and rebels” who read “Omar Khayyam . . . , Oscar Wilde . . . Beaudelaire” (sic) even as they all listened to “not only Debussy and Satie but also a terrifying composer called Schoenberg.” In this group “bourgeois society and its values, pretensions and hypocries were not merely dissected, but dismembered and annihilated.” In college this conversion to the classical posture of modernism was completed and “destined. My mother’s death, the break with my father, my loss of religious faith, my disenchantment with the University of California, Southern Branch (as UCLA was then called) were unmistakable signs that my young life was in crisis.”

In 1928, riding a motorcycle across the country and in seeming flight from his background – the father, the family, the Catholicism, the Los Angeles barrio – Limón moved to New York City, hoping to fulfill his life’s emerging, modernist artistic purpose. Initially intent on becoming a painter, he wholly absorbed the New York art world only to discover that he could not overcome the achievements of “Manet, Renoir, Cezanne, Braque and Picasso,” but especially his culturally telling favorite, the Spaniard, El Greco, who “had done all I hoped to do and done it supremely well.” At a total loss of what then to do with his artistic ambitions, Limón happened to attend a dance recital where, to “the stirring preamble to the Polonaise in A-flat major of Chopin,” he watched Harald Kreutzberg dance. “Instantly and irrevocably, I was transformed. I knew . . . that I had not been alive . . . that I had yet to be born.”

Limón employs the metaphor of birth at greater and revealing length beginning with the very first sentence of his memoirs. “Early in the year nineteen hundred and twenty-nine, I was born at 9 East Fifty-Ninth Street, New York City. My parents were Isadora Duncan and Harald Kreutzberg,” and, “my foster parents, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weideman. It was at their dance studio and in their classes that I was born.” “My grandparents were Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn,” he added. We witness a fascinating disownment of his real birth and pedigree and an equally fascinating appropriation of another, the latter he says, “an impossible pedigree and, with the exception of Harald Kreutzberg, a very American one.”

But then Limón feels the need to add, in Spanish: “Muy Americano. Muy yanqui,” and we can clearly sense that his struggle against los norteamericanos and his heritage have not been forgotten.

The rest is not only history – modern dance history – but now also the history of José Limón, the modern dancer and choreographer, Mexican American, who, from the 1930s well into the 1960s, achieved a total preeminence in his field. As
the formidable dance critic John Martin put it in the New York Times in 1949, “there is no other male dancer within even comparing distance of him.”

The great majority of this dance career produced mostly dances of a Western “universalist” character. Yet, his defining practice of a seemingly socially abstracted modernist dance, of an art form meant to “decry systems and codification,” was itself paradoxically tied to his Mexicanness and his struggle against the yanquis; as if in his practice of modern dance, he was decrying Anglo-dominant systems and codifications. As his editor Jowitt astutely notes, “taking his place in the family of American modern dance involved investigating his Mexicanness. He too needed to speak to the violence of his birthplace, of his ‘race’.” Limón clearly reveals this paradoxical conjunction between the modern dancer and his Mexican sensibility:

You put on the leotard . . . stretch . . . bend . . . flex . . . turn . . . pant . . . sweat . . . hurt. You learn that the past – the jarabes . . . the Mexican in you, the fearful passage to the land of the gringos, the wounds, the deaths – have been only a preparation for this new life.

But gradually this Mexican sensibility in relation to dance began to emerge more explicitly, beginning with the most evident instrumentality of dance: the body. As perceived by others and by himself, Limón’s racialized body clearly spoke to his identity and was foregrounded as such: “cheek bones that belonged on a Mayan bas-relief and dark deep-set eyes,” his tall, dark, and indeed very handsome body was compared by critics “to a bull, an eagle.” But Limón also insisted on the particular and valuable dance features of the male body, as he seemed to join this sharp sense of dance maleness to his Mexican identity as well.

Says Deborah Jowett: “During the years he built a career, male dancing had to be distinguished from the female in order to give it credibility as a profession. In an article entitled ‘The Virile Dance,’ Limón took a swipe at ballet, which was degraded at birth, he said, by its association with the ‘high born sycophants and courtiers’ surrounding Louis XIV and later guilty of a ‘feminization of technique.’” If, in the current moment, we allow Limón this indulgence in his masculinity, I suggest that we are seeing here a rehearsal – through an idiom of the body and dance genres – of the very masculinist Mexican Revolution’s overturning of the Porfirio Díaz regime’s sycophantic relationship to an “effete” French haute culture, to be replaced after the Revolution by an overcompensating emphasis on a masculinized identity.

Most of his career emphasized an abstract modernist dance, but one (as I have suggested implicitly) keyed on his Mexican American identity and sense of struggle. But such an identity soon took explicit dance form. For example, he explicitly modeled some of his otherwise modernist dance moves and poses on the Spanish/Mexican bullfighter even when the particular dance had nothing to do with such a figure. To him, the bullfight “was a dance – profound, formal, and elegant.” But by 1939 this Other identity was explicitly emerging in dance.
In that year he choreographed and was principal dancer in a new work called *Danzas Mexicanas*. It must be noted that this dance was performed not in New York but in California, at Mills College in Oakland, as if to return Limón in full cultural force to that state with its complicated significance for him.\(^{24}\) Other such dances would follow, principally *La Malinche* (1947), where Limón comes to critical terms with what he called his sense of guilt – on his Spanish masculine side – over the Spanish conquest of indigenous Mexico, particularly of its women. In Limón’s revisionary rendition of this historical, mythic, foundational story, Malinche, the Indian woman who became Cortez’s lover and counselor, “comprehends and loves” the “oppositional forces” of Indian and Spaniard and is “burdened by guilt. She is a traitor to her people, but then, in Limón’s version of the story, she joins forces with ‘El Indio’ and together they defeat ‘the Conquistador’.”\(^{25}\) In this rendering, Limón anticipates a revisionary critical posture toward *la malinche* – or in Nahuatl, *Malintzin* – in current Chicana feminist criticism.\(^{26}\) But this now emergent and critical Mexican identity would take a long and transnational step further.

In the mid-1930s Limón met Miguel Covarrubias, the great Mexican polymath of the arts, at an after-theater dinner party. Covarrubias was a member of a Mexican artistic intelligentsia that visited and in some cases took up residence in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s both to be abreast of the modernist arts/intellectual scene in the city, but also to lend that scene its very nationalist and indigenous Mexican perspective. Elsewhere, I have discussed the particulars of this artistic and intellectual traffic between Mexico and New York and the critical role played by Covarrubias in its development.\(^{27}\)

One might very much like to say that Limón then became an active participant in the Mexican circle of Covarrubias in the city and that this circle played a role in inspiring his choreography of *Danzas Mexicanas* and *La Malinche*. Yet, there is no evidence in Limón’s memoirs or elsewhere that such a substantial and lasting relationship developed. The meeting with Covarrubias appeared to have been brief and singular at that time, especially since Covarrubias was actually back living in Mexico City, and it is very likely that Limón met Covarrubias – and very briefly – during one of the latter’s quick visits to New York to deal with his many residual commitments.\(^{28}\) Limón would not see Covarrubias again until 1950, but this next meeting would be of great significance for the issues at hand in this essay.

Among his very many artistic activities, Covarrubias had been appointed Director of the Dance Department of the National Institute of Fine Arts. Always the Mexican nationalist, but also always the visionary energetic innovator, Covarrubias wanted Mexican dancers to move beyond both Mexican folkloric dancing and the European ballet to articulate Mexican identity within a modernist idiom that would push the boundaries of form while offering a national content. With this vision, he remembered and had been monitoring the activities of José Limón and invited him to come to Mexico not only to dance, but also to instruct aspiring young Mexican dancers in the dance synthesis that he had created in the
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United States between modernism and *mexicanidad*. As Williams notes, Miguel knew he was taking a chance inviting *yanquis* to instruct Mexicans. That one of these *yanquis* was Mexican American and the exemplar of world modern dance no doubt made the task easier, although even here there was an element of risk, for such Mexicans are *de afuera* (outsiders) in more than one sense. Their mutual risk paid off handsomely, for the project was a huge success. The Mexican public and its intelligenstä received Limón and modern dance with great enthusiasm. Limón and his New York dancers – but now also joined by newly trained Mexicans – danced at the famous Palacio de Bellas Artes to full houses. He revisited Mexico three more times through 1952, creating new dances at the institute on Mexican themes, working closely with Covarrubias, who designed some of the sets, but also with composers Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Reyes – both figures in the New York days – among other Mexican artists. These new productions included *Los Cuatro Soles* (The Four Sons), *Tonanatzintla*, *Diálogo*, and *Redesas*, but Limón and his dancers also performed *La Malinche*, a courageous, audacious act in Mexico given its revisionary treatment of *la malinche* female figure. These productions in turn required extensive research and writing on Mexican cultural history by cadres of young intellectuals all carefully instructed and supervised by Covarrubias and Limón. Perhaps of longer lasting significance, Limón, always with the active participation of Covarrubias, established his name within the most influential intellectual and artistic circles of Mexico, leaving behind a cadre of dancers and choreographers who continued to carry on his work.

Not satisfied with this great success, these two reunited *mexicanos* then arranged for other young Mexican dancers to come to the United States for instruction under Limón, as well as to perform on their own. “Bellas Artes wowed” American audiences; “the best loved of their performance pieces was *Los Cuatro Soles* for which Limón had done the choreography, Miguel, the sets and costumes, and Carlos Chávez the orchestration.” The production displayed, in other words, the best of Greater Mexico at that time and difficult to surpass even today. According to one reviewer, *Cuatro Soles* “represented a new peak of accomplishment in Mexican theatre dance and augured still greater accomplishments by this formidable trio.”

Miguel Covarrubias did not accompany his young dancers for this triumphant return to the United States. The ugly politics in the United States that stained so much of American culture reached him as well. He was denied a visa. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had discovered that Covarrubias was on the list of supporters for Lázaro Cárdenas’s “Americanos Por la Paz” conference in Mexico in 1951; that he also endorsed the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held in New York in 1949; that he had taken into his home an old New York friend, Professor Maurice Swadesh of Columbia University, after he emigrated to Mexico fleeing HUAC persecution; and that he had hidden the communist organizer Arnoldo Martínez Verdugo from the Mexican police in his home after a violent demonstration
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in 1952. In 1943 the US Embassy in Mexico filed a report to the Secretary of State listing Miguel along with Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros as individuals who “may drop their socialism . . . while others may seek other means of bringing about the world revolution.” Some of these “charges” were true. Covarrubias could certainly not be described as radical or revolutionary in his outlook, and nor could José Limón, but neither shied away from endorsing and actively supporting progressive causes. But in the United States of the 1950s even tepid endorsements could ruin lives.

Miguel Covarrubias continued his active cultural life in Mexico in close touch with his colleagues in New York to the end of his days in 1957. Limón also continued to develop his dance career in New York (and Connecticut) until his death in 1972. New York had done so much for each man, but New York and therefore the United States was also enlarged by their presence. For both, but certainly for Limón, this reciprocal enlargement occurred in the context of a historical and ongoing relationship between what Américo Paredes called “Greater Mexico” and the United States, a relationship born in war and hostility and always encumbered by animosity, suspicion, repressions, and racial offense even as, on occasion, moments of amity were also found. Indeed, a less than politically candid approach to these relationships might veer in the direction of amity, the rhetoric of “good neighbors,” or “the enormous vogue of things Mexican” in the United States. The Mexican “culture industry” of this time, in which Covarrubias played a central role, has been the object of a left-critique recently for its masking effect on Mexico’s continuing political and economic inequalities and its complicity with dominant sectors of the United States.

Limón returned to the United States from Mexico a seemingly changed man, changed seemingly as a result of Miguel Covarrubias. It is wholly instructive that in his memoirs Limón offers us a separate chapter at the end called simply “Covarrubias,” summarizing his activities with his good friend while in Mexico. Undoubtedly this second and much longer moment with Covarrubias in the latter’s home country greatly influenced Limón. In a letter to Rosa Covarrubias, he says,

I have not recovered from the impact of Mexico, and the Covarrubiases . . . I look out the window on Woodland Ave., an old and familiar sight to me for two decades, and suddenly I am a stranger here and I say, “What in the world are you doing here? Go on home. Go back.” . . . I have always been a torn man. Pulled apart and asunder in many ways by one thing and another and now more than ever the conflict is greater because where at one time I only had dim memories, now I have seen it. And it makes me tremble, because my safe little world is no more. And I have to start all over again.

Ann Vachon has traced what she calls the “Mexican” ambivalence in Limón’s life and its expression in his dance, but suggests that the journeys to Mexico resolved the problem, and the above quotation would seem to support this
view. However, one suspects that Limón is being Mexican-courteous to his former hosts and giving them perhaps a bit too much credit. The record is clear that prior to this visit to Mexico, Limón had been contending with his identity all of his life. His memories about Mexico may indeed have been dim, but his memories about Texas, Arizona, and especially Los Angeles, California were not. They had been merely conflicted, needing and demanding gradual articulation and resolution, a resolution that Limón was finally able to make explicit in 1939 in *Danzas Mexicanas* back in California only a year after reconciling with his father, which is also to say with his home culture. *Danzas Mexicanas* was followed shortly after by *La Malinche*. It did not take Mexico to create this clear sense of his Mexican identity and his conflict with the United States, although it did reactivate them: as he says, they are now “greater.”

What does appear to be missing in this otherwise remarkable life is José Limón connecting with other Latina/os in common struggle throughout his entire life, although it is entirely possible that he began writing his memoirs because of the growing cultural consciousness of Latina/os in the 1960s, especially given the dearth of good readings on Latina/os at that moment. His memoir says nothing to this effect, but further research may establish such linkages. It is nevertheless a sad irony that Limón was very ill during the 1960s and died in 1972 just as Latina/o communities were beginning to acquire this greater self-consciousness, principally through their youth. One can now only imagine Limón identifying and training young Mexican American but also New York Puerto Rican dancers in the same way he had trained the young dancers of national Mexico in the 1950s.

José Limón responded to the social and racial dominance of the United States, and did so through an artistic valorization of his body and his native culture, a response that simultaneously engaged and enlarged the cutting-edge movement of artistic culture at that moment, which is to say, in short, modernism. Moreover, Limón’s accomplishments were not solely based on any regional and hermetic sense of Mexican American identity, but also on displacement and transnationality. As such he joins that company of “ethnic” intellectuals who though rooted in their native communities, nevertheless engage the world and bring that experience back to bear on their communities of origin and their struggles. As Paul Gilroy has noted of W. E. B. Dubois and Richard Wright, but also of African American life in general:

What was initially felt to be a curse – the curse of homelessness or the curse of exile – gets repossessed. It becomes affirmed and is reconstructed as the basis of a privileged standpoint from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely. It should be obvious that this unusual perspective has been forged out of the experiences of racial subordination.

Within Mexican America, one thinks of figures like Américo Paredes, our foremost literary intellectual, who though south Texan spent such fruitful time...
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in Asia and also in the great Mexican community of Chicago, as well as in West Virginia witnessing white poverty. One thinks of Tomás Rivera’s migrant farm workers and their refrain, “When we arrive, when we arrive.” One thinks of John Phillip Santos and his autobiographical journeying from Mexico to San Antonio, to Notre Dame, and now to José Limón’s New York and, like some Ishmael survived, now coming to us with his engaging account of that journey.

Latina/o cultural studies has encouraged mostly the critical analysis of various forms of Latina/o popular collective culture, but also analyses of the cultural forces that repress Latina/os. My earlier work, Dancing with the Devil, certainly worked within these parameters even as it sought to incorporate new theoretical tendencies. In keeping with an evolving cultural studies practice, in the present essay I have sought to expand this charter even further, particularly by turning to the political role of elite dance culture within the biography of a rare individual; he, from a subaltern heritage, who nonetheless danced within such an elite dance culture and its concomitant upper and upper middle class Anglo-American society in the United States; but also he, the figure in transnational motion, who danced from California to New York and from New York to Mexico City, and to other world capitals, including Madrid. But such a figure was ultimately conditioned, as Gilroy says, by racial subordination, so was not such a dance simultaneously his own dance with the devil even as he danced for the enhancement of his native and transnational community?

Notes

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1 José E. Limón, Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).


3 The various essays in the During and Storey volumes offer these critiques and expansions of cultural studies.


The Devil and the Dance


7 As such this study also stands in difference to “border cultural studies” which principally focuses on literary texts written by elite representatives of those sectors. While evoking the “border” and the “transnational,” such border cultural studies has very little to say about national Mexico. See, for example, the work of José Saldívar, Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press).


9 Limón, An Unfinished Memoir, p. 3.

10 Ibid, pp. 8–9.

11 Ibid, p. 10.

12 Ibid, p. 15.

13 Ibid, p. 13. Limón blamed his father for his mother’s death as a result of giving birth to several children. When she died, Limón [the son] took her gold wedding band from her finger, “irrationally,” he says (pp. 11–12).

14 Ibid, p. 15.

15 Ibid, p. 16.


17 Quoted in Deborah Jowitt’s “Introduction” to Limón’s Unfinished Memoir, p. ix.


19 Limón, Unfinished Memoir, p. 16.


21 Ibid, p. xiv.


24 Ibid, p. xv. Limón had danced in the state the previous year in Los Angeles, where he also had reconciliation with his father and saw the rest of his extended family for the first time since he had left (pp. 86–7).


28 Limón, Unfinished Memoir, p. 125.


31 Williams, Covarrubias, p. 193.

32 Ibid, pp. 188–90.


35 Limón, Unfinished Memoir, p. 188.
José E. Limón

36 Vachon, “Limón in Mexico.”
The Everyday Civil War: Migrant Labor, Capital, and Latina/o Studies

Nicholas De Genova

The establishment of a normal working day is . . . the product of a protracted and more or less concealed civil war.

(Karl Marx, Capital, p. 412)

The constitutive role of antagonism and struggle between labor and capital defines some of the decisive parameters of everyday life, and thus ought to be central to critical inquiry in Latina/o studies. In order to elucidate some aspects of this proposition, this essay draws from my ethnographic research in Chicago during the mid-1990s, in an industrial workplace that I call Caustic Scrub where I was employed as an instructor of English as a Second Language (ESL). The contradictions of workplace literacy that arise from the place of “training” in labor discipline had diverse ramifications for my own institutionally mediated social situation and practice, both as a workplace-based ESL instructor and as an ethnographer. While I was teaching three ESL courses at Caustic Scrub during the autumn of 1995, the institutionally embedded contradictions between these disciplinary aspects of workplace “training” and my own critical pedagogical and also ethnographic aspirations became quite pronounced. During this period, of course, I spent a great deal of time at this workplace each week, and came to know a large number of people who comprised the relatively small, predominantly Mexican/migrant and virtually all-male workforce. Indeed, I probably was teaching all of the more than two-thirds of the workers who were officially designated as “limited English proficient,” all of whom had migrated from Mexico. The particularities of the institutional setting in which I was working are especially salient.

Caustic Scrub was a kind of industrial service station, devoted to cleaning chemical products out of tanker trucks that had delivered their cargos and now had to be prepared for subsequent loads; in addition to truck tank cleaning, Caustic Scrub was also engaged with cleaning chemicals out of other types of industrial transport containers, and of course, chemical waste disposal, as well as subsidiary operations involving tank demolition and disposal. Although this was
not a large workplace, Caustic Scrub was a corporation with operations across the United States, and the Chicago plant was one of the company’s largest installations; furthermore, it was certainly one of the busiest, owing to Chicago’s geographical centrality on the national scale as a transportation hub. The plant maintained three regular shifts, and operated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There was considerable variability among the chemical materials that workers had to handle and the processes required for each job, as well as variability across shifts, and likewise, extensive variability in the sizes of the jobs, the corresponding durations of the cleaning processes, and the content and proportions of often “caustic” cleaning agents required for each tank to be serviced. All told, this was a fairly complicated business, and a potentially deadly one. It was also a remarkable exemplar of “dirty work.” Some of Caustic Scrub’s competitors were unionized, but the Caustic management was fiercely anti-union; their competitiveness and profitability apparently depended upon it. Furthermore, there were far more severe “quality” standards and specifications now (in 1995) than had been in place only ten years prior, imposed both by federal regulations as well as transnational corporate customers.

The ESL courses that I taught at Caustic Scrub were also different from others I had taught elsewhere. In general, I was paid by a workplace literacy program that employed instructors and sent us to teach at the workplace sites of the program’s corporate clients. In the case of Caustic Scrub, however, my services as an ESL instructor had been hired by a private consultancy that had been contracted by Caustic, minimally to regularize its procedures, but also prospectively, however implausibly, to try to straighten out some of the Chicago plant’s most glaring health and safety violations.

My supervisor at this consulting firm, Harold, informed me that Caustic Scrub had literally no official, documented procedures for its labor processes, whatsoever. The firm had therefore been contracted to produce step-by-step job descriptions that would comprise a practical procedures manual, as well as related job-training materials. The company’s existing safety policy manual had been devised purely and singularly for federal regulators in the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The manual had never been distributed, nor read at all by any of the personnel in the Chicago plant (neither the production workers nor even the management), and would not have been comprehensible to most, even if it had. On the one occasion when the company pretended to comply with OSHA’s requirement of safety training, some fifty people were corralled into one small room for a day and a half. At that time, workers were paid “incentives” for attendance in the training sessions, and promised “bonuses — pending performance,” but they were never informed of any clear or definitive criteria by which to earn those safety bonuses. In the opinion of my supervisor at the consultancy, Caustic Scrub’s existing labor process was fairly anarchic. From the standpoints of health and safety, the procedures that were actually in practice were, in Harold’s words, sometimes “excessive,” other times “insufficient”; as he put it, there was “total variability.” Likewise, the recycling requirements of
the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had served to encourage the company to intensify its circumvention of health and safety regulations in the interests of reducing production costs. As a result of over-recycling, there was a perennial depletion of the efficacy of the plant’s “caustic soda.” By over-using the caustic cleaning agent, the company routinely ran the risk of releasing contaminated containers as “clean.”

Caustic Scrub’s major operation in the Chicago plant was considered to be “a productivity problem.” “Productivity,” in this context, was measured in tanks-cleaned-per-worker, as well as tanks-cleaned-per-shift. The overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking Mexican/migrant workforce in the Chicago plant had to regularly interact with an overwhelmingly English-speaking population of truck drivers who delivered their tanks to Caustic for a scrubbing. The tank truck drivers were frequently impatient, in part because they were not ordinarily paid for delays that might occur at the “tank wash”; they were paid per load, and the necessary intermittent processing of the tanks was treated as incidental. It is quite plausible to presume, moreover, that many of these truck drivers were also frequently impatient if not outwardly hostile toward the Mexican/migrant workers in the Chicago plant because they were racist whites. Several contacts in the company’s management as well as the consulting firm, for instance, reported to me that the predominantly white truck drivers were commonly inclined to blame delays in delivery on “the dumb Mexicans” at Caustic Scrub. Furthermore, such remarks were often accompanied by characterizations of the truck drivers as commonly speaking with “a heavy Southern drawl,” which was considered by Caustic management to be a further impediment to “efficient communication.”

This standard managerial conceit of placing partial blame for the “communication problem” onto the stereotypical figure of the truck drivers as “racist Southern rednecks” or “dumb white trash,” however, by implication, served to deflect critical attention from the more systemic racism of the company’s employment strategies. The handling of industrial chemicals generally entailed the requisite legalism of extensive written materials (typically, in English only) that were highly specific and technical, and generated in print so small that it was barely legible. The Mexican/migrant workers at Caustic had been employed in this dangerous work, at least in part, precisely because they could not read these precautionary materials about health and safety hazards. Given the exceptionally high risks to the workers’ physical well-being, coupled with the company’s concerted efforts to evade health and safety regulations in the interests of productivity and the realization of high profits, it was hardly surprising that despite a predominantly Spanish-speaking workforce in the Chicago plant, the company had consistently resisted any written communication in Spanish. The company’s racism left the Mexican/migrant workers to discover these lethal risks the old-fashioned way.

During my first class sessions at Caustic, I became quickly aware of just how lethal these risks truly were. Using an occupational safety warning poster that was ubiquitous in the workplace (due to an OSHA regulation), but which existed only in English and the content of which had never been presented to them in
any comprehensible manner, I asked workers in my classes to identify the risk index numbers that they were accustomed to encounter in their typical everyday work situations. Although the index they commonly encountered for Reactivity tended to be low, they were nevertheless occasionally handling “materials that can become unstable at high temperatures and pressures . . . and may react with water.” For Flammability, the workers identified the number 3 as the index with which they were most familiar, registering a “serious hazard” as they were handling “materials capable of ignition under almost all normal temperature conditions.” In the category of Health, the number 4 was an index that they repeatedly encountered on a daily basis; it indicated a “severe hazard,” the maximum hazard in this category. I explained that, according to the warning poster, this meant “major or permanent damage may result from single or repeated exposures,” and furthermore, that materials carrying that rating could be “life-threatening if exposed even one time only.” The workers merely laughed cynically. Edmundo, a 25-year-old migrant from a small rural town in Guanajuato who had been in the United States five years and had been working at Caustic for four of them, concluded, “Well, we’re already dead.”

Concerning this quite elementary and essential matter of life and death, the course participants went on to relate to me how a year and a half earlier, a worker had died after only one week on the job; he had fallen into a tank filled with “stripper” at a temperature of 150 degrees and was burnt to death. Likewise, only two months prior to this discussion, a worker had not been wearing a security harness while standing atop a tank that he was cleaning, and he slipped and fell to the concrete floor. As the hard hat he was wearing had no strap to secure it, he cracked his skull. In light of these men’s intimate acquaintance with such grisly tragedies, the palpable threat of injury and death nevertheless implicitly affirmed precisely the contrary of Edmundo’s wry pronouncement: whereas others had indeed been killed at Caustic, they were able amidst unnumbered daily hazards and risks to take comfort in the visceral fact that they were still very much alive. Indeed, many of these men had even come to exude a definite inclination to endure the severities of their work without abiding by various safety precautions. In light of such a potentially disastrous masculinist ethos of audacious disregard for certain safety concerns, Edmundo’s boldly fatalistic remark, and his implicit stance of effectively laughing in the face of death, can be understood as the expression of a will to transpose these men’s extraordinary vulnerability into a kind of defiant but empty bravado. The masculinist recklessness of many of the workers notwithstanding, however, the overwhelming inattention to safety training and protections was only possible, ultimately, due to flagrant managerial negligence and a deliberate mandate for high productivity at the expense of any serious consideration of the workers’ safety. From this vantage point, the male workers’ postures of fearlessness and stoic perseverance become evidence of a sometimes deadly complicity between the compulsions of their masculinity with their own exploitation and their subordination to the mandates of their employers.
The “Chicago problem” at Caustic Scrub, from the vantage point of corporate management, was entirely a “productivity problem” that was largely accounted for in terms of delays attributed to a “communication problem.” The “communication problem,” moreover, was identifiable as a “worker problem.” Above all, for corporate management on both ends of the transaction, the “communication problem” to be remedied, finally, was identified to be a “Mexican problem.” Thus, at Caustic Scrub, more than any of the other workplaces where I was employed over the preceding two years, workplace ESL – the production of language – was plainly equated with the “remediation” of a “problem” of “productivity.” This had already become strikingly clear in an early “consultation” session with William, a Caustic vice president who periodically visited the Chicago plant from corporate headquarters. William was a polished corporate executive who was accomplished at speaking in euphemisms. He explained that Caustic Scrub was concerned about “untapped resources in Chicago [that were] restricted by the people’s inability to communicate,” confirming that Caustic’s customers regularly reported, “We do have problems communicating with the Chicago plant.” “Untapped resources,” in William’s distinctly managerial idiom, signified not merely missed opportunities but also productivity that was deemed to be systematically “too low.” Indeed, I was made aware that the funding for ESL courses at Caustic was going to be productivity-monitored; if the productivity statistics did not improve markedly with the presumed increase in “English proficiency” among the Mexican/migrant workers (presumably, to be produced by workplace ESL “training”), then corporate headquarters would discontinue funding.

The ESL courses that I would be teaching at Caustic Scrub had been preceded by an earlier course that had been prematurely discontinued when local (Chicago) management felt compelled to repeatedly cancel the classes due to the exigencies of “production demands.” Nevertheless, William assured me that corporate management (in headquarters) were eager to begin “training” and were encouraged by what they perceived to be greater “openness” among the workers who had participated in the previous class. Meanwhile, he went on to explain, the company had instituted a new policy of no longer hiring people “who can’t speak and read English.” Job applicants were now to be screened in “pre-application” by the receptionist, and then their English would be verified again in a post-application “interview.” William was confident that the company was beginning to get past this “communication problem,” furthermore, because as he went on to explain, “We have been getting a higher quality applicant pool, because we’ve started offering better wages . . . We proactively applied a union-wage scale in order to prevent any kind of organized labor activity.” Shortly thereafter, I happened to be in the office when the acting plant manager of the Chicago operation, a relatively young US-born Mexican woman named Bárbara, was hiring two young Latinos – one Mexican, one Puerto Rican, both very probably US-born – who were both fluent in English. Largely because of her bilingual capabilities, Bárbara effectively operated as the ultimate authority over the everyday organization of labor subordination and discipline for a predominantly
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Spanish-speaking (Mexican/migrant) male workforce. “On pay day, people like to ask how much you made,” Bárbara explained, and then explicitly warned the new employees not to ever discuss their pay with the other workers. These newly hired English-speaking workers, whom William referred to as “a higher quality applicant pool,” were indeed starting the job at higher wages than the company was paying its Mexican/migrant workforce, many of whom had already been working at Caustic for several years. Two months later, Mario, a worker in one of my classes, referred to this practice of management: “Well, I don’t know, maybe it’s discrimination – but you can be working here for years, and then some white guy [güero] will bring along a brother or cousin or whatever, and that person immediately goes into some cleaner job, while the rest of us are all doing the shittiest work.” To this, the following week, Mario added, “My uncle has been here seven years; I’m here four years – we have more seniority, but still make less money than others on their first day of work, just because they speak English. We know they [the bosses] pay them more, even when they don’t know anything about the job.”

Indeed, even during the first week of instruction, the workers who participated in my classes had already begun discussing the evidence of this new hiring policy. “The company is only hiring people who speak English now,” Mateo explained, noting that job applicants who did not speak English fluently were being turned away, even if they had previously worked in the plant and already knew the job well. Manuel added, “They’re hiring whites [güeros], or Blacks [prietos], or little gang-bangers [gangueritos] – and they all quit the job after three days because they don’t want to get their hands dirty!”

The resentment of the Mexican/migrant workers for the company’s discrimination against people like themselves (including their own former co-workers), who did not speak English fluently, articulated a sense of vulnerability that frequently manifested itself in terms of contempt for other workers whose English language could potentially be used to discipline and even displace them from their jobs. The Mexican/migrant workers frequently articulated a poignant critique of the company’s intentions to render them redundant, on the basis of a stubborn rejection of the workers’ Spanish language as a “lack” of English. The workers had been remarkably resilient in their accommodation to the lethal severities of the work, and readily denounced this effectively racist affront to their valiant perseverance and self-sacrifice. For precisely these reasons, however, what revealed itself to be a rather persistent inclination to disparage other workers’ incapacity to endure, or refusal to tolerate, the particularly dangerous and potentially brutal character of labor subordination at Caustic Scrub, entailed an excessively masculinist (yet always ambivalent) compromise that these male workers sustained with their own exploitation. Likewise, their critique often emerged already entangled in its own racialized contradictions as well (cf. De Genova 2005: 147–209).

A few weeks later, a related discussion ensued in another class after one of the course participants had been abruptly removed from class for a disciplinary matter. In their exasperation with management, the rest of the course participants
commenced to address a variety of issues. “They think that if you don’t speak English, then you don’t think,” declared Leonardo, who had been working at Caustic for six years. Then, as if he was incredulously reckoning with his own realization, marveling just at that moment at this racist absurdity, and wanting to impress upon me the preposterousness of it, he said again, emphatically, “Really, they believe we can’t think!” Benedicto, who had been working five years at Caustic and was the shift leader among the tank cleaners, elaborated the critique further: “The bosses themselves don’t know how to do the work – they have to ask us. There was one guy, a Tejano [a Texas Mexican], and he spoke perfect English, and Spanish – well, he didn’t know Spanish so well, but he knew English – but all he knew of the job was blasting [a simple demolition job] – after four years here! If you told him to clean a tank, he’d have no idea, and he always used to ask us how to do things!” Leonardo responded with a knowing chuckle, and pointed out the obvious – “Speaking English doesn’t keep you from being a damned fool [pendejo]!”

“They can get people who know how to speak English, who even know how to read and write English! – That doesn’t make them intelligent,” Mario resumed the critique with renewed indignation. “And it doesn’t mean they know how to work . . . Anyway, some of the bosses themselves don’t even know how to read, like Mike – you could bring him this piece of paper, he’d look at it and he doesn’t know!” Indeed, in a meeting with management, I had heard Mike, a white supervisor, admit quite candidly and in the presence of William (the executive from corporate headquarters), that Juan Carlos, one of the Mexican workers who migrated at a young age and had attended high school in the United States, could probably do better on an English test than he could himself. Although the company now appeared to be determined to hire only English-speaking workers, there was in fact a consensus across the divide between workers and management in which all recognized that working at Caustic Scrub was not really about literacy. Indeed, it was precisely this that made allegations of Mike’s “illiteracy,” as well as his own admissions of deficient literacy, quite beside the point.

The distinctions that Mario made are crucially meaningful: one could be “intelligent”; one could be “intelligent for the job”; and one could “know how to work” – none of which was reducible to either of the others. Clearly, the practical value of being specifically “intelligent for the job” was considered infinitely more pertinent than some abstract measure of “intelligence” in general. More important still, “knowing how to work” – which was very much related to “wanting to work,” or being willing to “get your hands dirty” – were all masculinist qualifications that the Mexican/migrant workers who persevered at Caustic invoked to distinguish themselves as a group (and the specific commodity that was their racialized labor-power) from others whom they admonished as too soft (or simply too “lazy”) to withstand the labor requirements in this workplace.

“You see, Nicolás,” continued Benedicto, who had been in the United States 15 years, addressing himself directly to me now, “this is what we need English
for – because every boss in this company is a stupid motherfucker, and they’re all full of shit! . . . We’re not really going to learn English when we’re all Mexican here and speak only Spanish, much less the older guys [some of whom were already nearing retirement age, and had never had any formal education, even as children in Mexico] – but we could use English to defend ourselves with these fuckers!” To this, Mario, who had been working at Caustic for four of his ten years in the United States, added, “and we could use it to go somewhere else and get a better job.” Leonardo was quick to agree with this sentiment. “Yes, that’s true. This is dirty work, but there’s a lot of dirty work, and some is much dirtier. You go to any one of those places, and you’ll see the one who doesn’t speak English doing all the dirtiest jobs. And if you have two guys start the same day in the same place, and one speaks English and the other doesn’t, the one who speaks English will always get the cleaner job, and the one who can’t speak English gets sent to the dirtier one. And we know this work is better paid in other places – the drivers tell us, it just comes up in talking. We know they’re taking advantage of us here.”

On one occasion while Bárbara was speaking to one of the ESL classes, Patrick, one of the white supervisors, was present and chided her, teasingly, “This is English class – so speak English to ’em!” One of the course participants, Manuel, turned to Patrick with a sarcastic and slightly threatening smile, and sternly told him in English to leave them alone. “If two Mexican people want to speak Spanish, that’s their business,” Manuel asserted, “and anyway, you should learn some Spanish.” Then, shifting to Spanish in order to demonstrate his point, he muttered contemptuously, “¡pinche maricón! [fucking faggot!]” The rest of the class openly laughed at Patrick in affirmation of Manuel’s intervention. As a supervisor, Patrick of course had recourse to other means for settling accounts with workers with whom he had grievances. Not more than a week or so thereafter, I happened to be present on one occasion when Patrick casually but meaningfully inquired of Bárbara, “So if you’re in charge now, can I fire four or five of ’em?” She replied without any hesitation, “Yep! – We’re cleaning house!” Three hours later that same afternoon, it was Manuel himself who was summoned into the office – not to be fired (at least, not on this occasion), but to make a telephone call informing one of his co-workers of his dismissal.

During the first week of classes, as if to reaffirm that participation in the English classes was indeed “work,” and as such, subject to the management’s scrutiny and surveillance, Bárbara announced at the beginning of each of the three classes that an employee time clock was going to be installed in the conference room for the workers who were attending ESL class. She explained that if they should fail to punch the clock, they would not get paid — condescendingly repeating three times during the course of her announcement, “You’re not kids anymore! [¡Ya no son niños!].” Bárbara assured the workers, moreover, that if they neglected to punch in, she would show them no mercy; she warned, “And don’t come cryin’ to me with ‘I’m sorry’ or anything else!” The workers who participated in the ESL course were already perfectly accustomed to punching
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time-cards in the company clock; they simply denounced the new requirement to punch yet another time clock in the office as “just a lot of bullshit [puro pedo].” Still, they never considered it particularly extraordinary or terribly intrusive. Nonetheless, the installation of a special time clock to accompany the workplace ESL courses was yet another technique by which management could, in effect, communicate to the workers: “We, the management, control this English class. You, the workers, are here on company time. We pay for it, we pay you, and if you don’t punch the clock, we’ll cheat you out of your pay for class time. Even in the classroom, you’re working for us, and under our control.”

For their part, some of the workers appreciated the opportunity to avail themselves of some of the “luxuries” of the “conference room” – including a coffee maker, and occasionally some leftover lunch spreads from catered managerial meetings. On one occasion, there were cookies on the counter that probably belonged to someone who worked in the office. Manuel helped himself, and others teased him that he might get caught in the act of this transgression. Manuel replied, defiantly but matter-of-factly, and also pedagogically, “It’s the product of our labor – all of this is the product of our labor.” Somewhat startled, I seized the opportunity to teach Manuel’s critical insight in English, and wrote it on the chalkboard. “Watch out, Nicolás,” Mateo said, now in a more conspiratorial tone, “Doug [the white plant manager] will come in here and say we’re all a bunch of communists!” I agreed, and we all laughed as I erased it. “We’d better be careful what we say in here,” Manuel then remarked, only half-jokingly, “because maybe they have a tape recorder hidden somewhere under the table!” Although the management had in fact repeatedly sought to assign me a dubious role in the service of the company’s surveillance of the workers’ discontent, the workers’ light-hearted jokes served to underscore the sheer absurdity of the company’s compulsion to control every aspect of their working lives in the plant. In this sporadic and fragmentary manner, nonetheless, we intermittently managed to cultivate a fragile and beleaguered space for the ends of a critical dialogue about the workers’ everyday struggles in relation to the company’s overarching imperative to subordinate their labor for the purpose of maximizing productivity and profits.

Beyond the space of the classroom – indeed, beyond my modest ethnographic endeavors altogether – the Mexican/migrant workers at Caustic Scrub were immanently involved in the continuous, albeit inevitably partial, elaboration of a critical knowledge of their laborious everyday life. Notably, such “a critical knowledge of everyday life . . . not satisfied with merely uncovering and criticizing this real, practical life in the minutiae of social life [but rather] able to pass from the individual to the social . . . and vice versa” – these are precisely the terms in which Henri Lefebvre distinguished the very substance of Marxism (1991: 148). Theoretically, then, this essay underscores the extent to which all Latina/o studies scholarship fundamentally demands a critical analysis of capitalist class relations and the global dynamics of the capital–labor relation. It is however only with recourse to the irreducible specificities and contingencies of history – history
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both as a coagulation of legacies from the past and as it is lived and made in the present – that we may come to understand the particular ways that the capital–labor relation has been imposed and maintained, and that the general terms and conditions of capital accumulation have been and continue to be fought out by real human actors in particular places and times. Arguably, ethnography’s immersion in the seemingly prosaic textures of the everyday is a methodological technique distinctly well-suited to the task of excavating such struggles as they are made in the ever-fleeting present, as lived historicity. By examining in close ethnographic detail some of the crucial faultlines that defined the predicament of Mexican/migrant workers in an industrial workplace in Chicago, this essay has sought to demonstrate – as a central concern for Latina/o studies – the significance of the constitutive role of labor within and against capital (cf. Bonefeld 1995; Holloway 1995). For workers at Caustic Scrub (as well as other workplaces where I was employed and realized my ethnographic research), their most visceral sense of the meaningfulness of their experiences as “Latinas/os,” or more specifically as Mexican migrants – prominently including the discrimination and abuse they experienced on the basis of their (often undocumented) immigration status, their Spanish language, and their manifold racializations – were effectively inextricable in practice from their exploitation as workers. Moreover, the workers’ everyday struggles at Caustic Scrub (re)produced and also transformed the imminent conditions of possibility for both their subordination as labor for capital as well as their apparently mundane but nonetheless intractable insurgencies as labor against capital – as historical subjects making history, in other words, racialized migrant workers actively participating in the ongoing reconstitution of their social world. Latina/o studies, similarly, must cultivate and sustain its legacy as an insurgent intellectual and political project, forging its own distinctive labor both within and against the material and practical horizons of US imperialism and the global regime of capital accumulation.

Notes

1 This company name as well as all personal names in the ensuing text are fictive. Due to the fact that some of the people who have been my interlocutors in the larger research project are vulnerable to the punitive legal recriminations that could be brought to bear upon their undocumented immigration status, I have chosen to protect the anonymity of the people depicted here. Likewise, in the interests of protecting myself legally against any possible charges of breach of contract or confidentiality on the part of this company, where I was indirectly employed, I have opted to exclude or alter any extraneous details that could serve to identify this particular workplace.

2 For a more extended discussion of the politics of workplace “training” and second-language learning in a context of racialized migrant labor, see De Genova (2005: 13–55).

3 For a much longer and substantially different version of this essay, in which masculinity is subjected to considerably more prominent critical scrutiny, see De Genova (2006).

4 “Gang-banger” was the ubiquitous term used in English to refer to street gang members in Chicago, and is deployed here to convey the colloquial sense of the US-specific
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Spanish-language neologism *ganguero*. For a related discussion of this remark in terms of its implications for the racialized and generational politics of pan-Latino identification, see De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003: 95–106).


References


CHAPTER TEN

The Powers of Women’s Words: Oral Tradition and Performance Art

Yolanda Broyles-González

My very recent return to my ancestral homeland, the Sonoran desert, has opened the floodgates of memory. As my body moves through particular plant environments, the changing seasons, various neighborhoods I call(ed) home, the homes of relatives and friends, the rhythms of the day and night, the monsoon and the dry season, the intensity of borderlands politics, and my new workspace in the University of Arizona’s Women’s Studies Department, I find myself vividly remembering what seemed long forgotten or existing only as a dim recollection. I am startled every time I recollect. Typically, a memory emerges as I move about, as the body interacts with varied contexts. I have come to realize how powerfully memories are attached to places and that the “place” is the confluence of my body and its contexts. My body sometimes remembers things the mind has forgotten, for memory is tied to the senses. Sometimes it’s tactile, aural, oral (as taste or word), or visual. Sometimes the memory comes through the powerful aroma of gobernadora (creosote, the queen of desert medicinal herbs); something is retrieved from the vast memory system, a reconstructed fragment of past experience, filtered through the lens of the here and now. My mind is limited in what it can access; yet I know the bodily archive is unlimited. The mental limitation seems evident, for example, when the recollection is an ancient emotion without an accessible “rational” or “factual” component. The emotion inhabits my body.

I was raised in this desert, nurtured by the rich teachings and life examples of the oral tradition. Remembrance was practiced on a daily basis when I was growing up. It seems we practiced the memory arts at all times. Elders performed in living rooms and porches, sang songs for hours during road trips, dropped dichos to illuminate and guide our living circumstances. My father was a widely sought-after orator, a master of buen hablar, called upon to perform at community and home celebrations: Cinco de Mayo, Diesiceis de Septiembre, and other gatherings. At home he performed (a masculinist) borderlands history,
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replete with all the (men’s) names missing from my school history books. Typically, he would perform in the living room for whoever stepped through the door, while my mother cooked in the kitchen punctuating his discourse with head-shaking and an occasionally whispered “Creo que son mentiras.” It took me years to understand why a masculine history could never constitute “truth” nor raza women’s history. Her contra-decir was significant because it signaled the heterogeneities of the oral tradition. It challenged me to find her historia. Amidst the tensions of decir and contra-decir, of cantar and contra-cantar, the memory arts instructed us from childhood into adulthood and beyond. The school of life began with the arrullos and infant games (“riki ran, riki ran, los maderos de San Juan, piden pan y los dan . . .”); they progressed to the culinary arts that graced the kitchen table; they were an integral part of every celebration – the dancing, singing – and embraced historical discourses in the living room, and the healing arts that could help birth babies and cure us of susto. That encyclopedic orality provided the backdrop against which we understood “instruction” in school. “Los instruidos” who had attended school were a category that did not necessarily overlap with those regarded as “bien educadas/os.” “Good education” had nothing to do with K-12 or university training; buena educación was a designation earned by those versed in the practices of “respeto,” particularly vis-à-vis elders. The art of “saludar” was inculcated from birth: “Saluda, Mijita” was a perennial and essential life cue. Children in my household could be called upon to recite by heart: an ancient poem, a song, a tongue twister, answers to adivinanzas, or to join in the life art of making tamales and champurrado. The ancestors have left a rich legacy, and that legacy includes the social tools needed to access the profound depths of life, as well as to redress the profound wounds of colonial historical trauma.

What the living breadth of the oral tradition has held out to me is a connection to raza communities and an arsenal to counterbalance the distorted teachings of so much of print culture, particularly in print culture’s K-12 forms. I am a survivor of curricular assault and my research interests – following upon my doctorate in German studies – have for the most part gravitated heavily toward the extracurricular popular performance forms of the borderlands. During my decades of joint appointments in German and Chicana/o studies departments I felt most heavily drawn to the power of women’s spoken words that provided so much guidance and a tenuous stability within the social instability of growing up low income and of color. Of course, there were also powerful male performers, yet the gendered division of labor meant that I spent more time in women’s circles, especially during social and ceremonial gatherings.

I have recently come home to these desert circles even though I was absolutely certain – at age 19 – that this was the one place I would never return to. It reminded me too much of poverty, racism, sexism, and being a child and an adolescent. I regarded my time at Safford Jr. High, at Tucson High (where I began learning German), and at the University of Arizona as preliminaries to real life. I felt my entry into adulthood could only happen elsewhere. That elsewhere
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included 12 years of study in Germany at four German universities, a PhD from Stanford University. It included 19 years as a Chicana/o studies and German studies professor at the University of California, and four years before that as a professor at the University of Texas, San Antonio. In spite of all those libraries, all those books and all that reading and writing, in spite of my total immersion in print culture, I found myself always drawn back, as a visitor, to my Tucson community where people spoke and sang by heart, with no books or written materials; where the Yaqui ceremonial cycle beckoned me back every year.

In the course of time my life became a pendulum between print culture and oral tradition. I moved continually between writing and forms of culture disassociated from writing and reading. The more immersed I became in print culture the more I understood the counter-dynamics of orality. Spoken performed words always carried an incomparably greater power for me than that of printed words. Within the oral tradition words are always attached to living human beings and never to a disembodied paper. There has truly been no power greater in my life than the power of women’s words. Among these women I would include my mother, my grandmother, my aunts, godmothers, my mother’s comadres, my own comadres, and also some few very special teachers I had in high school and university. These women’s individual and collective words were largely patterned and informed by different forms of oral tradition. Among these forms of oral tradition I would highlight the performance of consejos (womanist life advice); historia (an oral spoken historical legacy that put my life in a larger context); dichos (sayings that sized up a situation for me and allow me to make good decisions). Dichos also convey powerful theoretical critique. My mother, the queen of dichos, for example, frequently stated: “Cada Maestrito tiene su Librito” (each little teacher has their own little book). That saying is all about the positionality and relativity of all knowledge. Also central are prayers, blessings, and ceremonial practices, the rituals of soulwork that sustain faith while building love, compassion, and the powers of endurance. Within the oral curriculum of the people’s university, furthermore, cuentos (storytelling) powerfully builds imagination and ethics; song and dance provide a means for expressing a gamut of social meanings and emotions. The power of women’s words is even memorialized in many corridos, for example, that encode the respect and authority accorded to mother’s words through fixed phrases such as: “Las palabras de una madre no se han de ver como quiera.” “A mother’s words are not to be taken lightly.”

Since time immemorial the native peoples of these lands have transmitted analytical, theoretical, and practical knowledge by heart and without writing. This has included knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, spirituality, birthing, agriculture, and other biological processes. In strongly oral cultures – such as those of Mexican borderland communities – language thus resonates with respect for the word, La Palabra. Numerous expressions in Spanish convey older Native American meanings concerning the word, La Palabra, and the importance accorded to La Palabra. Such expressions include, for example,
“cortar la palabra” (literally, to cut the word, meaning “to interrupt”). Then there is “pedir la palabra,” literally to “beg the word,” but which means “to ask to speak.” There is also “tener la palabra,” which literally denotes “to carry the word,” but what it really means is to be the person holding the honor of talking. An expression laden with cultural meaning is “tener palabra,” which literally states “to hold the word” but in fact measures your human value. “Tener palabra” means that your words match your actions, that your actions honor your words, that you walk the talk and are thus an honorable person and fully deserving of respect. Within ceremonial circles such as that of the conchero (aka “Aztec dancers”) the designated carrier of “La Palabra” designates highest authority and responsibility. The word is sacred and only the most meritorious become carriers of La Palabra.

I always tell people that my real education began after I received my Stanford PhD. It was then that I determined to spend more time with my grandmother, one of the great wise women in my life. My education had exposed me to great amounts of knowledge, but to relatively little wisdom. By the time university professors reach wisdom, if in fact they ever do, they are usually retired and gone. Wisdom is a deeper form of insight than knowledge. It is an ability to see the connections between everything, to discern what is important in any situation and to act on it accordingly. My grandmother could not read or write, but she could remember everything people said. She was a brilliant medicine woman who could heal with intuition, prayer, and plants. Her memory catalogue of healing plants numbered in the hundreds. After I embarked upon my unofficial PhD with her I realized it would have no end. It was a perpetual school of life and life lessons. My mother also was a great teacher, but I regarded her as a beginning professor and not yet a full professor in the school of life. My mother was too active as a laborer to have the time to teach as much as my grandmother did. From my mother I did, however, learn about the precariousness of wage labor, and about working-class labor struggles. She was the first person in our family to leave the millennial self-sufficiency of land-based rural work, and to migrate from the land to the cities to become a wage earner. She worked her life long as a sewing machine operator in various sweatshops and she frequently talked to me about economic injustice. Ultimately, I witnessed the power of her words in action when she helped unionize a Tucson sweatshop.

What were the other powers of my women elders’ words? To begin with, my women elders taught me the unofficial and unwritten history of indigenous borderlands women. That unwritten history was my own history, which I never read about in the K-12 curriculum. I never found my own face or the faces of my people in school books. But I knew I existed through powerful stories handed down in the family. Those stories became woman-centered frameworks, templates, and models for me. With women as chief authority and power-wielder within family life, women’s words carry inordinate power. And thus the words of my women’s elders in particular laid the foundation of who I am.

To give you an example, my grandmother always told me a story about being paid the same as men for the hard labor she did carrying water from the well (for...
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hire) alongside the men. That equal pay model implanted itself in my soul from earliest childhood. Many years later I was to find out that as a professor I was being paid 40 percent less than my male colleagues of similar experience and equal or lesser training. We know now that women nationally are paid 75 cents for every dollar that men earn at the same job. Latinas and Native American women tend to earn 59 cents for every dollar earned by men. My grandmother’s story, her pride in earning the same as men, was an important legacy to me. And I credit the power of her words, and a dedicated group of attorneys, for helping me launch the very first Equal Pay lawsuit against the 11-campus University of California. The giants in my life are the unwritten women who said no to inequality and yes to what was life affirming.

If I remember my Abuelita or grandmother here it is also to remember her as a spiritual teacher of the highest order. The power of her words was also the power of her spirit in teaching me prayers, hymns, and a deep connection to the spirit world. The power of her words transmitted the incomparable powers of faith to me. As we know, faith can move the mountain. Without that faith I could never have moved the mountain known as the University of California. Her daily blessing, as well as the blessings from my other women elders, provided me with the spirit-power that I needed to wage my struggle for equal pay. My faith in their blessing powers instilled me with faith in my own powers.

My love and fascination for the power of women’s words also has guided me in my research through the years. Most of my research has focused on women who have cultivated a strong relationship to the word, La Palabra, as a living and evanescent presence; I have conducted research on spoken and sung word arts. I love to do research on live performance. My research has in many cases taken me to the oldest archives on the planet: women’s living words. My book on El Teatro Campesino (the farm worker’s theater), for example, actually began with the chapter on the women of that legendary performance ensemble. That book was made possible because they each sat down with me over a year’s time and told me their life stories. Their lives directly fed my vision of that theater company’s history. Prior to my writing about the women of El Teatro Campesino the published record only mentioned and credited the male director. Needless to say, my effort to bring women’s voices into the print record triggered considerable opposition and even hostility from the male director. He went as far as to contact my publishers and threaten them. Thank God for the First Amendment! Nonetheless, the active resistance to a history that includes the accomplishments and voices of women is still all too commonplace. In the case of my Teatro book, the entire book is infused with the voices of women and also men. Yet the women’s stories are far more direct, critical, and questioning than the men’s. These were feminists functioning in a male-centered theatrical ensemble.

Another book project led me to legendary singer Lydia Mendoza, the only Mexican American singer to receive the National Medal of Arts at the White House. The book we published (Lydia Mendoza’s Life in Music: La historia de Lydia Mendoza, 2001) is a biography or “historia” as told to me. Lydia, like
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countless other Mexican women of her generation and class, never attended school. Yet her oral narrative is powerful, inspirational, articulate, and an important chapter of American music history generally overlooked in the academic world. This is the first academic book, which encompasses her six decades as an idolized performer.

At the moment I am working again at the crossroads between print culture and oral tradition. My next book is a collaboration with a Native American traditional elder of the California Chumash tribe, Pilulaw Khus. The Chumash people once occupied a huge stretch of California: the central coast between Malibu and Monterey. The devastation of multiple colonial invasions diminished their numbers. Broken treaties and Anglo squatters took the land. Yet the Chumash ceremonial traditions continue. To this day, we have no book published by a Chumash woman. My own role is that of mediator between worlds; the role of facilitator between an indigenous woman’s powerful voice and the world of print culture.

In what follows I provide a brief inventory of contemporary Chicana/Latina spoken-word art performers. Many of them draw from various elements of the oral tradition, be they as storytellers or as spiritual visionaries, corridistas, or other embodiments of La Palabra. Although some rely on scripted material, others rely more on improvisation and a physicality based in the memory arts.

Voicing Women’s Subjectivities: The Emergence of Chicana One-Woman Shows

The two decades from the 1980s to the present have seen a flourishing of women solo Chicana/Latina performance artists. That rich body of one-woman shows has, however, not received much critical attention. This essay is intended as a first introduction to that topic. My purpose is to introduce readers to a sampling of such woman performers, while probing the social conditions of their emergence, their topicality, and their aesthetics. The Chicano teatro movement of the 1960s and 1970s and its antecedents has been the subject of various books, such as Jorge Huerta’s *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* (1982), Nicolás Kanellos’s *A History of Hispanic Theater in the United States: Origins to 1940* (1940), and my own volume, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (1994). The post-Movimiento Chicano boom of one-woman shows is related to and in some ways an outcome of the Movimiento Chicano’s gender/sex politics. To some extent there is even a causal relationship between the collapse of the male-centered, misogynist, and often homophobic collectives and the rise of women’s and men’s solo performance art. The early collectives also characteristically featured an entrenched male leadership. As an extension of the sexist leadership, movimiento theater collectives also featured performance pieces with universalized maleness and male agency as the center of all dramatized human experience.
Many of today’s Chicana one-woman shows grew in part from that negative legacy of the civil rights movement. Patriarchy notwithstanding, the multiplicity and power of Chicana women’s voices was always audible – even if marginalized – during that Chicano movement. Precursors of today’s abundant solo performances can be found, for example, in the performed (voiced) poetry from the 1980s. Prime examples are Carmen Tafolla’s *Los Courts*, or Denise Chávez’s *Novenas Narrativas*, which highlight women’s subjectivities and voice. Cherríe Moraga’s early plays were also pathbreaking. Today’s one-woman performance creations also show kinship with the struggling itinerant 1960s teatrista collectives who could perform under any conditions and virtually anywhere. Yet today’s women performance artists also incorporate high-tech elements when feasible.

The historical specificity of the contemporary one-woman show’s emergence also has to do with the rise of women’s movements as well as gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender liberation movements, as much as with the alienation so many women, gays, and lesbians faced in the movimiento teatro (and other political) collectives. Some of the contemporary Chicana solo performers who foreground women’s feminist and lesbian visions and voices include (in alphabetical order) Belinda Acosta, Adelina Anthony, Nao Bustamante, Denise Chávez, Olivia Chumacero, Elvira and Hortensia Colorado, Rosa María Escalante, Laura Esparza, María Elena Fernández, Consuelo Flores, María Elena Gaitán, Linda Gamboa, Consuelo Norte, Marisela Norte, Monica Palacios, Ruby Nelda Pérez, Cecilia Herrera Rodríguez, Diane Rodríguez, Paulina Sahagún, Raquel Salinas, and Silviana Wood. Other Latinas (across various borders) include Cuban American performers such as Carmelita Tropicana, Coco Fusco, and Marga Gómez; Mexican nationals such as Astrid Hadad and Jesusa Rodríguez have also had a resonance in the United States. One can also include here the spoken-word performances known as “slams” and whose performers feature a whole new generation of women.

I would argue that in terms of their visibility and numbers these women solo performers have in some measure come to “represent” contemporary Chicana/o theater. Although the staging of individually authored plays in proscenium theater houses has also dramatically increased since *Zoot Suit* in the 1980s, that activity still remains sporadic at best. One-woman shows, by contrast, are more visible and often appear instantaneously in response to the issues of the day. They have the freedom to be radically countercultural and radically creative, for they are not tied to the censorship and aesthetic expectations of mainstream theatrical institutions – nor to dominant men. That freedom has allowed for strong women’s voices to come forward. Solo performance artists furthermore enjoy great independence, flexibility, and mobility. Space can be made almost anywhere: in a school, a church hall, a basement, a bar, or a neighborhood cultural center. Yet the price exacted for that independence is economic instability and a hard life on the road.

In the short space allotted me here I want to examine the contributions of a number of solo women performers. One of the earliest to craft a woman’s voice...
was Silviana Wood, a veteran of the Tucson, Arizona-based Teatro Libertad. In the 1980s she created the comedic “Doña Chona” character on the Reflexiones show for KUAT television in Tucson. This character was born of the Rasquachi Aesthetic: bold, funny, exaggerated, truthful, and of working-class tastes and views. She was unimpeded and sovereign because she performed alone. Doña Chona combined comedic consejos with political satire and absurdity for many viewing seasons. The ability to capture a television viewing audience week after week was certainly a breakthrough phenomenon for a one-woman show.

Another longstanding one-woman show, which has undergone constant revision and innumerable stagings in the last decade, is Raquel Salinas’s performance of Heat Your Own, directed and co-conceptualized by Teatro Campesino veteran Olivia Chumacero. Heat Your Own is a personal exploration of multiple images of the Chicana/Latina. First produced at Los Angeles Theater Center, it played to sold-out houses. The show portrays seven different women from seven walks of life ranging from the campesina, the ancestral Indian woman, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the guerrillera Zapatista, the factory worker, the student, a Chicana lawyer, and a homegirl or “chola.” The last character in the piece is a grandmother. The show responds directly to post-production discussions with audiences, changing in response to different geographical environments and topical issues specific to women. “It grows all the time.” The many different images that unfold intimate the many possibilities of womanhood and especially of liberated womanhood; hence the admonition to spectators concerning heating their own tortillas instead of expecting women to do that work.

One of the chief currents observable within many solo performers is a strong indigenous consciousness, usually through the acknowledgment and application of many elements from native systems of knowledge and native mythologies. Such dramatizations often include the central use of native archetypal female figures. In this regard, the collaborative team of Hortensia and Elvira Colorado have made many important contributions. As co-founders of the Coatlicue Theatre Company they have traveled widely, sharing the indigenous-based vision with communities throughout the Midwest and east coast. Whereas the teatros of the Movimiento Chicano initiated the recourse to indigenous ancestral heritage, the Colorado sisters have greatly deepened those understandings. The Colorado sisters draw deeply from the Mesoamerican cultural matrix, especially as they experienced it through the stories of their Indian grandmother. Among their earliest works is one entitled Coyolxauqui and which explores the contemporary meanings of Coatlicue and her daughter Coyolxauqui the moon goddess. Another early work which enacts the complexities and changing multiplicity of womanhood is La Llorona – The Wailing Woman. Hortensia and Elvira Colorado create strong figures from whom spectators can draw strength and inspiration. More recently they wrote and produced Blood Speaks and A Traditional Kind of Woman: Too Much Not ‘Nuff. The work of the Colorado sisters strongly affirms the indigenous heritage of Chicanas: “Growing up with racism – the thing about color and the denial of being Indian. The denial in our family is so imbedded
that we didn’t know our father’s side of the family – they were too Indian! We had to say we were Spanish and not Mexican. Least of all Indian.”

Among the most notable and active contemporary performers from the host of one-woman shows touring the United States and other countries is performance artist María Elena Gaitán. In one decade’s time (since 1992) she has created and performed various one-woman shows – which sometimes incorporate other artists peripherally. Each of these shows has gone through a process of evolution, growth, and transformation over time. Thus each show is many different recycled versions. In chronological order they are: Chola con Cello: A Home Girl in the Philharmonic (born 1992), De Jarocha a Pocha (born 1995), Aztlán Africa: Songs of Affinity (1998), The Adventures of Connie Chancla (1999), and a number of stand-up comedy shows. Her commitment to give voice to herself as an indigenous Chicana woman is both politically and aesthetically motivated.

Gaitán’s political contexts are the social crises generated in California by the passage of several anti-immigrant ballot propositions. Chola Con Cello: A Home Girl in the Philharmonic was a response to California’s Proposition 187 passed by voters in 1992. That Proposition sought to deny public education to undocumented immigrant children, while also denying prenatal care to undocumented women immigrants. It was followed by Proposition 227 which dismantled Bilingual Education in 1998 and then Proposition 209 which dismantled affirmative action. Gaitán’s most notable recent work is her re-vision of the 150 years of history since the end of the war between the United States and Mexico (1848) entitled The Adventures of Connie Chancla. She performs that span of US/Mexican history from a borderlands perspective, centering the voices of the marginalized. In one of the most ambitious performance undertakings of recent years, Gaitán hilariously reconstructs the hemispheric history of the Americas through the collective millenarian history of the “Chancla People” (for the most part women) and through the outspoken persona/voice of Connie Chancla. All of her historical narrative, beginning in precolonial indigenous history, is narrated with the help of dozens of slides images and with her musical performance.

Gaitán’s performance magnetizes because her truths are explosive, spoken vividly in explicit terms, and with expletives. It has the quality of a limpia or a grito – a ritual purification. Her humor and rowdiness shatter received knowledges – such as the official US white male-centered histories. With Connie Chancla the historical medium is comedy; she is grotesquely comical in the spirit of the trickster. Laughter is the ingredient which magically changes everything, which shocks us out of the complacency of seriousness. Connie Chancla’s attire is shocking and extravagant: her huge green wig with bright flowers, her shirt with giant polka dots, and yes, lots of make-up and glitter on her face. Yet, barrio historian Connie Chancla at all times foregrounds the strength, presence, stamina, beauty, historical trauma, and survival of native Chicana women.

Last but not least, west-coast based performance artist Mónica Palacios has – over the past two decades – also consistently relied on irreverent humor, while focusing on lesbian desire and its intersection with society’s homophobia. In
Greetings from a Queer Señorita she performs lesbian sexual and cultural identities, such as in a dinner scene where she brings her wife home to meet the family. Palacios amazingly plays all seven roles of her family members. Two other one-woman shows written and performed by Palacios are Confessions, a series of everyday stories centering on lesbian sexual experience and Latin Lezbo Comic, which she refers to as “a performance about happiness, challenges, tacos . . .” Latin Lezbo Comic is a more directly autobiographical coming-out narrative exploring the personal and political aspects of queer sexual experience. Palacios also discusses the creative process and the heterosexist, patriarchal, and sexist comedy industry. Although performing largely at alternative venues, Palacios has become an important voice in questioning mainstream sexual politics and affirming queer creativity through some of her anthologized writings.

All of the Chicana one-woman shows discussed here have established great presence and resonance in challenging the structures of oppressive power and in unfolding a womanist and non-heterosexist vision for the world. These – and many more not discussed here – are important contributions to the heterogeneity of “Chicana” and to the historical process of performative self-determination and self-imaging.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Language and Other Lethal Weapons: Cultural Politics and the Rites of Children as Translators of Culture

Antonia I. Castañeda

Age 7: El Doctor

“Dile que no puedo respirar – que se me atora el aire. Dile ...” How do I say “atora”? (Tell him that I can’t breath – that the air gets stuck. Tell him . . .)

“Tell your mother that she has to stop and place this hose in her mouth and press this pump or else she will suffocate.”

“How is he saying? What is he saying?”

He is sitting behind this big desk, and my mother was sitting beside me and holding on to my hand very tightly.

I...what does suffocate mean? How do I translate this? I don’t have the words.

“¿Qué dice? ¿Qué dice?” (What is he saying? What is he saying?)

“I . . . uh . . . Dice que . . . uh . . . Dice que si no haces lo que te dice te mueres.” (He says . . . He says . . . He says that if you don’t do what he says you will die.)

“Dile que cuando me acuesto por la noche que no puedo resollar.” (Tell him that when I lay down at night, I can’t breathe.)

“Resollar,” what does that mean?

Her gasps came out quickly and sounded so awful: a croaking sound that seemed to hurt from deep inside her throat. I sit in front of the big desk remembering, hearing her sounds, and feel again the terror of last night and every time I heard her and could not help. I do not have the words to help her. She will die. And all I could do was sit there and hold her hand and listen to her gasp and gasp for air – for breath that would not reach her, her eyes popping out – and watch her die. She called me her lengua, her voz. If she dies, it would be my fault.
I tell the doctor she cannot breathe and will die. And he says something I cannot understand about asthmatics and how there is little he can do except give her this pump and that I should be sure to tell her not to panic. Panic. What does that word mean? How do I say panic?

How does a 7-year-old girl, not yet in the second grade, translate the life and death words “atora,” “suffocate,” “resollar,” “panic?” How does she explain and interpret words she does not know in either language, while knowing at the same time that her mother’s life sits on her tongue and on what she does with the words given her? Where in her 7-year-old knowledge does she find the meaning of words that hold the life or death of the mother who calls her “mi lengua” – her tongue – the fleshy, movable organ attached to the floor of the mouth with which words are made? What cultural and linguistic rites are these in which a mother’s life balances on a child’s tongue?

Age 8: La Cuenta

“Dile que no le podemos pagar toda la cuenta porque ha llovido mucho y no hemos podido pizar. Pero que aquí están estos centavitos y luego luego se la pagamos tan pronto que trabajemos . . . y que queremos llevar una poca comida hoy – que si nos extiende el crédito un poquito. Andale, díle.”

He looks at me from behind his counter and says, “What? What’d she say?”

“My mother said we can’t pay all the bill today – because of the rain we have not been able to work and we will pay the rest real soon, as soon as we work . . . and can we have a little more food on credit?”

He looks at me, then he looks at her, and we stand there in front of him. He starts to say something I cannot hear.

“What is he saying? What is he saying? Go on, tell that we will pay him – but just now there is no work.”

I start to speak to him again. I look up to talk to him, and he stares down at me, and the look I see in his eyes tells me that he does not believe we will pay our bill. I have seen that same look on people’s faces in town when we all get out of the back of the truck by the city park, and me and my friends walk down the street – in Toppenish – the people just stare at us and glare at us with eyes that tell us we do not belong there. It is the same look the man at the restaurant gave us – at that place where we stopped on our way from Texas – when he wouldn’t sell us milk for the baby’s bottle.

“¿Qué dice? ¿Qué dice?” my mother asked.

“Nada mamá. No dice nada. Mejor vamonos. No nos van a dar más crédito.”

(Nothing mama. He is saying nothing. We best leave. They aren’t going to give us any more credit.)

What cultural issues are at stake for child translators? How do they interpret for themselves the cultures they must translate for others? What are the politics they confront each time they translate cultures? How do they negotiate their
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culture of origin, which cannot protect them and in which the roles of parent and child are inverted as children become the tongues, the lifeline, the public voice of parents, family, and sometimes of communities? How do they negotiate the culture they must translate for their parents – the culture that assaults and violates them, their families, and their communities with its assumptions and attitudes about them as well as with its language and other lethal weapons?

Age 15: El Rifle

“¡Ay tocan a la puerta. Trae rifle. Ha de ser uno de esos gringos que cazan faisanes. Anda ver qué quiere.” (Someone’s at the door. He has a rifle. It must be one of those gringos who hunt pheasants. Go see what he wants.)

I open the door to a man with a hunting rifle.

“¿Qe dice? ¿Qe dice? ¿A quién busca? ¿Busca a Raúl?” (What is he saying? What is he saying? Who is he looking for? Is he looking for Raul?)

“Sí mamá, busca a Raúl. Quédate adentro. (Yes, mama, he’s looking for Raul. Stay inside.)

“No, my brother’s not home. He’s working.”

“Well, you tell your brother that I came here to order him to stay away from my daughter. You tell him I catch him anywhere near Janice, or even lookin’ at her, he’ll be sorry. You tell him I have friends, and they know who he is. You tell ‘im, girlie, you tell ’im.”

I look past him, past the lingering swirls of dust his truck tires had stirred up on the dirt road, and know what the people in the camp meant when they told us stories about the Texas Rangers.

“¿Qué dice? ¿Qué dice? ¿Qué quiere con Raúl?” my mother cries from somewhere behind me. (What is he saying? What is he saying? What does he want with Raul?)

I tell him to put the rifle down because he is scaring my mother and to please leave. I step back inside the house and close the door. What can I tell her that she doesn’t already know?

Who are these children who speak in tongues and live in fire? What happens to them in educational and social systems that have historically committed psychological, cultural, and physical violence against children who speak languages other than English? What happens to Chicano/Latina/o children whose schools devalue their home language and culture while they, and all children in the United States, are steeped in lessons about America as a classless, casteless society where equality and justice for all reign supreme, where merit and hard work are rewarded, and where education – which is free and available to all children – is the key to success? What do we know about how working-class Chicano/Latina/o and other children – whose daily experiences of translating for family and community belie the national mythologies – negotiate the politics of cultures? What rites of passage are these in which children have to conceive the significance of, construct, and interpret entire cultural universes for adults, universes
that include every possible human experience, from the most traumatic to the most mundane? What rites are these in which childhood’s boundaries are transgressed each time a child is required to translate – and thus mediate, negotiate, and broker adult realities across cultures? How do child translators understand the act of translating? What meaning do they give it?

These questions frame part of my project, a social history of Tejana farm workers who migrated with their families between the Rio Grande valley of south Texas and the Yakima and Skagit valleys of Washington State during the two decades after World War II, from 1945 to 1965. Based on interviews with women who lived in five labor camps in Washington, the study examines the lives of Tejanas who came of age during these two decades. This excerpt is from the chapter on child translators.

Beginning in the 1920s and gaining momentum during the 1930s and 1940s, Tejano families, both nuclear and extended, began an annual migrant work cycle from Texas, to Arizona, to California, to Washington, to Oregon, to Idaho, and back to Texas. The children of these segregated south Texas communities, where generations of native-born children had often been denied even rudimentary education in English, were the girls and boys who scrambled onto the beds of tarp-covered flatbed trucks to migrate to las piscas, to live in labor camps, and work alongside their parents, older siblings, and other relatives in the row, field, and orchard crops of the Yakima, Skagit, and Wenatchee valleys. For many, one aspect of their childhood reality in Washington was serving as translators for Spanish-speaking parents, families, and community. Ironically, Tejano child translators had to be bilingual, able to move back and forth between English and Spanish any time they were called upon to translate, but in the Texas educational system, with its monolingual ideology, Tejano children were prohibited from speaking Spanish in school, and suffered corporal punishment when caught doing so.

In Washington, most migrant families lived in labor camps – some of which had communal showers, outside toilets, and communal laundries that consisted of large steel tubs with built-in washboards; others had neither showers nor laundries. Located at the end of long dusty roads or set far beyond groves of trees that hid the ramshackle structures from view, labor camps were not visible from the highway. Thus the camps, and their inhabitants, were rendered invisible to the local citizenry. Ostensibly, migrant farm workers did not exist.

What existed were inflammatory newspaper headlines decrying the threat that “illegal Mexican aliens” posed to local resources. McCarthyism and anti-communist hysteria denounced as foreign, subversive, and/or homosexual anyone even remotely suspected of harboring radical political sympathies and posing an internal threat to national security. What existed were INS roundups and deportations of Mexican workers, dubbed “Operation Wetback.” What also existed were Hollywood’s countless renditions of the “West as America,” which Chicano, Amerindian, Black, and Anglo children could see on Saturday afternoons at the segregated Liberty Theater in Toppenish, Washington – the heart of the Yakima Indian Reservation.
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Thus, for Tejanos, people of Mexican descent whose historical communities had existed under a state of siege since the end of the US war with Mexico in 1848, the repressive politics, policies, and culture of the 1950s were a postwar manifestation of long-lived patterns of repression, now further justified by nativist as well as racist arguments that Mexicans were foreigners. For the migrant farm-worker families of the Tejanas interviewed for this study, the “keep America pure” ideology, the economic and political policy of containment, and the cultural and political repression of the 1950s conveyed the clear message that people of Mexican descent were un-American, subversive, and unwelcome—except as temporary, seasonal agricultural laborers. Once the crops were in, they were to disappear.

During these postwar decades, the women whose stories begin and end this essay translated for their families and their communities. As children who translated in every possible situation, the question of how young Tejanitas experienced the act of translating is a critical political, and thus cultural, question. Their oral histories reveal that the act of translation occurs within, and is informed by, unequal relations of power. Translation usually occurs under conditions of stress and/or conflict. While the act of translating can be empowering to the child because she is helping her family, it is frequently traumatic, and the trauma is long-lasting. What, then, do we make of children translating cultures? How do we assess, analyze, theorize, and interpret this experience?

The scholarly literature on translation privileges the written word. It is produced by and directed to scholars who translate written texts in all literary genres. The non-academic literature on translation focuses on teaching businesses how to train workers to be translators and thus to digest “unassimilated diversity,” to quote Angela Davis. This work yields little of value for examining and understanding the experience of child translators who translate orally and on-the-spot.

In the late 1980s, social science scholars and practitioners—particularly sociolinguists, psychologists, anthropologists, teacher-education specialists, and social workers—began to examine and debate issues pertinent to children as translators. Generally, this scholarship casts the experience as a recent phenomenon specific to immigrant children and their families; it centers the debate on the psychological or linguistic “costs and benefits” to the individual child. One side argues that translating for parents and family is harmful to the child’s psychological development and that, because children play an adult role while they are translating, they may grow up too quickly and resent or lose respect for their parents. This perspective is exemplified by Richard Rodriguez’s undernourished Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (1981). Rodriguez accepted and internalized the tenets of a racist, classist society that deemed everything about him—the color of his skin, his language, his physiognomy, and his working-class origins—wrong, unacceptable, and un-American. He internalized these notions and relinquished his Mexican self, choosing erudite English over Spanish and a “public” Euro-American life over a “private” Mexican one.
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The other side of the debate argues that translating can help children develop language skills and understand American institutions. Lowry Hemphill, a specialist in language development, argues that translating is not necessarily something that should be discouraged, since it is “part and parcel of the whole experience of being an immigrant child. People do what they have to do to get by.” Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Professor of Education, who has conducted extensive studies on child translators in immigrant families, concludes that most children who serve as translators are comfortable in the role and that translating offers the opportunity for these children to improve their own literacy skills because “they have to make sense of words and ideas in one language and explain them in another.” Student translators, she argues, draw on skills that are employed by good readers and writers. Interested in the strategies that Spanish–English bilingual children use when translating for immigrant parents, Faulstich Orellana’s research offers unprecedented possibilities for understanding children’s translation strategies, the effect and meaning of translating in their educational development as well as its significance in family dynamics.

Similarly, in his autobiography *Barrio Boy: The Story of a Boy’s Acculturation* (1971), Ernesto Galarza reveals translating as empowering. The young Galarza learned very early to see himself in relation to his family, his community, and his class, and to understand and interpret the world in terms of power relations and class differences. For Galarza, translating was a powerful, positive, and valuable skill that he first developed as a child translator, a skill he honed and applied to spoken, to written, and to cultural texts throughout his adult life as a scholar, a labor organizer, and a tireless advocate for economic and social justice.

Drawing on cultural anthropology’s theories on translation, which focus on authority, power, and otherness, Galarza’s acts of translation as an adult may be analyzed in terms of “the translator as social actor.” While translation studies and critical theory on translation conclude that “translation today is as much about the translation of cultural, political, and historical contexts and concepts as it is about language,” the scholarship theorizes the act of translating literary and other written text. It does not analyze the translating acts or agency of children who translate the spoken word in situations and conditions not of their making, over which they have no control. So while children must read, translate, and interpret not only the spoken word, but also the text of bodies, attitudes, power relationships, space and movement of the translating moment, the new scholarship in translation studies has yet to analyze and theorize the universe of child translators.

Doctors and other medical professionals whose patients are recent immigrants, and who have medically diagnosed and/or treated a patient with a child serving as translator, have joined the debate over child translators. So too have some individuals who, as minor children, served as translators in medical situations. Both groups concur that children have not the linguistic knowledge and skills to accurately translate complex medical concepts and terminology and to have a child translate is to put both the patient and child at risk. Still, some adults
who were child translators interpret the act of translating as did Galarza, as part of familial responsibility which they gladly undertook, as empowering and transformative. In either case, I note that the current debate over child translators, and the state legislation that has been drafted to prevent children from providing language interpretation at hospitals, doctor’s offices, and clinics responds to the reality of late twentieth and early twenty-first century immigration to the US.

However, the issue of translating cultures, and specifically the experience of child translators, is a historical as much as a contemporary issue and experience. It is by no means solely or even principally an immigrant experience, at least not historically. Irrespective of which colonial power arrived on the shores of what Europeans named the North American continent, they had to communicate with the people living here. Europeans did not initially speak indigenous languages; somebody had to translate, and that somebody was often a child. Beginning with Malintzin Tenepal, or La Malinche, as she is known – the 14-year-old girl whom the Chontal Maya coast gave to the Spaniards in 1519, along with 14 other young women, and who became translator, lover, and tactical advisor to Hernán Cortes – the experience of translating cultures has been lived by native-born children and adolescents.

Throughout the Spanish Mexican periods, both Amerindian and mestizo children and adolescents captured in war, raids, and slaving expeditions in the northern frontier of Mexico could find themselves translating cultures, as in the case of boys and young men who worked for the military as scouts, horse-breakers, or herders, and in that of young servant girls who worked in the homes of soldiers and settlers. Indian children, in particular, were often captured, traded, or sold into slavery by Spanish Mexican military forces as well as by settlers and, after the Euro-American conquest, by settlers and paramilitary groups.

On another level, but also in terms of culture, children were at the center of the strategies employed by Spanish Mexicans as well as Euro-Americans to detribalize native peoples. Catholic missionaries and the Euro-American educational system went to great lengths to “denaturalize or deculturalize” native peoples through their children: in missions, in the case of the Jesuits and Franciscans, and in Indian boarding schools, in the case of Euro-American educators. In Texas, prior to the late 1960s, undemocratic language policies prohibited children of Mexican descent from speaking Spanish on the school grounds. This is fundamentally what the contemporary English-only movement is all about.

Although Malintzin’s narrative relating her experience is not available, we know that her acts of translation, as well as her sexuality, earned her the opprobrium of a Euro-centered, patriarchal Mexican/Chicano history and culture, which portrays her – the symbolic mother of the mestizo peoples – as a traitor and a whore. In the past two decades, however, Native American and Chicana writers and scholars have reinterpreted the documentary record and inverted the spurious sexualized and racialized image of Malintzin, claiming her as our own, even as lesbian.
Reinterpretations of Malintzin by Chicana and Native American scholars Adelaida del Castillo, Norma Alarcón, and Inés Hernández center on issues of subjectivities, translation, and agency. Del Castillo interprets Malintzin as a gifted linguist, a young woman who made well-considered choices based on her realities and those of her people. Alarcón examines La Malinche as a paradigmatic figure of Chicana feminism. Hernández draws upon the syncretic ceremonial dance tradition of the Concheros of “la Gran Tenochtitlán, in which La Malinche is the path-opener – the front(line) – the vanguard,” to discuss how in the contemporary period we can choose to be Malinches in a political, social, and intellectual context.

The Malinches of today, she states, are “all of the women who have accepted their role as ‘tongues’ and demanded that their voices be heard.” Including especially Rigoberta Menchú, who learned Spanish – the language of the oppressor – and made it her own, just as she learned and used the Bible as an organizing text and tool in her community; these women join their voices and their skills in the global struggle to end exploitation and oppression in all their forms.

With these very few exceptions, and linguist Frances Karttunen’s *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (1994), which discusses the young translators Malintzin and Sacajawea within a global context and experience, scholars have yet to focus on the spoken word and the act of oral translation across unequal relations of power based on age, gender, race, class, and culture. Centering gender and the experience that women have had as child translators and examining the pressures, conflicts, and contradictions that arise when they must translate in a context of unequal power raises critical epistemological and theoretical questions for feminism, and for feminist scholars seeking to theorize history, politics, and culture.

What did a Tejanita of seven summers know and interpret as she broke through multilayered power differentials to translate for a mother facing racist male editors, doctors, police, or school authorities? What did a teenage Mexican girl of 15 understand about sexuality, race, and violence when she had to translate her family’s needs to a storeowner who was close friends with the same white man with a hunting rifle who came to threaten her brother away from his daughter? How did these young Tejanas negotiate translating across two patriarchal cultures during the 1950s – their own, which sexualized them, and another, which sexualized and racialized them while disparaging their class origins? How did working-class Mexican girls live and interpret the cultural politics of the Cold War in which a pivotal ideological tenet was a domestic revival that centered the family, prescribed traditional gender roles, and prized marital stability?

How did migrant farm-worker girls, adolescents, and young women assimilate, accept, resist, subvert, perform, and/or transform this experience in the post-World War II era? What did they change, and how were they changed by the act of translating cultures across space, time, and circumstance? This study reveals that the rites of translating that Tejana and other child translators enacted as they interpreted adult realities from one adult to another and back again,
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challenge current theories of gender, childhood, class, power, language, translation, and the politics of culture in US history.

Age 10: La Escuela

“Dile que venimos con Doña Chelo para averiguar por qué espularson a Mariquita.”
(Tell him we came with Doña Chelo to find out why they expelled Mariquita.)

“Si, y dile que . . .” (Yes, and tell him that . . .)

The door opened and the principal came out, asking, “Who is Mrs. Rowdríguez?”

I touched Doña Chelo’s arm. She looked at me and stepped forward with her hand outstretched.

“We can’t have all these Mexican kids disrupting our school . . .”

“¿Qué dice? ¿Qué dice?” Doña Chelo asked.

“If this is Mawhría Rowdríguez’s mother, tell her that her daughter bit the school nurse, and we had to expel her.”

“Dile que Mariquita no tiene piojos. Que soy muy limpia – cada noche caliento tinas de agua y baño a todos mis muchachos y los mando muy limpiositos a la escuela. Y a Mariquita le hago sus trenzas cada mañana. ¿Por qué le echaron todo ese polvo tan apestoso? Dile que la asustaron y la humillaron.”

“Doña Chelo says Mariquita does not have lice, her family is very clean. She heats water every night for baths and sends her children to school clean everyday. She braids Mariquita’s hair every morning. Why did you pour that ugly powder on her? You scared Mariquita and hurt her.”

“Tell her that we do this every year in March when all you kids from the camps start coming in. Tell her that the lice powder is not harmful and that the school nurse tries not to get it in their eyes or mouth. There was no reason for Mawhría to cry and scream like she did. And then when the nurse tried to hold her down, she screamed even louder and bit and kicked and hit our poor nurse. Tell her she should send her children to school clean and neat. And she should teach her children to behave – to respect school authorities.”

“¿Qué dice? ¿Qué dice? ¿Cuándo puede regresar Mariquita a sus clases? ¿Cómo puede aprender si me la espulsan? Yo no quiero que se queden burros como nosotros, que no nos admitían a las escuelas en Tejas. Dile Nenita. Dile.” (What is he saying? What is he saying? When can Mariquita return to her classes? How can she learn if they expel her? I don’t want them to remain ignorant like us because they wouldn’t admit us in school in Texas. Tell him Nenita. Tell him.)

“Les estoy diciendo, Doña Chelo. Les estoy diciendo.” (I am telling them, Doña Chelo. I am telling them.)

Notes

1 The four translation stories in this essay derive from a larger study of Tejana farm workers based, in part, on oral histories. These stories are composites of translation stories related by the women I interviewed, and my own childhood experiences of translating. At issue is that with few exceptions, Tejano migrant families were Spanish-speaking US citizens whose
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access to public education and instruction in English in pre-desegregation Texas was limited at best, when not outright denied.


5 The women interviewed for this study lived in labor camps in Toppenish, Crewport, and Sunnyside in eastern Washington, and in Mt. Vernon and Lynden in western Washington.

6 See Miguel, “Let All of Them Take Heed.”


11 Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982). Omission of the accent in “Rodriguez” is consistent with the way the author of Hunger of Memory spells his family name.

12 Hemphill, “For Immigrants’ Children, an Adult Role.”


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In his well-known book *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez, An Autobiography*, Mexican American writer Richard Rodriguez candidly acknowledges judging his own masculinity “against some shadowy mythical Mexican laborer – dark like me, yet very different.” While an undergraduate student at Stanford University (a process that he claims “effeminized him”), it was the “Mexican-American janitors and gardeners working on campus” that he specifically positioned himself against in constructing his personal sense of gender. He apparently also eroticized these working-class Mexican men in the process.

Rodriguez discloses that this latent homoerotic desire was initially ignited by the ruggedly masculine Mexican *braceros* that labored near his Sacramento, California home as a child. He confides that he viewed these macho Mexican laborers with “silent envy.” “I envied them their physical lives, their freedom to violate the taboo of the sun. Closer to home, I would notice the shirtless construction worker, the roofers, the sweating men tarring the street in front of the house. And I’d see the Mexican gardeners. I was unwilling to admit the attraction of their lives. I tried to deny it by looking away. But what was denied became strongly desired.”¹ This is the only passage in *Hunger of Memory* where Rodriguez’s homoerotic desires are directly intimated, albeit in rather veiled terms.

I am interested here in more explicitly discussing the way Chicano gay men construct, position themselves, and give personal meaning to their most intimate homosexual desires and longings. Where, for example, did Richard Rodriguez’s homoerotic construction of dark “sweating men,” the “shirtless construction worker,” and “shadowy mythical Mexican laborer” come from? How did these particular constructions of Mexican manhood ignite his desire for the men that
embodied these “shadowy mythical” categories? How does a man like Richard Rodriguez, or any other Chicano gay man for that matter, erotically position themselves in relation to their primary sexual object choice?

While homosexual desire and longing for other men clearly takes varied and multiple forms, I want to explore here one particular way that Mexican men who have sex with other men give personal meaning to their homosexuality. In so doing, I am not suggesting that there exists one common expression of homosexual desire that is shared by all Chicano gay men. I am interested here in problematizing the nature of homosexual desire and exploring how it reflects and reinscribes aspects of their patriarchal family socialization in very complicated and often troubling ways.

Nettlesome issues of power/domination, honor/shame, the privileging of masculinity, derision of femininity, eroticization of difference, and raw sexual objectification are deeply embedded in how many Chicano gay men structure and give meaning to their homosexual lives. Central to this process is the way in which hegemonic constructions of Mexican manhood are erotically ignited and given form in their most intimate homosexual desires. It is here where Chicano gay men’s fathers, uncles, cousins, and other extended male kin are often erotically interpolated and deeply implicated in their most intimate constructions of homosexual desire.

Eroticizing Mexican Manhood and Looking for Papi

In exploring the nature of homosexual desire among Chicano gay men I draw upon three of the life history narratives collected for a larger book project. Their homosexual lives clearly reflect the explicit valorization and eroticization of Mexican American manhood in both conscious and unconscious ways. Nowhere is this cultural and psychic structuring more apparent than in how they construct and position themselves to their object of sexual desire. Mexican American masculine ideals consume these men’s homosexual desire and structure their erotic practices. While their sexual partners and sexual practices have varied over time, this masculine ideal has remained a constant and is particularly rife with individual meaning in the life history narratives discussed here.

Another related and reoccurring theme that emerges is the common way these men articulate a need for intimacy in discussing their homosexual desire. Nearly all of the men interviewed spoke of longing and desiring an older, more masculine partner/man than them. Some explicitly articulated this in terms of a deeply felt quest for intimacy and bonding with a father-like figure. Few of the men spoke of having meaningful relationships with their fathers and some spoke of having an absent, distant, emotionless, and in some cases, even openly hostile or abusive father. Consequently, as the three men discussed here eloquently express, many spoke poignantly about their desire for the intimacy with an adult male figure that had typically eluded them in childhood.
I want to provisionally refer to both their longing and desire for ruggedly masculine adult Mexican men (to the affective and sexual dimensions of their homosexuality) as “looking for papi.” In so doing, I use this phrase as a metaphor or trope rather than a literal referent to some unresolved oedipal drama or eroticization of their fathers. “Looking for papi” takes varied and multiple forms in these narratives, with different sets of meanings and associations for each man. In other words, there are multiple constructions and articulations of longing and desire that are captured and given voice in these life histories. I explore only one of the particular ways in which these erotic constructions are given personal expression.

The three men discussed here ranged in age from their mid-twenties to their mid-forties. While all are of Mexican decent, they ethnically identified in different ways: one as “Chicano” and two as “Mexican.” Two of the men were born in Mexico and the other in the United States. Those from Mexico immigrated to the US either as young children or teenagers and lived in the bay area at the time they were interviewed. All are from humble Mexican working-class backgrounds.

Two of the men successfully completed a Bachelor of Arts degree and the other an Associate of Arts degree. Two of the men are working full-time in respectable white collar occupations in the San Francisco bay area. The other is a part-time student and employee who also volunteered for a Latino gay organization. Although most of their interviews were conducted in English, all three are very fluent in Spanish and bilingual.

Another crucial difference among them can be found in the particular way each projected a personal sense of gender. How these men forged their gender identity had tremendous implications for how they later embraced a homosexual identity and structured their erotic roles and relationships with other men. In this regard, sociologist Nancy Chodorow perceptively reminds us that “All men’s and women’s love fantasies, desires, or practices are typically shaped by their sense of gendered self. But this sense of gendered self is itself individually created and particular; a unique fusion of cultural meaning with a personal emotional meaning that is tied to the individual psycho-biographical history of an individual.”

**Deep in the Crotch of the Chicano Gay Psyche**

**Mario: A 26-year-old Chicano gay man**

Consider the case of Mario, a 26-year-old Mexican American man born and raised in Berkeley. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from a local university and was working in a mid-level white collar position at the time of his interview. Short and muscular in stature, Mario described himself as “fairly high on the masculinity side.” Mario learned about gender norms in his family by observing
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his father’s role in the home and from other adult men in his life. He was raised with his father in the home but acknowledged that they were not particularly close or affectionate with one another. “My dad was never really open to us in expressing a lot of feelings,” he recalled. “And if I were to learn something from him, it would be from observation . . . The kind of communication that I didn’t have with my father I later had with an uncle of mine.”

Mario had little difficulty complying with the male gender expectations of his family upbringing. “I was very comfortable with what a boy was supposed to do,” he disclosed. “I think what made life comfortable was this freedom that I got from being a boy. I mean like not having the chores, not having the responsibility, being able to go out on the weekends with friends. These were like gifts, you know, that were sort of given to me by birth that I could like use up. These were the gifts that a boy gets because he’s a boy. There was a very lax privilege and king-like comfort that I had and enjoyed.”

Mario’s father and other adult male relatives helped ensure compliance with the gender expectation in his family and openly patrolled these borders. His father, for example, warned him about compromising his masculinity by spending too much time with his older sisters. “I remember that I wasn’t supposed to hang out that much with my sisters,” he recalled. “I remember that he would pull me out of that circle . . . making it clear that that’s not what I should be doing. So that if it happened he would have me cut the lawn or have me go somewhere else out of the room. But, he made it clear, that guys don’t hang out with girls, you know, los hombres no se juntan con las chavalas (men don’t hang out with girls).” His father’s brother would take this further by warning Mario that “Si te juntas con las viejas, vas a ser un maricon (If you hang out with women you’re going to become a fag).”

Above all, Mario stressed, the gender prescriptions that he received in his family required “not showing any kind of feminine attributes. Whether it is the way you express yourself or the way you looked, whether you’re holding your hand the wrong way; not sharing, not exposing any kind of emotion. Just don’t express anything, just kind of keep everything in. That, I think, was the most important, that stuck to me more than anything else.”

Mario candidly acknowledged that the qualities he initially found sexually attractive were ignited at a very early age. Mario confided that his first memory of having any sexual desire for another man occurred at the age of ten while rubbing his uncle’s back during visits to his home. He would occasionally massage his back and stomach muscles as a way of relieving his workday stress when he visited his family.

While this was seen as completely innocent by everyone at the time, he confessed being sexually aroused by his uncle’s rugged Mexican masculinity, handsome mestizo features, and tall muscular body. “I would put my hand under his shirt and rub his belly and back,” he recalled. “But I didn’t see it as a massage, no, that’s not the way I saw it. That was the earliest I remember having any kind of contact with another man that I enjoyed, that I saw as sexual.” While
there was never any explicit sexual interaction between Mario and his uncle, this
titillating experience left a lasting impression.

Most of his subsequent sexual experiences during his teens and early twenties
were with older white gay men who happily offered him their sexual services.
But one day he encountered a man who embodied his sexual desire for the
rugged Mexican masculinity initially ignited in his home. Mario described this
sexual awakening or epiphany in the following way:

Then, all of a sudden, I see this Mexican man in Oakland. He was tall, had a
mustache and actually reminded me of my uncle. All I knew is that I wanted to
have him and I wanted him in a different way. I didn’t want to just get him off.
I wanted to do something more. I wanted to feel him. I wanted to be hugged . . . I
wanted to see what was under those clothes. I wanted to see his belly. So I pursued
him and guess what? I went down on him for the first time and enjoyed it. I got
him off; it was a one-way scene.

You know, I never saw him again ever. But after that I just started looking for
people who resembled him. I started looking for brown faces. I started looking
for black hair. I wanted to relive that again. I wanted to experience it again . . . Now
I could have sex with another man and I could blow someone off, I could kiss
another man but there were certain requirements. Yes, they had to be butch. If
possible, I had to see a wedding ring. And, I remember asking them before we did
anything, “Are you married?” And, they would say, “Yes.” And I would be like
very happy. “Alright, let’s do it.” [laughing]

At the time of his interview Mario had been in an ongoing relationship with
another Mexican man for three years. His partner, Jorge, was 11 years older and
a recent immigrant from Mexico at the time that they met. During their first
sexual encounter, Mario recalled that Jorge “did the daddy thing, he didn’t
wanna touch me, nothing like that. And so, I was very careful to make sure that
we would not do anything that would ruin this fantasy of mine. Yeah, that’s
exactly what I wanted.”

Their sex relationship has continued to follow carefully scripted erotic roles
that both men have self-consciously negotiated. While they continue to actively
role play, neither has surrendered his personal sense of agency in the process.
Each man retains a strong sense of sexual subjectivity. According to Mario,
“We’ve been together now for nearly three years and our sex has changed. We
have oral sex now, it’s a two-way street but there is still no anal sex involved
from either party. But, I see him hotter today than I did the first time I met
him. And the first time I met him I was completely turned on by this man.
I mean, he was like every wet dream that I’ve ever had: he’s everything that I’ve
ever wanted.”

Mario’s narrative illustrates well how our sexuality is largely structured through
“sexual scripts” that operate at the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic
levels. For example, Mario’s socialization into Mexican American family norms
provides the “cultural scripts” or general parameters for the scripting of his
adult homosexual behavior. His narrative also captures how they guide and structure his sexual interactions with other men along mutually recognizable erotic roles. This dramaturgy reflects how cultural norms and individual desire are enacted through “interpersonal scripts” with various sexual partners. Finally, his gravitation toward certain erotic roles and sexual practices is an expression of the way his sexuality is fundamentally anchored in “intrapsychic scripts” or the place where our sexuality is psychologically constituted.

Although he has comported himself in a very masculine way, Mario has continually sought older, more masculine men than himself as his primary object of homosexual desire. His uncle initially embodied all of the masculine qualities that have been so central to the structuring of his erotic life. Despite his equivocations on this issue, it also seems apparent that he has positioned himself in a “subordinate” way to his “dominant” Mexican immigrant partner. Their relationship, however, is not transacted on a transgendered basis but, rather, on a transgenerational basis in which age provides the basis of difference and erotic currency.

Whatever the fundamental form their erotic role relation takes, it is undeniably inflected by the traditional mappings of gender and sexual roles within Mexican American culture. There does exist, however, some fluidity and degree of hybridity in the way that they have negotiated and mapped their homosexual relationship. This variability and fluidity notwithstanding, Mario has apparently found the construction of “papi” he was looking for and they now live happily together in the east bay.

Gustavo: A 44-year-old Chicano gay man

Gustavo is a 44-year-old man born in Guadalajara, Mexico who migrated with his family to the United States at the age of five. He earned an Associate of Arts degree from a local community college and was working as a station agent for one of the local transit districts at the time of his interview. Gustavo is a short, fair-complexioned man, fastidiously groomed with a very soft-spoken and polite demeanor. He admits to being somewhat of a misfit as a child and being conscious of being “different” and not conforming to the expectations of manhood in his family.

“I always thought that there was something wrong with me,” Gustavo confided, “because I wasn’t aggressive or liked to fight like my older brother. I didn’t like the idea that I was being viewed as feminine, but realistically I always felt like if there were two categories, feminine and butch, I’d be more on the feminine side. . . . I liked finer things, you know, like being clean shaven, and having my hair combed. I think those are characteristics usually associated with women.”

Despite not having a father in the home, Gustavo received clear messages from his mother and older siblings about the expectations of manhood in their Mexican immigrant family. His ability to comply with these cultural prescriptions
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became the template upon which he would assess himself as a young boy and later as an adult man.

I felt like they expected a man, you know, to be macho and a head of household. You go to work and come home and that's the expectation. I knew I was different; I wanted to do different things. But my mother, as far as I can remember, always said that I should be more like my brother. You know, she'd throw that up to me a lot. So, you know, I always thought that was something wrong with me because I wasn't aggressive . . . like my brother. I resented him a lot. He always like tried to boss me around and discipline me like a dad. And I used to always tell him that he wasn't my dad. I guess I was pretty rebellious because of that.

Gustavo’s mother reigned as the main parental force and disciplinarian within their household. He describes her as a very strict woman with rigid ideas about the appropriate gender roles for her children. He recalled, for example, that he was expected to empty the trash and attend to extensive yard work while his older sisters took primary responsibility for chores within the home. Despite his longstanding conflict with his mother over his rebelliousness, Gustavo shouldered primary responsibility for her financial well-being and failing health during the last years of her life. He did so with a clear sense of importance of his carrying out this familial responsibility with honor and respect.

Gustavo’s father remained in Mexico when the rest of his family migrated to the US and was never an integral part of his childhood socialization or upbringing in this country. Although Gustavo would eventually marry and raise three children before turning to a very discreet gay life, the object of his deeply felt homosexual desire has remained rather constant.

I know what I like and what I don’t; and I don’t like anything real feminine. I’ve always been attracted to men who were masculine, who were macho. Because I think it was opposite of what I was, you know. I have always been attracted to older men; big, real masculine, and hairy. I like somebody else taking control and me being the submissive person. Because with girls, I’ve always had to take the initiative, be the aggressive person. I have always liked it and I think it stems back to growing up without my dad, when somebody takes control of my body. It makes me feel secure and protected, you know, by somebody bigger, stronger, and more masculine. The fact that a person wants to hold me and kiss me and be affectionate with me, that excites me.

Gustavo has never been in a serious, long-term relationship with another man and is not likely to do as he has not openly disclosed his homosexuality to either his family or his three adult children. He confided, however, that he had managed to secretively maintain a relationship with Mark, a white married man, for over ten years. While their clandestine affair is far from personally fulfilling, nonetheless, it captures aspects of Gustavo’s homosexual desire that have been a constant throughout his life. “It’s really kind of a plus that he’s married,”
he acknowledged. “I feel comfortable having sex with him, you know. And, it’s kind of a turn-on too, because he’s masculine, butch, and, more or less, I guess bisexual. Hmmm, that’s a real turn on for me. He’s not feminine in any way.”

All of the dichotomies that circumscribe patriarchal gender relations in Mexican American culture have crept into the way that Gustavo has come to define and give personal meaning to his homosexuality. He has constructed a homosexual world deeply inflected by binary notions of masculinity/femininity; older/younger; stronger/weaker; active/passive; protector/protected; instrumental/affective, etc.

Gustavo’s narrative also captures well how the ideals of Mexican manhood are intimately embedded in the way he has structured his homosexuality. Although he was once married and assumed a patriarchal role, he is now prepared to subordinate himself to his idealized object of homosexual desire. He continues to look for papi. In the meantime, he remains content being the other woman or the “mistress” in Mark’s life. Yet even here some movement in and out of scripted roles exists. Gustavo confided that over time he has now assumed the active, penetrating role in his sexual relationship with Mark. The ostensibly hetero-sexual contractor that he is having an affair with now dons women’s clothes and allows himself to be anally penetrated by Gustavo. Homosexual erotic roles, it seems, are not only far more fluid and variable among different couplings of men, but also vary considerably over time in a relationship such as this.

Roberto: A 36-year-old Mexican gay man

Roberto is a 36-year-old gay man who had lived in San Francisco for six years at the time of his interview. He completed an Associate of Arts degree from a local community college, was working part time, and was continuing his studies towards a Bachelor of Arts. He also spent a fair amount of time doing volunteer work for a local Latino gay organization. Roberto was born in Tijuana, Mexico and migrated with his family to the US at an early age. They initially settled in the San Diego area. He acknowledged having a difficult and strained relationship with his “emotionally distant” father while growing up. Verbal and psychological abuses at the hands of his father were among his most vivid childhood memories. As a consequence, he rarely speaks to him to this day.

Part of his conflictual relationship with his father stemmed from Roberto’s difficulty in meeting the male gender expectations of his family of origin. He recalled that his father was “very tough on me, very tough on my brother and me, but more on me, it never seemed like I could do anything right.” Particularly painful was “being humiliated in front of other children by my own father. It was really painful to the point where that I started crying sometimes . . . porque me maltrataba verbalmente [because he verbally mistreated me]. . . . If I didn’t do something right, my father would be like ay, no vas a ser nada, vas a terminar barriendo la calle [oh, you’re going to be nothing, you’ll end up sweeping the street] or something like that, something really menial and mean.”
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Roberto openly discussed his earliest sexual attractions for men in terms of a deep-seated need for protection and male intimacy. According to Roberto, he had always wanted “to be close to men . . . sort of clinging on them without necessarily having sex with them.”

I love to kiss and I love . . . to wrap my arms around another man and have him wrap his arms around me. Envolto como un papel [wrapped up like paper], I love that. That’s like the best feeling in the world. I find myself if I’m really comfortable, putting my hand on his chest, like protect me, protect me, because that’s how I feel. That’s one of the reasons why when I was first out I do, to a certain degree, am attracted to older men; because I want to be protected . . . And being that I’m 5’5,” most men are taller than I am. I like them to be stocky, but I like them to be taller too. I can wrap myself around them, but kind of be protected. And that’s a big issue for me.

Although Roberto ethnically identifies as Mexican and is perfectly bilingual, he made it a point of noting how much he enjoys having sex with Latino men in Spanish. He would also occasionally play into the colonial fantasies of white gay men sexually attracted to him in this intimate and endearing way as well:

This one guy I remember saying can you speak to me in Spanish and I’m like what? Then I got into it and I started touching him and I kissed him on the neck and said: Aquí quieres que te bese? Como quieres que te bese? Ay, papi dime como! [Do you want me to kiss you here? How do you want me to kiss you? Oh, daddy, tell me how!] It was really like a telenovela [soap opera], papi dime como and the guy really got aroused.

But it is with ruggedly masculine and hairy (velludo) Latino men that Roberto truly enjoyed this type of sexual intimacy. He recalled with great fondness one particular Latino man that embodied these special qualities:

It was a guy from Argentina . . . me encanta tu acento [I love your accent] . . . we started talking in Spanish and then I kissed his neck. He wanted me to kiss his shoulders . . . He was a great kisser. Oh yeah. He kissed me in the back of the neck while I was sitting on the side of him and he was behind me and he started to kiss the back of my neck and I just let him have it. I was in the moment. I put my head back and listening to the music that they were playing. I closed my eyes and — como que estaba flotando en una nube [like I was floating on a cloud]. That’s how I get. When I make love with somebody, I listen to the music in my head. I listen to the music.

At the time of his interview, Roberto had not been in a long-term, committed relationship with another man. While he had dated a number of men while living in San Francisco for six years, and confided having had six sexual partners in the past year, he remained unattached. Although he was sexually active and
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looking for a partner, he stressed that sexuality was more than simply a matter of pleasure-seeking bodies. According to Roberto, “you should have some sort of connection with somebody even if it doesn’t necessarily have to be a heart to heart connection. There should be some sort of connection that kind of goes beyond the physical sense.” In speaking of what he ideally seeks in a relationship with another man, Roberto described it in terms of a need for a male protector in his life:

I’m happy that this person is attracted to me, I’m happy that this person sees me as a sexual being and wants to be with me. We both smile and we both are very gentle with each other. It’s a great feeling and even for the moment. What I do is I sometimes hold people and I put my head on their chest. I do that a lot. I feel protected. I feel like no one’s going to hurt me.

The romantic storyline and need for male intimacy that Roberto articulates, like the telenovelas he refers to, comes with a well-crafted script and orchestrated soundtrack (that is, of course, sung in Spanish). Roberto has idealized the object of his most intense homosexual desire and has carefully constructed any future relationship as well.

Here too is the familiar cultural world replete with the traditional binaries that underlie constructions of gender and sexuality in Mexican American culture. There are protective fathers (who are big, strong, tall, and hairy chested) who “wrap their arms around” and protect their loved ones from the ravages of a cruel, heartless world. Roberto has clearly positioned himself as a protagonist in this drama and constructed a homoerotic world with deep roots in the Mexican cultural world in which he was raised. At the present time, he continues to look for the elusive “papi” in his life.

Discussion and Conclusion

The three men discussed here carried a personal sense of gender that was deeply rooted in their childhood socialization into Mexican American family norms. In different ways, each man negotiated and reconciled his gender identity in light of the way manhood was defined in their families of origin.

Each man not only positioned himself differently in relation to these cultural ideals, but also incorporated them into their sexual practices. When asked to describe their most intimate object of sexual desire, it almost always assumed a ruggedly masculine, “muy macho” Mexican male form. Mario, Gustavo, and Roberto each articulated a deeply felt desire for someone with “brown faces,” “black hair,” “older,” “bigger,” “stronger,” “taller,” “stocky,” “hairy,” “aggressive,” “butch,” “real masculine,” and “married.”

The life history narratives discussed here also capture the undeniable way that the gender role polarities in their Mexican American families found expression
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along parallel lines in their homosexual lives. While this often occurred in unexpected ways, it does not obscure the modicum of agency involved in how these men deployed and scripted their homosexuality. More often than not, they gravitated toward scripted erotic roles in the sexual dramas that they vividly discuss in their life histories. Some men move rather freely in and out of these performative roles (e.g., playing different erotic roles with different men) and embraced hybrid patterns of homosexual relationships. Others are far more limited in their repertoire and continue to be typecast character actors gravitating to one particular erotic role and type of homosexual relationship.

Furthermore, these narratives reflect a powerful underlying need for intimacy and longing for an adult male figure that took varied forms for each man. This quest for intimacy generally found expression in their desire to surrender themselves to an older, more masculine man than themselves. This reflects a personal longing and desire for a paternal figure that could provide them solace or “protection” from the ravages and cruelties of their daily lives.9

The way that these men have structured their homosexuality raises nettlesome issues for those of us committed to gender and sexual egalitarianism in Chicano culture. These discontents and politics notwithstanding, how we come to live and experience our sexuality is not something that we simply choose at will. I have tried to suggest how larger social structures and cultural worldviews are embedded in how Mexican American gay men give personal meaning to their homosexuality. While they have some agency in this process, their most intimate and enduring homosexual desires are clearly shaped in conscious and unconscious ways.

The underlying sociological and psychological dimensions of these realities require us to reassess the way that gender and sexuality are forged within Mexican American families. The family homes of the men interviewed for this project were teeming with explicit and covert forms of sexuality. Uncles, cousins, brothers, and even grandfathers have all played a sexual role or had sexual contact with the men interviewed for this larger project. Neighbors and family friends also figure prominently in these early childhood sexual experiences.

It would be naïve for us to think that homosexual desire and longing does not involve some association and past relationship of Chicano gay men with their Mexican fathers or another adult male relative. I have tried to illustrate that the structuring of homoerotic desires and practices has deep cultural moorings in the gender socialization within their families of origin. How this is personally constructed, individually deployed, and experienced in the lives of men of Mexican descent that have sex with other men refracts in different ways for each man. These differences notwithstanding, the social and psychological structuring of these desires and practices is deeply forged within this familial context. It is here, in the relationships forged among men within Chicano families, that we must turn to in exploring the construction of homosexual desire among Chicano gay men.
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Notes


3 What all of these ethnic Mexican men living in the San Francisco bay area have in common is that they prefer to have sex with other men. While some may have had sexual relationships with women, they all acknowledge a preference to have sex with other men and are comfortable defining themselves as “gay” or homosexual. This commonality in sexual orientation, however, does not belie the tremendous variations that exist in the backgrounds of the 50 men interviewed for this project. Differences in age, nativity, generation, class, education, language usage, ethnic identity, HIV status, etc. all play an important role in the social organization of their homosexuality. Fifty life history interviews provide the primary data drawn upon for this larger research project. The men ranged in age from their early twenties to their late forties. All were men of Mexican descent living in the San Francisco bay area. While they ethnically identified in various ways (as Mexican, Chicano, Mexican American, Latino, etc.), they were all ethnic Mexican men born in either Mexico or the United States. Regardless of their nativity or generational status, I use the term “Chicano” to capture the commonality in their ethnic backgrounds as Mexican homosexual men living in the United States. I am well aware of both the political nature of this term and the possible objections to the use of this particular ethnic signifier or category. However, pan-ethnic categories like the term “Latino” or “Hispanic” obscure rather than accurately reflect the commonality in the specific ethnic background of the men interviewed for this larger project.

4 Sociologist Nancy Chodorow argues that we experience and enact our sexuality in a gendered way that is both consciously and unconsciously inscribed. She has perceptively reminded us in her book *Masculinities, Femininities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994) that “men and women love as psychologically and culturally gendered selves, with gender identities and sexual desires that they consciously and unconsciously experience and enact” (p. 78).

5 Chodorow, *Masculinities, Femininities, Sexualities*, p. 91.

6 I want to respectfully acknowledge that the inspiration for this heading draws from the show “Deep in the Crotch of My Latino Psyche” by Chicano performance artists Alberto Araiza, Luis Alfaro, and Mónica Palacios. It was performed in Los Angeles in 1992.


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Unlike Freud’s conception of human beings as incessantly driven “pleasure seeking” creatures, it appears that Nancy Chodorow’s view of men and women as “object seeking” beings provides a more useful way of making sense of these men’s desire for other men. Relationality and love, rather than primal aggressiveness and libidinal drives, are the driving force in Chodorow’s “object relations” approach to human sexuality studies. Sexuality in this framing is experienced as a longing to not only be with but to become one with a desired object (which is most often a person or part of a person that has been eroticized). From this perspective, our sexuality becomes intimately bundled up with a lifelong quest for human connectedness rooted in the pre-oedipal relationship between mother and child. We incessantly and irrepressibly seek to recapture the original state of oneness and total satisfaction that we experienced in our mother’s arms.

Following the logic of this argument, this state of oneness finds expression in different ways for these men. For Mario, it is having another man’s penis in his mouth and fellating him to orgasm (while perhaps murmuring “dame tu leche”) that captures this pre-oedipal moment. The total satisfaction he attained while fellating the man that reminded him of his uncle is a good example of this “oceanic bliss.” For Gustavo and Roberto, on the other hand, it is a far less sexualized relationality that propels their homosexual desires. Their bliss involves little more than resting their heads softly on their partner’s chest while in the arms of his tender embrace.

Differences in their expression notwithstanding, some element of melancholia – the response to an imagined loss – also plays an important role in the structuring of their homosexual desires. In this regard, Chris Girman has recently observed that the “performatve” dimensions of their sexuality may represent “an attempt to simultaneously grieve and prevent oneself from grieving over some sort of loss. But men must grieve through their bodies . . . Macho men are grieving over the loss of their identificatory desire – the macho father – who is sexually unavailable to them. The macho performances of the machismo ideology are designed to assuage this grief but ultimately amplify it as an even stronger wave of melancholy is articulated by a macho body exhausted by maintaining macho performances.” See Chris Girman, *Macho Macho: Seduction, Desire, and the Homoerotic Lives of Latin Men* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), p. 96.

While this need for intimacy and human connectedness may be a universal feature of our existence and have roots in maternal childrearing, it has apparently taken male (rather than female) form in the case of these homosexual men. While heterosexual Chicano men seek this elusive connectedness with women (who embody qualities that they associate with their mothers), Chicano gay men seek the same thing but do so with men as their object of sexual desire. It should come as no real surprise, therefore, that aspects of Chicano gay men’s sexual desire for other men would reflect an unconscious longing and melancholia associated with their fathers or another important male relative. Homosexuality is, ultimately, about both sexual desire and emotion longing for other men.

Perhaps Chicano gay writer Raúl Coronado has put this best when noting that “it is time for men to explore how we have become the men that we are, how our relationships with the men in our family have shaped and formed our sense of masculinity, how our sexual and emotional desires impact and are shaped by other aspects of our identity. One way we, as men, can begin to engage in this dialogue may be by returning to our own sense of loss during these formative years.” See Raúl Coronado, “Bringing It Back Home: Desire, Jotos, and Men,” in Angie Chabrám Dernersesian (ed.), *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 239.
A woman born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Brooklyn, New York, is expecting her first child. Having lingered in many communities but remaining firmly rooted in none, having named and renamed herself, she is like a stamped travel trunk. She needs to constantly rub the compass in her belly and look within for her true North. This woman has flat feet. Always a nauseous feeling of vertigo, disoriented on the land where she feels both native and foreign.

Balance is often difficult for this woman but she keeps traveling. Sometimes she sits in her Brooklyn apartment horrified that she lives in a country where scientists fiddle with genes and black men are still dragged to their deaths. Other times she finds herself exhausted on a plane back from a summer stay in Santo Domingo, glad (and surprised she is glad) to finally see the island of her birth shrink away through the window. Where's home for this woman? She can’t completely control the world around her; she herself must become home.

After twenty-seven years it’s still hard for me to believe that I am that buoying woman full of new life, flat-footed, wanting the right shoe to keep balance and walk my own path. Who the hell am I, really, I ask all the time, and with more probing, who do I want to ultimately become?

To become anything involves a process of gradual transformation from one state of being to another. Caterpillars become butterflies. Children become adults. I spend most of my life in a state of constant transformation. My views of the world change with the calendar dates. One year I like my wardrobe, the next year I’m disgusted. I’m not satisfied with myself for too long, wanting new beginnings: a new hair-cut, a change of address, more schooling, increased spiritual growth. So I fumble through life in this haze of changes, leaving a trail of discarded husks. Occasionally, in moments of intense reflection (and writing), I go back to one of these husks to sniff it, to see if some of my original essence is still there. I’ll try one on for size, maybe take pieces of it to graft onto the newer me. Still, many times I feel outside of myself, as if I live my life in third person, the struggle being to turn the “she” into “I.”
This struggle's not a simple matter of replacing pronouns. It's the tough process of breaking through the outer shell and inwardly becoming that “I.” The fact that I was born at roughly $23\,^\circ 30'\, N$ and $30\,^\circ 30'\, W$ and was raised at $38\,^\circ\, N$ and $97\,^\circ\, W$ easily generates a laundry list of who I'm supposed to be: a “Dominican-York” in spandex, probably raised in Washington Heights, a spitfire Latina torn between “Old World” submission and “New World” rebellion, a Hispanic American sponsored by Budweiser. The list could be longer if I only paid more attention.

But I don’t. Ironically, it’s in the very country that has generated this list (and fiddled with genes and dragged black men to their deaths) where I feel I have the luxury of becoming “I.” These United States, where individualism is Word, has allowed me the privilege of breaking away from that woman who was supposed to live with her parents until marriage (virgin), who was supposed to study at a local college instead of going away, who was supposed to keep her hair long and ultra relaxed.

For a long time I fiercely fought the idea that I’d become American (a term itself so slippery, so transitory, that no geography, no anthropology, no obsessive essay can stuff it into a neat category). Living all my life in a country where anyone with a dose of melanin is considered marginal, I have willingly, if not defiantly, used many other cultural/racial labels for myself outside of the mainstream. I've labeled myself a Dominican woman, an Afro-Dominicana, Latina, Afro-Latina, black woman, Caribbean woman, woman of African descent, woman of the African Diaspora, woman of color.

I used and still use these labels before resorting to “American” or the oh-so-dreaded hyphen, “Dominican-American.” My resistance to “American” also has roots in the efforts various ethnic groups historically put into obliterating their own culture to fit into mainstream (white) United States.

Okay, I've done my share of frantic Dominican flag-waving worthy of a Fifth Avenue parade in mid-August: Goddammit I'm Dominican, baby! I am merengue. I like plátanos and fried cheese. My Spanish is song. I like sand between my toes. I love drama. I love parties. Visit my home and I'll offer you a million beverage. I'm sun-drenched and superstitious. I'm obsessive-compulsive. I'm beautiful. I'm hardworking and self-reliant. I'll die without family. I'll die without jokes. I have a martyr complex. I'm political. Raunchy. Resilient. Dios, patria, libertad!

Again I've become a list.

Where does Dominican end and “I” begin? Sure, within each culture there are differences. This combination of qualities is not solely Dominican (though some may say it’s pretty damn close), but I do wonder where stereotypes end and the heterogeneous identity or self begins. Then within each family there are differences. So what is there to be said for national psyche and personal idiosyncrasy? Though I've lived here since I was three months old, I became a naturalized citizen at the age of twenty-two. I was born in 1972 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, I was conceived and raised in Brooklyn, New York.
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Papi came to New York in 1962, a year after the end of Rafael Trujillo’s thirty-year dictatorship. The opportunity to travel abroad opened up to those beyond the rich, and Papi grabbed it with hopes of improving the economic lot of his parents, his siblings, and himself. Mami arrived five years later, leaving behind a rural upbringing for a shot at better work, and maybe an education. They met each other here, and despite the drudgery of sweatshops and odd jobs, managed to begin a life together.

Twenty-three and pregnant with her first child in a country she was still adjusting to, my mother later went to spend her last months of pregnancy with her mother-in-law in the Dominican Republic. As the last of my organs developed, she sat eating mangoes in the shade of my grandmother’s porch, always with too much spit in her mouth. Now in my last weeks of pregnancy and with less spit in my mouth, I wonder how she must have felt away from the chill of New York, knowing that once she had me she would have to return. I’ve never bothered to ask her who she imagined she would become in the United States, who her children would become. Mami, what went through your mind as you held your three-month-old baby in your lap and the island shrank away through the airplane window?

Soon we were four siblings being raised in a predominantly working-class Latino neighborhood on the Southside of Brooklyn. Like many immigrants and their children, we lived in two worlds. Each of us in the family found individual ways to navigate between the varying degrees of our Dominican and American selves – including my parents. During tax season it’s Papi who does the taxes for folks for whom English is still a nightmare. My siblings’ music collections include bachata, hip-hop, reggae, merengue, R&B, and salsa. My mother has read Danielle Steel, V. C. Andrews, Jackie Collins, and some American classics – in Spanish. My own eyes cross when I’m looking from both Dominican and American perspectives. The vertigo comes from being simultaneously nearsighted and farsighted, a feeling of seasickness, my compass awry. Even my parents’ vision of this land has changed.

My parents’ American Dream in the ’90s is fresher and more proactive than their dream during the ’70s. Making lots of money here and returning to the Dominican Republic to build a house and live happily ever after has been replaced by investing in the well-being of their family here in this country. They’ve sweat thick drops to channel resources toward their children’s education, and service in our Brooklyn community. The United States is their present reality and priority. As naturalized citizens, they’re still helping steer the gears of America. They – we – are here to stay.

But where else would I be? I’ve lived here all my life. I’ve studied and worked here, and even conceived new life here. I will not cheat myself of an America I’m continuously helping to shape.

My race politics, to many a Dominican stateside and abroad, are amusingly American: African-American, in particular. A quickness to embrace blackness
or African heritage is in direct opposition to Dominican pride in hybridity. “We are a mulatto nation,” says current president Leonel Fernández with a comfort that comes from not having to prove whiteness or accept blackness. Though the Dominican Republic is a racially heterogeneous nation, its strong African presence can’t be simply dismissed with deflated statistics and powerful hair relaxers.

Having been raised in the United States has allowed me the legacy of black consciousness left behind by past generations. Like every other person of color, I grew up colonized: “bad hair” complexes, trying not to smile too widely to keep my nose “in check,” taunting my brother with the darker skin. Whiteness and blackness were relative, their meaning changing as I got older. Growing up, we Dominicans were the blacks and Puerto Ricans the whites in a Latino community that replicated the United States’ racial polarities. White status came with lighter skin, automatic American citizenship, and English fluency, sometimes at the expense of Spanish.

In the United States “culture” and “race” seem to be Siamese twins. High school peer and intellectual-bully-on-the-down-low Dana Hale forced me to reconfigure what I identified as. Dana herself was a contradiction. She preached blackness à la Malcolm X in green contact lenses and peroxide hair. I wasn’t Dominican, she maintained with authority, I was black – our only difference being that our slave owners spoke different languages. Black not only meant race but also culture (the Siamese twins), whereas for me black referred to race, not necessarily culture. I considered myself Dominican, not black in the sense of African-American. “Latino” and “black” didn’t have to be such oxymorons. I refused to accept blackness on African-American terms, as if they had a patent on the concept.

“See, that American imperialistic streak is where they’re just like their white counterparts,” I’d say to Pan-African friends in college. Dominicans – or more specifically “black folks who speak Spanish” – were an anomaly to many African-Americans. In my dorm room I hung a Dominican flag, as did other children of immigrants, not only to remember but also to educate. I gravitated toward the black diaspora on campus instead of the Latino groups, which were really cliques of Latin America’s well-to-dos who wouldn’t be bothered with either Chicanos, Nuyoricans, or any other American derivative thereof. I wanted to simultaneously share my urbanness, my blackness, my Latinaness, my Dominicanness, and all the other “nesses” I was still discovering. In addition to a heavy workload freshman year, I further splintered myself as a member of the Black Student Union, the Caribbean Club, the Hispanic Society of Professional Engineers, and any Pan-African group activities. I’m sure this country’s fixation on racial/ethnic categories contributes to making many a poor soul suffer from multiple personality disorder.

Returning to my Brooklyn neighborhood after college, I found myself having assimilated very American idiosyncrasies. I didn’t feel as “Latina” with a prestigious white college degree under my arm and a very Afrocentric view of the world. At the local bodegas I was sometimes spoken to in English, then met with surprise when I answered in as Dominican a Spanish as I could muster. I was
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reactive at family gatherings when I heard slurs worthy of David Duke. My words had little credibility. Who gave a damn that I was in defense of our own blackness? Who cared that the black struggle in this country has allowed us fairly comfortable bus rides and somewhat reduced the number of times a cop’s club grazes our heads? I was just this Americanized post-college kid with too many black friends and other imported ideas in her kinky head.

Some of the other imported ideas in my kinky head took away a lot of my “femininity.” I was literally too headstrong. Love of books and sports and going places and an appetite for learning were not “girlie” enough for most of my extended family. A part of me, though, was very much subservient – the well-behaved A student who never challenged authority figures. Summer trips to Dominican Republic – where the cultivation of feminity can be almost clownish – has made me most aware of how the United States has shaped my idea of feminity.

My cousins (the “hair and nail cousins” as coined by writer Julia Alvarez) hated the slackness of my jeans or my refusal to wear my hair straight. Well, I hated having to be accompanied by a male relative or acquaintance wherever we went past sundown. I hated having to limit my comments on politics in conversation with men. I hated the incessant “psssst” coming even from the mouths of ten-year-olds. I hated the rigorous exhibition of our bodies for foreign consumption. I hated claustrophobic discussions with other women about clothing, hair, men, men, and men. I hated the complacent martyrdom of women humiliated by their husbands’ infidelities. I hated constant questions about boyfriends and marriage and children. I hated male chest thumping, for everything from driving a car to eating a piece of fruit. I hated to hate.

Being raised here, then, has brought me into conflicts with my parents. Though they raised me to be educated and hence, independent, the result later proved to go against their own traditions. They were uncomfortable with my wanting to study away from home, to travel, to have boyfriends (premarital sex), to move out on my own. Along the way they’ve eventually supported my decisions, but I was always left with a feeling of guilt, of having betrayed them and broken from tradition. For them, American women aged before their time because they lived worldly lives. “There’s a difference between being liberated (la libertad) and being a ‘libertine’ [el libertinaje],” my father would say, shaking his index finger at me, the specter of illicit sex always hovering.

Well, with delightfully illicit sex now behind me (and, hopefully, still more ahead of me), I’m entering the realm of motherhood. In a few weeks, I’ll bring a new soul to this world. Will I be an “American” mother or a “Dominican” mother or both? Which elements of each woman will I draw from? Whether or not I choose to be the one to wash dishes and cook and clean is of consequence. The name my partner and I choose for our child is of consequence. It may determine whether this soul will be defined by the double hyphens, Dominican-Puerto Rican-American, or whether American will be a sufficient term to contain
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her or his rich cultural and racial background. Every action in my life responds to where I have placed myself – including my writing.

The very language of this essay is an eye-cross. Not simply English, but English with American idioms and conventions. My writing has many times been a struggle to find the right word, the right turn of phrase to articulate an idea, emotion, or experience that may have originally occurred to me in Spanish, or emerged out of a very Dominican place in me.

I shuttle the world in my head from Spanish to English and vice versa. Spanish to English has helped me find more interesting phrasing for my work, consequently filling my writing with enough hiccups to keep an editor’s knuckles cracking. English to Spanish has helped me fill in the parts of my Spanish that haven’t matured beyond high school composition. Consequently my Spanish, however fluent, is littered with Anglicisms.

I can’t say I’m fully comfortable in either language. When speaking to native Spanish speakers, I hold my breath after blurting out a word fashioned out of English when its Spanish equivalent fails me. I don’t feel my Spanish is “educated” enough. My relationship to the language is not academic as it is social and religious, and very much a part of my childhood. I’ve been told that in Spanish my voice takes on a softer, pleasant, sometimes subservient timbre. The language does represent for me love and constraint, passion, warmth, and at times self-oppression. Self-oppression from obligatory Sunday mass, from parents with many rules for children growing up in New York, from a country where children and women are told too often to shut up.

English, on the other hand, feels so much more liberating, cruder. I curse more, demand more, invent more. Though the language to me is colder, not always as colorful, it’s more elastic. Black English, in particular, allows for more movement and expression. Yet around those who chew English like gum, I still find myself faltering. There are so many words in my vocabulary with which I am intimate as a reader but not as a speaker. I understand the meaning of “episiotomy,” yet my pronunciation of it is phonetic, and the discreet listener will repeat the word properly for me before taking another sip of calcium-rich juice at the birthing center.

With my siblings I speak English. Spanish used to be a way of tattletaling. “Alex, no digas malas palabras.” With our friends, too, English is the language of choice. Spanish used to be for us too right-off-the-boat, not hip enough. Spanish meant trousers and pointy shoes instead of Lees and fat-laced Pumas. Lees and fat-laced Pumas were the cornerstones of hip culture for us. As we get older, the meaning of culture and what we choose as our culture becomes more complicated than clothing and music. We are all in transition, becoming something else, giving birth to new selves. Now is a time to nurse new life. It’s a time for me to soak my feet and calibrate my compass. I’m still at 38° north latitude. 97° west longitude.

The real question for me isn’t “Have I become American?” but “Is this discussion already passé?”
PART THREE

Vidas: Herstories/ Histories
Of Heretics and Interlopers

Arturo Madrid

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Of Heretics and Interlopers

I have been an interloper, or by other accounts, an intruder, in the institutions of American society for most of my life. I have come to wear the label proudly. My earliest sense of being an interloper was in church, but later, as I went out into the larger world, I came to experience it in the other institutions. My sense of being an interloper led me early to the consideration of issues having to do with the imagining of community, with the contestation for community, with who belongs and who does not and why, as well as with the consequences of a historical imagining of community that is exclusionary in nature. I am not the first in my family to be an interloper. I am simply one in a long line of interlopers. Gabriela Barela, my mother, and her mother, Trinidad Tafoya, were interlopers, as was my father, Arturo Teófilo Madrid and his grandfather, Albino Madrid. Albino Madrid was also the first heretic.

Herejías

My great-grandfather Albino Madrid was 10 years old when the US Army of the West took possession of what is now the state of New Mexico in 1847. Shortly before the arrival of the Anglo-American colonizers in New Mexico he and his family had settled an area that was the historical hunting grounds of Apaches, Comanches, and Kiowas. Albino Madrid, his parents, and grandparents, lived a las orillas del mundo, at the edge of their known world, on a land grant located on the eastern slopes of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range, in a fortified village that afforded them protection from indigenous peoples on whom they had intruded. The village was situated on the banks of the Gallinas River, a few miles downstream from the town of Las Vegas, the first New Mexico stop on the Santa Fe Trail. By the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of
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the Hispano villagers had moved downstream into the llano, the westernmost edge of the Great Plains, driven from their holdings by the depredations of the Anglo-American colonizers and specifically those of land speculators who dispossessed them of their communal lands.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century Albino Madrid parted ways with kinfolks and neighbors and became an apostate; that is to say, he renounced the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church and became a Protestant. In so doing Albino Madrid and his family also chose to become part of the new Anglo-American society, a society they undoubtedly believed would provide them with opportunity and protection. As a consequence, at a moment when his neighbors and kinfolks were moving downstream into the dryness and isolation of the llano, in order to preserve their historical way of life, Albino Madrid and his family moved upriver, towards the future, to join their co-religionaries and to incorporate themselves into the new society. They settled on the west bank of the Gallinas River, on a hill overlooking the original Las Vegas settlement and its plaza, in close proximity to the Presbyterian mission church and school.

When Albino Madrid and his family arrived in Las Vegas, however, Anglo-Americans were already moving to the east bank of the Gallinas River, to a new town founded along the route of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, which reached New Mexico in 1879. My grandfather’s new co-religionaries, the Anglo-American Presbyterians, also crossed the river to establish their own new community and institutions, leaving their Hispano brothers and sisters in Christ behind in the original settlement, in what for the conversos, the Hispano converts to Protestantism, was a hostile social and political space.

Like the Israelites and the early Christians, the Hispano Protestants felt chosen by God, and like them they found themselves besieged. In parallel fashion to the fortifications Hispano settlers on the frontier built to protect themselves against Apaches, Comanches, and Kiowas, the Hispano converts had to erect psychological barriers to protect themselves from the hostility of their Catholic neighbors, who called them herejes – heretics – and worse.

Notwithstanding their brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ, Hispano Protestants found themselves in separate congregations from their Anglo co-religionaries, and not simply for reasons of language. They became unwitting beneficiaries of the legacy of Anglo-American racial ideology, which found them wanting. They were mixed-bloods, mestizos, considered biologically and socially lesser, and thus unworthy of inclusion in the new society and its institutions. As a consequence the Hispano Protestants ended up in the interstices between two worlds: one that was hostile to them because they were apostates and a second that rejected them because they were manifestly the inferior “other.”

Disdained by their Anglo mentors, the Hispano Protestants nonetheless reaffirmed their faith in the new society and its values. Fortified by their new beliefs, they raised high their defenses against Hispano hostility and Anglo rejection and began the process of forging space for themselves in Anglo-American society and its institutions. Notwithstanding their accommodations, that is, speaking
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English, becoming educated, taking on the values and ways of their Anglo brethren, the Hispano Protestants would continue to be perceived by members of the new society as interlopers in their world, different in degree but not in kind from their Catholic kin.

My great-grandfather Albino was a brave man to leave his historical faith and community in order to insert himself into a new and different one. So too was my maternal grandmother, Trinidad Tafoya, who left her ancestral village and mission church and made a space for herself and her family in an Anglo community and church. Following in the tradition of my ancestors, I have – over the course of the past four decades – insinuated myself into proscribed spaces, have involved myself in the struggle to tear down the walls of exclusion, have sought to lay claim over the entire range of American institutions with which I have come in contact.

Por la ventana/Through the Looking-Glass

I grew up in a remote and historically marginal part of the United States, in a river valley located at the edge of the Colorado Plateau and on the western slopes of the Southern Rocky Mountains, in the ancestral hunting grounds of Utes and Navajos. The village in which I lived served as the governmental seat of a county larger than the state of Connecticut, but had a population of fewer than 25,000 people. The main street ran in front of my parents’ house. My earliest memory is that of looking out the window of my parents’ home and witnessing the entire life of my community through that window.

As I grew older the windows I peered out of included those of the county courthouse where my mother worked, and always the windows on vehicles that transported me here and there. My neighbors were persons who looked like me, had names like mine, and shared my historical experience. They were laborers, farmers, ranchers, merchants, public officials, and professionals. My paisanos participated in the governing of its institutions, and were engaged in the processes of a democracy. In short, they formed a community. I too was a member of that community. I was at ease in the institutions: its schools, public offices, and community halls, as well as its commercial establishments.

I inherited my community. It was my home, a space created for me by my parents. Although they were not natives to the place I knew as home, they were nonetheless admired and respected members of their community. They were educated persons. My mother was an elected and appointed public official; my father a schoolteacher and school administrator. They spoke Spanish and English and were literate in both.

Upon taking up residence in the place they would make home for several decades, my parents became part of the larger community by participating in its celebratory activities – births, baptisms, marriages, accomplishments and triumphs – as well as those that called for sympathy, solidarity, and support, whether
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accidents, illness, misfortune, or death. But most importantly, they took on the responsibilities of members of a community, made theirs the concerns and aspirations of their fellow citizens, responded generously with time and money to requests made on them.

Our religious beliefs and practices were, however, different from those of the locals. We were protestantes in a Hispano Catholic community, and uniquely so. If I forgot, my neighbor and schoolmate Dora reminded me. She quizzed me about our beliefs and about our religious practices as we walked to school. Religion informed the life of that community, as it does of most rural villages. The cycle of life was marked by feast days and the rituals and activities associated with birth, life, and death. Dora was particularly concerned with where we would be buried when we died. “You know you protestantes can’t be buried in the camposanto,” she would remind me. “Only us Catholics can be buried in sacred ground.” Except for the curiosity my classmate Dora exhibited about Protestants, our religious persuasion was not an issue with respect to our social relations.

Rio Abajo/Downstream

From the dining-room window of my parents’ home I observed in microcosm and at a very young age a world in global transformation. From that vantage point I saw young men go off to war and only some of them return, and when the war ended saw trucks and cars speed down roads where wagons and buggies had previously rumbled, electric lights blaze where kerosene lamps had glowed, and entire families leave to seek their future beyond the confines of their ancestral spaces. But I also saw the world change by way of the metaphorical windows through which my parents kept themselves informed about the larger world: the radio, the newspaper, and the news magazines to which they subscribed.

I grew up very mindful of being different vis-à-vis the larger society, a difference that was reinforced by the two principal institutions of my childhood: school and church. Long before I heard the word or understood the concept, I was conscious of my ethnic “otherness,” which I shared with friends and neighbors. We were different from them, the people my grandparents called “los americanos.” My schoolbooks told of a larger world where we did not figure, one I also learned about from movies and subsequently, television. I was aware, early on, that we had a different status and occupied a different space from those persons I saw represented there.

Our different status was particularly evident at the Protestant churches my parents attended and the one to which my maternal grandparents belonged. Our fellow Protestants differed from us not only with respect to ethnicity but also in terms of their cultural attitudes and class make-up. In those institutional spaces, notwithstanding our accommodations, we were interlopers and thus my parents donned the protective armor of demeanor, dress, manners, and speech.
Ignorant of their history and that of their parents and grandparents, oblivious to the historical dynamics of the United States, I thought then that my status and my role in the larger society were a function of how I comported myself, of my wardrobe, of developing social graces, and above all of speaking English well and particularly without an accent. It was not until many years later that I came to the realization that we were interlopers in a society that had historically imagined itself as mainly male in gender, Protestant Christian in religion, and Northern European in its ethnic and cultural origins; that we were heirs to a historical legacy of exclusion; that we were trapped in an ongoing imagining that continued to find us wanting, lacking, not measuring up, however refined, elegant, educated, or well-spoken we might be as individuals.

My parents armed me as best they knew how and sent me downstream to become a citizen of the larger world, in the same way that my great-grandfather Albino Madrid had moved his family upstream a century before in order to join the new society. No longer was I surrounded by persons I knew or who knew who I was, who looked like me or had names like mine, whose surroundings or circumstances were known to me, whose realities or life experiences were familiar to me, whose activities and involvement touched on mine, whose concerns I shared. In that changed and larger world there was not a community that approximated my community of origin. Moreover in that larger world we were either missing or invisible. I have written about those two phenomena in an essay titled “Diversity and its Discontents” (Academe 76: 6) and I will not repeat it here. Suffice it to say that I came to understand that our accommodations to American society, while necessary for our survival, were not sufficient to make us acceptable and that our only option was to lay claim to its institutions and struggle to make them work for us.

The More Things Change . . .

What changed most significantly over the course of the second half of the twentieth century were our relation to the rest of the world, the demographic make-up of our national population, the nature of our economy, the social relations of our society, and the culture of our institutions. After World War II, the US ceased to be isolationist and became increasingly active in shaping the politics and economies and cultures of the larger world. In the process the larger world came to our shores as well and accelerated the transformation of our society. By the end of the century people from every region and culture of the world, as well as of every religious persuasion, were living and making their living alongside us, were contributing to the growth of the nation’s economy, and utilizing its institutions.

In the decades following World War II we purged our society of most de jure exclusionary policies and practices, as well as the most egregious manifestations of de facto exclusion and discrimination. That same period saw widespread
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diffusion in the civil arena of instruments of assessment originally developed during World War II for military purposes. In the postwar era those instruments, whose original purpose was to identify technical ability and leadership potential among populations who had benefited from inherited privilege, became widely used as a means for selection, whether for admissions to, employment in, or professional advancement in the institutions.

These changes have both advanced and complicated the functioning of a democratic society and its institutions. Two of them have particular import for Latina/os: the changes in the social relations of society and the changes in the culture of its institutions. One of the compelling and driving myths of our society is that it is a classless one. The myth is embodied in the Horatio Alger story. It is an ideal we revere and pursue. The ideal is evidenced in the significance we assign to opportunity. It has served historically to blunt challenges to privilege.

Increasingly, however, we live in a world that sorts out the sheep from the goats and does so very early on. We have developed a system of evaluation to determine who has ability and potential to accumulate privilege and who might not or cannot. While an admirable system in theory, in practice it has significant flaws, since the system makes no allowance for advantage. Thus the person of great capability (as determined by the appropriate instruments) whose life circumstances have permitted her/him more and a greater range of opportunities, a greater fund of knowledge, and a more extensive set of experiences, is at a distinct advantage to a person whose life circumstances have not. Despite the fact that the instruments are principally predictive in nature (and are particularly good at sorting out the privileged sheep from the privileged goats) they have been promoted as being scientific and objective and absolute by stakeholders and by parties who have an interest in the outcomes. Policies and practices to compensate for disadvantage and lack of privilege are deemed to be invidious, discriminatory, and antithetical to the ideals of a democratic society.

We have also been extraordinarily successful in convincing ourselves as a society that exclusion and discrimination are things of the past. Its contemporary manifestations are rarely acknowledged, and when challenged or exposed, hotly denied or haughtily dismissed. No African American or Latina/o students? They don’t qualify. No African American or Latina/o employees? Can’t find any. No African American or Latina/o managers? They lack the qualifications. No minority or female officers or officials? They are not competitive. They don’t have the drive. They don’t have the staying power. They don’t have the experience. They don’t measure up. Etc., etc., etc.

Duty, Privilege . . . and Serendipity

I have written elsewhere that all Latinas/os, notwithstanding their origins, circumstances, or status, are asked the same question: And where are you from?
Implicit in that question is the belief that we do not belong, that we are not part of the “imagined” US community, that we are interlopers in this society. Some of us also experience another question that flows from that same belief. Unlike the previous question it is rarely a simple or direct question. Rather, it takes various forms, both friendly and unfriendly. The question is part of an initial change. It is posed innocently, but quickly becomes sharp. That is, on what basis do you hold this position, this title, this responsibility, this honor? What qualifies you to be x, get to do y, have received z? Why are you here, involved in such, responsible for this, in charge of that? Ultimately, however, it boils down to the question: Why you, the interloper, and not me, who really belongs?

It is not a question that is easily avoided, nor does the questioning ever cease. When faced with it, I bite my tongue. My tongue has, as a consequence, gotten shorter over the years, but unfortunately not less sharp. I assess each instance carefully. These are treacherous waters. Here there be dragons. Can I educate? Or do I prevaricate? My head urges caution; my heart, however, surges as the adrenaline kicks in. I might be able to avoid an answer, but I cannot evade the questions. My very existence summons those queries from whatever space or depth they occupy. I resist, but in the end the heart prevails. It is where hope resides. And so my brain engages.

I have given much thought to this matter. Earlier in my professional life, aware of the aggressive nature of the query, I would don the armor of my bona fides, lay out my credentials: degrees, honors, titles, appointments, affiliations, and associations. Later in life I would point at my nose and say: Because I have a good nose. And in response to quizzical looks I would add: I can smell money and trouble a long distance away.

These days I do not display my credentials. They hardly provide any protection and few are impressed by them. Nor do I attempt to be ironic. Irony is wasted in a world where subtlety is no longer valued. Instead, I say: Privilege, duty, and serendipity. My answer bemuses or intrigues. Aggressors quickly disengage. They seek a reaction, and not a response. The self-satisfied moo and move on to graze elsewhere. Only the foolish, or the innocent, or the truly curious, pursue the matter further.

Luck? That, of course, my interlocutors understand. Why else would I be here? But duty? I grew up in a Calvinist environment, I explain. Historically, Calvinists have believed they are chosen people. The advantages that being one of the chosen might represent was not something I understood as a child, but I certainly knew what my obligations were: hard work, honesty, integrity, compassion, righteousness, duty. At the top of the list was duty, but it was inseparable from the others. I was expected to meet responsibilities both stated and unstated, however onerous they might be. I had an obligation to speak up and to speak out, whatever the consequences. It was my duty to take on tasks and to carry them out well, however burdensome they were.

I have assumed responsibility, taken on obligation, been driven by duty all my life. I know no other way. It was my duty to oppose segregation, to challenge the
insanity of the Vietnam War, to support the farm workers’ campaign for equity and justice, to seek better educational services for poor and minority children, to struggle against exclusion and bigotry based on race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, and always to fight for justice and fairness, notwithstanding the consequences.

I rarely get to tell about privilege. Eyes glaze over before I’m done with duty. I was born to privilege, I explain. I come from a family that was literate and educated for multiple generations. One of my ancestors, Roque Madrid, a military officer, wrote a journal about the campaign he led against the Navajos in 1705. Albino Madrid is known to Presbyterian history as the Bible-reading blacksmith. He was literate long before he came in contact with the Protestant missionaries in the 1880s. My grandfather Teófilo Madrid graduated from a theological seminary in 1894. Both my parents were college-educated professionals.

I had advantage, I continue. My parents were not wealthy, but they were able to provide experiences and opportunities that permitted me to see what existed beyond the bounds of the region in which I lived. My horizons were not defined by the mountains or ridges that surrounded my village, nor were they determined by fear of the unknown or rejection of the unfamiliar. My parents pushed me to leave the comforts and securities of home; to subject myself to unfamiliar environments and make them mine; to move out into the larger world and become a part of it.

My privilege as a person who felt ownership over the institutions of society; who did well on instruments of evaluation beginning with the earliest of these, the Stanford-Binet test; who had access, support, encouragement, validations, opportunities, and much luck have afforded me many windows into the institutional life of the United States. Over the past thirty years I have had occasion to hold high-level appointments in a number of institutions as well as to serve on the boards of a wide range of others. Although I continue – understandably – to accept the invitation to be the first Latina/o to be asked to serve on an official body, I am ever more reluctant to be the one and only Latina/o on those bodies, and I do not allow myself to think that I am the only Latina/o qualified to take on such responsibilities, much less capable of exercising them.

Several years ago I served on the board of the community foundation for a large metropolitan area. Our director, a well-known and well-respected figure in that world, had occasion to be interviewed for a study on the challenges facing community foundations. The biggest challenge, he stated, was addressing the needs of a society that was undergoing technological and demographic change at a very high rate. Of particular concern were the needs and circumstances of minority populations, new and old. For whatever reason the officer and his interviewer neglected to clarify when the interviewee was speaking off the record.
In addition the controls that would normally obtain in the editorial review process did not, with the result that when the report was released the director was quoted, much to his chagrin, as stating that “minorities” did not “give” but only “took.” Quite gratuitously he also added that Latinas/os “were the most racist people he knew.” His remarks were picked up in the local media and became a matter of public record.

Latina/o leaders took great umbrage – and rightly so – at the charge of racism. I, on the other hand, was far more concerned with his view of Latinas/os as “takers” and not “givers.” The changing demographics of the city had already resulted in the appointment of a small number of Latinas/os to highly visible and principally ceremonial positions, but no significant incorporation of members of that community into the workings, the management, or the policymaking dimension of the agencies or institutions. The community foundation, to be sure, had diversified its staff and board, and sought to assure that its response to change was substantive rather than either token or symbolic. What was missing was the appreciation that Latinas/os were not just a welfare clientele, but that they were persons who had the will to give and already had a record of giving, and that moreover could be active participants in the institutions of the local community and contributing members to the larger society, if given the opportunity and the appropriate rationale.

Over the course of its history this society has attributed behaviors, values, and characteristics to entire populations in order to deny them ownership of the society’s institutions and control over their destinies, and it continues to view entire communities and their constituents in deficit terms and/or treat them paternalistically. My world, and the world of persons who share this heritage of exclusion, is not one in which participation in, much less a sense of ownership of the institutions of the society has been a given, nor is taken for granted. On the contrary, we have had to demand to be included. And we have had to do battle against being portrayed as being ignorant about, uninterested in, or antagonistic to democratic processes and institutions.

The reigning discourse promotes the myth that discrimination and exclusion are a thing of the past; that the problem is reverse racism; that America’s poor and its others have only themselves to blame for their status and circumstances. It is a powerful myth, one that rationalizes privilege. Even more horrifying is that the poor, the marginal, the excluded, have apparently internalized that message and that so many of those who have benefited from the battle against exclusion propagate it.

I dispose of no counter-soundbites, no counter-discourse, no counter-myths with which to turn the tide. I continue, however, to be tenacious in my belief in the promise of this nation’s institutions. But I am also acutely conscious of the history of this society and of its contemporary realities. I do not believe, despite the reigning discourse, that liberty – in the sense of opportunity – or justice – in the sense of equal protection under the law – are available to all, if only people had the right values, the right attitudes, the right manners, worked
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harder, and spoke English well. But I believe in the pursuit of truth and of speaking truth to power; and further that the pursuit of truth can lead to liberty and justice, if we are prepared to struggle for those ends.

Whatever our history as a society, whatever the consequences the past has had on the present, the future has to be different. If we are to truly be a democratic society we must assure that rights and protections obtain for all. And if we are to become a society dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, where justice and mercy obtains for all, we must assure that our society provides opportunity for all, and particularly for those who by virtue of not having advantage do not gain access, do not obtain support, do not acquire validations. Most importantly, all the peoples of this nation need to feel that the society’s institutions exist for their benefit and that the health of these institutions is in their interests. Our well-being as a national community depends on our ability to bring about shared ownership of and shared responsibility for our institutions. This is where community can begin. The place to start is at the local level. It is where participation in and ownership over the society’s institutions occurs or doesn’t. It is where change first occurs and is first felt. It is where needs are met or not. It is not only the necessary but also the most logical place to start.
The scene is the “Mapping Memories and Migrations: Re-Thinking Latina Histories” conference held in February, 2004. Before a packed house at the Latina/o Cultural Center in Dallas, Texas, an elegant Mexican American senior citizen rose from her seat to ask me, the panel moderator, a question: “Can you explain to me the word Chicano?” During the break, a colleague pulled me aside inquiring if I had recognized Anita Martínez, the woman who had asked the “Chicano” question. In 1969 Martínez was the first Mexican American woman elected to the Dallas City Council. A longtime community advocate, Anita Martínez had worked closely with her friend and fellow council member Juanita Craft, a leader in the local NAACP. Given Ms. Martínez’s civil rights credentials, a historian might be tempted to call her a “Chicana”; however, for Anita Martínez, the term held little meaning.

Nomenclature and self-identification remain salient issues. What does naming reveal about our multiple identities, our máscaras (masks), our sueños (dreams)? People of Mexican birth or descent refer to themselves by many names – mexicana/o, Mexican American, and Chicana/o (to name just three). Self-identification speaks volumes about regional, generational, and even political orientations. Multiple identities even surface within individual families. As Salt Lake City housing activist María García reflected, “My mother is Spanish; one brother is Mexican; my sister is Mexican American; I am Chicana. Three brothers are Hispanic; and the youngest is Latina/o.”

Rather than offering a smattering of sources, I intend to sketch out the racial/gendered contours of twentieth-century Chicana/o history over the last twenty years, problematizing notions of mestizaje (morena/o), whiteness (blanca/o), and...
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cultural coalescence (café con leche). The situational nature of racial constructs in the historical (and the historians’) moment can be discerned by both focused overview and case study. My recent research on school desegregation in the Southwest seeks to interrogate and interpret issues of whiteness from the standpoint of superintendents, Latina/o parents, and their children.

In 1969 the National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, hosted by Corky Gonzáles and the Crusade for Social Justice, offered a potent nationalist vision linking an Aztec past to a Chicano future. The concept of Aztlán as the mythic Aztec homeland reborn in a Chicano nation resonated among the audience over fifteen hundred strong. Certainly Aztec motifs would come to dominate the iconography of the movimiento as young militants embraced the hagiography of a pre-Columbian past as their own, both in public protests and cultural production. This Aztec imaginary was not only front and center in public protests, but also in cultural production.

The quest for indigenous roots influenced not only students, artists, and creative writers, but social scientists as well. The historical stasis of the essentialized Chicana/o emerged in a popular book published in 1979. In *La Chicana*, Alfredo Mirandé, a sociologist, and Evangelina Enríquez, a doctoral candidate in literature, baldly proclaimed: “Aztec norms of feminine expectation have remained surprisingly intact to the present day. They are relevant for Chicanas because they suggest that prescribed roles for women in the culture are essentially inflexible.” What exactly were the precise unchanging expectations that could be traced from “Aztec models” to the present? According to the authors, these included “being the heart of the home, bearing and rearing children, being clean and tidy, dedicating oneself to a husband, and preserving one’s respectability in the eyes of the community.” This laundry list of cultural prescriptions could be applied to women across time, region, and culture. For instance, the cult of true womanhood in Victorian America comes immediately to mind. The authors blithely ignore over five hundred years of historical change, not the least of which encompass three centuries of Spanish colonial rule, the conquest of the Mexican North, and the successive movements of peoples to the United States (al otro lado).

Writing in the 1970s and early 1980s, most historians sidestepped the search for indigenous roots, preferring to document labor market segmentation, inter-generational economic stratification, barriozation, and at times trade union organization. Marking with statistical precision the colonial legacies wrought by Manifest Destiny, these pioneering studies by Albert Camarillo, Richard Griswold del Castillo, and Mario García (among others) center on material conditions and structural impediments with identity, whether Chicano or mexicano, taken as a given. Identities, whether racial or regional, were assumed rather than theorized. Moreover, Chicano history meant just that – emphasis on the masculine ending *o*.

and drawing on trade union documents, newspapers, and oral histories, I chronicle the stories of union life among California food-processing workers during the 1930s and 1940s. Mexican women in common cause with their Euro-American (predominantly Jewish) co-workers created and led a grassroots union in which they achieved unparalleled benefits, especially for the era, such as equal pay for equal work and vacation pay. Racial constructions or self-identification certainly escaped my view, but brief references to the impact of US popular culture and to intergenerational tensions between daughters and their parents would provide the kernel for my next book, From Out of the Shadows.6

In 1990 historian Elizabeth Salas in Soldaderas in the Mexican Military returned to the concept of indigenismo within her overview of women soldiers and caretakers during the Mexican Revolution. “Soldaderas have marched through most of Mexican history,” the author declares as she links Mesoamerican women warriors (the ancestors) with las soldaderas and their symbolic descendants – Chicana student activists. The strong masculine warrior so prevalent in movimiento motifs shows his feminine side, so to speak, in Salas’s narrative.7

Salas emphasizes that Mexicans carried the soldadera image with them as they journeyed north and yes; they carried that and so much more – a whole array of cultural codes, political beliefs, and occupational skills. Chicana/o labor historians writing in the early 1990s charted the development of a “Mexicanist” identity rooted in class, culture, politics, and employment. Community took center stage. Concentrating primarily on male agricultural workers, scholars such as Camille Guerin-Gonzales, Emilio Zamora, and Gilbert González meticulously record the building of community from neighborhood institutions to trade unions, all predicated on mexicanidad, a fusion of class and cultural identity.8 In general, these monographs focus on neither Mesoamerican linkages nor racial constructions per se, but instead on the structural factors influencing the everyday lives of Mexican workers and their responses to racism and exploitation. Within this paradigm, Lisbeth Haas in Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769–1936 and Devra Weber in Dark Sweat, White Gold interrogate the interplay of gender and memory. Haas imaginatively traces collective, public memory across time and generation, while Weber reveals the gendered dialectics of private memory: “Men remembered the strike in terms of wages and conditions; women remembered the events in terms of food.”9 Bolstered by a fervent sense of mexicanidad, worker identities as community builders and proletariats politicized by material circumstances and at times Mexican revolutionary ideals serve as the common interpretive threads running throughout Chicana/o labor studies.

Imbricating color as part of racial and class formations, Linda Gordon, in her award winning study The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction, details how in 1904 New York City Irish foundlings bound for Clifton, Arizona in an orphan train were given to Mexican parents upon their arrival. Stunned to see white babies in the arms of Mexicans, Euro-American women urged their male kin to round up the children by force. After the round up, the Catholic religious were literally run out of town and the children were redistributed to Euro-American households.
Vicki L. Ruiz

The orphanage sued but lost in the Arizona Supreme Court and later the US Supreme Court. Gordon posits that Mexicans had chosen the children precisely because of their complexion and heritage, in part as an investment for their families’ future, as the young boys would grow up to claim white wages in the mines. Furthermore, as Stephen Lassonde notes in his New York Times book review, by “‘taking in a piece of Anglo culture’ – each child ‘might become a true americano.’”

To be an American resonated among middle-class Mexican Americans during the early decades of the twentieth century, most visibly within the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Founded by Tejanos in 1929, LULAC, a middle-class civil rights organization, struck a chord among Mexican Americans and by 1939 chapters could be found throughout the Southwest. Envisioning themselves as patriotic “white” Americans pursuing their rights, LULACers restricted membership to English-speaking US citizens. Taking a page from the early NAACP, LULAC stressed the leadership of an “educated elite” who would lift their less fortunate neighbors by their bootstraps. With a somewhat different spin, David Gutiérrez in Walls and Mirrors argues that “LULAC members consistently went to great lengths to explain to anyone who would listen that Americans of Mexican descent were different from (and by implication somehow better than) Mexicans from the other side.” Through the prism of gender, Cynthia Orozco’s scholarship illustrates how women’s voluntarist politics indicated that there existed less social distance between immigrants and citizens as well as between workers and merchants than the rhetoric of LULAC would lead us to believe. LULAC women were bridge people simultaneously seeking to meet the material needs of newcomers and neighbors while engaging in direct action for civil rights. Yet, it must be noted that in billing itself as the other white group, LULAC worked hard in “maintaining the color line between its members and African Americans.” In his highly acclaimed monograph, The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture, Neil Foley beautifully deconstructs how peoples’ perceptions of themselves are based on both who they are and who they are not.

Indeed, by drawing out the dialectics between morena/o and blanca/o, Neil Foley explains, “Mexican identity, like whiteness itself, fissured along lines of class, nationality, and culture.” In Texas towns, immigrants clung to a Mexicanist identity while their middle-class neighbors and even their own children considered themselves white. Yet, this duality, while important, does not take into full measure the fulcrum of individuals and cultures in motions, the shifting hues of café con leche. The dances of cultural negotiations can be observed throughout Spanish-speaking communities, from Hispano villagers preserving a regional community in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado (Sarah Deutsch’s No Separate Refuge), to second generation Mexican American men in Los Angeles, who according to George Sánchez were Becoming Mexican American. Situating women’s lives squarely within the “swirls of cultural contradiction” is a central premise in From Out of the Shadows. In tandem with the claiming of public space
by women across generation, class, and region, cultural coalescence represents
the text’s signifying paradigm. From the flapper of the twenties to the riveting
Rosies of the forties to Chicana Brown Berets of the sixties to contemporary
community and labor leaders, women have made history. This emphasis on
the public, however, has cast its own shadows (pardon the pun), including the
long shadow of heteronormativity. As Elizabeth Rodriguez Kessler astutely and
charitably points out in her review, “Ruiz’s devotion to the political struggle
consumes the majority of her text; and she devotes only two pages to the struggles
Chicana lesbians endure.”

Sexuality and power drive much of recent Chicana historiography and yes,
there exists a significant body of critical scholarship that can, indeed, be charac-
terized as distinctly Chicana, emphasis on the feminine. A bold envisioning of
Chicana historical consciousness as a decentered metanarrative, Emma Pérez’s
*The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* breaks open categories
of poststructural analysis and queer theory as they apply to select twentieth-
century transnational case studies. Her discussion of diasporic subjectivities of
Mexican immigrant women is a major contribution to Chicana/o history and
cultural studies. In exploring identities rooted in occupation, race, and place,
Mary Ann Villarreal and Deborah Vargas chronicle the lives of women entertainers
in south Texas, musicians and vocalists who traveled with their bands earning
a livelihood and crafting their own sense of self. Mary Ann Villarreal is the first
historian to examine the lives of twentieth-century Mexican American women
who patronize or operate local cantinas and the ways in which they appropriate
or negotiate a very male-identified public space. Challenging the masculinist
memories of the Chicano Student Movement, Marisela Chávez’s nuanced inter-
pretation of Chicana activism in California lends a big-picture perspective as she
interrogates the overlapping strands of nationalism, Marxism, and feminism as
refracted through global concerns and grassroots projects. Both Marisela Chávez
and Lorena Oropeza offer unvarnished portraits of youthful militancy, revealing
moments of both courage and stupidity. In ¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No!, Lorena Oropeza
recounts the hidden costs of activism; for example, how Kathy Davis del Valle,
the daughter of a mexicana and an African American, was exhorted by Chicano
nationalists to change her name to Katarina and to distance herself from her
African American father in order to “prove” her commitment to La Raza. This
incident was not an aberration, as students of blended heritage who came of age
during the 1960s and 1970s encountered similar litmus tests.

The Chicano Movement, of course, extended beyond campus activism. In
*Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the US Catholic
Church*, Lara Medina focuses on the participation of nuns in the Chicano Move-
ment. She examines the ways in which the sisters navigated the Church, Chicano
nationalism, and the communities they served. *Las Hermanas* have contributed
materially and spiritually to their neighborhoods as they have pioneered strategies
of empowerment through grassroots organizations based in liberation theology
and Alinsky-style organizing techniques.
Masculinity must also be problematized. Steven Rosales’s study represents the first historical narrative of Mexican American men in the US military from World War II through Viet Nam. Conducting extensive life histories with over forty veterans, Rosales carefully sorts out the ideations of masculinity as he frames his narrators’ experiences as soldiers, sailors, and pilots. Equally important, he gauges the impact of military service on their civilian life. In the acclaimed *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Class in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900–1970*, Matt García deftly delineates the faultlines of generation, gender, and citizenship in the suburbs of southern California. He brings out the tensions between Mexican American male citrus workers and Mexican nationals who entered the groves as *braceros*, tensions that arose over wages and women. Asserting a “protective” proprietorship over “their” women, Mexican American men positioned themselves as “a cut above the *braceros*, whom they viewed with suspicion and at times outright hostility.” Focusing on youth, García interrogates the lived experiences of Mexican Americans as individuals who traversed and transgressed a sociocultural milieu that included as integral actors Euro-Americans, African Americans, and Mexican immigrants. He demonstrates the multiplicity of inherently political intercultural discourses among such groups as aspiring thespians performing at the Padua Hills dinner theater, to African American and Latina/o musicians and their young fans who frequented a popular integrated Pomona dance hall, the aptly named Rainbow Gardens.

Does region matter in racial constructions and cultural coalescence? The overwhelming majority of monographs in Chicana/o historiography have focused on the Southwest (usually California and Texas), although since the early decades of the twentieth century a significant number of Mexican immigrants and their US-born children, side by side with other Latinas/os, have called the Midwest home. In her monograph on Chicago’s Mexican communities, Gabriela Arredondo offers an intriguing alternative vision to accepted paradigms in immigration history. She asserts that Mexicans in Chicago did not acculturate along the same lines as ethnic Europeans in that consumer culture and working-class consciousness did not translate into an “American” identity. Rather, she traces how Mexican immigrants developed their own brand of *mexicanidad* drawing on popular intellectual discourse in Mexico and as a response to big city life and discrimination.

Like Arredondo, García, Foley, and Gordon (to mention a few), I am fascinated by the interplay of the everyday and self-identification. To what extent are constructions of whiteness an individual strategic shift in response to material circumstances (e.g., segregationist policies), or as in New Mexico and Colorado, a deeply held identity, an orientation forged by both public memory and cherished family genealogies? Blood quantum is not the issue. As John Nieto-Phillips so astutely notes in his dissertation, historians should not focus on who claims to be Spanish, but “examine how that identity evolved and was shaped in various contexts” as well as how it played out over generations.

My research on school desegregation in the Southwest reveals the situational nature of racial constructions. The landmark case *Méndez v. Westminster* (1947)
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offers a glimpse into a multivalent discourse that often went unspoken over passing, white privilege, and Latina/o identities. No doubt, complexion counted when parents sought to enroll their children in local schools. The güera (light-complected) Alice Esperanza Méndez Vidaurri was admitted to the “white” elementary school in rural Orange County, California while her more morena cousin Sylvia Méndez was turned away. Her parents Gonzalo and Felícitas Méndez sought legal redress.26

In March 1945 Gonzalo Méndez, William Guzmán, Frank Palomino, Thomas Estrada, and Lorenzo Ramirez, with the help of LULAC, sued four local school districts – Westminster, Garden Grove, Santa Ana, and El Modena. They challenged, in part, the common practice of drawing school boundaries around Mexican neighborhoods to ensure de facto segregation. Mexicans who lived in “white” residential areas were also subject to school segregation, as the Ayala family found out when 18-year-old Isabel was turned away when she tried to enroll her younger siblings at their local school in Garden Grove. To add further insult, according to the preeminent commentator on California life Carey McWilliams, placement of children was also based on phenotype. In McWilliams’s words: “Occasionally the school authorities inspect the children so that the offspring of a Mexican mother whose name may be O’Shaughnessy will not slip into the wrong school.”

During the trial, superintendents reiterated well-worn stereotypes as exemplified by the Garden Grove superintendent’s bald assertion that “Mexicans are inferior in personal hygiene, ability, and in their economic outlook.” Furthermore, these youngsters needed separate schools given their lack of English proficiency, and they “were handicapped in ‘interpreting English words because their cultural background’ prevented them from learning Mother Goose rhymes.” The court transcript is replete with images of “dirty” Mexican children. For example, Superintendent Kent recited a laundry list of hygienic deficiencies peculiar to Mexican children that warranted, in part, their segregation. These deficiencies included “lice, impetigo, tuberculosis, generally dirty hands, face, neck, and ears.” When the plaintiffs’ attorney David Marcus queried, “Are all children dirty?” Kent answered, “No sir.” When Marcus pushed the issue – “Do you keep a record of dirty hands and face?” – “No” was the response. Kent’s testimony persistently portrayed Mexican children as at a marked disadvantage vis-à-vis their “Anglo Saxon” peers to such an extent that he considered it a “shame” to integrate, even if it meant the inclusion of only one token Mexican American child into an all-European American classroom. “It is very hard for one child to compete with 40 children of another race in a class.” His reliance on the term “race” speaks volumes.28

Devising a twofold strategy, Marcus questioned the constitutionality of educational segregation and called in expert witnesses – social scientists who challenged these assumptions about Mexican American children and the supposed need for separate schools. When she took the stand, Felícitas poignantly summed up her family’s struggles: “We always tell our children they are Americans.”
Taking almost a year to formulate his decision, Judge Paul McCormick “ruled that segregation of Mexican youngsters found no justification in the laws of California and furthermore was a clear denial of the ‘equal protection’ clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.”

Méndez v. Westminster assumes national significance through its tangible connections to Brown v. Board of Education in four interrelated areas in addition to the direct involvement of NAACP counsel Thurgood Marshall, whose name appears as a co-author of an amicus curiae brief for this case. First, according to historian Rubén Flores, the Méndez case influenced a shift in NAACP legal strategy to include “social science arguments”; he calls the links “clear and unmistakable.” Second, Judge McCormick in deliberating his decision relied not just on legal precedent but also on social science and education research. As Charles Wollenberg noted, “much of the social and educational theory expressed by Judge McCormick anticipated Earl Warren’s historic opinion in the Brown case.” Third, “it was the first time that a federal court had concluded that the segregation of Mexican Americans in public schools was a violation of state law” and unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment because of the denial of due process and equal protection. Finally, as the direct result of the Méndez case, the Anderson bill (1947) repealed all California school codes mandating segregation and was signed into law by then Governor Earl Warren.

For Andrea Pérez, her desire to marry World War II veteran Sylvester Davis met resistance from the state of California. Andrea Pérez was the daughter of Mexican immigrants; her fiancé Sylvester Davis was African American. Fully aware that California’s anti-miscegenation code prohibited their union, they hired attorney Dan Marshall to challenge this discriminatory law. Indeed, after a Los Angeles County clerk denied the couple a marriage license, Andrea Pérez filed suit. In 1949 the California Supreme Court ruled in Pérez’s favor, becoming the first state Supreme Court to strike down an anti-miscegenation law. As Dara Orenstein brilliantly points out, this decision hinged, in part, on mestizaje. She argues that the court rendered the statute as “too vague and uncertain” given that the legislation did not take into account people of “mixed ancestry” and that government employees could not consistently determine degrees of whiteness.

In addition to this line of reasoning, the California Supreme Court further ruled that the law violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

From the borderlands era to the present, the fluidities embedded in mestizaje allow for multiple constructions of subjectivities including morena/o, blanca/o y café con leche. In locating meaning in gendered lived experiences, we should be mindful of our responsibilities to our narrators, to our craft, and to our communities. Or as Valerie J. Matsumoto insightfully comments: “Perhaps scholars should be reminded that we, no less than those we study, are actors in history, making choices that affect the lives of others.” Critical of standpoint methodologies that purport to give voice to the voiceless, postcolonial theorist Rosalind O’Hanlon cautions against using “their words [to] address our own concerns,
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and to render their figures in our self-image.” While I concur that we should not recast narrators/subjects into plaster saints or (worse) intellectual replicas, I do believe their words and deeds can provide guidance, comfort, inspiration, or cautionary tales that can be applied to the here and now. At heart, I am probably an unreconstructed social historian who still dreams of a useable past.

Notes


2 Interview with Maria García conducted by the author, October 2, 2004.


7 Elizabeth Salas, Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 120.


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14 Ibid, p. 211.


16 Rubén Martínez, “The Role of the Intellectual Chicano/Latino in Our Communities” (talk given at the Graduate Humanities Center, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, CA, October 6, 1993).

17 Ruiz, *Shadows*, p. xvi.


27 Frank Barajas, “On Behalf of . . . ,” graduate seminar paper, Claremont Graduate School, 1994, pp. 1, 12, 26; José Pitti et al., “A History of Mexican Americans in California,” in *Free Views: An Ethnic History Site Survey for California* (Sacramento: California Department of
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José Montoya’s elegiac poem “El Louie” is a classic of modern Chicano literature. Published in 1970 and first popularized in the heady years of the Chicano political-cultural Movimiento, it is probably the most recognized Chicano poem of that time, and arguably still to this day. And yet it has an ironic relationship to that generative period, whose prevailing discourse of *la causa* favored rebel-heroic figures like Moctezuma, Emiliano Zapata, Che Guevara, or, more presently and locally, Reies López Tijerina. Their lives of explicit political struggle, consecrated in murals and other popular expressive forms, embodied a prevalent Movement ethos of masculine resistance against the forces of oppression and inequity.

Although powerfully personified for most of the poem, Louie Rodríguez has no such political or revolutionary inclinations. Rather than ennobling battles against conquerors and colonizers, Louie’s antagonists were Chicanos from other towns and neighborhoods as well as the demons of his own limited circumstances. Because Louie’s key years of action and impact were as a first generation pachuco in the 1940s, a strident and influential camp of Movement intelligentsia faulted Montoya for glorifying what they considered to be a sordid aspect of community history, better left forgotten. It did not help Montoya’s standing when he also began to produce a continuing series of pachuco-themed drawings and paintings. But while some ideologues decried “El Louie,” a greater public within and outside of the Chicano Movement took to the poem with great gusto.

In a context where word-of-mouth was one of the more effective structures of dissemination, the buzz about this poem quickly gave it an audience many times greater than when it was first published in *Rascatripas*, a Raza community newspaper in Oakland. Montoya had emerged as a significant Chicano poet after being included in the groundbreaking 1969 collection *El Espejo*. But as word and copies of “El Louie” spread across the alternative nation of Aztlán, Montoya came into greater demand as a speaker at all manner of political, cultural, and
An Appreciation of “El Louie”

community gatherings. Montoya’s well-honed oratorical skills contributed mightily to the spreading appeal of the poem.

The status of “El Louie” as a Chicano poetic hit was further solidified when El Teatro Campesino dramatized it in their touring repertoire and in a filmed version broadcast on Los Angeles public television. Montoya’s work influenced Luis Valdez’s own pachuco-era dramatizations in the full stage production of Zoot Suit (later adapted to film), for which Montoya served as technical advisor and poster artist. In this same period, “El Louie” would become a core text in the emerging curriculum of Chicano studies. First disseminated in mimeograph copies, it was textually canonized by inclusion in two foundational Chicano literary collections, Literatura Chicana and Aztlan: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature.

Memorializing the life of Louie Rodriguez, a close friend of the Montoya family and camarada of Montoya’s older brother, the poem conveys a subdued emotional charge that mixes respect, affection, and lament. While Louie was clearly no epic hero, Montoya nonetheless saw exemplary qualities of leadership, honor, and dramatic expression in his actions and demeanor. The setting significantly conditions Louie’s characterization. In the third tier urbanity of his home town (“Fowler no era nada como/Los [Los Angeles], o’l E.P.T. [El Paso Texas] Fresno’s/Westside was as close as we ever got to the big time”), Louie was a vanguard figure who first introduced metropolitan pachuco style and attitude. He thus embodied the spectacular appeal and self-fashioning confidence (“He dug roles, man”) of “big time” barrio youth culture against the drab limitations of California’s Central Valley social landscape.

The poem foregrounds those golden days of his youthful influence, but its episodic narration goes on to reveal the contradictions, pressures, and downward spiral of a Chicano everyman who died tragically alone. The spectacular promise of his youthful influence ultimately underscores his inability to transcend the limitations of his environment, adding a poignant irony to his life trajectory: “the end was a cruel hoax.” Montoya’s rounded account of Louie’s life thus offered one of the first fully rendered and achieved characterizations in contemporary Chicano literature, at a time when the hunger for such representation was acute.

Furthermore, the easy interplay of Chicano vernacular Spanish and English, and the fluid and dramatic free verse form, echoed and validated popular Chicano linguistic practice in a way that literally rang true to the ear of his intended community of readers and listeners. It could, in this respect, be seen as a precursory Chicano performance poem or spoken-word text. Montoya’s reading style certainly anticipated and fits within the parameters of these intersecting genres, and many current practitioners do cite him as an influence among the veterano generation of Chicano poets. For all the reasons noted, “El Louie” struck a resonant chord among its audience, which reveled in seeing that the lives of people like themselves could be the stuff of literature. So while the poem was conceived in grief, the tragic aspect of Louie’s demise is ultimately
Raúl Villa

subordinated to the vigorous and proud assertion that “his life had been remarkable!” an assertion that continues to endear the poem to its many fans.

EL LOUIE

José Montoya

Hoy enterraron al Louie

And San Pedro o sanpinche
are in for it. And those
times of the forties
and the early fifties
lost un vato de atolle.

Kind of slim and drawn,
there toward the end,
aging fast from too much
booze y la vida dura. But
class to the end.

En Sanjo you’d see him
sporting a dark topcoat
playing in his fantasy
the role of Bogart, Cagney
or Raft.

Era de Fowler el vato,
carnal del Candi y el
Ponchi—Los Rodriguez—
The Westside knew ‘em
and Selma, even Gilroy.

48 Fleetline, two-tone—
buenas garras and always
rucas—como la Mary y
la Helen . . . siempre con
liras bien afinadas
cantando La Palma, la
que andaba en el florero.

Louie hit on the idea in
those days for tailor-made
drapes, unique idea—porque
Fowler no era nada como
Los, o’l E.P.T. Fresno’s
westside was as close as
we ever got to the big time,

But we had Louie and the
Palomar, el boogie, los
An Appreciation of “El Louie”

mambos y cuatro suspiros
del alma—y nunca faltaba
the gut-shrinking love-
splitting, ass-hole-up
tight-bad news—
Trucha, esos! Va 'ber
pedo!
Abusau, ese!
Get Louie

No llores, Carmen, we can
handle 'em.
Ese, 'on tal Jimmy?
Hórale, Louie
Where’s Primo?
Va 'ber catos!

En el parking lot away from
the jura.

Hórale!
Trais filero?
Simón!
Nel!
Chale, ese!
Ooooh, este vato!

And Louie would come through—
melodramatic music, like in the
mono—tan tan tarán!—Cruz
Diablo, El Charro Negro! Bogard
smile (his smile as deadly as
his vaisas!) He dug roles, man,
and names—like blackie, little
Louie . . .

Ese Louie . . .
Chale, call me “Diamonds”, man!

Y en Korea fue soldado de
levita con huevos and all the
paradoxes del soldado raso—
heroism and the stockade!

And on leave, jump boots
shainadas and ribbons, cocky
from the war, strutting to
early mass on Sunday morning.

Wow, is that el Louie
Mire, comadre, ahí va el hijo
de Lola!
Raúl Villa

Afterward he and fat Richard would hock their bronze stars for pisto en el Jardín Canales y en el Trocadero.

At barber college he came out with honors. Después empeñaba su velardo de la peluca pa’ jugar pócar serrada and lo ball en Sanjo y Alvizo.

And “Legs Louie Diamond” hit on some lean times . . .

Hoy enterraron al Louie.

Y en Fowler at Nesei’s pool parlor los baby chooks se acuerdan de Louie, el carnal del Candi y el Ponchi—la vez que to fíleraron en el Casa Dome y cuando se catió con La Chiva.

Hoy enterraron al Louie.

His death was an insult porque no murió en acción—no lo mataron los vatos, ni los gooks en Korea.

He died alone in a rented room—perhaps like a Bogart movie.

The end was a cruel hoax. But his life had been remarkable!

Vato de atolle, el Louie Rodriguez.
Preservation Matters: Research, Community, and the Archive

Chon A. Noriega

ISMANIAC: I, the conceptual artist, being of sound mind and lack of reason, hereby bequeath all of my personal charm and wit to the orphans of modernism. I leave my striped ties and checkered past to the cubist entrepreneurs who are direct descendants of spotted reptiles. Furthermore, I leave my entire fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties memorabilia to the Department of Disposable History and Archival Research.

He tosses the will.

Harry Gamboa, Jr., Urban Exile (1998)

No scholar stands so tall as when he or she stoops to pick up such a discarded document . . . for therein lies our history. The passage above is from Gamboa’s Ismania: A Conceptual Performance, which was originally presented at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) on March 28, 1987. Glugio Gronk Nicandro, better known as Gronk, performed the role of Ismaniac in this one-man play, providing cutting remarks on 26 keywords and related images projected side-by-side onto a screen. The keywords are all “isms” that describe a doctrine, system, theory, quality, or condition. Some are neologisms, others are vernacular or slang words. Each keyword is presented on two slides with the “Ism” part on the second slide; and the list runs from A to Z:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ismania’s Alphabetism</th>
<th>Slide B</th>
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<tr>
<td>Slide A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract expression</td>
<td>Ism</td>
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Thus, in 1987, we have two artists – co-founders of both LACE and the Chicano art group Asco – presenting a conceptual alphabet for their times.

Like other Asco performances, Ismania quickly entered into the realm of hearsay, fading memories, and tattered fliers. I first met Gamboa in 1991 and over the next several years tried to find out more from him about the conceptual movies, performances, and writings he was reputed to have produced. What I had found were the traces, the effects, but not the cause. Gamboa did not make things any easier. Shortly after we met, he completed a story, “Where They Found Javier” (1992), that satirized both archival research and investigative journalism in reconstructing the “life” of a recently deceased artist. In 1993, when I commissioned Gamboa to write an essay on his photography and video pieces, he again confounded the historical method: “Sometimes it is impossible to give an accurate account of my personal history since I have maintained extensive notes since 1972 (along with support documents and photographs)” (“Past Imperfecto,” 1994). You may need to read that sentence again. Gamboa distinguishes his notion of an “accurate” personal history as distinct from his own extensive archive of that same history. The truth is an elusive thing, and not something hidden that can be recovered from the archive. But the cat was also out of the bag. Gamboa had finally admitted that he had an archive.

Throughout 1994, Harry and I met to look over these notes, support documents, and photographs. We were now friends and despite our different professional orientations we shared a similar view of history, the archive, and writing. We both evinced a necessary skepticism about the archive, even the ones of our own making, since we believed that archives provide the raw materials for stories – that is, particular, limited, and partial histories – and not History – that is, a history that claims to be total. But this issue is not just a formal one about historical truth. By its very nature – or is it funding? – the archive is a political institution that excludes much more than it includes. Without a presence in the archive, excluded groups are less able to tell their stories within the marketplace.
of ideas. Thus, being skeptical about the archive and historical truth in no way contradicts the necessity of introducing new materials into the archive that can complicate the historical record. And so, I appraised Harry’s papers for the Mexican American Collection at Stanford University Libraries, which then acquired them in 1995. What I found was so extensive – and even Harry was surprised – that it suggested the need for something in addition to archival preservation. Here were 10 essays, 15 image-text works, 16 performance scripts, 23 short stories, and 21 poems – all produced between 1974 and 1993. In appraising Harry’s papers, I had assembled nearly 700 manuscript pages of conceptual writings – many published in ephemeral outlets, others performed and filed away, some having never seen the light of day – that represented an alternative vein within the canons of Chicano literature and the American avant-garde. Even more importantly, as exemplified by *Ismania*, much of this writing constituted an alternative critical mode and perhaps even a new system of thought about contemporary art itself, one that did two seemingly contradictory things: (1) it used language against itself and by extension against certitudes about historical truth; and (2) it insistently connected language, art, and the social in a way that produced political and historical claims.

In 1998, I edited Harry’s collected writings into a book called *Urban Exile* that was named after one of his most influential manifestos about Chicano art. That manifesto ends:

There is a social responsibility which the artist is confronted with: it is the responsibility for creating beauty, controversy, real and surreal visions, absurd versions of actual events, symbolic interpretations of his/her environment, and also to express the universality of our culture’s uniqueness and our culture’s interdependence on cross-cultural understanding.

And what of the social responsibility of the scholar and university towards this history?

As my story suggests, the process for answering such a question will often start with an intellectual pursuit. In my case, I wanted to know more about Harry’s artistic production. But what happened next moved me into the realm of social responsibility. In contacting Harry, I entered into a personal relationship that allowed each of us to understand the other’s framework. That relationship then became the basis and mechanism for identifying materials for preservation, establishing a special collection within an archive, and then finding a way to make alternative histories and critical modes available to a larger public – in this case, through book publication and DVD compilations of his video work since the 1980s. For me, Harry’s work represented a crucial missing link in the histories of the Chicano art movement and the post-1968 avant-garde. But at the same time his writings also constituted a critical mode that continues to inform my own work as a scholar. It is a critical mode that produces a double take. Harry achieves this impact when he expounds on “the universality of our culture’s
Chon A. Noriega

uniqueness” or when he states that “it is impossible to give an accurate account of my personal history” because he has kept an extensive archive. When we do that double take, when we look back a second time and reconsider what he has written, we can gain a better sense of what Harry means by social responsibility: living in a complex and interdependent world that requires more than one framework, one approach, or one source.

Latina/o Studies often works within a preexisting intellectual framework that can best be summarized by the phrase, “Research that makes a difference.” This framework acknowledges research qua research – that is, the peers, methods, sources, and practices that define knowledge production within the social institution and professional culture of academia. But the framework also speaks to the imperative emerging out of the various civil rights movements that scholarship – and the university more generally – must also contribute to the knowledge base, resources, and development of minority or underserved communities. Ironically, that imperative echoed the founding mission of the very universities then excluding or ignoring the Latina/o community. In the United States, land grant universities were founded on the basis of precisely such dual missions: to look inward within the profession in the pursuit of knowledge and outward in order to apply that knowledge in the service of society. In effect, civil rights movements seeking social equity merely restated the same practical question that ushered in the public university: How can it serve the entire population and its various communities?

So how, exactly, does one create research that makes a difference? In the remainder of this essay I will outline the process and principles that may provide a model for developing “research that makes a difference,” emphasizing the role of preservation and dissemination as fundamental to fulfilling that dual mission. I will focus my comments on the particular role of university-based research centers insofar as they provide an institutional interface between scholars and the community. The same research can serve one function within the university and quite another in the community. The aim is to try and become aware of these differences early on in the process, so that the research can and will serve both functions effectively. But the onus should not be on individual faculty members and ad hoc efforts, but rather reflect an institutional priority and an organized and sustained commitment. In that way, research centers can establish and nurture an informed, substantive, and ongoing partnership between the university and community-based groups.

Process

In developing a research agenda, community forums around key program areas can be an invaluable tool. The idea is to let community leaders know about ongoing efforts and upcoming plans, and to get their input about the state of the field and their sense of what the university, the research center, and the faculty
could do – or have not been doing! – to support their efforts. These dialogues provide a reality check about the relationship between the university and the community. They also establish goodwill, provide invaluable feedback on existing projects, and present scholars with solid new ideas about how to proceed. With the forum as a starting point, it is crucial to continue to involve the participants in subsequent activities, strengthen the relationship by developing collaborations and partnerships, and use the event to identify and engage other individuals and organizations.

At the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, community forums followed by research-driven summits have allowed for productive exchanges between the center and the community that continue to inform our research program. To date, we have held such meetings focused on the arts, public health, and education. In February 2004, for example, the center convened a Latina/o arts summit with fifteen Los Angeles-based Latina/o arts organizations (and three national ones) in order to get a better sense of the field as well as to address the need for immediate preservation efforts. Several directors had attended our earlier community forum on the arts. When it became apparent that these groups had never met before, the center agreed to sponsor regular meetings as a way of providing an ongoing forum for these groups to develop an advocacy voice and arts agenda that could serve their diverse missions and programs. Interest was so great that a second meeting was held in June 2004, during which time we applied to the Getty Foundation for a grant to support a survey of archival holdings at these organizations. At the June 2004 meeting, the grant award was announced, and we took this opportunity to ask the arts organizations, “What questions would you like us to add to the survey in order to serve your own needs?” To our surprise, everyone agreed that what they wanted to know about each other’s organizations was a detailed sense of the “philosophy” that guided their mission, programs, and related activities. Typically, archival surveys only take an inventory of documents that make up a collection – measuring linear feet, describing general holdings. But these groups also wanted us to gather and process information about the history of ideas behind the documents. That information, they argued, would be invaluable for them on two fronts: providing an intellectual basis for future cooperation (grounded in their philosophical orientations) and documenting for posterity these organizations’ individual histories. We believe that this information will also make the eventual survey report much more dynamic and comprehensive, and provide us with an opportunity to develop archival collections that reflect the organizations’ contexts.

This process encouraged us to develop a new book series, the Chicano Archive, on special collections related to these and other organizations. Each book includes an original historical essay on the organization and the funding aid for the collection; and a significant portion of the print run is then given to the organization. The result is a reference tool for libraries that will hopefully encourage further research, but also a marketing and development tool for the organization itself. In this way, the publication serves not just the needs of
university-based archives and academic programs, but also the community that contributed the archival holdings.

Principles

So what did we learn through this process? First, we learned that we needed to know even more about the Latina/o arts community and the potential interface with scholarship. Toward that end, the center conducted surveys on arts resources which were released in two reports. Written by Rita González, then a PhD candidate and the CSRC Arts Project Coordinator, both reports underscore the need to take immediate action in order to recover and safeguard the history of Chicano and Latina/o participation in the arts. This history is fragile, ephemeral and—in terms of the archive—largely neglected, making the Latina/o arts something on the order of what Gamboa calls the “orphans of modernism.” Preserving and documenting this history is vital, not just for the academy, but for the Chicano and Latina/o arts community itself. One of the things we kept hearing—during the forum and in our surveys—was that community-based arts organizations were losing their “institutional memory” as documents disappeared and cultural workers retired or died. These documents and memories can tell us about artistic production, exhibition practices, critical reception, and funding patterns for cultural organizations, as well as the interconnections of Latina/o arts to national and international spheres. Such materials also allow scholars to assess the role of artists in identity- and rights-based social movements. However, this is only possible if they are preserved and made accessible.

While preservation quickly emerged as an area where the needs of the university and the community converged, we had to acknowledge the considerable skepticism that existed toward the university. Latina/o arts organizations and ethnic museums, faced with severe budget shortages, often cannot afford the costs of documenting their own history. But, as one respondent to our survey on Latina/o arts preservation observed, “many organizations would like to institute a formal archive or designate a recipient of archival materials, however, they refrain from doing so due to financial constraints and negative experiences in collaborative ventures.” Indeed, the skepticism about collaborative ventures with universities is based on experience: universities have a well-earned reputation for dropping into communities to extract what they need—for research, for their libraries—but then do little to benefit the community and its institutions in a way that is immediate and transparent. The moving van that shows up and takes the artifacts of a community’s heritage back to the university archive may indeed serve the commonweal and preserve the historical record, but it can also weaken the community in that very same moment by removing those artifacts from its day-to-day life. Thus, we realized the need to pose a new kind of question about our projects: How can doing what we do as academics also strengthen community-based organizations? One answer would be to develop long-term collaborations.
that not only serve our needs as a research university, but that also bring real, tangible benefits to our community-based partner. There is no template or cookie-cutter approach that works in all instances. From the start, each side must be very precise and particular about its needs in order for the collaboration to work.

Perhaps the most important lesson we learned from this process had to do with the need to make room for other contexts than the one that informs the academy, especially with respect to collections development. After all, as art collector Armando Durón stated at our first Latina/o art summit, no one can tell what the “historical cut” will be 100 years from now – that is, what or who will be seen as important or forgotten. Along these lines, in our surveys and meetings everyone stressed the need for incorporating the community’s own contexts for our archival holdings and research. The artists and their communities sustain a vibrant and vital context within which the arts make sense, and it is incumbent upon the university to take that into account as part of the collection process. After all, that context is itself an essential, if ephemeral, part of the history that the archive is attempting to preserve. Oral history provides one way to “capture” that context, and should be done whenever possible. But it is even more important to take a partnership approach in establishing an archival holding in the first place. Such an approach begins by ensuring community access to the collections and the research. Why? Because for many in the Latina/o community, access means that they have been taken into account as part of the university’s activities. In other words, access is fundamental to context. And a significant part of that context is that Latinas/os continue to make up a disproportionately small part of the student body, faculty, and administration. In Los Angeles, Latinas/os represent 72 percent of the students in the public school system (and growing), but less than 13 percent of the freshman class at UCLA (and declining). The practical implications for the university are clear: if community members do not feel that they will be allowed access to the documents and artifacts that used to reside in the community, there will be little incentive to place these objects in an archive. But the concern for access actually goes beyond the objects per se. Instead, it’s about what those objects represent – a mission, a history, a philosophy, a way of being – and the hope that the university can give greater voice to these ideas buried within documents, artifacts, ephemera, and lived experience. This hope actually dovetails with the research mission of the university itself, provided the university accepts the community as part of the audience for its publications, websites, DVDs, and academic presentations (e.g., lectures, symposia, conferences).

In addition to archival preservation, there is a need to facilitate and support research efforts that integrate this material into the historical record, and thereby also provide the documentation that the community-based arts groups need in order to survive and remain relevant. This research must be rigorous, critical, and expansive. It must question, challenge, and not just praise, otherwise it will fail to meet both academic standards and community needs. Such research is crucial on two fronts: the institutional and the individual. Such an approach is
substantially different from starting with cultural formations, historical formulations, or theoretical premises that can predetermine what or who gets taken into account. Instead, scholars need to cast the net widely, so that the historical record can include the inevitable contradictions, exceptions, and complications that challenge any categorical system, interpretive paradigm, or political agenda. Consider, for example, the fact that the founders of at least two US Latina/o museums were artists whose work – because it was abstract or associated with non-Latina/o avant-garde movements – fell outside the category of “Latina/o art” that these museums helped define. The irony is obvious, but there is also historiographical insight to be gained as well.

In the end, there is simply too much to be done and precious little time. Very few research institutions house the remnants of Latina/o institutional, cultural, or expressive histories. But it is through archival collections that we will be able to substantiate the historical connections among myriad groups, cultures, and organizations. In short, preservation matters. In order to have the best chance of preserving Latina/o history, we must undertake multi-institutional efforts that involve not just the universities, archives, museums, and libraries, but also community-based organizations and individuals. Working together toward a shared goal – but also with a practical sense of our different needs – community leaders, artists, librarians, archivists, and other interested parties must address the potential loss of the documents that make up the history of Latinas/os in the United States.

As the interface between the university and the community, research centers need to be not only concerned with archive building and scholarship but with developing long-term relationships with the community that result in a strengthened infrastructure. What value is there in preserving the artifacts of a community-based institution, or developing academic publications about its past, without also assisting that institution to survive and to continue serving its community? That is the social responsibility with which the scholar and the university are confronted. The university can be a mausoleum or it can be a partner creating vital links between the past and present. But it cannot claim to be an innocent bystander whose hands are tied by exigencies. Instead, research projects must serve not only the scholars who will utilize primary research materials, but also the larger public. That dual mission – nothing less than the founding mission of land grant universities – will only happen if we structure our activities in such a way as to facilitate both community partnerships and research that makes a difference.

Notes

I want to thank Kathleen McHugh for her editorial feedback and encouragement. Rita González, Tere Romo, and Jennifer Sternad Flores not only provided invaluable comments on an earlier draft, but they have been an essential part of the arts projects that inform this essay. An earlier

1 I’m thinking here of Raphaël Montañez Ortiz, co-founder of El Museo del Barrio in New York, and Peter Rodríguez, founder of the Mexican Museum in San Francisco.

**References**


The sixth-floor, walkup apartment in the South Bronx represented the center of my universe. On that warm, spring-like day the world was close to war, but this factor had a minimum effect on the sweetness of life at that very moment. Following the customary morning routine, a breakfast of buttered bread and warm milk laced with coffee, I sat beside my mother on the red, crushed-velvet sofa set opposite tall twin windows that overlooked the neighboring tenement rooftops. The scarlet cushion fabric rubbed against the backs of my legs, making me itch and I gently shuffled my calves from side to side. “¿Qué dice, Mami? ¿Qué dice?” I repeated with 4-year-old persistence. My mother glowed, pregnant with a new life, and fingered the newspaper draped across her lap. A slight hesitation, then concentrating on the page before her, she slowly related the comic strip antics of Archie and Veronica, and then Dagwood and Blondie. Gradually, index finger pointing the way, she reached my favorite – Little Lulu. She read in measured, heavily accented English, pronouncing each syllable as surely her third grade teacher in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico had taught her to do.

If mother and I fully comprehended the funnies’ alien words, harsh-sounding linguistic obstacles that conveyed a popular pastime in American culture, I cannot remember for sure. But what was clearly evident was that the cultural lessons I was determined to unlock in that foreign tongue held not an inkling of my own people’s proud heritage. It would distance me for a long time from developing an appreciation for the connections between ancestral women on distant island shores and those who, like me, would reach maturity in diaspora.

With time and a zealous Catholic school education, I became proficient in the English language. The written word flooded into my home via magazines, newspapers, and the treasured comic books my father salvaged while cleaning out the trains that came into Pennsylvania Station. Before my tenth birthday, small sister in tow, I would barge into the local public library hauling off every book within the limits of my restricted children’s card. And while I reveled in this newly discovered world of words and wisdom, heroic adventures, time travel, distressed damsels, and exotic lands, not one book ever told me about me.
It was precisely because experiences like mine were common among the children of the pioneer migrant generation of Puerto Ricans who came to live in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s that heritage and education were important in pre-World War II communities. Among the first Puerto Ricans to settle in the city at the turn of the century, cigar workers highly valued education. The tradition of *la lectura*, reading aloud to cigar workers in the tobacco factories of Puerto Rico and Cuba, found fertile ground in the fledgling New York *colonias*. Other examples of learning and instruction flourished in countless Puerto Rican and Hispanic associations that formed educational committees and study groups to provide intellectual sustenance and cultural continuity.

I would not know for decades that a woman named Pura Belpré was among the pioneers concerned with educating young people in the early 1920s. The city’s first Puerto Rican librarian, Belpré encouraged the New York Library system to collect books about Puerto Rican folktales and culture. An ardent storyteller and writer, Belpré wrote original stories, like the beloved *Pérez y Martina* about the elegant cockroach, Martina, who falls in love with Pérez, the shy mouse. Belpré translated treasured folktales, including the tales of fabled trickster Juan Bobo, who always managed to get the best out of ridiculous situations.

By the time I met Belpré at Brooklyn College in the late 1970s, she was a revered master teacher; a pioneering icon with an impressive record of achievement that helped advance the New York Puerto Rican community. When the diminutive, almost fragile, brown-skinned storyteller read *Pérez y Martina* aloud to a large audience of student teachers, she commanded their attention as if they were children sitting on a library floor for story hour.

I did not have role models like Belpré. At the age of seven I was enrolled in the neighborhood parochial school, and my education under the custody of Dominican nuns took a different trajectory. Before I realized it, I was “being raised” Irish Catholic!

One might ask how a light-skinned Puerto Rican girl, who could barely distinguish the *sh* in shore from the *ch* in chicken, got raised Irish Catholic. It happened almost automatically when you attended St. Anselm’s Roman Catholic School in the South Bronx, at the dawning of the great population shifts from Puerto Rico to New York City. Unlike the parochial schools of today, St. Anselm’s, or “St. Anne’s Slums,” as kids derisively called it, boasted a predominantly Irish American student population, a smaller concentration of Italian Americans, and an even less significant smattering of Puerto Ricans. Nurturing Irish antecedents and catering to a more established immigrant community, the school cultivated close ties to the old country and culture through its many activities. Among them, St. Patrick’s Day generated a flurry of activities every year that included two nights of musical entertainment presented to captive audiences of parents, relatives, and friends. A tall, stern-faced music teacher, with a full head of graying ringlets bouncing in time to the music, instructed the children, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, in the intricacies of Irish reels and step dancing. Despite Miss O’Brien’s valiant dedication, months of preparation often failed to
clone miniature Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaires, but the magnificent sight of high-kicking, step-dancing Irish girls in native attire was always worth the effort. In addition, the evening included crooning traditional Irish songs until there was not a dry eye in the house – except perhaps for the Puerto Rican parents who came to savor the musical talents of their offspring but harbored little sentimentality over the old Sod.

In those days the nuns hovered over their charges like penguins protecting their young; indeed, these youngsters represented survival and continuity, for the children the nuns taught ensured cultural and spiritual bonds between Ireland and America for decades to come. Long before I knew anything about the political connections between Puerto Rico’s colonial struggles and Ireland’s – about women like Lola Rodriguez de Tió, Luisa Capetillo, and Lolita Lebrón; or about Don Pedro Albizu Campos and the Gaelic movement for liberation – I admired the tenacity of a people who so fiercely resisted acculturation. Engaged in the national business of Americanization, replete with civic lessons, English-language dominance, democratic values, and worthy Euro-American founding fathers, these teachers still remembered how to infuse pride in the “Old World” heritage. And so at some level I must have internalized the notion that you didn’t have to give up one identity in order to assume another – that both strands could coexist without conflict. That understanding, however, would not manifest itself until I was much older.

Contradictions abounded for me and other Puerto Rican youngsters caught in an assimilationist one-way street. For the teachers and administrators, many of whom had not encountered a cohort of non-English-speaking youngsters in the classroom since the great immigrations of the early twentieth century, Puerto Rican children were virtually invisible; their rich multicultural and multiracial history, language, life-cycle commemorations, ritual kinships, and affirming institutions were inconsequential. Hundreds of Puerto Rican children became casualties of an Americanizing cultural onslaught that, coupled with intense wartime patriotism, absorbed them into a national ideal that promoted equality, yet maintained a colonial stranglehold on Puerto Rico, and sanctioned ethno-racial divisions on its own shores. Throughout those formative years I firmly embraced the American dream even as a nagging inner voice vacillated between my public and private beings questioning my authenticity. I frequently snuck out for pizza, disparaging my mother’s traditional foods; spoke English, consciously abandoning my Spanish foundations; and preferred American to Spanish movies, even though I worshipped Mexican film stars Jorge Negrete and María Félix. For most of my generation who experienced this painful dichotomy, survival would rest on selective adaptation; the ability to pick and choose cultural elements from both cultures, blending “American” and Puerto Rican ways of being into something unique called US Puerto Rican, Boricua, or Nuyorican. But it was, nevertheless, a rough job for a kid.

If I could pinpoint the inception of personal activist leanings as a young adult, it would probably be during my college years. I discovered the “hallowed halls”
were neither immune from the ethno-racial prejudice of the period, nor eager to question canon. The pervasive invisibility of anything Latina/o silently echoed its very absence throughout my education, but motivated me to piece together evidence to counteract the negative Puerto Rican images projected by the dominant culture. Determined to make a difference in the lives of barrio students, the star in my personal compass pointed towards teaching as the viable medium for social change. I believed that if I could give back to my community, influence just one student out of the many who would cross my path, I would be paying back, not only for the omissions in knowledge, but also the opportunities given to me. Armed with the baccalaureate degree, I prepared to put my philosophy into practice. I taught high school English for four years, in working-class communities in New York, and later, Chicago, a feat my Uncle Fernando found totally incongruous since I was teaching English to “Americans.”

Two remarkable events occurred in 1971 that would impact on the implementation of my goals. The first involved my father or “Popi,” as he was known to his children and grandchildren. He came to live with us, alternating domiciles between my family’s in Long Island, and my sister’s in Boston. Living in households with school age children and working husbands, Popi promptly became the pivotal person in the running of each home. This extraordinary arrangement allowed me to enroll in graduate studies, and my sister to go to law school. He was there when the children came home from school; kept food in the pantry; connected us to extended family; paid the newspaper boy; and fed the dogs. An adventurer who traveled the world over as a young merchant seaman, and a voracious reader throughout his entire life, my father became my touchstone, particularly about Puerto Rican heritage and culture. Ironically, I had set out on a journey to find ancestral foremothers, but instead discovered a father – my resolute cheerleader, companion, but toughest critic.

The second event in what would become a defining era in the creation of ethnic studies began with a challenge. I sought admission to graduate level studies in the History Department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook with a well-defined agenda in mind: to tell the story of the Puerto Rican community from my parents’ pioneering generation to the present, to set straight the historical record, and to ensure that Puerto Ricans would forever find themselves in the national narrative. If Stony Brook could not help me achieve this goal, I would go somewhere else. The university accepted the challenge. And so began my intellectual journey into the study of Puerto Ricans, Latin Americans, and US Latina/os.

Before the social reformations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, if Puerto Ricans appeared at all in college syllabi, it was usually in courses that perpetuated a deficit model in analyzing the group’s myriad adjustment “problems” in urban settings. The prevailing social science literature pictured a rural, alienated, dislocated community unable to cope with urban incertitude, and often marginal to the wider society. Moreover, Puerto Ricans appeared as victims or perpetrators of their deplorable situation, as isolated, ahistorical beings. The repercussions of
the colonial relationship between island and mainland were not mentioned, and the burning issues of racialized groups in white America fell between the cracks. Especially lost was any understanding of Puerto Rican roots and their role in shaping the Americas.

The institutionalization of Puerto Rican studies on many campuses throughout the Northeast brought specific courses on island history to college curricula. These relied on importing academic talent from Puerto Rico to teach them, but rarely included mention of the US experience. With the exception of community studies courses strongly focused on contemporary social issues, historical information was absent. Migration, a defining issue in US Puerto Rican history, was deemed individually motivated. Analysis of migration endorsed a “push-pull” paradigm that ultimately argued for assimilation into mainstream culture in much the same way that prior immigrant groups had become hyphenated Americans.

By the 1980s I was an assistant professor at Brooklyn College in the Department of Puerto Rican Studies. My publications attempted to address omissions in the literature. With the unprecedented immigration and natural growth among Americans of Latin American and Caribbean background, Puerto Rican and Latina/o studies could no longer be ignored. As activists cast from the cauldrons of the Chicano student movement, and its Puerto Rican counterparts, entered the ranks of university faculty, more attention focused on Latina/o history.

My own work on US Puerto Ricans was recognized by the New York State Department of Education, and in 1987 I was appointed to a five-year project to create an interdisciplinary curriculum on Latina/os in the making of America. Two years later I was invited to advise the Commissioner of Education, Thomas Sobol, in his endeavors to infuse a multicultural focus into the state’s social studies programs. The Curriculum of Inclusion, an advisory report written by the Task Force on Minorities, chaired by Hazel Dukes, then president of the New York chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, had created a furor both in the popular media and among university professionals. Torn apart by detractors for its “inflammatory” language about US history and cherished American values, it gained notoriety throughout the nation.

Trapped in the middle of America’s “culture wars,” the night before the meeting with the commissioner, I reread the report several times in a state of anxiety. I was not prepared for the large audience of State Education personnel that greeted me the following morning. Members of the Task Force on Minorities, Commissioner Sobol, and three high-profiled consultants, Asa Hilliard, known for the Portland African-American Baseline Essays, Diane Ravitch, adjunct professor at Columbia’s Teacher’s College, and psychologist Edmund Gordon of Yale University, were present. One by one, the other consultants presented their views on the report. The last to speak, I felt this was an opportunity I was prepared for, a perspective that bolstered my ebbing confidence in the bold approach I wanted to take. Convinced that the report had not gone far enough, I
argued for the creation of a balanced curriculum created by a team of distinguished scholars that would include the experiences of all Americans, respect multiple perspectives, and embrace the vast body of knowledge on US Latina/os and other minorities. To my relief and satisfaction the following year, Commissioner Sobol created a blue ribbon commission to review social studies as taught throughout the state, and to develop a framework for curriculum development.

Almost from the start, the Social Studies Review and Curriculum Development Commission received negative media coverage. The commission was portrayed as Sobol’s attempt to either ameliorate or to implement Curriculum of Inclusion ideology. It actually was the commissioner’s intent to distance himself from the stridency of the report, while acting on its critical insights by bringing together “eminent scholars and educators . . . distinguished scholars and teachers in relevant fields who represent a diversity of views and backgrounds,” to review social studies in New York State. I was one of 24 scholars and teachers selected from over 300 nominees. We were African Americans, Euro-Americans, Latina/os, Asian Americans, and Native Americans; university professors, teachers, and administrators; public school and Ivy League representatives. Among the prominent scholars were sociologist Nathan Glazer, Harvard University; historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Graduate Center of the City University of New York; historian Kenneth Jackson, Colombia University; psychologist Edmund Gordon, Yale University; and political scientist Ali Marui, SUNY, Binghamton. To paraphrase the welcoming words of the commissioner, if we couldn’t do it, no one could. He was referring to the intellectual and diverse make-up of the Review Committee charged with recommending what social studies should include and how the fields should be taught.

At stake was the definition of American society, and the political positions represented on the commission covered a wide spectrum of opposing ideas. The conservative tone set by Schlesinger posited “US history as the making of a single nation with a common culture . . . primarily European – racially and culturally . . . Despite problems,” he concluded, “the West has been the major force for democracy.” I more or less accepted the notion of a common culture, but from a different perspective. Can the representative culture be my own, I asked? In other words, where did Latina/o and other people of color fit in? We questioned whether indeed Americans shared a common culture or rather common understandings and beliefs. Mazrui concluded by calling into question “two sociological myths” of “shared ancestry and collective purpose. If we are going to engage in ancestor worship (for example, the Founding Fathers) . . . we need to be more inclusive of our ancestors. Second, we need wider participation to justify the claim to collective purpose.” From that point forward I knew the dialogue would be thoughtful, that hopefully we would learn from one another, be willing to compromise, and strive for consensus by working through our differences. For many of us who had devoted our lives to promoting concepts of American diversity and multiple perspectives, this was indeed an opportunity to make a difference. As Catherine Cornbleth, professor in the School of Education
Virginia Sánchez Korrol

at the University of Buffalo, wrote: “subsequent meetings of the Review Com-
mmittee can be characterized as a roller coaster in slow motion – with highs
and lows, twists and turns, but moving slowly and occasionally doubling back
on itself.”

Nine months later, before a standing-room-only crowd of journalists, educators,
state personnel, and the Regents of the State of New York, Sobol presented
our report, One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence.
In my mind, the opening salvo in the document’s preamble said it all. “The
United States is a microcosm of humanity today. No other country in the world
is peopled by a greater variety of races, nationalities, and ethnic groups. But
although the United States has been a great asylum for diverse peoples, it has
not always been a great refuge for diverse cultures.” The document affirmed
multiculturalism and multiple perspectives, acknowledged racism, and recogn-
ized the continuing struggle to close the gap between abstract democratic ideals
and concrete practices.

But Sobol’s ideals, and those of most of the members of the commission, were
...
The Star in My Compass

world. Children’s voices could be heard comfortingly at play out in the front court, reminding me of other days when my own daughters’ playful squeals were what I listened for. A bee circled my chair, and for a brief moment I wondered if it was an ancestral spirit come back to prod new insights I might have forgotten. I shivered, aware of the lengthening shadows. Gathering my papers, I rose from the table and went indoors.

Note

It is a common cliché to say that the youth are our future, but if this is the case for Latinas/os in the US then we have good reason to be worried. Latinas/os have the highest dropout rates and the lowest college attendance rates (García 2001). On most measures of academic performance we are overrepresented in the negative categories (i.e., enrollment in special education and remedial programs, and the number of students who are suspended or expelled, etc.) and we are underrepresented in the positive categories (honors and advanced placement courses, gifted and talented programs) (Meier and Stewart 1991). In higher education, we are not at the bottom of the achievement hierarchy, but since the advent of high stakes testing in several states across the country, more and more Latina/o students are leaving high school without diplomas, and are unable to matriculate to college (Haney 2003).

Miguel Fernández is one such student. Miguel is from the South Bronx, a community once described by a presidential candidate as a “hell hole,” and by yet another as the poorest census tract in the United States (Kozol 1995). Despite these negative characterizations of his community, for Miguel the South Bronx is home. He doesn’t think much about the fact his neighborhood has some of the highest rates for asthma, teen pregnancy, or juvenile homicide in the nation, or for that matter, the highest unemployment rates in the city (González 2004). The litter on the streets, the deteriorated and dilapidated buildings, or the long walk he must take to the subway to get to and from school doesn’t bother him.
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him either. For Miguel, the South Bronx is where his abuelita, his familia, his many, many primos all live, as does his novia Sonja and Wilson, his best friend. In fact, Miguel has a sense of pride about being from the Bronx, and he’ll be the first to tell you that it is home to Jennifer López, the world famous New York Yankees, and a long list of notable Latinas/os.

Although I was born in Manhattan and raised in Brooklyn, I have a connection to the South Bronx too. Unlike Miguel, my thoughts of the South Bronx aren’t so pleasant. When I think of the South Bronx, the image that comes most quickly to my mind is one of violence and danger. I remember when the South Bronx was burning in the 1970s as a result of fires set by arsonists working for absentee landlords who would rather burn down beat-up old buildings to collect insurance than improve them for the people who lived there (Wunsch 2001). My grandmother lived in the Mitchell Houses on Willis Avenue and 138th Street for over twenty years. The projects are still there, but they are no longer regarded as such a rough or dangerous place to live as they once were. The South Bronx is in the midst of a revival now (Jonnes 1986; Wunsch 2001) and gentrification has brought with it a change in residents. Of course, as property values rise and old buildings are torn down those who cannot afford to pay market rate rents – people like Miguel’s family – will be pushed out.

When I used to visit my grandmother as a boy we were not allowed to go outside to play on the swings or monkey bars. My father told us that dangerous hoodlums controlled the play areas, and perverts lurked in the stairways and alleys. My cousin, who also lived in the South Bronx, served as a proof that my father’s dire warnings were no joke. He was murdered at the age of 14; stabbed to death because he made the mistake of refusing to give up his hard-earned leather jacket to a couple of young thieves. There used to be a community center named after him off of Gunhill Road, but that too has become a victim of gentrification and has since been torn down.

Times have changed since the bad old days in the 1960s and 1970s, and the gentrification that prompted the makeover of Manhattan in the 1990s has finally hit even this neighborhood. Many of the worst projects and many run-down tenements have been torn down and replaced by single-family homes. The changes are striking and despite the obvious improvement, they are somewhat disturbing. For someone like me who has been away from the South Bronx for many years, it’s easy to get a strange and eerie feeling when walking through the neighborhood. As you observe all of the new construction and the new homes that have been built, you get a clear sense that the neighborhood is being improved for people who do not live there yet, and while there are many sites from the past that are familiar, there is also a lot that is new and strange and that seems out of place. The elevated train still runs along Jerome Avenue, and many of the bodegas and White Castles I once frequented are still on Fordham Road. But things look different to me. The neighborhood is still home to some of the poorest people in New York City (Wunsch 2001; Jonnes and Jonnes 2002), and still has a reputation
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for crime, violence, drug dealing, and gangs. But the Bronx, like the rest of New York City, is changing as property values rise and the middle class moves back to reclaim once blighted areas.

This kind of change means that for Miguel, his family, and thousands of other recent immigrants, the South Bronx may be a temporary home. Interestingly, Miguel is not unaware of the changes being brought about by gentrification and what it may mean in the long term for his family, but he doesn’t feel threatened by it either. He and his family regard the South Bronx as a temporary stop on their journey to progress; a place that served its purpose when they first moved in, but not a place to become attached to. His family didn’t pick the South Bronx out of a catalogue when they arrived from the Dominican Republic. They moved there because housing was cheap and his mother’s cousin was able to help them find a place to live not far from her. They are well aware of the problems in the neighborhood, so for them, the greatest sign of upward mobility would be to leave the South Bronx for good.

When she arrived, Miguel’s mother was unmarried and raising six children on her own. She knew she would need family support to get by in this strange new country, so she moved to the South Bronx without a second thought, despite the warnings about danger that she received from others. Like most immigrants, she came full of hopes and dreams, with high expectations, and a firm belief that life in America would be better. Better because that’s what everyone had told her about America since she was a child, and better because it would allow her and her children to escape the unhappiness and hardships they knew in the DR. She didn’t dwell on the fact that when she left she was leaving behind a whole network of extended familia and community. All she thought about was what she was trading it in for – the possibility of eventual prosperity in the United States of America. For her, the South Bronx was merely a starting point on the way to that better life. Eventually she hoped that she and her children would find a home with a yard in the suburbs of New Jersey or Long Island. But for now, they – like thousands of immigrants before them (Tobier 1998) – would find a way to make it in America by starting in the South Bronx. With faith and determination they could view the hardships they encountered as temporary obstacles; bumps in the road that one day they could look back upon just like life in their hard lives in the DR, as another part of what they had overcome.

This is the Faustian bargain that many immigrants embrace. They give up a world they know for one that is completely foreign based on the belief that they can find a way to make the new country work for them (Portes and Rumbaut 2002). They are overwhelmingly risk takers, brave enough to settle in a strange land where they do not speak the language or know the customs, because they hold on to the tenuous belief that with hard work good fortune will eventually come their way. Latino immigrants and their children are people of the future. They are a people whose gaze is so firmly affixed on the promise of a better life that it becomes possible for them to endure a host of hardships and inconveniences that might set others back completely. They are a people
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who manage to hang on to their optimism even in miserable ghettos like the South Bronx.

Miguel was only 11 when his family arrived from the Dominican Republic. When he first arrived he spoke no English and he often felt afraid and intimidated at school. On the playground other Latino kids who barely spoke English themselves teased him because he spoke only Spanish. For years, he felt intimidated when riding the subway with bigger kids from other parts of the city. They were mean and aggressive. They pushed to get a seat, they used foul language, and they knew how to scare a person with little more than a stare. Those days of being scared are over now, and Miguel isn’t afraid or intimidated anymore. He’s not a big kid, but he knows how to carry himself and he knows how to stare back and give the look that lets others know he’s not a punk. Because he’s no longer afraid, Miguel is now at ease in the South Bronx. The many obstacles he has confronted and overcome have made him stronger and have not dampened his optimism about the future in the slightest.

Miguel attends Walton High School, a school that gained notoriety during the 2003–4 academic year because of severe overcrowding. I worked with the school during that academic year and was amazed to learn that it had an enrollment of 4,200 even though it was built to accommodate no more than 2,000. The school was in the news on more than one occasion that year because of rising concerns about school violence. In response, Mayor Michael Bloomberg placed Walton on his list of unsafe schools and promised to do whatever it would take to make it safe again, even if it took placing a policeman in every classroom. As a result of the mayor’s posturing, students at Walton were required to wait on long lines each morning, sometimes in sub-zero temperatures, to pass through metal detectors before entering the school building. Once inside, I was often struck by the irony that while the officials were fastidious in their security screening, they paid little attention to whether or not students were actually attending class.

Despite less than ideal conditions at his school, Miguel is a diligent and dedicated student. He appreciates the importance of getting a good education to achieve his dreams, so he studies hard and strives to do his best. However, as the eldest of six children, Miguel also works 30 hours a week at a local fast food restaurant to help support his family. He works after school, sometimes till 10:00 p.m., and every weekend for 8–10 hours a day, but he never complains. He knows that his mother needs the money to pay the bills and he likes the fact that he’s able to buy clothes he likes to wear with what’s left over.

Miguel is well liked by his teachers. They appreciate his positive attitude, honesty, hard work, and the respect he shows to them. These traits, along with the excellent grades he earns, have distinguished him from his peers. On more than one occasion he has been singled out by the principal as a positive example; a person other students should strive to emulate. He receives ample helpings of praise and encouragement from his teachers, who tell him with great confidence that if he keeps up the good work his future will be bright.
However, his guidance counselor knows better. After his second attempt, Miguel was still not able to pass the English portion of the New York State Regents exam. Though he’s lived in this country eight years and attended schools in New York City, his command of English remains weak, and without a Regents diploma, Miguel will not be able to attend a public college. To complicate things even further, Miguel is also an undocumented immigrant. Though his counselor has told him that there is legislation pending in the US Congress that would allow undocumented immigrants to receive financial aid and to attend public universities, the combination of his testing troubles and legal complications has caused him to reevaluate his goals.

Instead of college, Miguel plans to stay on at the fast food restaurant. His manager has praised him for his reliability and work ethic, and promised that he would recommend him for an assistant manager’s position in six months if he hangs on. This would mean he would be entitled to health benefits and a salary close to $30,000 a year. For Miguel, the possibility of a stable job and a position of authority is a reward so alluring that he decides it makes far more sense to hang in there rather than working to pass the Regents exam at night school.

In my work with schools, I have met many students like Miguel. Though not all are as studious, as focused, or as disciplined, there’s no shortage of promise and potential among the students I meet. This is especially true for those who have recently migrated from the Caribbean and Latin America. In cities like New York, Boston, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Newark, the Latino students I meet, especially those who are recent immigrants, are often ambitious and respectful toward adults. They are also full of hope about the future. Like their parents, they have the drive, the work ethic, and the persistence to take advantage of opportunities that come their way, and unlike so many urban youth, they have the will to find a way to improve the circumstances they find themselves in.

Of course, it is risky to generalize or to overstate the importance of will and work ethic. As the experiences of young people like Miguel show us, drive and optimism can sometimes take you only so far. When you live in a community like the South Bronx, sometimes circumstances beyond your control – the school you attend, the neighborhood you live in, whether or not any jobs are available – are far more powerful in determining how far you’ll go or where you’ll end up. Attitude and drive certainly count too and the research literature suggests that many immigrant students are willing to work hard and make sacrifices, particularly when compared to US-born youth (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001).

As part of a study on high schools in Boston (Noguera 2004a), I conducted an interview with a Honduran honors student from English High School in Boston. During the course of our conversation I asked her about the source of her motivation to succeed in school. With a sense of clear resolve and a wisdom that seemed extraordinary for a person her age, she informed me. “If I don’t do
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well in school my mother told me she will send me back to Honduras to wash clothes. That’s what she did there, and I know for sure that I don’t want to do that. You can hardly live there on the money you make from washing clothes. That’s why we had to leave Honduras. People are barely surviving over there. So I try to do my best in school. If can get into college and become a nurse or something I’m going to be able to help my family and myself. I definitely don’t want to end up washing no clothes.”

Of course, not all of the Latino students I meet are so full of drive, determination, or clarity about their goals. Some are angry and sullen, less optimistic about the future, less focused about the purpose of their education, and less inclined to believe in the elusive American Dream. These are usually the second and third generation Latino students, the ones whose ties to home – Mexico, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic – are more remote. Unlike their immigrant counterparts, these are children of the present. Children who are so consumed with surviving, with getting by, with learning how to make it from day to day, they make no plans for the future, and often have trouble contemplating life past 18. They are also the ones who speak broken Spanish, if they speak it at all, and who identify as Latino, Chicano, Hispanic, or simply claim ties to the clique in their hood.

The research literature on the socialization of Latino students has identified this disturbing trend, one that results in the transformation of hopeful Latino immigrant youth into angry and frustrated Hispanic Americans (Portes and Rumbaut 2002; Zentella 2002). In a reversal of past patterns, assimilation no longer serves as the pathway into mainstream American culture and middle-class status for many Latinas/os as it once did for European immigrants. Instead, the evidence suggests that the socialization associated with acculturation and assimilation is sometimes harmful to academic achievement and performance of Latina/o students (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Interestingly, the research also suggests a similar pattern with respect to health and well-being. It turns out that recent Latina/o immigrants are less likely to smoke, contract heart disease, diabetes, or cancer, or have out of wedlock births (Hayes-Bautista 2002).

Berkeley anthropologist John Ogbu tried to explain the difference between Latinas/os, which he categorized as “caste-like,” non-voluntary minorities, and earlier European immigrants who were drawn to the United States voluntarily. According to Ogbu (1987), because the non-voluntary minorities were incorporated through coercion – conquest, colonization or slavery – they were more likely to develop oppositional attitudes toward assimilation, and by extension, toward school. Though Ogbu’s theory has been widely embraced by scholars of immigration (Noguera 2004b), try as he might, his framework never really worked for Latinas/os. There is simply too much diversity among Latinas/os; while some might be categorized as non-voluntary immigrants (e.g., Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and possibly Panamanians), others (especially those from Central and South America) clearly came to the US voluntarily – at least, if fleeing war, repression, or hunger can be considered a voluntary move.
Once they arrive in the US, new forces take over in shaping social identities, and Ogbu paid little attention to how variations in social context influence patterns of social adaptation. A Mexican arriving in LA, or a Dominican arriving in Washington Heights in New York, can function in a monolithic culture for quite some time. However, for Latinas/os who settle in a community that is more diverse, new forms of affiliation may emerge and the significance attached to national identities may melt away, particularly among the youth. For a young person like Miguel, identifying as a Dominican becomes less important when your friends are not just from the DR but also from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Central America. Hybrid identities forged through cultural fusion happen naturally. Perceptions of self invariably become even more complicated when you look black, at least by US definitions, speak English with an Ebonics accent, and when the music you listen to is a mix of hip hop, merengue, reggae ton, house, and rock. Even as the steady arrival of new Latino immigrants gradually begins to change the face and the character of American culture, our presence here also transforms who we are, and most importantly, who we are becoming.

The patterns evident in education mirror other disturbing trends for Latinas/os in the United States. Latinas/os in the US constitute the youngest, fastest growing, yet poorest subgroup of American society (Smith 2002). We stand out from other groups because in several states we are both more likely to be employed and more likely to be poor (Clark 1998). This is because more often than not, Latinas/os are trapped in the lowest paying jobs. We are the laborers, the busboys, maids, nannies, gardeners, mechanics, and waiters. We specialize in doing the dirty work, the work US-born Americans reject. We remove the asbestos from buildings, we handle the toxic waste, and we take care of the sick and the aged. In cities across America we wait patiently on street corners for contractors seeking cheap labor, and we take the subways and busses early in the morning to arrive on time to watch the children of those who earn salaries exponentially greater than our own (Hondagneu-Stoleto 2001).

We are the backbone of the US economy, and we are despised because of it. Instead of gratitude and appreciation for all we do, we are subjected to resentment and scorn, and increasingly overt hostility and violence. We are accused of taking American jobs, of making neighborhoods unsafe, of deteriorating the quality of life in affluent areas, and spreading communicable diseases (Cornelius 2002). Though American society is historically a nation of immigrants, and though increasingly the US economy is dependent upon the labor of Latino immigrants in particular, we are treated as a burden, as unwanted parasites, and problems that must be tolerated, or if possible, removed.

Education should serve as our ladder out of poverty. Just as it has for other groups in the past, education should be the source of opportunity and the pathway to a better life. Unfortunately, more often than not, the schools that serve Latinas/os are not unlike Miguel’s Walton High School. Such schools have failed to serve as the vehicle through which our collective dreams and aspirations can be fulfilled. Too many Latino students attend schools that are overcrowded,
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underfunded, and woefully inadequate in terms of the quality of education they provide (Garcia 2001). More often than not, Latino students are trapped in the worst schools, and more than other ethnic groups, Latinas/os are likely to attend schools that are segregated on the basis of race and class (Orfield and Eaton 1996). For all of these reasons, Latinas/os have thus far had limited success in using education as a vehicle to fulfill collective dreams and aspirations.

Of course, our hardships are relative. Compared to those we leave behind in our countries of origin, many of us are far better off. That is why we are able to send money home, to support those who are still struggling and barely surviving. And that is why so many more continue to come. The US is the land of opportunity, and though there are always sacrifices and costs associated with leaving, for those who risk the journey, there are also often rewards. Our home countries know this too, and increasingly, the governments of Latin America regard us – Latina/o immigrants in the US – as a prized resource. The remittances we send home are a stable source of foreign exchange, worth more than oil exported from Mexico, the bananas shipped out of Central America, or the tourists who visit Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 2004).

Immigration is a complicated issue, one that does not lend itself to simplistic, dichotomous analysis. In 1996 I participated in a debate over Proposition 187, the first of several wedge issue measures, used by conservatives in California to mobilize their base (e.g., white voters) against a vulnerable scapegoat, namely us. I was asked to debate an economist from UC Davis about the merits and fairness of the proposed law, which if passed would deny undocumented immigrants, or aliens as they preferred to describe us, access to public services like healthcare and education. In response to his assertion that the law was not racist but merely a rational response to the fact that immigrants were displacing Americans in the labor market and taking unfair advantage of public services, I pointed out that even if the law was approved by the voters it would not succeed in curtailing illegal immigration. I suggested that the reason why so many immigrants were making the dangerous trip across the border was not in pursuit of education, healthcare, or other social services, but because of the tremendous imbalance in wealth between the US and Latin America. Certainly, it was not the attraction of California’s public schools, widely regarded as some of the most inequitable in the nation (Oakes 2002). Rather, immigration is driven by the need to escape poverty and suffering, by the hope that success will make it possible to send money home, and by the often unrealistic belief that by leaving it will be possible to obtain a small piece of the American Dream that has been so creatively marketed to the rest of the world.

Speaking in front of liberal and idealistic undergraduates at UC Berkeley, it was easy to win the debate against a conservative economist, but I knew even then that we would lose the larger battle. Not only was Proposition 187 approved by over two thirds of California voters, it set the stage for a string of other “grassroots” initiatives aimed at rolling back gains in civil rights that had been
made in previous years. The end to race-based affirmative action policies in higher education, the end to bilingual education under the so-called “English only” initiative, the get-tough three strikes law, and the juvenile crime initiative which lowered the age at which adolescents could be prosecuted as adults, all had harmful effects on the status and well-being of Latinas/os in California. In yet another public debate, this time against Ward Connerlly, the African American member of the University of California Board of Regents who has spearheaded the effort to eliminate affirmative action in higher education, I pointed out that if we had to rely on a referendum to bring an end to slavery, then forced servitude might still be around. As noted legal philosopher John Rawls has pointed out, democracy in the form of majority rule can be the worst form of tyranny. Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, this series of race-based initiatives was adopted at just the time that California was becoming a non-white majority state (Clark 1998), and while the new laws have not deterred the growth of the Latina/o population in California or throughout the nation, they have made the path to progress much more difficult.

I saw the effects of crushed dreams and vanquished aspirations vividly during a recent visit to New Bedford, an old industrial town on the southeastern coast of Massachusetts. I was asked to assist the city in a planning effort designed to reduce the number of juvenile homicides. Over the previous year there had been a startling rise in the number of adolescents who had been murdered in the city, startling because none of the community leaders could understand why. They had a hunch that maybe the high unemployment in New Bedford might be a factor (the official estimate was 25 percent at the time of my visit in May 2004), or similarly that the high school dropout rate (officially listed at 12 percent, but unofficially presumed to be closer to 50 percent) might also have something to do with the problem. But these were factors and not causes, and with no way to link these factors to a strategy that might aid the city in preventing more violence, there was no reason to believe that the carnage would be abated on its own.

I was asked to conduct a workshop on youth violence prevention with community leaders to help them gain a better understanding of how various factors were linked to this social phenomenon, and hopefully to begin to devise a strategy for prevention. With all of the key stakeholders from the city present, including school district officials, members of the city council, churches, non-profits, the police, and probation departments, etc., an interesting discussion unfolded about the lack of opportunity for youth in New Bedford. Though no concrete solutions emerged from the meeting, we did leave with an agreement to do two things: (1) to include young people in the process of formulating solutions to the problem; and (2) to keep this group of stakeholders meeting and planning together until there were clear signs that progress was being made.

All of us, myself included, left the meeting hopeful that we had started a process that would have a meaningful impact on this pressing problem. Later that evening, I was asked to speak at a community cultural celebration in a large high school auditorium. I generally don’t like being asked to give lectures between
performances by local hip hop artists and Cape Verdean folk dancers, but I obliged with the understanding that I would keep my remarks very short. I knew before I spoke that the juvenile homicides was a big issue for the community because earlier in the day I had passed by homes where large banners were hung carrying pictures of young people who had recently been killed. Many of the banners and posters carried a simple message, imploring all who would take time to read to “STOP THE VIOLENCE.” Aware of how salient the issue was I tried to speak directly to the problem of youth violence that the community was grappling with, but to do so with a sense of hope about what might be done to address the problem. After my remarks, I was surprised to learn that the MC wanted to take questions from the floor rather than returning immediately to the entertainment. I was even more surprised to see a young Latino male raise his hand immediately without any prodding from the MC or myself.

Speaking loudly and with no apparent apprehension, the young man declared: “Maybe if there was something for young people to do in New Bedford we wouldn’t be killing each other. It’s boring like hell here. No jobs, no colleges, no places to hang out. I think people are killing each other because they’re bored to death.” It was an interesting thesis, one that hadn’t been considered by the group of community leaders earlier in the day, and a comment that left me at a loss for a response. Having teenagers of my own who often complain of boredom, I responded by saying that boredom generally emanates from within, and that the only remedy for boredom was imagination. I encouraged him not to sit back and wait for someone to offer him a job, but to be creative and think of ways that he might create opportunities on his own. Even as I made my suggestion I knew that if pressed I might not be able to come up with any creative examples for self-employment, but I still felt that the young man needed a sense of empowerment instead of seeing himself as a helpless victim.

As it turned out, I didn’t have to offer any concrete suggestions. The next hand up was that of a middle-aged Mexican immigrant. Though he struggled with English, he readily shared his own story with the audience, directing his remarks to the young man who had spoken first. He explained that he had moved to New Bedford from Mexico five years ago. When he arrived he knew no one, so he took a job cleaning fish and earning minimum wage. After two years of dirty, backbreaking work, he said he was able to save enough to open a restaurant. He said he now owns two Mexican restaurants in New Bedford and employs 20 people. He then said that the only thing keeping him from doing more to help the community were the young hoodlums who have robbed him several times, and most recently forced one of his employees to be hospitalized as a result of a beating during a hold up. Sounding not unlike a conservative Republican, the man challenged the young people present not to be afraid of hard work, but to get off their butts, and to stop waiting for someone to give them something.

Again, I was taken aback by the direction our conversation had taken. Stumbling to figure out what I might say in response to the immigrant’s challenge, I was
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bailed out by a young Latina who was so eager to speak that she jumped out of her seat and demanded the microphone. Speaking with passion and defiance, she blurted out: “I’m sick of hearing people in New Bedford put young people down. I ain’t going to clean no fish for minimum wage and I shouldn’t have to. I went to school right here at this high school (the meeting actually took place at New Bedford High School), and I had plans to go to college after graduation. But I got into problems with the law, and now I have a criminal record. A lot of businesses won’t hire you if you have a record. I’m willing to work hard, but I need to get a chance.”

Her remarks and the passion with which they were delivered prompted several people in the audience to applaud, and now it was up to me to make sense of the exchange. How would I acknowledge the truths inherent in both perspectives: the hopefulness of the new immigrant, the frustration and resignation of the second generation? Given the late hour and the bad set up for an extended conversation, I punted. I encouraged the young woman, and the young man who’d spoken earlier, to get together with the restaurateur after the meeting to find out about a job and to learn how he managed to do what he had accomplished.

Reflecting on my visit to New Bedford I was compelled to recognize that the clash in perspectives symbolized a larger division among Latinas/os – the newly arrived full of hope and expectation, and the fully settled, who understand the reality of dead end jobs and racial discrimination. Both perspectives are rooted in “truth” and an understanding of reality, but neither perspective provides a clear way for Latinas/os as a group to move forward. Can hard work alone help students like Miguel whose educational opportunities are limited by the kind of school he attends, and whose chances for mobility through employment are constrained by the labor market in his community? Will anger and resentment for those who object to their second-class status help? How do we harness the energy and drive of the newcomers but at the same time refuse to accept a permanent place on the lower rungs of American society?

These are the big questions that face Latinas/os in America, but who’s providing the answers? We are at a moment of incredible possibility. Latinas/os are being courted by both major parties as swing voters with the ability to decide state and even national elections. Media moguls, baseball team owners, and fast food restaurants now recognize us as an important consumer market, but to recognize that we can vote and spend money says very little about our potential to alter our status in this country. If we are to move from the lower tiers of society and not become a permanent underclass, and if our communities, schools, and social institutions are to provide the support and nurturing that our children so desperately need, we will need a new direction and a new strategy. Until that time, we will remain like Miguel – industrious and hopeful but trapped in circumstances that stifle our ambitions and dreams. We can and we must do more, and those who have more, our small but growing middle class, have an even greater responsibility to act.
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Notes

1 During the 2003–4 academic year, I worked as a consultant to Region I, one of the ten school districts that comprise the New York City public schools. I was asked to assist Walton High School, which was being broken down from one large, comprehensive high school into several smaller autonomous learning communities. I spent much of the year assisting administrators of the school as they carried out this task.

2 As a researcher and the Director of the Metro Center at NYU, I work with many schools throughout the United States. For a description of my research, see City Schools and the American Dream (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

3 In much of the sociological literature on immigration it has been held that assimilation would lead to social mobility for immigrants. Second and third generation immigrants have generally fared better than new arrivals. For Latinas/os, available research suggests the opposite may be true. See Jiobu (1988).

4 For an analysis of these propositions and their impact on Latinas/os in California, see Chavez (2001).

References

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En la lucha: Sites of Struggle
For Latinas/os in the United States, education has always been a complicated and troubling issue. While often touted as being at the very core of a democratic society and the way out of poverty, education has had varying outcomes depending on context, historic time, and players involved. As a result, public education for Latinas/os has been a conflicted issue, paradoxically serving to both level the playing field for some and, for others, to replicate structural inequalities – the very inequalities that it was allegedly created to eliminate.

In this essay, I explore the complex nature of public education for Latinas/os in the United States and discuss how it has served, or not, to provide Latinas/os with an equal and equitable education. To do so, I consider the issues of language, culture, and power as they have been intertwined in Latinas/os’ educational experiences and outcomes. First, I review some relevant statistics related to Latinas/os in US schools, and then I present, in broad strokes, our complicated educational history in this country.

Who are the Latinas/os in US Schools?

To understand the Latina/o educational experience, we need to understand a bit of the history of Latinas/os in the United States. Some Latinas/os have been here for hundreds of years, while others will arrive tomorrow. Many Mexicans, the most numerous of all Latinas/os, have resided here since before there was a United States. Even Puerto Ricans and Cubans, although relatively recent arrivals, had a small but stable community in New York City and Tampa, Florida as far back as the 1860s. At the same time, Latinas/os from Central and South America and the Caribbean reach our borders and shores every day. This reality makes the Latino community an incredibly diverse one in terms of arrival, history in the United States, race, social class, language(s) spoken, and many other characteristics.
According to the 2006 Census, approximately 35,000,000 Latinas/os currently reside in the United States, an increase from 9 to 12.5 percent of the total population in just the ten-year period from 1990 to 2000 (US Census Bureau 2001). Although it is an impressive increase, many within the Latino community view this number as a gross undercount because of the great number of undocumented residents, particularly in border states. Of the 35,000,000 Latinas/os counted in the 2000 Census, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were by far the most numerous at 58.5 percent. Puerto Ricans were next at 9.6 percent, followed by Cubans at 3.5 percent and Dominicans at 2.2 percent. Central and South Americans and other self-identified Latinas/os made up the remaining 2.8 percent (US Census Bureau 2001). An estimated two thirds of Latinas/os are either immigrants or the children of immigrants (Suárez-Orozco and Páez 2002).

Because Latinas/os are an exceptionally young population (youths under 18 make up 35 percent of the population except among Cubans, a group that is quite a bit older than other Latinas/os), because of a birth rate that is higher among Latinas/os than in the general population, and because Latinas/os send their children to public schools in high numbers, the percentage of Latina/o children in US public schools is even larger than the percentage in the general population. Of the over 47,000,000 children enrolled in US public schools, 7,668,000, or 16.3 percent, are Latinas/os (National Center for Education Statistics 2000–1). A great number of these children do not speak English as their native language, a situation that is not limited to Latinas/os alone. In the academic year 2001–2, the number of students with limited English proficiency was 4.7 million, or 9.8 percent of the total school-age enrollment. This change represents a growth of 14 percent in just two years, and a huge increase of 105 percent from the previous decade. Although an astounding 400 languages are represented in this number, children who speak Spanish account for over three quarters of all children for whom English is a second language (Kindler 2002).

The states with the largest number of Latinas/os are California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and Arizona, but no state has remained untouched by the enormous influx of Latinas/os in the past two decades (National Center for Education Statistics 2000–1). Even states whose previous ethnic and racial diversity consisted almost entirely of African Americans or Native Americans now count Latinas/os among their largest “minority” populations. Nevada, for instance, had a 123 percent increase in the Latina/o population from 1990 to 2000, and North Carolina saw a 110 percent increase during the same time (US Census Bureau 2000a).

The Complicated History of Latinas/os in US Schools

The history of Latinas/os in US schools has been a long and complicated one, too long to treat adequately here. But in general terms, it has been a history characterized by segregation, exclusion, and racism and, at the same time, distinguished
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by the struggle for equality and moments of social justice and inclusion (García 2001; Nieto 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2004). Like African Americans, Native Americans, and others, Latinas/os have for many decades fought for equal educational opportunity. Although a number of fine historians began unearthing this history many years ago, until recently it has remained unacknowledged and on the periphery of educational research (Sánchez 1940; Weinberg 1977). A new generation of historians, mostly Latinas/os, has taken on the task of documenting the educational history of Latinas/os, and as a result, it is finally coming to light (Donato 1997; González 1990; MacDonald and Monkman, 2005; Ruiz 2001; San Miguel 2001; Spring 2004).

Mexican Americans, the largest Latina/o group and the group with the most extensive experience in the United States, also have the longest and most deep-seated history of exclusion. For example, while the Brown v. Board of Education decision is universally recognized as the case that shot down the doctrine of “separate but equal,” few people—even educators—recognize the less well-known but also defining moments of the struggle for equal education on the part of Mexican Americans in such cases as Independent School District v. Salvatierra in Texas (1930), protesting the segregation of Mexican children; Roberto Alvarez v. Lemon Grove in California (1931), the first successful desegregation case in US history; and Méndez v. Westminster in Orange County, CA (1945), which ended the segregation of Mexican children in California schools. Some of these cases, in fact, served as legal precedent for the Brown decision. The history of struggle against segregation and exclusion also helps illustrate that Mexican Americans did not passively accept the situation, but instead fought to reverse it.

The historical context has been different for other Latinas/os. For example, although the Puerto Rican community was already well established in New York City in the early twentieth century, “the great migration” of Puerto Ricans did not begin until the late 1940s and early 1950s (Sánchez Korrol 1994). And while Puerto Ricans attended schools that were in some cases quite segregated by race, they were so primarily because of residential housing patterns (Nieto 2000). Thus, in contrast to the Mexican American experience, it was not unusual for Puerto Rican children to attend schools that were somewhat integrated by race and ethnicity but segregated by social class. Nevertheless, most schools were caught completely off-guard by the massive influx of Puerto Ricans, and for many years the majority of Puerto Rican children received little in terms of language or academic support, as documented in a number of early studies (Margolis 1968; Morrison 1958; Office of the Mayor 1968).

Both social class and race were implicated as well in the case of the Cuban community in the United States. Although there had been a relatively small and racially mixed Cuban population, both in New York and in the Tampa area prior to 1959, those who emigrated in the first large exodus after the Cuban Revolution were mostly white and middle-class. Many in the group that left Cuba after 1959 benefited not only from their race and social class, but also from Cold War politics that afforded them a very different reception from the federal
government than that given other Latinas/os. The reception took the form of generous aid packages, direct federal grants, and support for bilingual education (MacDonald and Monkman, 2005; Sánchez Korrol 1994). The first bilingual school in the nation, for example, opened its doors to Cuban children in Dade County Miami in 1966, in spite of the fact that Mexican American and Puerto Rican communities had long advocated for such schools for their children. Yet it was not until 1968 that a small number of bilingual schools opened in other parts of the country to serve these communities.

The Continuing Impact of Segregation and Exclusion on Latinas/os

Even today, the legacy of educational inequality is visible in Latina/o communities around the country. Latinas/os, for instance, are still segregated from their non-Latina/o peers in schools, although it is now de facto segregation. Fifty years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision that supposedly would end segregation based on race, Latinas/os are now more segregated by race/ethnicity, and poverty, than students of all other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Orfield 2001).

Because education and social class are invariably linked, we also see the legacy of inequality in terms of the poverty level among Latinas/os. Poverty is especially grim among people of color: in the case of Latinas/os, more than 21 percent live under the poverty line (US Census Bureau 2000b). Among Latina/o children, a massive 34.4 percent live in poverty (Capps 2001). In terms of family poverty, Dominicans experience the highest rate of poverty among Latinas/os (29.9 percent), followed by Puerto Ricans (22.8 percent), and Mexicans (21.2 percent), while Cubans, at 12.9 percent, experience the lowest poverty rate (Falcón 2004).

We see the legacy of inequality as well in the high dropout rate of Latinas/os, particularly Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. Highest among any other group of students in the nation, for the past half century the dropout rate has ranged from 25–80 percent, depending on the year, the city, and on the method used to count dropouts (García 2001; Nieto 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2004). Although high school completion among Latinas/os improved slightly from the late 1970s through the 1980s, no doubt due to the influx of funds as a result of the War on Poverty and other programs, by the early 1990s – when most such programs were on the wane – the dropout rate was again on the increase. As of 2000, the high school completion rate for Latinas/os (64.1 percent) was dramatically lower than for all other groups: for Asian Americans it was 94.6 percent, for Whites 91.8 percent, and for African Americans 83.7 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2002). Among Latinas/os, the high school completion rate differed according to national origin: for Mexicans it was 48.7 percent, for Dominicans 51.7 percent, for Central and South Americans 60.4 percent, for Puerto Ricans 63.3 percent, and for Cubans 72.6 percent (Falcón 2004).
Current conditions in schools exacerbate the high dropout rate among Latinas/os. For instance, high-stakes testing, beginning slowly in the late 1980s and increasing considerably since then, has had serious repercussions for the high school completion rate among both Latinas/os and African Americans. According to some reports, the highly touted and allegedly successful statewide testing in Texas has resulted in a sharp increase in dropout rates for both Latina/o and African American students (Bracey 2000). In Massachusetts, high school completion rates for Latinas/os and African Americans are the lowest in ten years, largely due to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, the state’s high-stakes test (Massachusetts Department of Education 2004). Similar findings have been reported nationwide (Amrein and Berliner 2002).

Other indications of educational underachievement are also prevalent among Latinas/os. In fact, many educators describe Latinas/os, especially Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Central Americans, as the most educationally disadvantaged group in the nation based on academic achievement, test scores, class placement, retention, and enrollment in and graduation from college (García 2001; Nieto 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2004).

The Politics of Language and Culture

Language has been at the heart of much of the education of Latinas/os in the United States, and historically it has been used by both Latinas/os and non-Latinas/os for various ideological positions and campaigns: as a justification for segregation, a rallying cry for cultural maintenance, a dire warning about the takeover of the nation by immigrants, and an organizing tool to stem the tide of anti-immigrant sentiments. We see the results in everything from community demands for bilingual education, to ballot questions to eliminate it; from calls for a constitutional amendment to make English the official language of the country, to ballot questions to deprive immigrants of their right to a public education.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Mexican students’ supposed language deficits were used as a justification for segregation, many times for housing them in completely separate schools. Teachers in these segregated schools were for the most part Anglo-Americans who did not speak Spanish and the official policy was one of English-only (MacDonald and Monkman, 2005; Sánchez 1940). As a result, children who spoke Spanish in school were often harshly punished for doing so. Yet it was clear that the stated need for Mexican students to learn English was frequently nothing more than a ploy to keep them separated from Whites because even when they mastered the English language, they were kept in segregated schools. Ironically, many of them became monolingual English speakers. Although segregation in their case was rationalized on linguistic rather than racial grounds, racism was the real reason: as in the case of African Americans, Mexican Americans who went to “Mexican” schools attended dilapidated and inferior buildings, used old and out-of-date
textbooks previously used in White schools, and were not allowed to compete in Anglo athletic leagues.

Starting in the 1960s, the struggle for equal education among Latinas/os generally meant the demand for bilingual education (García 2001; Nieto 2001). In fact, many Latinas/os began to define bilingual education as the major civil rights issue for the community. It was viewed as helping to counteract the assimilationist agenda of schooling, which often resulted in children shifting their cultural and class identification from their own largely Spanish-speaking and working-class communities toward those of the dominant society. Parents, community leaders, and concerned educators began to fear that through the hidden and expressed curriculum and the educational power of the media, young Latinas/os were being taught to reject the values of their communities, including their language and culture. As a result, from the 1960s to the 1990s, many advocates took to the streets and went to the legislatures and courts to secure bilingual education. The results can be seen in such court cases as the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* decision, and in such legislation as the 1968 Bilingual Education Act (which has recently been quietly but almost completely dismantled, emphasizing now only English language acquisition). Nevertheless, the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), as well as several state affiliates, still regularly draw thousands to their annual conferences, and numerous researchers focus their efforts entirely on bilingual and second language education, further signals that language issues are still central to the conversation about educational equity for Latinas/os.

Until recently, bilingual education enjoyed broad support among all Latina/o groups regardless of ideological and other differences. It is still very popular where there are large Latina/o communities, but the attacks on bilingual education from well-funded groups (English Only is a prime example) and individuals (California millionaire Ron Unz is the most notable case) as “un-American” and as leading to ethnic polarization have taken their toll. The result has been the elimination of bilingual education in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, among other places, and its dilution in others. So widespread has been the campaign against bilingual education, in fact, that currently the term itself is hardly heard in public discourse anymore; it has been replaced by the innocuous “English language learners” (ELLs), as a more politically neutral term that emphasizes only the fact that students need to learn English, not the fact that they already speak another language. The Spanish language, nevertheless, continues to be of tremendous importance to Latina/o communities and, as such, it still resonates as a major rallying cry for equal educational opportunity.

Other justifications besides differences in race and language have been used to deny Latinas/os equal educational opportunity. For many years, Latina/o culture was viewed by non-Latinas/os as incompatible with US norms. As a result, “Americanization,” a term that has largely been abandoned in educational discourse, was a major emphasis in educating Latinas/os and other immigrants. The stated goal was to bring the blessings of democracy to those considered inferior to other Americans. But according to González (1990), the major reason

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for, and result of, “Americanization” was to preserve the political and economic subordination of the Latina/o community. Although “Americanization” as a term is no longer in vogue, its close cousin “assimilation” is still viewed as a worthy goal in many schools, as well as in US society in general. The reasoning has been that if Latina/o children expect to excel academically, they must be willing to forget Spanish and identify primarily with the broader community. This argument has been made not just by non-Latinas/os, but by conservative Latinas/os as well (Chavez 1991; Rodríguez 1982).

The Continuing Significance of Language and Culture

Even during periods of “Americanization” and other assimilationist pressures, many Latinas/os have insisted on retaining Spanish and their cultural roots while at the same time learning English and becoming biculturally adept. Although no one would argue that cultural and linguistic identification by themselves can solve the myriad problems of educational achievement among Latinas/os – the problems are both too knotty and too deep-seated to believe that a simple solution will do the trick – it is nevertheless important to understand and build on the significant role that language and culture have traditionally played in the Latina/o community.

A great deal of research has pointed to the positive impact of a strong and healthy sense of identity on both educational outcomes and mental well-being. In fact, throughout much of the history of Latinas/os in the United States, cultural and linguistic maintenance has served as both a defense against a hostile environment and a non-negotiable demand for educational improvement. For example, numerous studies have documented that native language maintenance can act as a buffer against academic failure by simply supporting literacy in children’s most highly developed language (Cummins 1996; Díaz Soto 1993; Zentella 1997). Moreover, the consequences of native language maintenance can be long lasting. Patricia Gándara (1995), analyzing the impressive academic achievements of 50 Mexican American adults who grew up in poverty and went on to attend prestigious colleges and universities, found that only 16 percent of them came from homes where English was the primary language. The largest percentage of these successful adults grew up in households where only Spanish was spoken, and a remarkable two thirds of them began school speaking only Spanish. Not surprisingly, then, in their exhaustive review of research studies concerning the adaptation and school achievement of immigrants of various backgrounds, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut (2001) came to the conclusion that students with limited bilingualism are far more likely to leave school than those fluent in both languages. They also discovered that immigrant youngsters who maintained a close link with their family’s culture and language were better adjusted and had more positive educational outcomes than those who did not. Hence,
rather than an impediment to academic achievement, it appears that maintaining a strong sense of cultural and linguistic identity can help students weather the difficulties that schooling may present.

Demands for bilingual education and for maintaining cultural ties thus need to be understood as being part and parcel of the “American Dream – Latina/o style.” Most Latinas/os want nothing more for their children than economic security and an easier life than they have had. They know that attaining these objectives means getting an excellent education. But there is a fundamental difference between the way these objectives are defined within the Latina/o community and how they are defined in the broader population. For most Latinas/os, getting a good education is not in contradiction with maintaining the Spanish language and retaining a sense of cultural identification.

The argument for retaining language and culture is not meant to deny the inevitable adaptation that takes place when immigrants live in a different country. It would be both foolhardy and naive to believe that culture and language can be retained as if frozen for all time. Adaptation is inevitable, even necessary and beneficial, because it acknowledges that culture is not static but always changing to fit new contexts. Romantic notions of cultural and linguistic maintenance notwithstanding, it is clear that change is not only ubiquitous but also needed and welcome. Nevertheless, for many Latinas/os, wholesale assimilation and cultural rejection – common byproducts of public education in the United States – are out of the question. The fierce tenacity with which many Latinas/os have insisted on these things is in sharp contrast to the experiences of other immigrants, particularly those from Europe who came to the United States at the start of the twentieth century, to whom Latinas/os are often compared. Yet the experiences of these two groups cannot be comfortably compared because they are dramatically different in historical context and for reasons of race and geographic proximity to homeland.

The Sociopolitical Context of Education for Latinas/os

Language and culture, however, are just part of the picture. Just as important, and in many cases, even more so, is the sociopolitical context in which Latina/o students are educated. Thus, much recent research on the education of Latinas/os has emphasized the need to reexamine the impact of unfair school and societal policies and practices on academic achievement and high school completion. These policies and practices include inequitable school funding, overcrowding, rigid ability grouping, retention, high-stakes testing, irrelevant curriculum, and disciplinary policies that are unevenly applied (Darder et al. 1997; Garcia 2001; Nieto 2000; Romo and Falbo 1996).

The lack of political representation of Latinas/os in educational decision-making also makes a difference. For instance, a study by Kenneth Meier and
Joseph Stewart (1991) found that when the level of representation among Latinas/os in decision-making rose, the level of discrimination against Latina/o students was reduced. These researchers also found that politically well-represented Latina/o districts graduated proportionately more Latina/o students from high school than districts that were poorly represented.

In addition to institutional policies and practices, the attitudes and dispositions of teachers toward their Latina/o students are paramount in encouraging students to become what Nilda Flores-González (2002) has identified as either “school kids” – that is, those who connect with schooling and thus have a better chance to succeed – or “street kids” – those who have largely given up on school because they feel like “outsiders” and don’t see school as a place where they belong (Frau-Ramos and Nieto 1993; Zanger 1993). On the contrary, when Latina/o students feel accepted and affirmed, their level of achievement tends to increase (Abi-Nader 1990; Flores-González 2002; Valenzuela 1999). Clearly, staff development policies are also significant in this situation.

Rather than continuing to focus on students or their families as “the problem,” recent research instead suggests that schools and communities need to look at their own institutional policies and practices in order to improve the education of Latina/o students. While this in no way minimizes the responsibility of Latina/o families and communities, it simply reaffirms the traditional responsibility of US schools to educate all students, not just those from English-speaking, middle-class, and well-educated families. Rather than focus on conditions about which they can do very little – poverty, low parental educational levels, or single-parent family structure – schools need to focus on what they can change. The growing research on the sociopolitical context of education for Latinas/os makes it clear that the major problem identified at the beginning of this chapter – that is, whether schooling ultimately serves to replicate structural inequalities or to level the playing field – can best be addressed by paying attention to how institutional policies and practices hinder or promote Latina/o students’ learning. This approach has become the focus of recent efforts by Latina/o educators, researchers, and policymakers, and of their allies.

**Looking to the Future: A Cause for Optimism and a Call for Vigilance**

In the long history of the struggle for social justice for Latinas/os, one lesson is clear: nothing will change until Latinas/os themselves work to change the condition of education for young people in our communities. Latina/o activism in education, particularly as reflected in the Chicano and Puerto Rican movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and through organizations such as Aspira and the National Council for La Raza (NCLR), is what is called for in improving educational outcomes for Latina/o students. There is some cause for optimism that this is beginning to happen, but there is also cause for concern that too little is being done.
Beginning at the end of the twentieth and continuing into the first years of the twenty-first century, increased attention has been paid to the education of Latinas/os in the United States. A growing number of journal articles and books attest to the increased interest in the education of Latina/o students. Not coincidentally, a growing number of Latina/o scholars are dedicating themselves to researching education in Latina/o communities. The fact that researchers share a cultural heritage with the students they investigate is crucial in developing insights, and even research approaches, that can be helpful to non-Latina/o researchers, as well as to policymakers and teachers who work with Latina/o youths (Hidalgo 2000).

A recent activity building on this reality is the National Latina/o Education Research Agenda Project, or NLERAP, spearheaded by the Puerto Rican Studies Research Center (also known as the Centro) at Hunter College in New York City in 1998 and funded by a number of leading philanthropic organizations. With a national advisory board consisting primarily of Latina/o scholars whose research focuses on the education of Latinas/os, NLERAP hopes to develop a community-based and action-oriented educational research agenda that will identify school and non-school conditions that support or inhibit Latina/o students’ learning and development (Pedraza and Rivera, 2005; see also NLERAP’s website, www.nlerap.hunter.cuny.edu/). In addition, since 1990, both Republican and Democratic presidents have signed executive orders focusing on improving educational excellence for Latinas/os. With each executive order, a Presidential Advisory Commission has been established, with a charge to report its findings to the White House, the Secretary of Education, and the nation.

Presidential advisory commissions notwithstanding, it will take a greater concerted effort among all interested parties, but particularly among Latinas/os ourselves, to improve education for Latina/o youngsters. The longstanding Latina/o quest for equal education – one that has been characterized as “un paso pa’lante y dos pa’tras” (Meier and Stewart 1991) – must continue if we are to resolve the seeming contradiction between the nation’s promise of educational excellence for all with the dismal reality of educational failure among so many Latinas/os. Until we do, Latina/o students will remain among the most miseducated and undereducated in the nation, and too many lives will continue to be lost. In the final analysis, although it has proven to be elusive, a good education remains the best hope that Latina/o youngsters will have meaningful and productive lives.

References


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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Moral Monster: Hispanics Recasting Honor and Respectability Behind Bars

Patricia Fernández-Kelly

Introduction

The facts surrounding incarceration in the United States are alarming: America has the largest captive population on earth – with 5 percent of the world’s people it holds 25 percent of the world’s prisoners – over 2 million people – one in every 143 US citizens (Pager 2003).

Most prisoners are men, although women constitute a fast-growing category. Young males with low schooling levels are much more likely to be locked up than their educated counterparts. Many convicts are responsible for violent offenses against persons, but more than half are serving drug-related sentences (Executive Office of the President 2000).

Race is a preeminent factor in imprisonment. African Americans represent only 12.3 percent of the US population but they are 44 percent of those behind bars (Human Rights Watch 2003). In other words, blacks face seven to eight times the risk of confinement than whites (Wacquant 2005; Western et al. 2005). Two groups, Hispanics at 12.5 percent and African Americans at 12.3 percent, make up a quarter of the country’s population but are 60 percent of those in prisons and jails (Human Rights Watch 2003).

Staggering as they are, those figures conceal national and generational variations. For example, newly arrived Mexicans in the US – whether legal residents or not – seldom commit serious crimes. Their children, by contrast, face a 20 percent risk of incarceration. For second generation Jamiacans and Haitians the corresponding figures are also steep – 18 and 14 percent, respectively. Twenty-two percent of second generation Dominicans and Colombians have prison records.
Patricia Fernández-Kelly

(Portes and Fernández-Kelly, forthcoming). Put summarily, working-class, racially distinct, and second generation immigrant youngsters are especially susceptible to confinement.

Puerto Ricans occupy a singular position in that landscape. Out migration from the island to the US soared after World War II, frequently led by women seeking a better future for their children. Puerto Rican flows drew strength from the labor demand in low-skill services and manufacturing (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños 1979; Grosfoguel 1992; Levine 1987). As a result, nearly 40 percent of women employed in mid-Atlantic garment factories in 1970 were of Puerto Rican descent. Segregated in poor neighborhoods, attending ineffective schools, and facing discrimination, children growing up in the mainland faced impeded social mobility. Unemployment rates among Puerto Ricans are comparable to those of blacks – nearly 13 percent do not hold jobs. An even higher proportion of Puerto Rican men between the ages of 15 and 35 are underemployed (Baker 2002). Not surprisingly, they are also overrepresented among those serving prison sentences.

The relationship between race, immigration, and incarceration is part of a larger historical trend. Throughout most of the twentieth century, differences in confinement rates for various ethnic groups remained comparatively small because putting people behind bars was considered a measure of last resort. As a result, and despite crime fluctuations, imprisonment remained fairly stable between 1920 and 1970 at about 100 per 100,000 of the country’s inhabitants. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s – during the Reagan and Bush administrations – those rates skyrocketed, increasing fivefold to 470 per 100,000 in 2001. Impoverished and racialized groups bore the brunt of those momentous changes.

As confinement reaches epidemic proportions among the most vulnerable social segments in America, it becomes pressing that we understand what goes on behind bars. In the next section I give attention to the way in which Puerto Rican prisoners are redefining the carceral experience in New Jersey’s maximum security prison.

Rebuilding Identity behind Bars

Among many remarkable items in the first special edition of *InsideOut*, a prison magazine, are these two verses:

Nameless, we grab at the sharp steel that encages us
hoping the blood spilled sanctifies
the progress that we’ve made with dust.

Internalize the burn ’cause “In Time We Trust”
that in turn others will yearn
to be more than just numbers, more than just . . .
Luis Beltrán, the poem’s author, has been locked up since he was 16, when he was convicted as an adult for double homicide. Now 29, he serves on the Board of Directors of Hispanic Americans for Progress, Inc. (HAP), a not-for-profit, self-help organization established in 1992 by Puerto Rican inmates at the New Jersey State Prison (NJSP), New Jersey’s only maximum-security facility. Nearly 2,000 men live there. The majority are serving extended sentences ranging from 30 years to life; approximately 300 inmates reside in a psychiatric division; and 14 await the death penalty in almost total isolation.

Jesús Sanabria and Jason Jiménez, the director and executive assistant of HAP, see educating prisoners and the public at large as a top priority. As part of that effort, William García, the fourth board member, presides over “Support for Kids at Risk” (SKAR), a program whose aim is to instruct youngsters about the risks of antisocial behavior and the slippery slope leading to incarceration. InsideOut, a quarterly publication produced internally and mailed to schools, churches, and social service agencies, is part of that effort.¹

Since the spring of 2003, under the auspices of Princeton’s Community Based Learning Initiative, students in my courses have been working hand in hand with prisoners affiliated with HAP to produce and expand the distribution of InsideOut in color and on fine-grade paper. Throughout the school term, one or two at a time, Princeton students trickle into New Jersey’s daunting penitentiary to labor in the company of outcasts. Contained in the three special editions completed thus far, are the poems, paintings, and essays created by prisoners. The words by Luis Beltrán quoted earlier are an explanation of one of the magazine’s covers reproduced here (figure 21.1).

As with everything else that HAP does, the intent behind InsideOut is to recast the meaning of experience. Vilified by the public, prisoners respond with images of worth and decorum. Below, I examine the social and political parameters framing those efforts.

To be deprived of freedom for extended periods of time presents individuals with just a few options. Some inmates sink into despondency or despair – suicides and mental illness are frequent behind bars. Others focus on turf and bodily force – gangs in correctional institutions illustrate that trend. Yet others focus on merit as a means to redefine identity. The men of HAP belong in that category – they endeavor to rebuild society from the ground up under strictures that would immobilize most ordinary people. One day at a time, they brave bureaucratic barriers, negligible resources, and harmful stereotypes with a single goal in mind: to salvage a bit of dignity. That pursuit is common in other groups, but imprisonment amplifies it, laying bare the inner workings of economic, social, and political processes. To understand HAP is to understand the micro-mechanisms that make social life possible.

Take, for example, the case of Alfredo (Ibrahim) García. He has resided at the New Jersey State Prison since 1998, when he was transferred from a North Carolina penitentiary where he was serving a 20 year sentence for murder, the result of a drug transaction gone awry. Alfredo remembers that his parents, both
of whom grew up in Puerto Rico, held full-time jobs. As much as they taught their son right from wrong, they were often not around to prevent him from slipping into trouble. Alfredo was bored by public school. He received superior marks into the eighth grade but he didn’t think those grades were meaningful: “all you had to do is show up and barely do nothing, and the teachers just moved...
you along.” More exciting and lucrative were the streets. Even as a 12-year-old boy, he worked as a lookout for older adolescents dealing drugs. One thing led to another until the night Alfredo found himself in the middle of a road looking squarely into the eyes of a dead man. He was 19. That he did not pull the trigger leading to the fatality was of no consequence – he was still tried and convicted for murder.

In prison Alfredo reassessed his life. He became a Muslim – Islam is the fastest growing religion in American prisons. Eventually, he also joined Hispanic Americans for Progress. In 2001 he started taking correspondence courses from Penn State University’s World Campus. By 2004 he had completed 54 credits and was wrestling with Calculus. His grade point average was nearly perfect. Alfredo’s hope was to obtain a Bachelor’s degree and, subsequently, to become a lawyer. His focus on education paralleled a desire to reconstitute his public image:

My mother, she tried to teach me good but when you're young and by yourself, there's so much you can’t understand. [In prison] you get a lot of time to think and grow. I want to make my family proud [so] people will know I didn’t waste my life but learned from experience, [so] my son will not be ashamed of his father. That’s what keeps me going.

Alfredo’s thinking is not rare. Like monasteries, prisons uproot individuals from families and communities, sharpening their senses, and compelling them to reconsider who they are. Prisoners are forced to live alongside strangers, fearing random violence, and bound by abnormal restrictions – at the New Jersey State Prison inmates are locked up in their cells to be counted nine times over a 24-hour cycle. Many succumb to passivity, rage, or insanity. Others, like Alfredo, willfully recreate meaning and, because they are always being reminded of their crimes, their determination to redefine who they are and how others perceive them is felt all the more acutely.

Sociability thus becomes a precious resource among prisoners. Interpersonal skills make for survival behind bars and for the maintenance of connections with outsiders. It is for that reason that HAP tries to keep a steady flow of volunteers and visitors coming into the Donald Bourne School, the prison’s educational facility. But the contact between inmates and guests or volunteers is not solely about education – it is also about sending a message into the wider society: “The public thinks we’re no good,” says Jesús Sanabria, the director of HAP, “so every time people from the outside meet with us, we hope they will come out with a different impression and help change the stereotype.” Difficult as that mission may appear, it sometimes succeeds: “They are not what I expected,” remarked a student in the InsideOut team after her first encounter with Sanabria and his associates, “they’re so polite and welcoming!” Others notice the prisoners’ intellectual hunger, wit, and frankness. With little else to do, many spend the better part of their day reading. They use self-disclosure and expressions of regret to lighten the weight of personal tragedy. Crimes are
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made understandable, if not justifiable, through conversation. Civility ensures that guests will return.

A plethora of subverted meanings underlie the surprised reactions of visitors – preparing for an encounter with monsters they face instead mannerly versions of their own selves. The discrepancy between reality and expectation is made sharper because incarcerates are about the only group defined by their worst deeds. We expect other populations to change and evolve. Prisoners, on the other hand, remain fixed in the social imagination as embodiments of danger and depravity. “I can’t even remember what happened,” says a HAP member about the fateful night when, maddened by drugs and alcohol, he stabbed a cousin to death during an altercation, “but my crime is the only thing the society knows about me. In other people’s eyes I’m just a fucking killer!” To expand public understanding of prisoners as full human beings is a major pursuit of HAP. Such an objective, however, requires repeated contact with the outside and the honing of symbolic capital. Because education is associated with respectability it becomes a key element in the search for interaction with the external world.

Aware of its emblematic and practical benefits, many inmates eagerly seek the kind of instruction that they rejected as youngsters or that was not available to them in the first place. To regain honor they cultivate the mind. Obtaining a good job after release from prison is a common dream. Yet since the 1970s, when incarceration rates began to grow rapidly, the trend has been towards declining support for education in prison and in favor of raw custody. Most Americans back punishment, not rehabilitation. As a result, educational programs have nearly vanished in correctional institutions. College courses are almost non-existent after the elimination in 1994 of Pell Grants for deserving inmates. High school instruction exists but is limited by space shortages and procedural complications. Still, prisoners like Alfredo García resort to correspondence courses at their own expense. The effect is spotty and often fruitless.

In that lugubrious landscape, HAP does what it can to address prisoners’ learning aspirations. It courts listless administrators and mediates between a bureaucracy not properly staffed and prisoners eager to obtain a proper instruction. The existence and legitimacy of HAP depend on inmate recognition, volunteer loyalty, and administrative support, but coordinating those constituencies is not easy. Authorities view education with mixed feelings – as a means to keep prisoners busy, but also as a security risk. Volunteers are easily discouraged by administrative obstacles. Some prisoners see educational programs as entertainment – a way to break the tedium of prison life – more than as serious pursuits. Those warring feelings and agendas converge at events attended by outside guests, prisoners, and administrators. Education suddenly becomes the centerpiece of attention.

HAP invests countless hours in the organization of two annual banquets and a public poetry reading. One of the banquets marks the anniversary of the organization’s birth. The other one celebrates HAP’s Spanish Language program. At the poetry reading, prison and community writers present their work in English
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and Spanish. Those functions offer a glimpse of the organization’s inner soul. More than 100 inmates are invited, but to be worthy of that honor each one of them must conform to the behavioral code instituted by HAP. Prison staff and volunteers are earnestly sought as guests. By bringing together those within and outside the institution, HAP affirms its role as gatekeeper and promoter of decency. It also salvages feelings of agency and empowerment through education.

At the banquets, self-improvement is celebrated, encouragement is offered, and food cooked by the organizers is served. Men with skins in various shades of brown, their arms covered with tattoos, and hair braided into corn rows, waltz around filling glasses with iced tea, making sure that guests approve of the arroz con pollo (chicken and rice), a small but telling indication that the event is not devoid of cultural and national significance. “Puerto Rican” and “Hispanic” are recast in terms of competency and hospitality. “We’re the only organization capable of doing this kind of thing,” notes Jesús Sanabria, the director of HAP, “that’s [how] we show that to be Hispanic is to be smart, and generous.”

In other words, the banquets are public reenactments of the organization’s mission. They are performances that fulfill in the symbolic realm objectives of worth and self-respect. Their preparation requires political savvy and the cultivation of trust and reciprocity. Those public events, as well, act as a social cohesive sustaining the bonds between the organizers and their constituency. Jason Jiménez, HAP’s executive assistant, spends sleepless nights making sure that every detail in the celebrations is attended to – official permission must be obtained; forms must be filled out and paperwork pushed forward; guest prisoners must be screened; invitations must be delivered or mailed; the gymnasium where the banquets take place has to be adapted and decorated; certificates of achievement must be created and signed by the Board of Directors of HAP and, if possible, by the prison’s administrator. Even further, skits and music have to be composed and rehearsed; tokens of appreciation, often in the form of soap sculptures or paintings created by prison artists, must be commissioned. Equivalent activities in the world outside would attract little attention. In prison they represent small miracles.

Puerto Rican men bent on preserving cultural pride founded HAP, but it is in the interest of the organization to attract men of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The result is a delicate balance between cultural distinctiveness and inclusiveness. HAP offers Spanish classes and publishes Revista Hispano Americana in that language. Yet some of the people most eager to learn Spanish are not Puerto Rican. Explains Jesús Sanabria, “HAP is open to everyone regardless of race or cultural background. Our vision is to serve anyone who wants to learn because, after all, Hispanic values are universal values.” By extending the limits of ethnicity, HAP hopes to buttress its position vis-à-vis prisoners and prison authorities. Teaching Spanish becomes an exercise in the management of legitimacy.

Beyond those efforts lies an even more elusive purpose. The paramount goal of HAP is to reach young people at risk of confinement. “Please don’t follow
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my footsteps because my footsteps were death traps!” begins a rhyme included
in InsideOut’s first special edition. In partnership with Isles, a Trenton-based
community organization, HAP works with juveniles already under government
supervision for comparatively minor offenses. Troubled teenagers are regularly
brought into prison for a talk with Sanabria and his associates. One at a time, the
prisoners recount their personal histories, weaving together a narrative of deep
sorrow and remorse. In rapid succession they transfigure into fathers admon-
ishing errant children, older brothers recognizing how hard it is to grow up
poor and desperate, and wizened prophets promising a better future if only the
right choices are made. By the end of the meeting, more than one visitor has
shed tears and fallen repentant into the arms of the inmates. The men of HAP
make hope tangible at least for a moment. Two videotapes of such meetings
are available for educational purposes as part of the Support for Kids at Risk
(SKAR) initiative.

The Search of Atonement

Hermon Tandy, a HAP member, is a mannerly African American who grew up
in a stable family. Although his father left when Hermon was a boy, his mother
strived to keep him and his two siblings away from bad influences. Despite those
hopes, Hermon acquired a costly heroin habit as a college student attending
Rutgers’ Camden campus. When he was 23, wishing to marry his high school
sweetheart, he sobered up and got a job as a shoe store manager. After the store
went out of business and Hermon lost his job, he turned to hustling to support
his brood. His plan was to sell heroin while he found a better position. Instead,
he became an addict.

One night, fresh out of cash, Hermon took his wife and young children to buy
clothes at a mall in preparation for the new school year. He asked Mary to wait
in the car while she listened to religious music. Hermon then walked over to
the far end of the parking lot with a gun hidden in his jacket. From behind
he approached a white man as he opened the door of his Nissan Maxima and
pointed the gun to the side of his head demanding that he surrender his ATM
card and password. After the man complied but before fleeing the crime scene
Hermon felt a need to offer an explanation to his terrified victim:

Really, I’m not a bad person. I’m sorry to have to do this but I have to. I just want
you to know that I’m really sorry and what’s more, I’ll pay you back. I really will
because I was brought up the right way. I hope you can forgive me.

Hermon had just finished his shopping spree when he was arrested. Convicted
for several counts of robbery, car jacking, and the illegal possession of a firearm,
he is now serving a 20-year sentence. “It was a horrible thing to do to another
human being,” Hermon admits, “but you have to understand that even then
I asked to be forgiven. I knew right from wrong. I wasn’t an animal. I only robbed to take care of my own.” In his explanation, Tandy evinces a haunting concern about morality shared by other prisoners.

Taking care of one’s own is a frequent theme running through the stories of men behind bars. As in other cases, the construction of identity involves a differentiation between us and them; between what is acceptable and what is not. Killing to protect women and children or to defend territory and property are seen as defensible behaviors consistent with standards of masculinity. In fact, most men who end up in prison first get into trouble as they enact a transition from undifferentiated childhood into manly adulthood. “My mother was my mother but the street was my father,” says Luis Beltrán with a rhythmic intonation. Even as a boy, he was considered the head of the house. When his young mother remarried, he felt displaced and saw hustling as a path to reassert masculine power. He slipped into what Philippe Bourgois (2002) calls the search for respect. Luis was not a violent youngster, but when put to the test in the company of two friends, he didn’t hesitate to shoot an elderly couple as part of an attempted burglary. Once in prison, Jesús Sanabria took him under his wing. He now says, “You might think Beltrán was a hardened criminal but, no, he was more of an innocent; he didn’t know nothing. It was in prison that he learned to be a man.” Friendship and care now bond the two men in a loop of mutual redemption.

It is sometimes possible to cast murder in honorable terms or to explain it as the product of impulsivity. Other crimes aren’t so easily redefined. Rape and child molestation are seen by prisoners as affronts to masculinity because true men are expected to shield the weak from harm. Convicts charged with rape and pedophilia face a high risk of physical abuse, sexual enslavement, and even death. They become outcasts whose main function is to buttress the superior status of thieves, murderers, and drug dealers. Prisoners thus reproduce behind bars hierarchies found elsewhere in the society. To construct themselves as subjects, they separate from others who are understood to be not only different but also inferior. What Foucault calls dividing practices are foundational mechanisms in the creation of social order within and outside prison.

Unable to forget or undo the moments of violence that doomed them, inmates refashion morality out of signs and symbols imprinted with large meanings. Although he is not a vegetarian, Jesús Sanabria has not eaten meat in more than twenty years; his restraint is meant as a sacrifice, an oblation to protect his family from harm, and an appeasement offering to his victim’s relatives. Not a day passes by when Luis Beltrán doesn’t talk to the couple that he shot dead. In silence he calls out their names so that their memory will not perish. His is a delicate gesture judged by the magnitude of the crime, but it’s all that he can do now. “They were good people,” he muses, “they would’ve helped a lost kid like I was.” In his essay for one of the special issues of InsideOut, William García writes, “Do not allow your mother to suffer as I have allowed mine to. Cherish your moments together.” Every year Jason Jiménez pours energy into
the organization of events to mark the anniversary of the foundation of HAP with solemnity and honor. The past cannot be unmade, but the present is full of symbolic possibilities.

Conclusions

Prisons have become strategic locations for the investigation of new forms of inequality. A growing bifurcation of the labor market in the age of globalization has brought about an increase in the number of jobs available to educated people and a reduction of desirable positions for working-class and impoverished groups, including racial minorities and children of immigrants. The Puerto Rican founders of Hispanic Americans for Progress are emblematic of an experience marked by downward assimilation. They prefigure the fate of second generation immigrants from Latin America now facing limited economic opportunities and social exclusion. Yet, as illustrated in the previous sections, prisoners are not defined exclusively by their crimes. In this chapter I have sought to recapture elements in the carceral experience that are veiled by the public understanding of inmates as depraved and irredeemable.

Bereft of freedom and forced to live under constant supervision, prisoners recreate social arrangements and seek to reconstruct an honorable identity. Educational advancement is pivotal to that objective for reasons that are practical as well as symbolic. Instruction and self-improvement are viewed as elements of personal worth and as means to connect with the larger society.

Perhaps most important is the realization that imprisonment does not mark the end of moral exploration. On a daily basis, inmates wrestle with the memory of transgressions and they actively search for atonement. In the spring of 2004, at the annual poetry reading sponsored by HAP, a young woman addressed an audience of nearly one hundred prisoners in these terms: “When in hell they tell you not to speak then sing.” That, in a nutshell, is what Jesús Sanabria and his associates try to do. There lies the intellectual discovery, there, the moral wonder.

Notes

A different version of this essay was included in An Invitation to Public Sociology (2004), Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.

1 The proper names included in this essay are real at the request of the men in question.

2 Society condones the absence of rigorous educational programs for inmates at its own peril. Locking up criminals and throwing away the key may satisfy desires for revenge, but it has deleterious effects. Most prisoners are eventually released, but many are unprepared to meet the challenges of reentry. Recidivism rates in the United States are higher than in any other advanced country. That unholy cycle is not broken but enhanced by the absence of educational opportunities.
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References


CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A Rebellious Philosophy
Born in East LA

Gerald P. López

For nearly three decades, I have been among those promoting an idea of progressive law practice that complements, meshes with, and, at its best, serves as one shining example of my rebellious philosophy. And the Center for Community Problem Solving at New York University, which I launched in September 2003 and which I direct, puts into action a brand of effective and accountable problem solving that aims to earn each day and over time the label rebellious.1 We at the center work with many diverse people and institutions addressing a diverse slate of social, economic, and legal challenges. But perhaps no aspect of our work portfolio more vividly demonstrates how my earliest childhood experiences shape our current vision of practice than our center’s campaign to keep people out of the criminal justice system – everyone from youth we hope never get entangled to those with criminal records we hope never again see the inside of a prison or a jail.

Our campaign can be understood as our center’s opposition to and my career-long battle against the “modern war on crime.” Through a set of almost unimaginably irrational, mean-spirited, and ultimately dysfunctional policies and practices, this nation’s war on crime closely monitors vulgarly “profiled” individuals and groups, hassles them whenever possible, arrests them often without legal justification and for concocted reasons, prosecutes them perhaps as often to immunize frontline law enforcement officials as to enforce any law, sentences them for far too long, and locks them up in often utterly inhumane settings.

For decades now, we have done our best to hide from the price we pay for our policies and practices. We have long avoided spelling out and debating the extraordinary financial costs of long-term institutionalization. And we have long evaded making explicit and preparing for the complex consequences of imprisonment: “If we really believe these men and women were hard going in, what the hell do we think they’re going to be like coming out of prisons and jails?” We only rarely prepare inmates, families, and communities – either while people are locked up or when they get released – for the challenges of reentering the “outside world.” Then we hold those with criminal records to standards
everyone else need not meet (or at least can fail to meet without facing dramatic consequences). The message rings out: “You’d better somehow make it, even without support, because we’ll be watching your every move and, if you slip, you’re going right back to where we think you belong.” Now that’s nasty, no matter where you call home.

Much as I regard myself and our center as opposed to this war on crime, I feel bewildered and bothered when I hear this war described as new. It’s not that I don’t grasp the magnitude of the current crisis. It’s not that I don’t understand what’s both intriguing and maddening about ways in which we inflict and acquiesce in this ugliness. What makes me uneasy and dismayed is that this war on crime is not new. At least it’s not new if you’re talking about places like East Los Angeles. Let’s set the record straight: this nation has been waging a war on low-income, of color, and immigrant communities as far back as I can remember and farther back still. Make no mistake about how much what we’re now seeing perpetuates and extends policies and practices long part of life in the United States.

When I was a kid growing up in East LA in the 1950s and 1960s, we never knew a world where law enforcement was not in our face. I’m not talking sometimes in our face. I’m talking each and every day. Maybe you had to live in places like East LA and Watts and Compton and Pacoima to know just how much – for absolutely no justifiable legal reason – the LA Sheriffs, the Los Angeles Police Department, and the California Highway Patrol routinely rousted us, nastily provoked us, and calculatingly aimed in every way imaginable to get us into the criminal justice system. They thought law enforcement meant relentlessly monitoring and messing with everyone who lived in LA’s already economically and culturally marginalized communities. The actions of law enforcement officials – and the policies and practices of which they were a part – affected every family I knew. And my own family suffered life-long consequences.

I lived in a large household of parents, children, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Most of those who lived with us came up from Mexico, many initially coming without papers, some quickly getting legal permission to work for a while, some ultimately becoming proud US citizens. Over the years, everyone living with us felt the ugly provocation and real danger of having to deal with LA’s law enforcement officers. Not least among these family members who got ensnared in the criminal justice system was my brother – ten years older, a parental figure, a heroin addict by his mid-teens, an angry pachuco. By 18 he found himself locked up, beginning a cycle through various penitentiaries, including Folsom, San Quentin, and Soledad.

Rarely accepting the mockingly cruel treatment of prison guards and officials, my brother grew intimately familiar with solitary confinement. And, more than he now wishes were true, he had far too much to do with the founding of California’s earliest prison gangs, which over time spawned more prison gangs, which generated from all quarters mindless violence beyond the imagination of those of us who have never done time. All along, he had very little help trying to understand why he could barely read and write, why he was strung out on
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heroin, or why he could find a trustworthy second home only through gangs on the street and gangs in the joint.

Back home in East LA, we tried desperately to figure out how to cope. Baffled by what had happened to our son, our brother, our grandson, our father, our uncle, our cousin, we had no idea how to think about – and literally no vocabulary for talking about – his dyslexia, his addiction, his gang involvement. We found ourselves telling stories of how my brother was off caring for horses in Arizona, picking fruit in California’s Central Valley, driving rigs across country (all of which at some point he in fact did). We kept up the front even though we came soon to realize his “exploits” on the street and in the joint were an open “neighborhood secret.” We couldn’t find anyone with conventional clout (any government official, any private actor, any civic organization) to help us – any more than my brother could find somebody to help him.

The little support we did receive came principally from the tiny cluster of friends and family with whom we talked about our not-so-secret secret and from the folks that we would meet while my mom and I waited to board the buses that would take us on those long trips for those short visits authorities permitted us to have with my brother. Waiting on those somber lines, we would see people from the other parts of LA – people from neighborhoods like Compton, South Central, Japantown, Chinatown, San Pedro, Wilmington – on which the war on crime had been long waged, and people for whom these bus rides meant getting to see their imprisoned fathers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, and children. In our often silent and wary ways, we regarded one another as both strangers and relatives.

What smacked me hard during those early years was the criminal justice system’s absolute disregard for what we knew. No one in the system ever asked either my brother or other people in the joint or my mother and father or other family members back home what we were facing, what problems we would frame, what help, if any, we received in addressing our problems, and what we thought of our capacity with and through others to do anything to change either my brother’s situation or our own. Not one single person ever asked. Even as a wild, sports-crazy, and not-much-reflective kid, I still said to myself, “How in God’s name can they be running a system where the last thing they ever think of doing is asking the people most directly affected, ‘What do you think and how can we make it better?’” You didn’t have to believe we had all the answers. We certainly didn’t think we did. But couldn’t you imagine we had something important to share if anyone indeed cared about effectively solving a range of problems obviously implicated?

I realize that there were people all over Los Angeles and all across the country who never were consulted about what they knew and what they thought. In the reigning vision of democracy, we govern ourselves through experts who ask questions only to confirm what they already have decided to do, often only to hang on to their power. But let’s not conflate the reasons many others are not consulted with the reasons no one made inquiries of my brother and my family. When officials didn’t ask us folks from East LA, it was principally because they
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could not imagine that we had anything worth saying. For generations we had been perceived and described as genetically and culturally inferior. We were dumb and lazy Mexicans, messed-up and needy “wetbacks,” cross-bred and inter-bred mongrels. We could fill certain lower-echelon economic and social roles. But in the stock account that had taken cultural and cognitive hold over the Southwest and probably the entire United States, we Mexicanos and Chicanos couldn’t possibly have within us anything valuable to offer about how best to solve problems or to govern our shared world.

Even at an early age, I knew enough to say, “Hell no!” I tried with all my might to think through why I felt so repulsed by what seemed to be the reigning approach about how to live and work. Why exactly did I find so unacceptably appalling how we seemed principally to shape our democratic institutions and the problem-solving practices at the heart of our everyday routines and our future trajectories? And, at the same time, I tried to piece together my own contrasting “philosophy.” Could I develop a way of thinking and acting that could guide me across contexts to telling cultural and cognitive details, that could embrace the lessons of experience and the insights of imagination, and that could both appreciate and challenge life as we know it in pursuit of a future we might currently be able only to prefigure?

Back then I didn’t know how to pull apart the reigning scheme, to identify all the relevant elements, to see how together they could come to feel seamless, natural, and even inescapable. I didn’t even know the word “philosophy,” in English, in Spanish, or in the street versions of both through which I so often expressed myself. But youthful energy propelled me forward. And, with the help of many people, I learned over time to contrast the reigning approach with my own rebellious vision of how, through our institutions and through our practices, we can and should shape our lives and choose our vocations in ways both personally rewarding and collectively valuable.

In the reigning approach to organizational and human behavior, experts rule. These experts collaborate principally and often exclusively with one another (and with support staff paid to enhance their expertise). In framing problems and choices, identifying and implementing worthy strategies, and deciding how much and whose feedback qualifies as necessary for effective monitoring and evaluation, these experts issue top-down mandates with which subordinates typically comply (through a wide range of intermediaries) in order to be rewarded for doing their job. This approach and those who operate within its sway show too little interest in regularly adapting aims and means to what unfolding events and relationships reveal; too little curiosity about the institutional dynamics through which routines and habits form; too little time discovering how well strategies work for everyone affected by its reign; and too little belief in our individual and collective capacity to shape a future that does not acquiesce in the limits of today’s world.

The rebellious vision challenges the reigning approach along virtually every dimension. The rebellious vision depends upon networks of co-eminent institutions
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and individuals. These co-eminent collaborators routinely engage and learn from one another and all other pragmatic practitioners (bottom-up, top-down, and in every which direction at once). They demonstrate a profound commitment, time and again, to revising provisional goals and methods for achieving them; to searching for how better to realize institutional and individual aspirations; to monitoring and evaluating from diverse perspectives what’s working and what’s not; and to picturing future possibilities that extend beyond (even as they take cues from) past events and current arrangements.

The great gap between the problem solving championed by the rebellious vision and that nurtured by the reigning approach can be described as revolving around knowledge: Which institutions and which groups of people do we regard as “expert” sources of valuable knowledge? Which institutions and which groups of people do we believe need to be “in the loop” about information? To what degree and to what ends do our institutional and individual practices actively seek out new and evolving information about what we face and what we do? To what degree and to what ends do our practices – institutional and individual – put to use what we learn? Contrasting answers offered by the rebellious vision and the reigning approach can be discerned in the practices of diverse specialists (including the lawyers and others who serve low-income, of color, and immigrant communities). And they can be detected in the workings of democratic politics, market economies, and civil societies, and in the ideologies and routines of those who directly shape and comment upon these spheres.

This great gap between problem-solving methods parallels the contrast between the rebellious vision’s and the reigning approach’s vying ideas of how we should live. Must we accept what we’re now living as our only option? Or can we regard what we’re now experiencing as endlessly unfinished, not just in its details but in the very contexts that seemingly define our choices? Must we settle for wildly less than we dream in building our relationships, our institutional capacity, and our democratic communities? Must we deride our own ideas of a better life with labels like “naïve” and “adolescent”? Once again, contrasting answers offered by the rebellious vision and the reigning approach can be perceived across institutional and personal realms, in minute particulars about a life well led and in large statements about our collective mission.

When I launched the Center for Community Problem Solving in September 2003, we decided that our mission would draw upon and reach beyond the work I’d been doing with others throughout my career. The center would team up with low-income, of color, and immigrant communities to solve current legal, social, economic, health, and political problems and to improve our capacity to solve such problems. Along the way, we would strive towards our dream of an accountable and equitable democracy – one where equal citizenship is a concrete everyday reality, not just a vague constitutional promise.

To meet these bold aspirations, the center puts into action our comprehensive and innovative “rebellious vision of problem solving.” Through this vision, we meld street savvy, technical sophistication, and collective ingenuity into a
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compelling practical force. The power of our rebellious vision lies in extraordinary teamwork – teamwork in fact and not in name only. The center never works alone. We regularly work with problem solvers of all sorts – including residents, merchants, ministers, organizers, researchers, funders, service providers, artists, teachers, corporate executives, journalists, public officials, doctors, lawyers, bankers, religious leaders, and policymakers. Only by routinely partnering with absolutely anyone who might in any imaginable way contribute can we get to where together we hope to go in the future.

Our vision of community problem solving unites certain key fundamentals:

1 We collaborate with those who live and work in low-income, of color, and immigrant communities. We seek out and share knowledge about existing problems, available resources, and useful strategies.
2 Drawing upon this knowledge, we connect those who face problems with those in public, private, and civic realms who help address them. We build networks of valuable know-how among diverse problem solvers and help shape and meet common goals.
3 Where problems remain unaddressed even after making such connections, we help fill those voids by scavenging around for resources (in NYC, across the US, across the globe). We leverage what’s available with what may never have been tried, taking on apparently insoluble problems through everything from one-time trouble-shooting squads to more permanent full-fledged partnerships.
4 All the while, we vigilantly monitor how strategies get implemented and candidly evaluate what works and what doesn’t. Together with others, we develop and enforce standards by which to measure effectiveness, raising those standards as we increase our collective problem-solving power.
5 By sharing widely and regularly all that can be learned through formal research and informal exchange, the center aims to improve our problem-solving capacity. We work to convince all involved (individuals, offices, organizations, institutions, coalitions, and networks) that we can and must always get better at together meeting head-on life’s evolving challenges.

For the past three decades, I have insisted that we need sophisticated and manageable methods for assessing both the problems faced by and resources available to low-income, of color, and immigrant communities. The legal and non-legal offices, organizations, coalitions, and networks that serve these communities must learn – at least if we are to do our job as well as we should – to document and analyze what problems clients face and, simultaneously, what help they together might find to address these problems. Such research is anything but “academic” or “one shot” or a “luxury.” In our view, studies of this sort must become part of “business as usual” and united with street delivery of services.

Since 1999, in partnership with the Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies (CUES), I have led a multidisciplinary team in conducting the Neighborhood
Legal Needs & Resources Project (NLN&RP) – a sweeping study in Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, and English of problems and resources in Harlem, East Harlem, Chinatown, the Lower East Side, Bushwick, and Bedford-Stuyvesant. Relying principally on a sophisticated telephone survey of 2,000 residents and intensive in-person interviews of more than 1,000 service providers, we have the following aims:

Phase 1  Information gathering: collect comprehensive information about problems residents face, where they go for help, and how they regard the help they get.

Phase 2  Data analysis: analyze the rich data residents and service providers have collaborated with us to generate.

Phase 3  Information sharing: team up with those who live and work in these neighborhoods and with a wide assortment of others to share, put to use, and mobilize around what we have learned.

Phase 4  Distribution of tool kit and guide: make available what we learn and how we learned it to those in New York City, across the country, and in international circles interested in studies such as the NLN&RP and its critical role in developing effective problem-solving systems.

In June 2003, we completed our telephone survey of 2,000 residents. Already we have learned extraordinary amounts from these interviews. We’re now in the midst of running qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data collected through our surveys with residents and service providers. At the same time, we continue our march to complete the outreach side of Phase 1, combining intense background research and a daily slate of outreach interviews to close in on our goals.

Meanwhile, we keep drawing on everyone – from residents to hip hop artists to ad executives – about how best to share and organize around what we have learned. Ultimately, through a variety of formats and languages, we will share the information gathered to inform and galvanize the many constituencies implicated in the quality of problem solving in New York City’s low-income, of color, and immigrant communities. And we shall make widely available the NLN&RP plan and instruments and further explore its potential for improving everyday and long-term problem solving.

Our partners at CUES are the first to say they could continue to crunch the data we’ve gathered for years to come. But already we’ve learned tons. And what we’ve learned from the communities who have so generously shared with us their experiences and know-how already has begun to shape our current work agenda. Here is only a sample of our efforts to keep people out of the criminal justice system.

The Reentry Project aims to help people with criminal records deal with a range of problems, to shape reentry policies and practices, and to improve available services. We develop community education programs, cultivate consortiums
A Rebellious Philosophy Born in East LA

of service providers, and implement empirical studies of what works and what
doesn’t in reentry.  

The Reentry Orientation Program connects people coming out of prisons and
jails with available resources. Our workshops and guides cover everything from
applying for identification and benefits to getting shelter and food, to finding
affordable housing to accessing education and jobs, to managing family and
childcare issues to meeting health needs.

The Keeping Our Kids Out of the Criminal Justice System Campaign aspires
to prevent our young people from getting entangled in the criminal justice system.
Teaming up with teachers, families, and everyone willing to pitch in, we help
youth make wise choices, reform our educational and juvenile systems, and raise
awareness about incarceration and its alternatives.

The Campaign to Hire People with Criminal Records makes the case for why
we all benefit from recruiting, hiring, and promoting people with criminal records.
Collaborating with everyone from employers to public officials to the general
public, we work to increase dramatically our clients’ employment opportunities
and social mobility.

The Consumer Surveys of Problem-Solving Resources insist that we must
have the equivalent of a “Zagat Survey” of resources available to low-income, of
color, and immigrant communities. We have developed and will soon implement
consumer surveys – beginning with people with criminal records – to allow diverse
client populations to share their opinions of those to whom they turn for help.

The Streetwise About Money Campaign helps our client communities manage
their money as wisely as possible. We share knowledge and build skills about
how to sort through bank accounts, credit cards, payday lending, check-cashing,
credit counselors, and pawnshops, principally through financial education drives,
workshops, manuals, and reform efforts.

The Fair & Just Workplace Campaign, in coordination with the New York State
Attorney General’s Office, reaches out to low-wage workers, employers, and the
public. Through workshops, written materials, public opinion drives, and lawsuits,
we work to enforce minimum wage, overtime, and healthy workplace laws.

The Public Health Project teams up with low-income, of color, and immigrant
communities to better understand health problems, access care, and shape both
service and research. We conduct community-based participant-informed research,
disseminate findings in accessible formats, and design interventions and mobilize
communities based on what we learn.

My mom died January 24, 2004. For about the last ten years of her life,
she suffered dementia’s awful wounds. At the beginning, she simply couldn’t
remember some of what she had lived. In some ways, that might have been a
blessing. But in an oddly serendipitous and spiritually meaningful coincidence,
at roughly the same time my mother began living with this illness, my brother
moved back into my mom’s small apartment. He returned for the same reason he
always had returned: he was a junkie and he was in a jam and he was hiding and
he knew my mom would put him up.
In the first few years, he and I cleaned up his legal messes and got him help in trying, once again, to stay off the junk. As always, his situation proved precarious. And on a daily basis he felt the impulse to hit the streets and hustle—who knows what exactly, but a fix if nothing else. But my mom was going downhill fast. My brother knew he couldn’t both hit the streets regularly and take care of my mom in a way he felt she deserved. So, he stayed home, trying yet again to learn to live in ways now nearly foreign to him.

Near the end, the dementia had ravaged my mom. But now and then, she would suddenly emerge lucid. During those moments, most frequently of all, she would ask me, “How are we going to get your brother a job so he can live out a good life?” Now you could say she was just being a great mother, a great mother to a 64-year-old man, a life-long junkie, one of the hardest people you could ever meet. And you’d be right: she was a great mother—in fact, she was the perfect mom for me.

But my mom was passing along a message that anchored and propelled her entire life: not only should my brother not give up, but neither should we and neither should anybody else. Rather, in her exceedingly radical and practical way, she was insisting we should all think in very concrete terms: “What’s the next step in actually trying to live out what we dream for ourselves, for our families and friends, and for the world we aim to make fundamentally a better place?”

Since my mom’s death, my brother has been very sick. At first, he contracted a serious infection from sources unknown, then he endured severe complications from diabetes, then he suddenly began throwing up pints of blood from what turned out to be four previously undiagnosed bleeding ulcers. At this point, he’s dealing at once with all sorts of serious health problems. Still, at least when gently coaxed, he’ll ask me, “Should I stay in LA or should I go back to Arizona?”

When I first heard that question, for a moment I thought, “What does he mean?” Then when I heard him ask the question repeatedly, often with follow-ups, it finally dawned on me. My God, my brother’s following my mom’s lead. He’s proclaiming: “I want to see if maybe I can do something with the rest of my life, maybe work with the other Chicanos and Mexicanos taking care of horses in Arizona, certainly not just play out my hand without having learned a damn thing or without having tried. I want to put it all on the line, see if I’ve got what it takes, see how I can live as a full-grown adult, and see if I can make at least some what I dream come true.”

Is that some crazy utopian claim? I don’t think so. In fact, for me it’s anything but. The absolutely grounded conviction that my mom lived by all her life and that my brother still clings to is that we can and must strive for something better, knowing that there have been moments of “something better” in the past, and that there can be such moments again in the future. And they both seem to be saying that if we can learn to be any good at working together, we can lengthen these moments. And as we do so, we can change along the way both how we think about our living together and how we think about our solving problems together (including through our professional lawyering).
A Rebellious Philosophy Born in East LA

Yes, the rebellious conviction that drove my mom and still drives my brother is ambitious. Perhaps it’s even against the odds. But how do we know what we can individually and collectively accomplish unless, against the reigning approach to how to live and work, we act as if our dreams can come true? Join my mom and my brother. Join millions of people all across the globe. Reject absolutely the “common sense” and “mature” notion that what we’re now living marks the limits of what’s possible. Imagine we can with others shape our lives, our problem solving, and the futures we dare to dream.

Notes

1 See www.communityproblemsolving.org.
2 See chapters 1, 4, this volume.
4 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/about.html.
5 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/neighborhood/.
Gerald P. López

6 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/reentry/.
7 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/reentry/program.html.
8 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/reentry/
9 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/reentry/
10 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/consumer/
11 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/streetwise/
12 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/fairjust/
13 See www.communityproblemsolving.org/projects/publichealth/
Latinas/os at the Threshold of the Information Age: Telecommunications Challenges and Opportunities

Jorge Reina Schement

The Dávillas had a telephone. So, when we got a phone call, they would send their kids to the fence, and the kids would call and tell us we had a phone call. And, my mother and father had to go all the way to the front of the house, to the front of the yard, and we had to go around the fence. But I was little, so I could – I still remember, they’d get a phone call and they’d all start running to get the phone, and I would just go under the fence.

Frank Rodríguez

Frank Rodríguez lived in Los Angeles, California, during the 1950s. The lack of a phone in his and many other Latina/o households reflected their place on the margins of Los Angeles’ social structure. With few exceptions, they lacked representation among the public office holders who represented them, the medical and legal professionals who served them, the police who kept order among them, the clergy who ministered to them, and the teachers who educated their children. English-language media rarely acknowledged their existence; and, when they did, the focus revolved around crimes and arrests. Anglos grew up with little knowledge of those Latinas/os living among them. From Los Angeles to New York, Latinas/os as people, as cultures, as language, remained invisible to mainstream America.

But now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Latinas/os have become a presence that cannot be ignored. Between 2000 and 2003, the Latina/o population of the US grew from 35,306,000 to 39,899,000, an astonishing increase of 12 percent when compared to a total US population increase of 3 percent. By 2003, Latinas/os comprised significant percentages of the populations of Arizona
Table 23.1   Hispanic population as a percent of total US population: 1980–2050 (projected for 2025 and 2050)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hispanic origin as percent of total population</th>
<th>Total US population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>227,726,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>284,710,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>281,422,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2025</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>337,815,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2050</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>403,687,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(28 percent); Colorado (19 percent); Connecticut (11 percent); Florida (19 percent); Idaho (9 percent); Illinois (14 percent); Kansas (8 percent); Massachusetts (8 percent); Nevada (22 percent); New Jersey (15 percent); New Mexico (43 percent); New York (16 percent); Oregon (10 percent); Rhode Island (10 percent); Texas (35 percent); Utah (10 percent); Washington (9 percent); Wyoming (8 percent). In the third quarter of 2001, Latina/o babies accounted for 50.2 percent of all births in the state of California, where Latinas/os comprise 35 percent of the population. In these statistics, one sees the dynamic make-up of America in the twenty-first century (not surprisingly, José ranks first among names for boys in California). For, through a combination of immigration and high birth rates, Latinas/os have outpaced the population as a whole, and will increase as a percentage of the total population well into the century (see table 23.1).

As a result, the twenty-first century population of the United States will differ markedly from the population encountered by adult Americans living today. Whereas, today, whites comprise roughly three fourths of the total population, they will comprise less than two thirds in 2025, and even less into the second half of the century. Still, two thirds will not make whites a national minority, contrary to alarms raised by some race-baiting politicians. More likely, the social terrain will change unevenly. Urban areas will undergo the greatest changes, since African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics are already urban populations (see figures 23.1, 23.2); while, in the countryside, the rural populations of many states will be overwhelmingly white. It is against this backdrop that Latinas/os will carve out a share of the information society.

Latinas/os and Telecommunications Policy

At the very moment in history when Latinas/os attain the title “largest minority,” they arrive in an economy and society defined by an overarching asset—information—and a dominating medium for its delivery—telecommunications. In the
Latinas/os at the Information Age

Figure 23.1  Selected ethnic population for Los Angeles, CA 1992 and 2020

Figure 23.2  Selected ethnic population for New York, NY, 1992 and 2020

Jorge Reina Schement

twenty-first century, telecommunications will serve as the primary pathway to economic participation, political participation, and social participation – the three avenues to equality in American society. For Latinas/os, however, that pathway may not stretch clear and straight.

Information age rewards come to those capable of gaining access to the production and distribution of information; consequently, if they are to benefit, Latinas/os must engage in the public policy discourses that drive telecommunications; first, by identifying specific policy debates, then, by joining them as a new voice. However, these debates ebb and flow across corporations, state and federal agencies, the courts, the White House, and foreign governments – raising the question, which policy debates should be addressed? Of the many public discourses, several pertain most directly to the needs and rights of Latinas/os as individuals and as an information age community. Indeed, an agenda is on the table. What follows are overviews of the discourses reflected in the telecommunications policy agenda currently debated and promoted by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC).

Universal Service

From the time of the ratification of the Constitution, access to information as well as to the means of communicating has been recognized as the necessary condition for participating in any democracy dedicated to the promotion of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The First Amendment opens the door to participation by establishing prohibitions against laws limiting a free press, freedom of association, and free speech; thus, access to information, and the means of communicating it, forms the essential foundation for a society grounded in civic discourse.

In telecommunications the operationalization of access throughout the twentieth century meant a policy known as Universal Service, aiming to place a telephone in every home. In fact, that goal, to integrate the nation through an uninterrupted series of telecommunications networks, exposes the calculus of the information age. Policymakers find justification for the goal of “one nation, one network” in the theory of network externalities: that is, the benefit to anyone subscribing to a network increases as others join the network; the greater the number of households or individuals on the network, the more people with whom to connect; and, therefore, the greater the economic, political, and social value of the network to everyone. Clearly, a nation where everyone can connect to everyone else gains from their contributions.

The Communications Act of 1934 set the goal and technology of Universal Service as the availability, “to all of the people of the United States a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service with adequate facilities at reasonable charges,” meaning a telephone in every home.
but only 31 percent of households had telephones.\textsuperscript{13} Clearly, something had to be done, and Universal Service policy was the answer. Nevertheless, 125 years after its invention, telephone service remains out of reach for 7 million households, many of them Latinas/os, who, along with African Americans, consistently fall below Anglos in telephone accessibility.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, as long as so many Americans lack telephone service, Universal Service policy, though hardly a failure, does not qualify as a success.

Instead, the challenge looms both bright and dark on the horizon. New technologies have rendered plain old telephone service (POTS) obsolete.\textsuperscript{15} At the same time, continuous waves of new technologies arriving in bewildering combinations overwhelm the traditional vision of Universal Service as “one nation, one network.” If the goal of Universal Service is to remain part of the vision of the information age, then we must confront the modern adaptation of the question addressed by the writers of the 1934 Act; that is, what combination of these new technologies should be reasonably available “to all of the people of the United States” in order to assure full participation in an information age democracy? That modern adaptation, clearly, is the Internet, and access to it should form the core of any new conceptualization of Universal Service. Yet, this one commitment contributes no clarity of purpose: should there be a standard bandwidth; should there be universal household access to the Internet; should libraries receive special support; who bears responsibility for expanding the necessary infrastructure; should poor people receive subsidies for Internet access; and, most importantly, what should be the standard? For example, in an upper-middle class household, each member is likely to possess a personal television, telephone(s), recording device(s), and computer. The computers may be connected to a wireless local area network (LAN) as the entry point to a broadband connection serving both the household’s televisions and computers, while each member goes out into the public sphere armed with a cell phone and an iPod. Moreover, to maintain this standard, the household spends hundreds of dollars per month on hardware, software, updates, and services. As a result, the more complex the combination of technologies necessary to fully access the network, the higher the price of access, and thus the more likely some will be left out – which, for now, means many Latinas/os. In effect, American homes vary tremendously in their chosen technology package, making it hard to select one obvious standard.

On the other hand, Section 254 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the successor to the 1934 Act, defines Universal Service as an evolving concept and thus represents a clear break from the Communications Act of 1934 with its fixation on POTS. And since Universal Service constitutes the policy foundation for access, reimagining it as a malleable concept opens the door to new possibilities. The timing is good. With Latinas/os reexamining their place in the information society, a flexible universal service policy should prove advantageous. Granted, Universal Service is a hard concept to get one’s hands around. Unlike immigration, crime, education, housing, or healthcare, telecommunications policy – and Universal Service in particular – turns on issues that are far more abstract.
Consequently, the question of access to the information resources of the information age receives far less attention from Latina/o public policy leaders. Yet, one cannot overstate the importance of access as the basis for a participatory democracy and thriving information economy.

As a policy goal, successful Internet access represents the open door. Even so,Latinas/os continue to lag behind Anglos and African Americans when it comes to ownership of computers or subscription to broadband, telephone, and Internet services (see tables 23.2 and 23.3); though, when Latinas/os access these services they consume them every bit as eagerly as do other groups. Unquestionably, without access to the Internet and the new telecommunications infrastructure, Latinas/os will suffer political, economic, and social isolation in the information age; conversely, the realization of access brings opportunities. If mastery of the Internet can help Latinas/os participate in democratic discourse, become better consumers, compete in labor markets, and further business goals, then the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should include Internet access within its definition of Universal Service; otherwise, wealth alone will determine who participates. If Latinas/os want their interests represented, they will have to enter this discourse as active participants. Growing population numbers will not by themselves produce positive policy results. The lesson for Latinas/os: we will build better communities if we integrate Universal Service issues, like Internet access, within broader policy discussions. In other words, bringing policy issues such as immigration, crime, education, housing, and healthcare into the information age requires consideration of the information and technology needs of Latina/o households, families, and communities.

Table 23.2 Household computer penetration as percent: 1998–2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All US households</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 23.3 Household Internet penetration as percent: 1998–2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All US households</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Digital Literacy

The promise of Internet access falls short if Latinas/os lack the skills to make the most of it. Consequently, for Latinas/os, education, broadly defined, is the killer application of the information age. Yet, if history predicts, education will also pose the greatest challenge. Between 1970 and 2000, Americans as a whole increased the percentage of high school graduates from 62.3 percent to 84.1 percent of the adult population. During that same period, minorities lagged behind whites, but the experience of Latinas/os reflects the dimension of the challenge (see table 23.4). In 1970, blacks and Hispanics reflected their second-class status with less than a third in each group having graduated from high school. By 2000, blacks were closing in on whites (78 percent/84 percent), but Hispanics (57 percent) lagged farther behind whites in 2000 than they did in 1970 (1970: 22.4 percent spread; 2000: 27.9 percent spread). To be sure, Latinas/os have made progress, but since the fruits of education are relative, that “progress” translates into a net loss. So, as we enter the information age, Latinas/os find themselves short of the central asset of our time – education.

The more complex the information economy, the more job success depends on skills that many Latinas/os lack – the skills necessary to utilize available information technologies effectively. And, as the information age unfolds, lack of computer-related skills further widens the gap between those able to compete and those left behind. In a job market where corporations fall short of their needs for skilled labor, American business imports expertise from abroad while Latina/o parents watch as their own children drop out and fall into dead-end jobs. In fact, failure to acquire the skills of digital literacy punishes Latinas/os twice. They are bypassed by a rapidly evolving economy, and lack the new skills necessary for democratic participation in an information age democracy where information technologies and media determine voice and visibility. This body of skills encompassing applications of information technologies, as well as techniques for seeking and evaluating information, is generally referred to as digital literacy.17 And because it opens the door to a future that will be highly technological, Latinas/os at all levels should endorse digital literacy programs for both schools

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Table 23.4  High school graduate rates by race and Hispanic origin as a percentage of the adult population: 1970–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>50.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and adult education. Policy recommendations aimed at improving the educational opportunities of Latina/o children should include proposals for digital literacy programs as part of the full curricula of public schools beginning in the early grades, because it is in the schools where Latina/o children will have the opportunity to catch up with those who access the Internet at home. Anecdotally, as I observe the households of my professional colleagues, I see that they most often contain about one computer per person, with local wireless networks becoming ever more common. Children in these households receive their own computers in grade school. If Latina/o children are to stay apace, they will have to learn digital literacy early in their school experience. That said, Latinas/os should also take note of the importance of life-long learning for themselves as adults; in particular, by exploring the potential of the public library as an institution for teaching digital literacy. For those unable to continue schooling, the public library stands as democracy’s best hope for overcoming marginalization. Will Latinas/os meet the challenge of education? Simply put, they must.

**Commerce**

When the courts broke up AT&T’s monopoly over American telecommunications some twenty years ago, the FCC declared the dawn of an era of free and open competition. Yet, today, of the 1.2 million Latina/o-owned businesses, so few form part of the information–telecommunications industries that the Census does not even collect them as a category. For Latinas/os hoping to strike it rich in the new information age, the dawn arrived cold and rainy.

As telecommunications-centered industries exhibit continued consolidation, those few Latina/o-owned enterprises find it ever more difficult to stay in the game. Yet, Latina/o ownership of businesses is the key to building a stable and long-lasting middle class. Studies show that upwardly mobile Latinas/os entering the industry achieve responsible positions, earlier in their careers, when they work for Latina/o-owned telecommunications/media enterprises. Latina/o-owned businesses represent a socioeconomic catalyst towards the formation of a Latina/o middle class. Thus, ownership opportunities for Latinas/os in the industries that will dominate the twenty-first century economy constitute a determining factor in Latinas/os’ collective future. As a critical path, Latina/o small business ownership deserves the support of everyone, from corporate America to populist community activists, to government at all levels, because it’s good business and good social policy.

Clearly, any comprehensive Latina/o policy agenda should press for ownership opportunities in the industries that will dominate the twenty-first century economy. However, to compete in the market niches of the information economy, Latina/o entrepreneurs need Internet/information technology skills, which are often lacking. Looking forward, Latina/o policymakers should see technological sophistication within Latina/o businesses as community assets in which to
Latinas/os at the Information Age

invest. For example, corporate–small business partnerships can assist in building these human assets and contributing to the future of the Latina/o community. Indeed, beyond pure business alliances, corporate–community partnerships hold a key to bridging the digital divide for all Latinas/os. To be sure, any business-oriented policy agenda should recognize that, for businesses, incentives work best – therefore, any Latina/o policy agenda for business should include the following recommendations:

• Provide incentives to migrate Latina/o businesses online.
• Provide incentives to help Latina/o businesses upgrade their information capabilities, in order to keep them in Latina/o neighborhoods.
• Demand that telecommunications firms provide hookups to high speed fiber lines.
• Provide incentives for small businesses to upgrade their employees’ digital literacy skills.

In other words, since these are the places where most Latinas/os work, business and community merge here.

Community

Barrios of the twenty-first century will stock their bodegas and tortillerias as they always have. Meanwhile, the percentage of Latina/o Internet households will climb and probably come close to Internet adoption levels for Anglo households, though predictions of eventual 100 percent Internet household penetration are almost certainly unrealistic. For the foreseeable future, covering the distance between Internet households and everyone else will remain the responsibility of public institutions in each community; that is, public schools and libraries.

Within this context, the “e-rate” clause within the Universal Service provision of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 opened the door for Latina/o communities to link up to the Internet, by investing in two central community institutions. Through e-rate subsidies, funding can be provided for connectivity in public schools and libraries, which in turn builds community information assets. As of 2002, 99 percent of public schools enjoy high-speed Internet access; while, in those with Internet access, 92 percent placed computers in classrooms. For public libraries as a whole, connectivity looks equally successful: 99 percent connect to the Internet. In urban centers, where most poor Latinas/os concentrate, public libraries with Internet access score 100 percent. In other words, urban Latinas/os without home access can still connect via the local branch of the public library; though, for Latinas/os in small towns, the picture dims. Whereas large municipalities offer universal library access, only 40.2 percent of towns with 10,000 or fewer inhabitants boast a public library. Nor does big-city status necessarily confer access to those without the Internet at home. San Antonio, Texas, after an
intensive program of library branch expansion, now boasts 21 library branches with four more to be built. However, as the eighth largest city in the US, with nearly 1.3 million inhabitants, 60 percent of whom are Latinas/os, each branch (even with the additions) must serve on average 48,000 patrons.\(^{35}\) Even so, the e-rate investment in public schools and libraries has paid off by opening the door to the information age – even if only a little. In particular, Latina/o communities have benefited directly from a bitterly opposed subsidy first proposed by the Clinton White House in 1994, because broadly targeted, federal Universal Service policies can make a difference for the better at the local level.

Nevertheless, it is local institutions such as schools, libraries, public interest media, associations, churches, small businesses, local government, and extended family networks that form the basis of a thriving community. And, of these, local government deserves special consideration when it comes to telecommunications policy. As deregulation proceeds on the national level, local and state governments have begun to step into the vacuum. Increasingly, these lower-level regulatory entities determine the local operating environment for telecommunications service providers. Inasmuch as Latinas/os were all but invisible to national regulatory agencies, they now have an opportunity to work closely with local governments in order to get favorable regulatory results; and, in this arena, Latinas/os excel.

**First Steps into the Information Age**

It is easy, given the abstract nature of telecommunications issues, to overlook the importance of information technology assets as contributors to community development, but to do so would be a mistake. Community leaders must integrate telecommunications policy goals into their distinct agendas. The various elements that make up the political base of any Latina/o community have much in common when it comes to the telecommunications needs of their constituents. After all, universal access policies serve everyone and so enable groups with disparate interests to coalesce around a community-oriented telecommunications agenda. That agenda, regardless of what else it embraces, should contain the following points as its core:

- **Aggressive Universal Service compliance** to insure that the highest number of households have a telephone in service.
- **An Internet access policy** that seeks to maximize the number of homes with reasonably priced Internet service.
- **A commitment to building a high-speed, high-bandwidth fiber infrastructure within the community**, so as to attract small businesses, rather than lose them to areas that offer high-speed fiber.
- **A commitment to a digital literacy curriculum in local public schools at all levels.**
- **Support for building Internet access centers within local public libraries.**
Latinas/os at the Information Age

The mixing of cultures that takes place in the Southwest and southern Florida would amaze Frank Rodríguez’s family in the Los Angeles of the 1950s. Large corporations, if slow to change the make-up of their own senior management, nevertheless mark Latina/o consumers for special attention. Twenty-seven Latinas/os serve in the US Congress, and Anglo candidates for election no longer bypass barrios.26 More Spanish words enter American English every year. And mainstream America now knows that it is also a Hispanic nation. Yet, Latinas/os face serious challenges as they seek full participation in the information age. To ignore the challenges posed in this essay is to enter an information age where Latinas/os occupy the periphery. By taking up these challenges, Latinas/os will create an information age with opportunity for all, and in so doing, transform mainstream America.

Notes

1 Extract from an interview conducted March 19, 1998, in Los Angeles, CA.
2 Throughout this essay, I use the term “Anglo” as it is popularly understood in the Western and Southwestern United States, to identify Americans of non-Hispanic, European descent.
5 See David E. Hayes-Bautista, Paul Hsu, Aidé Pérez, and Miriam Iya Kahramanian, “The Latino Majority Has Emerged: Latinos Comprise More Than 50 Percent of All Births in California,” Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture, Division of General Internal Medicine and Health Services Research, School of Medicine, UCLA (5 February, 2003): “And, perhaps symbolically, the first day of that third quarter when Latino babies became the majority was July 4, 2001.”
9 After beginning with the portentous “When in the Course of human events,” the Declaration of Independence goes on to offer the most succinct description of a democracy ever written: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by
their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”


“. . . to make available, so far as possible, to all people of the united states a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide and world-wide wire and radio communication service with adequate facilities at reasonable charges, for the purpose of the national defense, for the purpose of promoting safety of life and property through the use of wire and radio communication, and for the purpose of securing a more effective execution of this policy by centralizing authority with respect to interstate and foreign commerce in wire and radio communication . . .”: Title I – General Provisions, Section 1 [47 USC 151]. The provision relating to the promotion of safety of life and property was added by “An Act to amend the Communications Act of 1934, etc.” Public Law 97, 75th Congress, approved and effective May 20, 1937, 50 Stat. 89.


If telephone household penetration has failed to reach 100 percent in 125 years, then Internet household penetration is unlikely to do better. The current best estimate holds that household Internet access will top off at around 75 percent for all households. See A. Lenhart et al., *The Ever-Shifting Internet Population: A New Look at Internet Access and the Digital Divide* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2003).

“(6) Access to advanced telecommunications services for schools, healthcare, and libraries—Elementary and secondary schools and classrooms, healthcare providers, and libraries should have access to advanced telecommunications services as described in subsection (h).” PL 73-416, 73rd Cong., 2nd Sess. SEC. 254, Universal Service.


In the 109th Congress (2005–6), 25 Latinos serve as Representatives: Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá (D-PR); Joe Baca (D-43rd-CA); Xavier Becerra (D-31st-CA); Henry Bonilla (R-23rd-TX); Dennis Cardoza (D-18th-CA); Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-21st-FL); Mario Diaz-Balart (R-25th-FL); Charles A. Gonzalez (D-20th-TX); Raul M. Grijalva (D-7th-AZ); Luis Gutiérrez (D-4th-IL); Rubén Hinojosa (D-15th-TX); Robert Menendez (D-13th-NJ); Grace Napolitano (D-38th-CA); Dennis Nunes (R-21st-CA); Solomon P. Ortiz (D-27th-TX); Ed Pastor (D-2nd-AZ); Silvestre Reyes (D-16th-TX); Ciro D. Rodriguez, CHCI Chairman (D-28th-TX); Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-18th-FL); Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-34th-CA); Linda Sanchez (D-39th-CA); Loretta Sanchez (D-47th-CA); José E. Serrano (D-16th-NY); Hilda L. Solis (D-32nd-CA); Nydia Velázquez (D-12th-NY). Two Latinos serve in the Senate: Mel Martinez (R-FL) and Ken Salazar (D-CO).
In this essay I compare and contrast the frameworks that social science researchers select for their analysis of Latina women employed in domestic service. Academics’ approaches to labor and immigration relate to the ongoing debate over explaining the Latino population as an immigrant population – thus focusing on ethnicity, culture, assimilation, and acculturation – rather than racial conceptualizations that identify forms of domination, subordination, and privilege. One approach takes European immigration as the point of comparison; the other centers on the racialized experiences of non-whites, including Blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and American Indians, as their point of comparison. This essay investigates how each of these paradigms affects the theoretical understanding of Mexican American, Mexican, and Latina immigrant women employed as private household workers, nannies, caregivers and maids.

First, I begin my critique with a discussion of two opposing models of domestic service – bridging v. ghetto occupation – each of which corresponds to specific characterizations of the workers employed. Earlier research examined Latinas’ experience in paid care work through the lens of structural discrimination theories of racial inequality using socialist feminist, colonial labor, or labor segmentation theories (Romero 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Ruiz 1987; Solorzano-Torres 1988). Recent research on Latina immigrant women employed in care work has shifted ground to theories of immigration rather than race (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002; Ibarra 1996, 2000; Mattingly 1999a, 1999b; Richardson 1999). Secondly, I provide an overview of the social construction of racialized gender versus gendered cultural differences in framing the interaction between Latina employees and their employers. Thirdly, I will critique the transition away from racialized analysis and towards an ethnic model. Unlike the earlier view, the new assimilation and acculturation paradigm discusses the economic independence from male wage earners and patriarchal families gained through employment (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). However, the analysis of women’s independence...
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often links their experiences to static conceptions of their culture of origin, suggesting a binary choice: either low-wage economic independence or traditional patriarchal domination. I argue that a better approach would be to recognize home culture as fluid and open to change in gender relations, and raising the possibility of political action to change the oppressive working conditions of caregivers in the countries where they find employment.

Bridging Occupation or Ghetto Occupation

The emerging scholarship on the globalization of care work has not clearly articulated the differences (or similarities) to previous historical periods in the US that relied on immigrant and migrant labor to fulfill reproductive labor needs. While women immigrate for various reasons and under specific historical and political circumstances, recent scholars investigating “global care chains” – a term coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2000) – have avoided comparisons with previous periods of heavy employment demands for domestic labor. Extensive research has unearthed the experiences of European immigrant women who were employed as domestic servants in Victorian America (Cott 1977; Dudden 1983); comparisons to earlier forms of the use of immigrant workers for paid reproductive labor have been ignored in the discourse on “global care chains.” This is unfortunate since similar discussions of the migration process and the isolation and long hours of live-in working conditions are found in the research on immigrant European women at the turn of the last century and could greatly inform recent research on Latina immigrants. Comparative research could clarify important questions about the differences and similarities in transitions to other sectors of the economy and the relationship between work histories in domestic service, patriarchy, and family status. Consequently, the claims of a new domestic labor or a different global care chain have not been accompanied by an articulation of specific differences to previous immigration patterns used to fulfill the reproductive labor needs, and have not led to better theory.

Important contributions to labor history arose from the social sciences and were grounded in the experiences of immigrant and native-born white women (Addams 1896; Katzman 1981; Salmon 1972; Sutherland 1981). A second distinct field of study emerged documenting black women’s unpaid reproductive labor under slavery. This field continued to investigate black women’s underpaid toil after emancipation in the South, and later their experiences migrating to the North to eventually dominate the care occupations as white women moved into factories and office work (Clark-Lewis 1994; Fox-Genovese 1988; Rollins 1985; Tucker 1988). Research on European women domestic workers in the US came to be framed by an immigration discourse which emphasized the assimilation process spurred by the cult of domesticity, the impact of home economics on strategies to standardize housework and childcare using scientific and efficiency models, and employees’ ethnic and class differences to employers (Dudden 1983;
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Matthews 1987). Having always maintained Southern homes and cared for white families, assimilation to the cult of domesticity was not the focus of research on African American domestics. Instead, researchers examined how their labor provided the privileges of white womanhood. Black women migrated to the North in search of higher paying live-in positions in domestic service and eventually moved to day work (Clark-Lewis 1994). Social science research on women of color domestic workers in the 1980s and 1990s argued that Japanese American (Glenn 1986), Caribbean (Colen 1986, 1990), and Mexican American women (Romero 1988a, 1988b, 1992) shared a racialized trajectory with black women in the US. These scholars conceptualized the experiences of women of color from a labor and/or race relations framework rather than assimilation to middle-class white culture. Clearly, the researcher’s choice to emphasize race or immigration as central to the experience of Latina domestics either places these workers on a continuum with black women or along the same trajectory as European immigrant women employed as domestics at the turn of the twentieth century.

Transitions in Domestic Service and Workers

The history of domestic service in the US has followed racial hierarchical hiring patterns in the labor force (Martin and Segrave 1985; Romero 1992). Only the most vulnerable workers, excluded from most other occupations, were employed as domestics. Domestic service, primarily live-in positions, was shunned by workers with other employment opportunities. Only the most vulnerable workers in the labor force sought positions as private household workers, nannies, and maids because of poor working conditions, low wages, and the lack of benefits and job security (Katzman 1981). Consequently, when jobs outside domestic service become available to any marginalized group of workers, they quickly choose to leave. European immigrant women dominated the occupation in the North until native-born white women moved out of factory jobs and into clerical positions, opening positions for immigrant women to escape the long hours and poor working conditions of live-in positions. During slavery and after emancipation, black women labored in the households of whites (Fox-Genovese 1988; Rollins 1985). As a consequence of the shortage of domestic workers in the North, black women were recruited and eventually became the majority in the occupation in the North as well (Clark-Lewis 1994; Palmer 1989; Rollins 1985). Domestic service, alongside agricultural work, was a primary source of employment for Mexican American and Mexican immigrant women in the Southwest. However, during recessions, both black and Mexican women were frequently replaced by white women who were unemployed. By the 1980s and 1990s, Caribbean and Latina immigrant (primarily Mexican) women began to dominate the occupation (Romero 1992).

Throughout this history, there have always been regional racial preferences that employers had for the women they imagined were best suited for cleaning,
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childcare, and live-in positions (Glenn 1986). The hierarchy of racialized preferences sorted workers by race and ethnicity, as well as pay scale and better working conditions. Employers’ preferences were also constrained by the economy, including unemployment rates (e.g., the last hired, first fired rule) and immigration flows (Clark-Lewis 1994; Rollins 1985; Romero 2002). During periods of labor shortage, workers were able to negotiate day work instead of live-in conditions, better pay, and limit the hours and work tasks (Glenn 1986). In response to these observed demographic patterns, Lewis Coser (1974), David Chaplin (1978), and Aaron Levenstein (1962) concluded that the Victorian aristocratic servant role and the mistress–maid hierarchical relationship was inconsistent with America’s democratic society. They developed a “changing character” thesis as an explanation for native-born white women’s absence among domestic workers and the overrepresentation of immigrant and black women. Levenstein (1962: 38), for instance, noted the significance of immigration in maintaining a labor pool for domestic service because “the servant class was never native American; even in colonial days domestics came as indentured servants who ultimately moved up to higher status jobs once their service was over.” Coser (1974: 31) asserted that “only persons suffering from marked inferiorities and peculiar stigmas can be induced to enter it.” He further argued that even if wages, benefits, and working conditions were improved, the work would remain stigmatized as servile, and workers would continue to leave at the first opportunity. These social scientists claimed that domestic service was positioned at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy because personal service is inherently degrading.

Social scientists then turned their attention to the declining use of domestic service in middle-class homes and the peculiar gendered racialized workforce in which European immigrant women experienced upward mobility to other occupations, whereas black women and their daughters found their work opportunities limited to domestic service. Framed as an entry level occupation, domestic service came to be praised for providing rural, traditional immigrant women with exposure to the modern world which offered opportunities to learn middle-class values and skills in a protected and supervised environment. In describing domestic service as an “occupational ghetto,” Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1996) captured the lack of intergenerational mobility of women of color in the US. While intergenerational mobility among European immigrant women had previously led theorists to conceptualize domestic service as a “bridging occupation,” even educated black women were relegated to domestic service in order to obtain lodging for schooling or were expected to include domestic work when employed as nurses (Hine 1989).

Sociological studies conducted by women of color feminists in the 1980s changed the paradigm; they rejected immigration, framing the mistress–maid relationship within the Americanization process, or casting domestic service as a path towards assimilation. Instead, they analyzed domestic service as a reflection of national race relations; they argued that the personal subordination embedded
in employee–employer relationships was grounded in race relations (Coley 1981; Dill 1981, 1988; Glenn 1986; Rollins 1985; Romero 1988a, 1988b). This new generation of sociologists noted the perception of domestic work as black women’s work in the South, Mexican women’s work in the Southwest, and Japanese women’s work in California. They exposed how racial preferences were rationalized on the basis of “natural” or “cultural” qualities of specific groups, disguising racial hierarchies under the veil of maternal benevolence. Research on the employment of women of color in domestic service conducted by Cock (1980), Dill (1981, 1988, 1994), Rollins (1985), Glenn (1986), Romero (1992), and Colen (1986, 1990) challenged notions characterizing blacks (in South Africa), African American, Japanese, Mexican American and Mexicans and other immigrant women of color in the US as finding their “natural” or cultural niche in the labor market. Given highly segregated neighborhoods and workplaces, women from different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds rarely share the intimate space of the other. They also recognized domestic service as an ideal setting for investigating larger theoretical issues, including the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. In the household’s intimate space several factors come together simultaneously: gender relations, interracial and interclass interaction, and location with women’s primary unrecognized workplace. Furthermore, the research setting highlighted significant differences among women in the location of the home that had previously been conceptualized by feminists as one that united all women with common experiences (Romero 1992). Rather than analyzing the labor process and employers’ attempts to control the work as an Americanization process, these scholars attended to race relations between employer and employee and/or the dynamics of labor process to uncover levels and types of personal subordination embedded in the work and social interaction.

Socially Constructed Racialized Gender v. Gendered Cultural Differences

In Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2002) introduction to their edited collection Global Women, they describe a link between First and Third World families and argue that global inequalities are producing a division of household labor that forces one mother to leave her children in order to work abroad caring for the children and family of an affluent woman. Rather than simply extracting natural resources from poor countries, the First World’s “care deficit” has led to the extraction of low-wage caretakers as well. Male workers no longer lead the immigration waves; the current trend is a “feminization of migration”; women are now sending the remittance checks home. They shift focus from labor relations to emotional relations. Rather than defining reproductive labor as a scarce resource, Hochschild identified love as a scarce commodity, contrasting the paid love purchased for First World children at the expense of Third World children. Instead of conceptualizing emotional labor as paid
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or unpaid labor extracted from the employee to benefit the employer, recent globalization studies conceptualize "love" as the essential component of the work, particularly among nannies, childcare workers, and nurses.

Several assumptions are embedded within this framework that links this analysis to the ethnic model of the bridging occupation rather than the racial model that characterizes women of color experiences in domestic service as a ghetto occupation. First, cultural differences between employer and employee, as well as differences between immigrant and non-immigrant labor pools, are emphasized to once again identify particular cultural values and norms as increasing the worth of certain ethnic groups over others. Second, the preference for the analysis of agency over structure is more likely to identify individual characteristics that contribute to social mobility. Whereas a structural analysis identifies changes in the market and overall economy that limit or expand opportunities, a focus on individual agency over structural concerns overemphasizes the personal rewards that Latina domestics and caregivers gain from their low-paid jobs. Third, rather than their framing agency in terms of resistance and coping strategies aimed at oppressive working conditions, the global care paradigm emphasizes accommodation.

One of the major changes in recent research on Latina domestics and caregivers is defining the emotional labor involved in domestic service and childcare as "love" or "caring." Moreover, naming emotional labor as love and caring is frequently linked to the worker’s own status as a mother or some perceived cultural propensity towards family, babies, and care work. The paradigm shift from the analysis of paid and unpaid emotional labor to the study of love and care, moves the analysis outside the conceptual framework of labor studies, and diminishes the significant economic inequalities between employer and employee in interpersonal relationships. Even though all forms of emotional labor do not need to be classified as unpaid or exploitative labor, the conditions under which the worker receives monetary or psychological compensation are seldom interrogated.

Attention to the peculiar relationship that women employers and women employees experience over the transfer of work considered "labors of love" from poor to affluent and middle-class families moves the analysis away from the labor process to focus once again solely on the gender dynamics. This is not inevitable. Some recent structural analysis has directly examined immigration (Mattingly 1999a, 1999b) and welfare policy (Chang 1993, 2000) that influence and limit Latina immigrant women’s choices in regional labor markets.

Although many recent studies of Latina immigrant women report verbal and spacial deference similar to previous generations of women of color domestics and nannies, researchers conducting interviews with live-in Latina immigrant women are more likely to argue the positive aspects of personalism in the employer–employee relationship than researchers studying the work experiences of African American, Chicana, and other women of color. For instance, several chapters in Global Women ignore class to focus solely on gendered relationships between women employers and employees. The differences and similarities
between women employers and their immigrant nannies acted out in the intimacy of home and family was emphasized by Susan Cheever (2002) in New York City, while Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (2002) similar description is situated in Los Angeles. Without familiarity with Hondagneu-Sotelo’s earlier (2001) research on the Domestic Workers Association in Los Angeles, the reader may easily conclude that domestic service is simply the configuration of “good” versus “bad” employers or a search for feminist employers. This is a logical conclusion to draw if the US employer–employee study is followed by Bridget Anderson’s (2002: 114) article, which ends with the proposed solution: “Real sisterhood, then, should take concerned women beyond their own homes; it means campaigning and organizing around issues of migration and domestic labor, having as important first demand that domestic work be treated, in the best sense, like just another job.”

Constructing emotional and domestic labor as love and caring also rationalizes the preference for immigrant women based on their traditional, ethnic cultures. This essentializes racialized gendered characteristics. For instance, in her description of Latina immigrant women engaged in care work as personal attendants, Lynn May Rivas (2002) argues that some workers seek invisibility. Based in California, Rivas’s research uncovers the way that immigrants hired as personal attendants for people with disabilities engage in invisible labor to create the illusion that people under their care are independent and self-reliant. Traditionally, the prime example for treating individuals as non-persons or as invisible has been the domestic servant (Goffman 1959; Katzman 1981). Previous researchers interpreted workers’ attempts at and preference for invisibility as a strategy for maintaining their dignity (Dill 1994; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). Without identifying racialized, classed, gendered, and immigrant intersections, “invisibility” becomes constructed as a collaborative process that demonstrates workers’ agency.

Research on women of color employed as private household workers identifies domestic service as an occupation encompassing a wide range of reproductive labor that recent researchers have separated into distinct occupations (e.g., house cleaning, childcare, elder care, etc.). While the distinctions are significant in comprehending domestic service as a continuum of differing work conditions, pay, and participation in the underground economy, many Latina immigrant women interviewed in recent studies report being hired for childcare and expected to do housework and cooking; while women hired to clean house find their employers expect additional chores (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Mattingly 1999a, 1999b). The ability to maintain boundaries identifying the range of tasks is still determined by the degree of vulnerability of worker status (including race, gender, ethnicity, age, citizenship, ability to drive and speak English) and working conditions (i.e., day work versus live-in positions). Without comparisons to the native-born women of color that Latina immigrants have replaced, the changes in the occupation remain vague.

Descriptions of the “new domestic labor” have not been clearly articulated in terms of the labor process or the continuum of work experiences (Ehrenreich and
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Hochschild 2002; Ibarra 2000). The labor process is rarely central to studies centering on immigration and gender. For instance, earlier researchers on Latina immigrant workers compared and contrasted the different ways that reproductive labor was structured to incorporate daily rituals and practices whereby the systems of gender, class, and race domination are reproduced. Thus Judith Rollins’ (1985: 156) study highlighted two functions for employing women of color: “Affording the employers the self-enhancing satisfactions that emanate from having the presence of an inferior and validating the employer’s lifestyle, ideology, and social world, from their familial interrelations to the economically and racially stratified system in which they lie” and their presence “makes the employers’ status clear to neighbors because women of color function better as contrast figures for strengthening employers’ egos and class and racial identities.” Unlike the ethnographic study that Leslie Salzinger (1991) conducted on Central American immigrant women employed as domestics in the Bay Area, recent studies rarely compare and contrast distinct working conditions in order to identify segmentations of the labor process established by employers, agencies, or the labor market that shape employer–employee relationships and the working conditions.

Conclusion

In this essay I identified ways that the new literature on domestic workers in Latina/o studies has repositioned itself in conservative traditional approaches to immigration studies and has moved analysis further away from questions of racial construction, race relations, and racial discrimination in the labor force. While the “new domestic labor” and the “global chain of love” perspectives seek to understand contemporary immigration trends and the globalization of care work, it is ahistorical and fails to examine similarities or differences to European immigrant women in domestic service at the turn of the century. Unfamiliar with the history of domestic service in the US, this recent attention on immigration – rather than racial – status, reproduces and perpetuates myths about social mobility and individual agency evident long ago in theorizing European immigrant women’s experiences in domestic service as a bridging occupation. In place of the individualistic paradigm, I argue for a structural account of the experiences of Latinas employed in reproductive labor within a historical and political context that compares and contrasts immigrant European women with native-born women of color in the US and addresses the intersectionality of race, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and class. Emphasis on social and political structures, including employment, income, dual-career couples, single head of households, and so on, is essential to understanding the cultural construction of care work, the ethics of caregiving, and class-based, racialized and gendered identities. Recent analyses of Latina women based on immigration studies tend to gloss over culture, class, gender, marital status, years of education, age, race, and years of employment to attend only to face-to-face interaction between employees and
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employers, thus constructing a monolithic notion of Mexican/Latina culture and its gendered ethics of care.

Linking contemporary experiences of Latina immigrant women to the historic experiences of European immigrant women and native-born women of color is essential to theorizing domestic service, childcare, and caregiving occupations. Without a structural and historical paradigm, it will be impossible to comprehend how work structure and the social relations embedded in tasks are commonly considered gendered, racialized, and/or immigrant work. Many questions remain unanswered about the future of paid reproductive labor in the US and the ghettoization of Latina immigrant women in domestic service, particularly in positions with the lowest pay and less desirable working conditions. Researchers report that recent Latina immigrants tend to be more educated than previous waves and were more likely to have been skilled workers in their country of origin (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). On the one hand, research suggests that Latina immigrants continue to experience domestic service as a ghetto rather than a bridging occupation. In her study of domestics in Los Angeles, Grace Rosales (2001: 185) found that Latinas did not consider “their lives had either improved or remained unchanged economically.” On the other hand, unlike previous generations of African American or Mexican American women, the daughters of Latinas living in the US do not appear to have their opportunities limited to domestic service. Additional research is required to investigate the plight of daughters that migrate after their mothers or that grow up in the US; are they limited by the low wages and job insecurity of domestic service?

Without analyzing how race matters in the globalized economy, researchers may unknowingly support domestic service as an ideal occupation for America-izing traditional Latina immigrant women to middle-class values. Recognizing the links to previous generations of workers of color assists in coalition building, advocates for all workers’ rights (regardless of citizenship status), strengthens unionizing efforts, and supports immigration, welfare, and labor legislation that impact the lives of Latina immigrant care workers. This latter approach is consistent with LatCrit emphasis on immigration as a central civil rights issue in the twenty-first century (Johnson 2004).

References

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The AIDS crisis provoked an overwhelming response among scholars, activists, and policymakers. Indeed, the epidemic during the 1980s and 1990s raised questions that added urgency to academic work. Scholars from many disciplines put the knowledge they produced at the service of efforts to end the epidemic. Those in disciplines closely tied to the making of policies wrestled with the ethics of scientific research, institutional and government responses, and social mobilization in response to AIDS. Social scientists were also influential commentators on the AIDS crisis, producing knowledge that could be taken up by policymakers and that in some cases called into question conventional wisdom about the epidemic and the populations it affected.

One of the most remarkable features of these years was that cultural critics joined the battle against AIDS. “We don’t need a cultural renaissance,” wrote Douglas Crimp in *AIDS Criticism/Activism* (1988), “we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it” (Crimp 1988: 7). Crimp’s statement points to what was particular about the contributions cultural critics made to the struggle. Much of this scholarship took as given that “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it” (Crimp 1988: 3). The necessary work, then, became getting to know these practices, critically examining them, and gaining some control of them.

With rare exceptions, cultural critiques of representations of AIDS have lost their visibility as the demographics of the epidemic have shifted dramatically towards Latinas/os and African Americans, particularly women. As the numbers of persons infected by HIV/AIDS among Latinas/os in the United States grow, academics committed to documenting and analyzing the daily struggles of these
Nowhere is this need for the perspectives of Latina/o Studies scholars more evident than in critiquing two key concepts in HIV/AIDS research: culture and interdisciplinarity. Paul Farmer’s book *Infections and Inequalities* (1999) is one of the most recent and powerful critiques of the misuses of the concept of culture. Farmer argues that assessing the damage the AIDS epidemic has caused in the US requires understanding social phenomena like having no work or losing one’s home, phenomena which increase the vulnerability of the poor to HIV (Farmer 1999: 77). After giving three ethnographic accounts of the lives of HIV-positive women living in Harlem, India, and Haiti, Farmer suggests that the social and economic marginality these women share is similar to that of many women of “very different psychological profiles and cultural backgrounds” (p. 79). The point is not to blame their sickness on “culture” or “individual will” but, rather, on the workings of “structural violence”: “historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces [that] conspire to constrain individual agency” (p. 79). Responding to AIDS appropriately, he suggests, involves analyzing the “differential political economy of risk” (p. 79).

Farmer’s project is to investigate the ways in which social forces “become embodied as personal risk” (p. 80). The United States, India, and Haiti share steep social inequalities. But these societies also share the use of structural violence to maintain a status quo that is oppressive to the poor. “In the United States, the enormous numbers of African Americans in prisons reflect this violence, as do death squads in Haiti and police brutality in Bombay” (p. 81). Farmer also points to the “symbolic violence” done to the poor by those trying to ameliorate their conditions: social scientists, policymakers, and “opinion shapers” who obscure more than reveal the challenges faced by women struggling against AIDS (p. 82). The “myths and mystifications” promoted by commentators share “an exaggeration of personal agency,” which is accomplished through stressing the importance of the individual culture or psychology (p. 84). Individual experiences must be analyzed within the larger context of social and economic structures that give meaning to the social relations and choices individuals make. Otherwise, the analysis not only misses the larger contours of the historical moment it is trying to capture. It also reproduces views of poor women as a “deviant subculture” (p. 94). Margaret Connors puts it well: “social scientists have rewritten social theory in order to distance themselves from the notion of a culture of poverty only to be found constructing a ‘culture of AIDS’” (Connors, in Farmer et al. 1996: 120).

Although Farmer and others offer a critique of culture within the social sciences that deserves attention (Treichler 1999: 234), this work is useful to a limited extent. Farmer and others are critical of the concept of “culture” developed in developmental psychology and traditional anthropology and sociology. Analyzing Farmer’s work, one becomes aware of the absence of elaborations of “culture”
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in the humanities. Beyond hinting at the “fragmented” nature of the production of knowledge (Treichler 1999: 234), this neglect of the contributions of cultural critics to the study of AIDS points to the limitations of what social scientists call “interdisciplinarity.” Indeed, it reveals that when they say they employ “interdisciplinary” approaches in their research, many social scientists working on AIDS usually mean that they have worked with other social scientists. With the exception of the work of Douglas Crimp, Cindy Patton, and Paula Treichler – whose work is often cited but whose ideas are not developed, applied, or challenged – cultural critiques of science have yet to find a place in AIDS social science research.

Confronted at an AIDS conference with whether or not political work on AIDS must be based on data proved “inadequate” by cultural critics, Treichler writes that a lack of “‘data’ about meaning and representation” must complement the work of social scientists. But if “artists, intellectuals, and cultural theorists” do not even get in the door of forums where knowledge about AIDS is produced and circulated, “no one will be equipped to produce or contribute such knowledge or even recognize it is not there” (Treichler 1999: 234). Doing away with the nature versus culture distinction, which informs critiques like Farmer’s – in which “culture” is imagined as the mantle social scientists have used to obscure “real” social inequality – Treichler points out that “culture” is not a particular realm within the social that is “affected by the AIDS epidemic.” It is wrong to assume that the insight that nature and culture are mutually constitutive means “that nature and reality are fixed, certain, and unyielding while culture and language . . . are up for grabs, purely arbitrary, or accidental” (p. 328).

Raymond Williams suggests that “culture” is to be thought of not as a concept but as a problem, a “historical movement” that has yet to be resolved (Williams 1977: 11). Thinking of culture as process, as unfinished historical movement, involves understanding how our knowledge of AIDS has evolved, the intellectual and political projects it has provoked, “and its symbolic function as a staging ground for both ideological and material struggles” (Treichler 1999: 328). AIDS is a “thing” that circulates in two spaces, one as “real” as the other: on the one hand, there are the cells, blood, and deaths where the “reality” of AIDS is realized; but there is also the “reality” of the existence in “language and discourse,” the spaces from which we come to understand that AIDS is happening in the first place (p. 328). Using language as a “window” through which the “reality” of AIDS can be looked at denies the materiality of how language constructs the very thing we are fighting against (p. 329).

Many social scientists have ignored the attention cultural critics have drawn to how language and “culture” – as processes with their own materiality – constitute the phenomena scientists and advocates fight against. One of the challenges facing intellectuals attempting to contribute to AIDS scholarship will be to encourage AIDS social scientists and advocates to grapple with the contributions cultural criticism makes to AIDS work. Latina/o Studies scholars have the additional challenge of balancing this intellectual formation’s foundational interest in
documenting the lived experiences of Latinas/os in the United States while developing more nuanced analyses of representations of AIDS in these communities. New scholarship may also make significant contributions by working against disciplinary constraints and against the traditional separation of the humanities and social sciences. This means that while social scientists should critically engage cultural critics’ insights and methodologies, cultural critics should also critically engage insights and methodologies produced by social science. The tasks are not easy ones, but attempts to build these bridges not by simply citing people but by actively engaging their ideas are crucial to the development of innovative work in AIDS research, policy, and advocacy.

Many scholars, policymakers, and average citizens of the United States imagine people with AIDS (PWAs) who are immigrants as carriers of disease. The narrative below gives us another way of looking at immigrants living with HIV/AIDS. By offering this case study drawn from my book in progress on Dominican immigrant homosexual men in New York City, I hope to encourage other Latina/o Studies scholars to join the fight against HIV/AIDS in the spirit of Suzanne Oboler’s influential Ethnic Labels, Latina/o Lives (1995): to interrogate the chasms of institutional taxonomies, practices, and discourses and the lived experiences of Latinas/os. This case study also shows the promise of interdisciplinary approaches to HIV/AIDS that are more attentive to culture-as-process.

I knew Arturo “Latoya” Mejía before I began my book project. Mejía moved to New York City for HIV treatment, and his move coincided with the beginnings of my graduate school career. We met the day we began to live in the house of a common friend – “the asylum,” we used to call it – where I rented a room. I had known HIV-positive people before, but I had never lived with a person dealing with this disease on a daily basis. In the process of getting to know Mejía, I began to understand some of what it means to continue living after seroconversion.

A tall, soft-spoken, well-educated, black Dominican living with HIV, Mejía currently travels back and forth between New York and Santo Domingo to see his doctor and to obtain refills for his treatment. I know few people with more zeal to live and to enjoy themselves. Mejía’s gargantuan appetite for food only matches his appetite for sexual adventures and the manic charm with which he tells stories. When I asked him about a recent trip he made to carnival in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, he replied with his idiosyncratic, ribald sense of humor: “I had a great time,” he said, “sweeping semen off the streets.” Mejía’s allure, his refinement, and his wit make him the center of attention wherever he goes. He is a force with which to be reckoned.

However, Mejía was also my most elusive informant. I learned about Mejía’s life through him and the extended network of friends that connects us. Members of this network included the man who hosted him while living in the United States and the men who arranged for his travels. These men are generally middle-class professionals in New York and in the Dominican Republic. Despite appearing to be quite open, Mejía is a very reserved person. He agreed to let me write about his experiences, but my attempts to schedule interviews with
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him during the two years that followed our meeting each other failed miserably. One time he saw me bring out a tape recorder – we were about to start “the interview” – while he spoke to someone on the phone. After hanging up, he looked at me and asked, “Will you fuck me?” Realizing that this was a joke, though I did not quite know where it was going, I replied no. “Well, you won’t fuck me but the man I just hung up with will. So see you later,” and he walked into the bathroom to take a shower. That was the end of that try.

When I did not structure our conversations as “interviews,” I learned the most about Mejía. He was resistant to talking about being HIV-positive with me, while being candid about his life in general.

By the time the interview finally happened, I knew Mejía quite well. There were questions I could ask him that would not have occurred to me before. I realized that my earlier attempts to interview him had been motivated by an interest to understand him not on his own terms but, rather, as belonging to a particular group of people: people with AIDS. To what extent, in looking at Mejía in this way, was I reproducing the epistemological traps of public health and the AIDS research industry, where the thrust of the effort has been to regulate the behavior and “risk” represented by PWAs? Are there ways to think about the survival of PWAs beyond counting viral loads and CD4 cells? Are there ways to understand the life of someone like Mejía without falling into the therapeutic listing of all the good things HIV/AIDS brought him?

What I learned about Mejía’s struggle against HIV reveals both his extraordinary accomplishment and the difficult field within which he pooled resources. After testing positive on his HIV antibody test in 1997, Mejía heard from a doctor that there was little the Dominican health system could do for him. He de, para decidirme a venir a vivir para acá, fue el haber salido positivo en las pruebas del HIV. O sea, me enfermé. Me dió hepatitis. Hepatitis B. Crónica. Allá en Santo Domingo. Y a través de eso, me hacen todas las pruebas, entonces determinan que soy HIV+. Me combaten la hepatitis. Duró un tiempo en tratamiento – bastante caro, por cierto. Me dicen que hay opciones, que ya existe el famoso cóctel, que no me puedo desesperar. Pero que es un poco caro. Calculo por cuánto me sale el tratamiento allá, y veo que me sale en un mes lo que yo gano en un año – lo que es el tratamiento. Y sin la garantía de que los medicamentos lleguen, porque no los venden tampoco. Hay que pedirlos en los laboratorios y que lleguen a través de alguien que se encargue de llevártelos. Entonces, fui hasta España, incluso, a ver porque mi pareja era española – a ver si allá los conseguía y me quedaba por allá. No se pudo. Nada. Tomé la determinación de que Nueva York era la única vía factible para conseguir tanto la medicación y el seguimiento médico.

What made me decide to come live here, was to have tested positive for HIV. In other words, I got sick. I got hepatitis. Hepatitis B. Chronic. There, in the Dominican Republic. And through that, they do all the tests and then they determine that I am HIV-positive. They start treating the hepatitis. I stay
for some time on treatment – very expensive, by the way. They tell me there are options, that there is a famous cocktail and that I shouldn’t become desperate. But it’s a little expensive. I calculate how much treatment costs there and I see that I have to pay in a month what I earn in a year – for the treatment. Without the guarantee that the medicines will get there, because they are not sold there either. You have to order them from the labs and have them get to you through someone in charge of bringing them. I even went to Spain, to see because my partner was Spanish, to see if I could get them there and I could stay there. We couldn’t do it. Nothing. I decided that New York was the only feasible way to get the medicines and the medical follow-up.

Faced with inequalities in the distribution of medications around the world, Mejía did not have much of a choice. People in his situation either figure out a way to access the resources available elsewhere or face possible death.

Mejía contacted friends and used his visitor’s visa to move to New York City, where those friends connected him with an experimental treatment program. After spending a year in the United States, Mejía returned to live with his family in Santo Domingo in late 1998. He currently visits his doctor in New York City roughly every three months.

That first year was not easy. By the first time he saw a doctor, Mejía had lost weight due to the damage caused by Hepatitis B, and he was diagnosed with AIDS after the first set of laboratory tests. Soon after he started taking medications, however, it became apparent that Mejía would recover. His CD4 count shot up and his viral load diminished. Though Mejía spent a few days sleeping or feeling drowsy, his recovery was nothing short of spectacular. The hardest part of living in the US for him was being far from his family and from his job. The work he found while in New York was mainly temporary. His decision to return to Santo Domingo came once he had recovered enough to arrange visiting his doctor a few times per year.

What resources enabled Mejía to survive the AIDS epidemic in the way he has? First, the network of friends Mejía tapped into after finding out about his HIV status was made up of generally light-skinned, middle-class, or upwardly mobile Dominican men who identify as gay, who migrated to New York City from the Dominican Republic as adults, and who work on HIV/AIDS prevention or are aware of what resources are available. Additionally, Mejía’s health may have been in decline at the time he first entered the United States. But his ability to mobilize markers of a middle-class status – evidence of earlier visits to the US and Europe, for example – helped him pass as a “tourist” to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Finally, the condition of Mejía’s immune system and the fact that he had not been treated at all – in a twisted but happy turn of circumstance – made possible his recovery. Mejía obtained the medication he needed free as part of an experimental treatment program targeting people living with HIV who had not yet received treatment.
Once his medicines were taken care of and he recovered his health, how did the people around Mejía understand and handle his being HIV-positive? How does being HIV-positive currently shape his interpersonal relationships? Sex may not constitute the center of Mejía’s life, but it is an important part of it. Sharing an attraction for other men is also what has brought Mejía together with many of his friends in the US and in the Dominican Republic. Sex is also what sets the tone of much of what Mejía talks about in public, giving a bawdy edge to his commentary among close friends. Aware of the unease that knowledge of his active sex life generates among the friends we have in common, I asked if living with HIV influenced how others interact with Mejía.

Mira, influye mucho. Los amigos – o en mi caso, mis amigos – están muy atentos a con quién yo tengo relaciones para correr la voz de que nadie tenga relaciones con esa persona. Aún ellos sabiendo que yo practico el sexo seguro, siempre han estado pendientes. Y eso, a mi me ha hecho, hasta cierto punto, daño porque he tenido que aprender a mentir a ellos de qué hago. O a dejar de hacer lo que quiero hacer para que ellos no sigan comentando. Porque cada vez que yo les digo, conoci a alguien, lo primero que me preguntan es, “¿Tú le dijiste que tú eras HIV positivo?” O sea, como que tengo decírselo. Entonces yo le dije “No porque si yo cada vez que conozco a alguien, por el simple hecho de conocerlo, aún no tenga sexo, le voy a decir que soy VIH positivo, mejor pongo el letrero y así no tengo que hablar.” Y eso si me ha pasado. Y creo que le pasa a todo el mundo. Que tengan, o sea, un grupo de amigos íntimos. Mis amigos sí, viven pendientes de eso. Muy pendientes a nivel de que si yo lo manosee, ni lo topan. Es como que le cayó la plaga.

...Entonces desde que me ven con alguien, “¿Y tú te acostaste con él?” Pero no “¿Tú te acostaste con él?” para preguntarme las preguntas que se hacían antes: ¿Cómo lo tiene? Eh... ¿lo tiene grande? ¿Te dió el culo? ¿Le gusta meterlo? No. “¿Tú te acostaste con el?” para saber si ya los demás se pueden acostar o no.

¿Cuál ha sido la discusión con tus amigos en cuanto a como tú debes llevar tu vida sexual? Porque evidentemente lo que está pasando aquí es que ellos quieren, de alguna manera, controlar tu vida sexual.

Aja. Aja. Y no controlarla para que yo no tenga sexo, sino controlarla para que yo no tenga sexo con las personas que posiblemente ellos puedan tener sexo porque les gusten. Yo si he tenido varios encontronazos con ellos en cuanto a eso. El hecho de – antes uno compartir no parejas sino en ciertas diversión de que estamos en una piscina bañándose y yo se lo mamo y aquel se lo mamo y aquel se lo mama. Ya prefieren ni siquiera invitarme a un evento donde pueda haber un tipo de cojé nalgas familiar, para ellos no tener ningún tipo de contacto conmigo porque soy el HIV positivo que ellos saben. Con los demás no importa, porque aunque no saben si es HIV positivo porque nunca se han hecho la prueba. Hay dos o tres que sí, que se la hicieron. Pero si somos
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diez y solamente lo saben de mí, los otros nueve creen que están libres de toda culpa. Entonces me excluyen a mí de muchas cosas para no tener ningún tipo de contacto o ningún tipo de histeria porque son de los que no aceptan todavía de que no se pega tan fácil. Creen que hasta con un beso se pega.

Look, it influences a lot. Friends – or in my case, my friends – pay a lot of attention to the people with whom I have sex to let everyone know that nobody should have sex with that person. Even though they know that I practice safe sex, they have always paid a lot of attention. And that has caused me, up to a certain point, damage because I have had to learn to lie to them about what I do. Or not do what I want to do so they don’t continue talking. Because every time I tell them that I met someone, the first thing they ask me is, “Did you tell him that you are HIV positive?” In other words, as if I have to tell him. Then I said, “No, because if every time I meet someone, just by the simple fact of my meeting them, even without having sex with them, I have to tell that I am HIV-positive, I should have a sign and that way I don’t have to talk.” And that has happened to me. And I think it happens to everyone who has a group of intimate friends. My friends yes, they pay attention to that. A lot of attention to the point that if I touched the person they won’t even touch him. As if the person caught the plague.

. . . Then as soon as they see me with somebody, “Have you slept with him?” But not, “Have you slept with him?” to ask me the questions that were asked before: How big is he? Does he have a big one? Did he give you his ass? Does he like to fuck? No. They ask “Did you sleep with him?” to know if the others can or cannot sleep with the person.

What has been the discussion with your friends regarding how you should conduct your sex life? Because evidently what’s happening here is that they want, in one way or another, to control your sex life.

Uhum. Uhum. And not control it so I don’t have sex but so that I don’t have sex with people that they might possibly have sex with because they like them. I have had a few fights with them around that issue. The fact that – before one would share not partners but in some good times that we were in a pool together and I suck this one and that one sucks it and then this one sucks it. Now they prefer to not even invite me to an event where there could be a type of sexual free-for-all for them not to have any type of contact with me because I am the HIV-positive person they know. With the others, it doesn’t matter, because even though they don’t know if they are positive or not, they have never taken the test. There are two or three who have taken the test. But if there are ten of us and they only know about me, the other nine think they are free of all blame. Then they exclude me from many things so they don’t have any kind of contact and none of the hysteria because they are the types that still don’t accept that it’s not so easy to get it. They think you can get it even with a kiss.
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Mejía’s seroconversion caused a shift in how others interact with him. In personal relationships built on a mixture of intimacy and complicity, his seroconversion has made others keep him under surveillance. Indeed, their expectation is that Mejía will not engage in a sexual encounter unless he prefaces it with the disclosure of his status. It is sad, for instance, to notice the dramatic change in focus of the questions his friends ask him when he sleeps with someone. The questions asked before, as Mejía explains, were the questions of friends. The questions friends now ask will help them decide whether or not to avoid sleeping with a person they identify as Mejía’s sexual partner.

The preoccupation of Mejía’s friends with keeping him away from the pool of possible sexual partners suggests that like many of the policymakers now concerned with keeping HIV-positive individuals under surveillance, community members are also focusing on the HIV-positive body as a vector of disease. This is by no means how all of Mejía’s friends feel about him. Some people might be tempted to interpret the difficulty Mejía faces within this circle as evidence of the problems faced by “ethnic” homosexual men or by people within these networks. Yet this anxiety is expressed within the very same networks that have provided Mejía with some of the resources, love, and support that have helped him continue living. A “cultural” interpretation of this kind, moreover, would probably also stress factors such as the alleged higher stigma and homophobia within Latina/o communities and other markers of US Latina/o cultures as “other” in an implicitly racializing and racist way. Thus, this interpretation would fit the (mis)readings of “culture” that provoked the critiques by Farmer and colleagues.

An interpretation that follows Farmer’s analysis of individual AIDS cases within a global structural framework of uneven access to life-saving medicines provides a welcome (if incomplete) reading of Mejía’s situation. The details of Latoya Mejía’s life reveal the possibilities and the limitations of the transnational social field within which he has circulated. Circulating through transnational social fields, especially as an HIV-positive person, is not something everyone can do. Privileges of access to well-informed and connected networks structure the possibilities of survival available to Mejía. These possibilities may well be out of the question for other people. Mejía can circulate in this field because of certain attributes and networks he can mobilize. Mejía would not have known protease inhibitors were available for free were it not for the friends he had in the United States who were up to date on medical trials. His ability to tap into his network of friends was critical to thinking that migration might be the means to succeed in his struggle against HIV/AIDS. Finally, the ability to mobilize class markers in front of an immigration officer makes the difference between entering New York as a “visitor” and risking one’s life to reach Puerto Rico on small boats via La Mona Canal.

Looking at HIV/AIDS from the perspective of someone living with the virus compels us to think beyond risk management, which drives so many efforts against the disease. For Mejía, the risk is not getting infected, but dying from
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a disease when there are medications available that will help fight it. This case study points to larger political and economic structures within which Mejía tries to survive. I have also been interested in showing how one person makes decisions about his health, given conditions of extreme inequality that he has little control over. Finally, this section narrates aspects of the life of one HIV-positive person that are in tension with the medicalizing gaze of his own network to show, in a small way, how fiercely Mejía clings to life.

Other questions remain, however, and it is in identifying and beginning to answer them that a perspective on culture-as-process complements and extends the structural perspective advocated by Farmer and others. Instead of looking at how certain structural constraints manifest themselves in individual behavior, a culture-as-process approach to these issues might focus on the ways in which Mejía and members of his network give meaning to exclusionary and inclusionary practices around disclosure of HIV status and stigma management. This orientation would help develop critical readings of Latina/o/Dominican culture and allow us to discern the practices that give stigma its materiality in social relations. If Mejía’s friends are, as I claim above, vigilant of his behavior, what are the factors that put them in situations where the surveillance of Mejía’s behavior becomes the thing to do? Furthermore, how do these practices of exclusion alter the texture of this network in ways that fragment it but that also produce some alliances? Finally, in what ways do these practices connect with the irregular transnational social field within which people, knowledge, and practices circulate and acquire meaning? These questions point to alternative analytic routes to “culture” as explanatory framework and technology of otherness, or as “mask” for the “reality” of social relations. These questions point to the promise of culture-as-process as analytic rubric for an interrogation of AIDS as an “epidemic of signification” (Treichler 1999) with a materiality emergent in Mejía’s networks and social relations and that organizes the way in which Mejía and his friends understand their experiences and struggles for survival.

Notes

Latoya Mejía and all of the other men who shared stories with me have my gratitude for the many ways in which they enriched my work with their voices and their smarts. I am grateful to Ginetta Candelario for inviting me to present an earlier version of this essay at Smith College in 2004 and for giving me incisive feedback on the ideas presented. I am also grateful to Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé for inviting me to present it at Fordham University in 2002. Juan Flores, Renato Rosaldo, and Alex Vazquez have my gratitude for inviting me to contribute an essay to this collection and for pushing me to rethink an earlier draft of the piece in terms of Latina/o studies as an interdisciplinary formation.

1 I am borrowing the expression “uneven world” from Radhakrishnan (1996).

2 Important examples of work in policy include that of Ronald Bayer (1989) and Klitzman and Bayer (2003). Feldman and Johnson (1986), Fee and Fox (1988, 1992), Herdt and Lindenbaum (1992), Kirp and Bayer (1992), and Levine and Gagnon (1993) are useful examples of early work on AIDS in the social sciences. Paul Farmer’s groundbreaking AIDS and Accusation:
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*Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (1992) is a significant and devastating critique of representations of AIDS from a social sciences perspective. Another important work is Epstein (1996).


5 Important early efforts include Alonso and Koreck (1989).

6 Farmer’s project began in 1996 with the publication of *Women, Poverty and AIDS*, co-edited with Margaret Connors and Janie Simmons. The critiques of Farmer et al. may have been news in the AIDS research world, but they certainly were not in anthropology. For an influential critique, see Rosaldo (1989). Fortunately, there is an emerging critique of the use of “culture” in health research coming from Latina/o studies scholars such as Vilma Santiago-Irizarry (2001).

7 See Diaz (1997), especially pp. 140–2, for an elaboration of the concept of culture from developmental psychology and traditional anthropology.

8 The boundaries between social sciences and humanities may appear to be blurred by the apparent currency of interdisciplinary in the US academy in general. However, the starkness of the distinction between these approaches does not only obtain at the conceptual level. The whole apparatus of US-based federal funding for AIDS-related research is almost exclusively devoted to research that can be categorized as “empirical,” “behavioral,” or “social scientific.” Thus, institutional locations and funding mechanisms have a strong impact in encouraging or discouraging definitions of interdisciplinarity that might go beyond the social and behavioral sciences.

9 The tendency to view HIV-positive immigrants as potentially corrupting of the US body politic can be discerned most explicitly in the resistance of US immigration authorities to allow self-reported HIV-positive people into the country and to conduct HIV screening as part of the procedures for obtaining a US Permanent Residence. Like marking “yes” in the question of whether one has ever been a member of the Communist Party or belongs to a terrorist organization, testing HIV-positive constitutes grounds for denial of the green card.

10 This case study is drawn from a chapter from my book in progress, *Tacit Subjects: Dominican Transnational Identities and Male Homosexuality in New York City*, under contract with Duke University Press.

11 This name is a pseudonym.

12 A recently approved proposal from the Dominican Republic to the Global Fund seeks to implement antiretroviral treatment in the country. Although some small efforts have been ongoing in the country, this is the most significant effort to bring antiretroviral medications to HIV-positive people in the Dominican Republic so far. See COPRESIDA (2004).

References


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Carlos Ulises Decena


Post-Movimiento: The Contemporary (Re)Generation of Chicana/o Art

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Millennial Generation

Today, several decades after the years of el movimiento, a “Millennium” cohort of Chicana/o artists continues to expand and revise the artistic inheritance of the Movimiento generation.

Breaching the past in a constant search for new forms and content is an exigency of modernist art practices. The avant-garde principle of “rupture” underlines contemporary critical discourse proclaiming the present moment as post-feminist, post-ethnic, and post-Chicana/o.

Many of the Millennial Generation of Chicana/o artists reject this totalizing rubric that accords value and prestige to artists making a total break with antecedent cultural traditions. Instead, one dominant strategy is a complex negotiation between continuity and change.

Some established and mid-career artists continue to redefine and extend central tenets of “Chicano Movimiento” art such as strong narrative content, realist and expressionist styles, symbolic vocabularies drawn from pre-Columbian and living indigenous cultures, and urban barrio iconographies.

Younger Chicana/o artists born after the Movimiento and trained in art schools within the critical discourse of postmodernity and globalization engage eclectic sources of inspiration and experiment with global aesthetic traditions. The Millennial Generation is technologically adept and deeply conversant with global vernacular cultural forms like hip hop and Japanese anime. Fashion, media, and film are other referents. Social concerns, if present, are muted and more individualized. Urban violence, sexuality, immigration, and dystopic, apocalyptic social visions are common. The avant-garde tradition of “rupture” with antecedent
artistic traditions is simultaneously present with mobilizations to continue and expand previous legacies of engaged art. The current moment is one of intense experimentation and transition with no defining aesthetic paradigm. As cultural critic Chon Noriega notes, “The community is too large and too diverse to fit under one aesthetic rubric, we’ve got too many generations.”

The consistencies, differentiations, and rearticulations of aesthetic options in the liminal social environment of Los Angeles are well captured in Josh Kun’s *Los Angeles Times Magazine* article “The New Chicano Movement.”1 From this article I have drawn out and rearranged a collage of intergenerational artists’ reflections about negotiating continuity and change.

*Rita González (curator)*

So how can we find a common language? I think a lot of people are tired of being curated by ethnic category. Artists will be supportive of galleries or museums that want to show Chicano artists, but they also want to be expanding the parameters of their identity as well.

*Henry Gamboa, Jr. (video artist)*

When I became involved with ASCO, we were developing artwork within the concept of “Chicano.” It was particularly important to utilize that term at that point. Now I find an even more pressing need to utilize it, because since that time our numbers have expanded while our representation everywhere has dwindled.

*Rubén Ochoa (conceptual artist)*

Where most of my work is headed now is less about any singular ethnic identity and [more toward] where different identities intersect and mix us up. I hope that you don’t see my work and all you get from it is that I’m Chicano . . . Sometimes I feel like we’re carrying this baggage on our shoulders, like we’ve been born into it. But if we just keep repeating the same iconography, it defeats the purpose of art: to grow and create and explore. Chicano art is so young. We can’t start repeating ourselves. We need to mix and blend and make art from where we’re from.

*Mario Ybarra, Jr. (artist, gallerist)*

Chicano art is not dead history. It informs my artistic sensibility. How could it not? They are the little voices in my head that help me process my own work. What I take from them most is the idea of producing art under extreme circumstances with an imaginative and critical stance.

Clearly the present moment is a time of shifting paradigms. Some Chicano/a artists continue to preserve, extend, and rearticulate antecedent traditions of engaged art (digital murals, for example), while others are moving beyond bounced notions of identity and culture, drawing inspiration from global vernacular and hybrid cultures (for example, Japanese anime or hip hop).

Traversing multiple modernities, the Millennial Generation explores all media: painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, sound, and digital art. Multimedia works, performance, and installations expand frames of reference from European
modernist traditions, non-Western cultures, and popular cultures of North and South America. Freed from an encompassing political project, Latina/o artists of the millennium make art that is a personal response to globalized realities. The tone and character of much current expression is personal and experimental. Some defining characteristics: the attitude and stance toward national cultural iconography and cultural traditions is less reverential, looser, even playful and ironic. There is increased filiation with international mass culture: fashion, media, and film. Gender, sexuality, and desire expand theoretical frameworks. Performative practices and events like “Día de Muertos” celebrations, festivals, and rituals continue to transmit social memory and sustain local knowledge. Digital technologies expand public art forms like computerized image murals and billboards, as well as more personal web-based projects. Representational strategies become more nuanced. Millennial Chicana/o artists are impatient with national narratives of culture and belonging, and more involved with global artistic practices of fusion, exchange, and negotiation. Overall there is a confident sense of maturity and intergenerational negotiation. The Chicano Movimiento artists linked to the Millennial Generation continue to produce powerful expressions that rouse both conscience and consciousness. Rather than a post-Chicana/o moment, the present sustains a cultural dialectic simultaneously affirming rupture as well as continuity and change.

An Emergent Latina/o Cultural Project

At the turn of the millennium, it is difficult to conceive of the United States as hermetically sealed, territorially contained, or internally undifferentiated. In the places where we live and work we are conscious of evolving translocal economic and social processes. Worldwide circular immigration patterns are a fact of daily life. Having long boasted of being Mexico’s second city, Los Angeles now also has a Salvadoran population equal to or greater than that of San Salvador. New York City, meanwhile, has as many Puerto Ricans as San Juan and as many Dominicans as Santo Domingo, while New Orleans is the second city of Hondurans. Through continual immigrations, Latin America has seeped into the United States. South–North immigration pathways are also cultural corridors enunciating a new geography, new cartographies of the imagination, and nascent cultural projects further redefining what Americanness means in the twenty-first century.

Seeking to catch the pulse and assess the state of current Latina/o art production nationwide, New York’s Exit Art presented a multidisciplinary arts project designated “The L Factor” from November 22, 2003 to February 21, 2004. Included were video, music, and literature programs. An art exhibition also titled “The L Factor” was conceptualized and co-curated by Papo Colo, Janet Ingberman, and Jodi Hanel. For the project, Exit Art invited 30 Latina/o artists who live and work in the United States to create a
conceptual portrait of the Latina/o figure of their choice who has entered into
the popular imagination of this country or into culture history. Movie star
Jennifer López, sports star Sammy Sosa, fashion designer Carolina Herrera, hip
hop master Big Pun, the artists Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta, musician Tito
Puente, environmental activist Chico Mendes, farm workers’ leader Cesar Chávez,
educator Eugenio María de Hostos, and, even, somehow, Speedy Gonzalez, are
among those portrayed in the resulting 27 commissioned works.

While dealing with symbols of Latina/o heritage, the icons selected by the artists
as points of departure for their art works were mainly from the fashion, media,
sports, and popular culture field. Political and historical figures were secondary.
Traditional paintings and sculptures were scarce in the exhibition, with a heavy
concentration on installation, videos, photography, and sound collages.

The selected artists in “The L Factor” exhibit all grew up in the United
States, but were born in Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Chile, Argentina,
Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Brazil. Others were born in the United States.
Ironic, whimsy, and a playful anti-heroic attitude were prevalent stances in art
works responding to such Latina/o cultural icons as Celia Cruz, Frida Kahlo,
and Carolina Herrera. In his inkjet on canvas photographic triptych of Celia
Cruz, entitled “Celia 1, Celia 2 and Celia 3,” Xavier Tavera captures a female
impersonator evoking the stylized poses and mannerisms of the legendary Queen
of Salsa. His artist statement encourages the viewer to ruminate on the evanes-
cent and ephemeral – “Celia Cruz meets Celia Cruz, they look at each other, they
approach each other, they recognize each other. She then embraces the mirror
image which reflects the legend.”

Andrea Arroyo presented a witty conceptual rendition of Frida Kahlo’s famous
eyebrows. As a stand-in for the usual renditions of Kahlo, weighted down by
Mexican regional costumes and jewelry, this minimal synthesis of the persona
had instant impact. Two structures shaped in the form of Kahlo’s eyebrows were
covered in Mexican rebozos. Hung from the ceiling, the graceful arched forms
resembled birds in flight.

Among the legendary Latina/o icons from the fields of art, music, and film,
the most popular personality with this set of artists was Jennifer López, who
inspired three different conceptual portraits in the exhibition. Of the three,
the most subtle and evocative piece was by Milton Rosa Ortiz titled, “La Aparición
de la Fama.” Riffing on the religious connotation of saintly apparitions, Rosa
Ortiz created a sculpture in the shape of a shimmering evening gown, evoking
the much commented-upon Versace-designed creation worn by Jennifer López
to the 2000 Grammy awards. Ortiz’s vision is a shimmering glass gown com-
posed of shards of broken glass collected from the streets of the Castle Hills
neighborhood in the Bronx where López grew up and from beaches in Ponce,
Puerto Rico, the hometown of her parents. Each piece of glass was suspended
with monofilament from a support structure in the ceiling, lit from below. In the
gallery space, the sculptural form was placed at the end of a processional aisle
and the object was placed high up, very much like religious statuary in church.
Post-Movimiento

The viewer walks toward the dazzling and shimmering object much like a pilgrim approaching a venerated reliquary.

“The L Factor” was an eclectic, gritty, and powerful exhibition featuring an emergent cohort of artists who continue to explore, expand, and redefine the meanings of a shared, very heterogeneous culture. New York Times art critic Holland Cotter comments on this cultural complexity:

Exit Art advertises “L Factor” as a showcase for a generation of emerging artists who are redefining what “Latina/o” means, in part by being at a distance from it. Most of the artists were born in Latin America but raised in the United States. Some speak no Spanish, or have names like Joskowicz, Kostianovsky, and Schneider. Although they deal with symbols of Latina/o identity in their work, they themselves wear their identity loosely and lightly, as a personal choice rather than as an imperative.4

The wide-ranging aesthetic options investigated by artists in “The L Factor” exhibit mirror the massive demographic transition currently changing the face of America. “The US Latina/o population increased 58 percent between 1990 and 2000, and this group, the largest minority in the country, now accounts for more than one of every eight Americans. The Census Bureau conservatively estimates that by 2020 Latinas/os will number 17 percent of the country.”5

Responsive to shifting social hierarchies, US Latina/o arts organizations are reorienting their visions and programs, seeking an embracing collective ethos that simultaneously respects the diversity among national groups while also searching for cultural connections among them. The very concept of comunidad (community) is relative to the perspectives and positions of each national group . . . Juntos pero no revueltos. Scholar Juan Flores articulates the point:

Communidad: the Spanish word, even more clearly than the English, calls to mind two of the key terms – común and unidad – in the conceptualization of this notoriously elusive idea. What do we have in “common,” and what makes for our unity? It is important to note that though the two terms point in the same semantic direction they are not synonymous, and their apparent coupling in the same word, comunidad, is not a redundancy. For while común refers to sharing – that is, those aspects in the cultures of the various constitutive groups that overlap – the sense of unidad is that which bonds the groups above and beyond the diverse particular commonalities.6

This deeper affiliation across groups is activating an emergent Latina/o Cultural Project.

Associations like NALAC (National Association of Latina/o Arts and Culture) composed of artists, scholars, and arts administrators are fomenting inter-Latina/o projects and programs articulating expressive forms of a new Latinidad. Through networks of regional meetings and a biannual national conference, focused on emerging Latina/o talent in the performing and visual arts, NALAC
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brings together arts practitioners and theorists to reflect upon, define, and promote new Latina/o expressive forms in contemporary US culture. This entanglement with mainline cultural paradigms and institutions, moving them beyond recognition to cultural parity, is a foremost current priority.

Another primary concern is the necessity for theoretical intersection and intellectual collaboration between the two Americas. Historically, hemispheric relations have been restrained by “differing” institutional and political histories, enduring inequalities, and uneven flows of knowledge and power among and between US Latina/o scholars and Latin American academics. North–South intersections must delicately balance the fantasy of mutuality with the reality of antagonisms in conceptual, theoretical, and even epistemological terrains.7

Currently, Latin American art has achieved some penetration in the US market, yet Latin American art history remains a peripheral discipline in the academy. To date, nineteen universities (among them New York University, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, Florida State University, and the University of Texas at Austin) offer undergraduate or graduate degrees in Latin American art. This at a moment when a national demographic transition positions Latinas/os as the largest minoritized ethnic group in American society.

From the vantage point of the United States, if Latin American art remains a peripheral academic discipline, then US Latina/o art can be seen as “la periferia de la periferia.”8 Even in those institutions teaching and researching Latin American art, there are only occasional courses on US Latina/o art, often promoted by ethnic studies divisions. Within a rising tide of exhibitions, publications, and research, US Latina/o art remains a cipher, an unknown terra incognita of the American imagination, both South and North.9

Perhaps the “marginalized” position that Latin American and US Latina/o art share in the American academy spurs us in the necessary task of advancing new affiliations and networks of support, cooperation, and knowledge creation. The “Latinization” of the US and the simultaneous “North Americanization” of Latin America calls for a deeper and franker dialogue between Southern and Northern scholars seeking to comprehend and negotiate global processes that reposition economics, communications, and culture. Collaboration must extend to articulating cultural exchanges such as symposia, exhibitions, and collective research and writing projects that will deepen and broaden the reciprocity of North–South agendas. Cultural negotiations built on candor, sincerity, and a shared vision propels networks for two-way communication, creating co-presence and mutuality.

In the current social arena, migratory flows and the constant movement of people and ideas across hemispheric borders position contemporary Latina/o experience and cultural expression as part of an incipient Transnational Imaginary. Today’s Latina/o culture is nurtured within translocal spaces and is vibrant in the formation of new mobile identities, incipient coalitions and solidarities, and possible social formations of connection, communication, and
conciliation within national groups and across borders. This continental space, *nuestra América*, is what literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt calls a “contact zone.”

Pratt explains, “contact zones are not geographic places with stable significations . . . but are simultaneously sites of multi-vocality, of negotiation, borrowing and exchange.”

Latin America and the Latina/o US form a dynamic contact zone with intellectual goods flowing along multiple “cultural corridors” from “here” to “there” and back again. Artists are able to simultaneously go back and forth between different landscapes of symbols, values, traditions, and styles and/or operate within a landscape that encompasses both concurrently.

Latina/o American arts and culture reflect the outside reality of continental America. A contact zone defined by ongoing processes of racial–cultural transculturations, a place where the rational and the historical coexist with the mystical and the mythical. The incandescent art and culture of Latinoamérica (both inside and outside our borders) continues to delight and astonish us. As the Latina/o American imagination gains security and acceptance, it envisions new horizons of human possibility. As we revise conceptual frameworks, articulate new paradigms, and establish new research priorities for visual culture in the hemisphere, we must sustain intellectual platforms of complex translations, honest disagreement, and shared common ground. The nurturing of communication encourages conviviality, while also acknowledging boundaries of mutual respect. The task remains open, encouraging our participation.

### Notes

9. One current scholarly project situated at the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in cooperation with the University of California.
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Los Angeles Center for Chicano studies, is “Recovering the Critical Sources for Latin American Latino Art.” Research teams in the United States and Latin America will identify the primary sources such as manifestos, articles, lectures, unpublished manuscripts, and other documents by artists, critics, and curators who have played a major role in the development of US Latina/o and Latin American art. A digital archive will permit researchers from all over the world to access the bulk of the recovered materials.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“God Bless the Law, He Is White”: Legal, Local, and International Politics of Latina/o and Black Desegregation Cases in Post-World War II California and Texas

Neil Foley

For nearly two generations, from 1911 to 1947, Orange County school districts in California maintained a dual school system – one for Mexicans and one for white students – until Ernesto Méndez and other Latina/o parents from four school districts filed suit in 1946 in the federal district court of southern California on behalf of 5,000 Mexican-descent children forced to attend separate schools. The school districts claimed that Mexicans were segregated because of language deficiencies that prevented them from keeping up with Anglo students. Mexican American parents claimed that school segregation was a violation of their rights as citizens and that no state law mandated the segregation of Mexicans, as it had for other groups. Mexican American civil rights leaders, moreover, had repeatedly claimed that Mexican Americans were Caucasians and that an attempt to segregate them from other whites was a violation of their Fourteenth Amendment rights.¹

While ignoring the issue of whether Mexicans were white or not, the district court agreed in Méndez v. Westminster that segregating Mexicans was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment since no state law mandated their segregation. But Judge McCormick, in a surprise ruling, went beyond this narrow legal ruling on the absence of state law and directly challenged the constitutionality of Plessy v. Ferguson, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling that became the basis for the “separate but equal” doctrine in American jurisprudence until 1954.
In his ruling eight years before Brown v. Board of Education, Judge McCormick wrote:

The equal protection of the laws pertaining to the public school system in California is not provided by furnishing in separate schools the same technical facilities, text books and courses of instruction to children of Mexican ancestry that are available to the other public school children regardless of their ancestry. A paramount requisite in the American system of public education is social equality. It must be open to all children . . . regardless of lineage.1

A year later, when the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Judge McCormick’s ruling, California Governor Earl Warren signed an Assembly bill to repeal sections of the California Education Code that allowed school boards to establish separate schools for Indians and students of Asian descent. Six years later, in 1953, Earl Warren was appointed by President Eisenhower to become the 14th Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and made his mark on the court and the nation with the famous words, echoing the views of Judge McCormick six years earlier, that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”2

A few questions come immediately to mind: First, if the Méndez case paved the way to the all-important Brown decision, why was it not cited in Brown v. Board of Education, particularly since Earl Warren was the governor of California when the Méndez case was ruled on, and his own state attorney general, John Kinney, submitted an amicus brief supporting the Mexican American parents? Second, why did Thurgood Marshall and his experienced team of NAACP lawyers choose a Mexican American desegregation case in which to submit an amicus brief in the years leading up to Brown v. Board of Education? Third, although Mexican American and African American civil rights leaders compared legal strategies in court cases to end school segregation throughout the 1940s, why was there so little communication and cooperation between the two groups in the postwar era? Mexican American legal strategists, for example, did not submit an amicus brief in Sweat v. Painter, the 1950 Supreme Court decision forcing the University of Texas to desegregate its law school. Nor did Latinas/os submit an amicus brief in Brown v. Board of Education. Finally, how did the Mexican government’s refusal to allow braceros to work in Texas influence the governor and elected officials to end discrimination against Mexicans throughout the state?

These are important questions for understanding the uneven progress of civil rights struggles of Latinas/os and African Americans in the Southwest, where both groups were subject to Jim Crow segregation in schools, restaurants, parks, swimming pools, and other public places. By examining the local, legal, and international dimension of civil rights struggles of both African Americans and Mexican Americans during and after World War II, we can better understand what issues and ideas brought these two groups together in a spirit of cooperation, as well as those that divided them, such as the insistence of Mexican American civil rights leaders on their white racial identity. Before examining
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court cases for what they tell us about the differing litigation strategies of Latinas/os and African Americans, we need to briefly look at the historical context in which these groups came to challenge school segregation in the West.

Segregation of African Americans in Texas followed the pattern of other Southern states, which meant that the color line was rigidly observed with serious, often lethal, consequences for black Texans. Mexican Americans, by contrast, occupied a complicated middle ground, sometimes white, sometimes not, depending on local customs, proximity to the border, class position, skin color, and efforts of Mexican American civil rights leaders to convince anyone within earshot that Mexican Americans were Caucasians. Segregation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest had become established by custom rather than statutory authority. Each state had its own laws and customs for educating its Indian, black, Asian, and Mexican populations. Thus, while Mexican children were segregated by custom in California, Asian-descent children and Native Americans were segregated by law. Texas, with few Native Americans or Asian Americans, adopted a tripartite system of segregation with separate schools for Mexicans, blacks, and whites. When it was not possible to segregate Mexicans into separate schools, Anglo school officials put Mexican-descent children, whether citizens or non-citizens, Spanish dominant or English dominant, in separate classrooms within all-white schools. Black children, of course, never attended white schools in Texas or any other Southern state.4

While the census of 1930 revealed the dramatic increase in the Mexican-descent population of the US, it also revealed that Mexican Americans outnumbered Mexican immigrants, for the first time. These second generation Mexican Americans insisted on their rights as American citizens and in the 1930s and 1940s began to challenge school segregation, but in a way that differed significantly from the legal strategies deployed by African Americans. With “separate but equal” still the law of the land, Mexican American plaintiffs and their lawyers sought to clarify that under Jim Crow law and practice Latinas/os were on the white side of the color line. Their success in these court cases, beginning in 1930 in Texas, did not address the segregation faced by African Americans in Texas and elsewhere in the West. In short, Mexican Americans sought to end de facto segregation of Mexicans rather than de jure segregation of blacks.5

In the first desegregation case in Texas, *Independent School District v. Salvatierra*, Mexican Americans charged school officials in 1930 with segregating “school children of Mexican and Spanish descent . . . from the school children of all other white races in the same grade.”6 The parents did not address the quality of the instruction or the condition of the separate schoolhouse, as had been the strategy of the NAACP, which was to break the financial back of segregation by forcing school districts to create and fund separate and equal schools. The Texas suit was aimed exclusively at the school district’s policy of separating Mexican American children from Anglo children. The District Superintendent argued that segregation was necessary because of their English language deficiency and
not “by reason of race or color.” In fact, he continued, “Spanish speaking children are unusually gifted in music” and possessed “special facilities” for art and handicrafts, talents he hoped to develop in these separate schools. The Superintendent was careful not to use the word “Mexican,” a word that carried strong racial connotations in Texas, and instead referred to Mexican children as “Latin Americans” or “children of Spanish . . . descent.” School officials resorted to the shrewd but devious strategy of substituting language ability and other cultural markers as a proxy for “race” in arguing the need for separate schools for Mexican children.

The Texas Court of Appeals, however, upheld the lower court ruling that “school authorities have no power to arbitrarily segregate Mexican children, assign them to separate schools, and exclude them from schools maintained for children of other white races, merely or solely because they are Mexicans.” The arbitrary exclusion of Mexican American children from “other whites,” the court ruled, constituted “unlawful racial discrimination.” Segregation was still lawful when school officials could demonstrate, through testing, that some students lacked English-language skills necessary to compete with Anglos. While not a complete victory, the Salvatierra case marked the beginning of a successful strategy to end desegregation in Texas. A year before the case, Mexican American activists in Texas had founded the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a middle-class, integrationist organization modeled on the NAACP. LULAC chapters spread quickly throughout California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas and provided limited financial support for legal challenges to segregation. Some LULAC activists, like M. C. Gonzales and Alonso Perales, worked closely with Mexican consuls in Texas to document and publicize the most egregious forms of discrimination. Mexican consuls were themselves refused service in restaurants and hotels in San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, and numerous small towns. Many of these complaints were brought to the attention of the Ambassador of Mexico in Washington, who expressed his concern to the US Department of State.

At the urging of Mexican consuls in Texas, the Mexican Foreign Minister, Ezequiel Padilla, placed Texas on a “blacklist” in 1943, banning it from receiving Mexican “guest workers” under the Bracero Program. The ban came a month after the Texas state legislature, hoping to appease the Mexican government, had passed a toothless resolution that “all persons of the Caucasian Race . . . are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of all public places of business or amusement.” By framing the problem of discrimination in terms of respecting the rights of all Caucasians, the resolution avoided the delicate problem of calling for an end to discrimination against “Caucasian” Mexicans without, however, weakening the structures of Jim Crow for African Americans. Texas was still a Southern state, after all, and nothing short of a social revolution would bestow equality and constitutional rights on blacks in the South. Although ineffectual in the extreme, the resolution did reflect the urgency of reaching an accommodation with the Mexican government to
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lift the ban on braceros at a critical moment of US involvement in World War II. LULAC took advantage of this blacklisting to press its case, unsuccessfully, for passing a law that would levy fines or other penalties on those discriminating against Mexicans.11

President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor Policy” toward Latin America also had repercussions for Anglo-Mexican relations in the Southwest. The US feared that the Axis Powers would find Latin American countries, particularly Mexico and Argentina, an easy target for anti-US propaganda, complicating the goal of fostering hemispheric solidarity through trade and mutual respect, or “reciprocity.” In 1940 Roosevelt established the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), a federal agency headed by Nelson Rockefeller, to promote better cultural and economic relations with Latin America, while the Office of War Information engaged in a propaganda campaign to counter Berlin and Tokyo’s claims that the US denied basic rights to Japanese Americans, Latinas/os, and African Americans.12 In 1943 the OCIAA dispatched field representatives to Texas and California to investigate the numerous discrimination complaints received by various federal agencies.13

African Americans, in contrast, had no international champions, like the foreign minister of Mexico and scores of Mexican consuls, to defend them against the worst abuses of Jim Crow laws and customs. For decades before World War II the NAACP complained bitterly that when a Mexican national was lynched in Texas, the Mexican government filed formal protests to the State Department, which paid an indemnity to the family of the victim. The federal government, the NAACP lamented, took action when a foreign national was lynched, but acquiesced in mob violence against its own citizens, particularly its black citizens. The Chicago Defender, one of the nation’s leading black newspapers, editorialized: “If the Secretary of State . . . can ask the Governor . . . [of Texas] about a lynched Mexican, why shouldn’t the Department of Justice ask about a lynched American?”14

Governor Coke Stevenson, like all governors in the South at the time, was committed to enforcing segregation of African Americans. When Willie Vinson, a black Texan, was lynched in 1942 for allegedly assaulting a white woman, the state attorney general wrote to Stevenson that the Axis propagandists exploited such lynching incidents and urged him to punish the lynchers. Stevenson, however, responded that “the Negro race . . . furnish[ed] the setting for mob violence by the outrageous crimes which they commit.”15 Stevenson’s assessment of Mexicans was less harsh, even if his motivation for ending discrimination against them had as much to do with placating Texas farmers, who were most affected by the ban on braceros, as establishing good relations with the government of Mexico in time of war. Nevertheless, in 1943, with funds from the OCIAA, Stevenson established the Texas Good Neighbor Commission, commenting that “Meskins is pretty good folks. If it was niggers, it’d be different.”16 Black Texans, excluded from “Good Neighbor” considerations, questioned how the governor could defend the rights of Mexican Americans while simultaneously denying
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those same rights to African Americans. One Texan, troubled by the discrepancy, urged Governor Stevenson to issue a proclamation “in behalf of the Negroes of Texas . . . just as you did the Mexicans.”

Meanwhile, the Texas branch of the NAACP closely observed the legal strategies of Mexican Americans in ending school desegregation. In California, Arizona, and Texas the courts ended segregation in school districts where it appeared that Mexicans were being arbitrarily segregated on account of race. Of the desegregation cases in California and Texas in the 1930s and 1940s, the one that caught the attention of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations was the 1946 California case, Méndez v. Westminster. In ruling that segregated education violated the Fourteenth Amendment, Judge McCormick wrote that public education “must be open to all children . . . regardless of lineage.” This was exactly the ruling the NAACP had been hoping to produce in its own cases to desegregate graduate and professional schools. The attorney for the plaintiffs in Méndez, David C. Marcus, was a successful civil rights lawyer from Los Angeles who had represented Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans in a class action suit, López v. Seccombe (1944), challenging segregation in public spaces in San Bernardino. Marcus put a former principal and employee of the Los Angeles County Schools, Marie Hughes, on the stand whose testimony foreshadowed that of the African American psychologist Kenneth Clark in Brown v. Board of Education. She testified “segregation, by its very nature, is a reminder constantly of inferiority, of not being wanted, of not being a part of the community.”

Judge McCormick agreed and ruled that “segregation . . . foster[s] antagonisms in children and suggest[s] inferiority among them where none exists.”

Thurgood Marshall seized on the language of McCormick’s ruling to argue in his brief to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals that “separation itself [is] violative of the equal protection of the laws . . . on the grounds that equality cannot be effected under a dual system of education.” In that brief Marshall skillfully combined the goals of both African Americans and Latinas/os, namely, “equality at home” as well as the “equality which we profess to accord Mexico and Latin American nationals in our international relations.” For added measure, Marshall reminded the Ninth Circuit Court that the United States ratified and adopted the Charter of the United Nations in 1945, which states that our government is obligated to promote “uniform respect for . . . human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race.”

The Ninth Circuit Court, however, did not take the bait. In upholding the lower court’s ruling, but not its reasoning, Judge Stevens noted that California law authorized segregation of children belonging “to one of or another of the great races of mankind,” which Stevens identified as Caucasoid, Mongolid, and Negro. Stevens further noted that California law permitted segregation of Indians and “Asiatics,” but that no state law authorized the segregation of children “within one of the great races.” Although Anglos rarely regarded Mexican Americans as “within” the white race, in the eyes of the law Mexican Americans were “Caucasoid” who could not be arbitrarily segregated from “other whites.”
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In other words, the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled in favor of the Mexican American children on the ground not that the separate-but-equal provision of *Plessy* was invalid, but that Mexicans were white, and that there was no California statute that mandated the segregation of Mexican Americans. Judge Stevens dismissed Marshall’s argument that segregation was unconstitutional and wrote, barely concealing his contempt, “We are not tempted by the siren who calls to us that the sometimes slow and tedious ways of democratic legislation . . . [are] no longer respected in a progressive society.”

Contrary to Judge Stevens’s faith in the “tedious ways of democratic legislation,” it was not likely that state houses throughout the South would enact democratic legislation to end Jim Crow in anybody’s lifetime. The remedy to racial segregation would have to come from the courts, if it was to come at all. Judge McCormick’s lower court ruling, on the other hand, offered African Americans at least a glimmer of hope in his unambiguous repudiation of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that American public education “must be open to all children . . . regardless of lineage.” Had the Ninth Circuit Court overruled the lower court and the plaintiffs appealed to the Supreme Court, perhaps Earl Warren’s famous ruling would have been called *Méndez* instead of *Brown*, and segregation ended seven years earlier.

The *Méndez* case, for all of its historical and juridical importance, was not cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* principally because Brown occurred within the familiar Black–White binary. The Brown decision was premised on racial segregation, which was not the central issue in the *Méndez* case. The Mexican American claim — that they could not be segregated because they were Caucasians and that no state law specifically mandated their segregation — was virtually irrelevant to the legal argument being made by Marshall and the NAACP. And of course, the Ninth Circuit Court flatly rejected Judge McCormick’s direct attack on the separate-but-equal doctrine of *Plessy*.

*Méndez* nevertheless was an important case, not only because the lower court ruling paved the way to *Brown*, as many scholars of Mexican American history claim, but also because the *Méndez* case exemplified how various civil rights groups crossed regional, racial, and ethnic lines to end racial discrimination at home only one year after winning the war against Nazi racism abroad. The NAACP, the American Jewish Congress, the ACLU, the Japanese American Citizenship League, and the National Lawyers Guild all filed amicus curiae briefs in this case. Moreover, *Méndez* held out the hope that the time had finally come to end segregation throughout the United States for all non-Anglo Americans. Like the NAACP brief, the American Jewish Congress abjured the separate-but-equal doctrine of *Plessy* and linked the ideology of racial discrimination to the recent horrors of Nazi Germany. The AJC brief also noted that no discrimination “is so vicious as the humiliation of innocent, trusting children, American children full of faith in life.” The *Méndez* case was also the first time the Japanese American Citizenship League intervened in a civil rights lawsuit involving another group. The JACL brief mounted an attack on the California Education Code that required separate schools for Japanese and Chinese students.
In arguing that it was time to end all segregation in California schools, JACL, like the American Jewish Congress, linked California’s racial and ethnic policies to those of Nazi Germany. The influence of the Méndez case also went beyond California. Thurgood Marshall and other NAACP lawyers were preparing a desegregation case in Hearne, Texas, in 1948, while LULAC leaders, the Mexican American attorney Gus García, and University of Texas Professor George I. Sánchez were preparing the first desegregation case in Texas since the 1930 Salvatierra case. With financial support from LULAC and the legal assistance of Gus García, Minerva Delgado and twenty parents of Mexican American children from five segregated school districts filed a complaint in 1948 alleging that the school districts had “prohibited, barred and excluded” Mexican children from attending school with “other white school children” and that segregation denied them the equal protection of laws “as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.”

Judge Rice, citing the Méndez case, ruled on June 15, 1948, that the five school districts named in the suit and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction were “permanently restrained and enjoined from . . . segregating pupils of Mexican or other Latin American descent in separate schools or classes.” Two weeks later Professor Sánchez received a letter from Thurgood Marshall asking for access to the Delgado case file in preparation for the desegregation case in Hearne, Texas, that was going to trial later that month. Sánchez wrote back that he would be happy to cooperate, but that the affidavits in the case would not be useful in the Hearne case. Affidavits in the Delgado case, Sánchez wrote, are “pointed specifically towards a denial of the pedagogical soundness of segregation that is based on the ‘language handicap’ excuse.” In other words, the strategy in the Delgado case was to challenge segregation on pedagogical grounds rather than arguing that segregation itself was wrong, especially segregation based on racial distinctions. Sánchez abhorred discrimination of all kinds, but his pedagogical approach to ending segregation did not resonate with Marshall’s direct challenge to Plessy that separate schooling was inherently unequal.

A few years after the Méndez and Delgado cases, attorneys Gus García and Carlos Cadena chose to challenge the court conviction of Pete Hernández on the grounds that Mexican Americans had been systematically excluded from jury service in Jackson County, Texas. Pete Hernández was indicted for the murder of Joe Espinosa by a grand jury in Jackson County, Texas, in 1951. No person of Hispanic surname had ever served on a jury in Jackson County in over 25 years, although the county was 14 percent Latina/o. García and Cadena relied heavily on numerous jury discrimination cases brought by African Americans who had won their cases by demonstrating that blacks had been systematically excluded from jury service in counties where they were heavily represented in the population. The appeals court upheld the lower court ruling that because Mexican Americans were members of the “white race” and the members of the jury were all white, no cause for discrimination existed. In their brief to the Supreme Court García and Cadena strenuously objected to the appeal court judge’s ruling.
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in these words: “for all practical purposes, about the only time that . . . Mexicans – many of them Texans for seven generations – are covered with the Caucasian cloak is when the use of that protective mantle serves the ends of those who would shamelessly deny to this large segment of the Texas population the fundamental right to serve as . . . jurors.”

In overruling the lower courts, the Supreme Court rejected the view that there were only two classes – white and Negro – within the contemplation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Justice Warren, writing for the unanimous court in 1954, ruled that “community prejudices are not static, and from time to time other differences from the community norm may define other groups which need the same protection.” These other differences included, but were not limited to, language, cultural practice, and religious beliefs. The court noted, for example, that an attempt to exclude Roman Catholics from jury service was a violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Justice Warren ruled further that: “When the existence of a distinct class is demonstrated, and it is further shown that the laws, as written or as applied, single out that class for different treatment not based on some reasonable classification, the guarantees of the Constitution have been violated.”

The court did not conclude that Latinas/os were racially non-white, but the decision did recognize whites and Latinas/os as distinct groups.

Two weeks after the Hernández ruling, African Americans won their case in Brown v. Board of Education. Mexican Americans wondered if the Brown decision applied to them, or if the courts might rule that desegregation applied only to black and white schools. Mexican Americans sought the answer 12 years later when busing appeared to be the way to integrate schools. In 1968 African Americans and Mexican Americans in Corpus Christi joined together in a suit against the practice of busing Mexican children to predominantly black schools to achieve integration, while leaving predominantly white schools alone. School officials used the argument that Mexicans were Caucasian to justify grouping black and Hispanic children to achieve integration. But the judge in the case ruled that Mexican Americans were “an identifiable, ethnic-minority group” and that the Brown decision applied to Mexican American students in public schools. The Corpus Christi case coincided with the Chicano movement’s evocation of “la raza,” signifying their rejection of a white racial identity and embracing their mestizo heritage.

So what became of the promise of black–brown cooperation and collaboration in the years after World War II when Mexican and African Americans borrowed from each other’s case law to end school segregation and jury discrimination? This is a complicated question and there is no easy answer. One is struck by the possibilities for meaningful collaboration and the failed promise of two very different civil rights activists, Thurgood Marshall and George I. Sánchez. They communicated by letter a few times and offered each other support and assistance, but their brief exchange of letters bore little fruit. A. L. Wirin, the activist ACLU lawyer from Los Angeles who submitted an amicus brief in the Méndez
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case, even suggested to Sánchez that LULAC file an amicus brief in the Heman Sweatt case to desegregate the University of Texas Law School. Sánchez wrote back that he “would like to see an amicus brief developed along somewhat different lines from those forwarded by Thurgood Marshall.” In fact, however, Sánchez endorsed the logic of Marshall’s argument. It’s worth quoting in full how Sánchez’s thinking had evolved in this 1949 letter to Wirin, a year or two after the Delgado and Méndez desegregation cases and five years before Brown v. Board of Education:

In the first place, “equal protection” should go far beyond mere comparison of professors-books-buildings in law school. The comparison should be one which involves the whole of education that has been made available to the white law-school graduate and the whole of education available to the Negro. This would involve comparison of the entire common school program, the preparation of teachers, general college libraries, the pre-law programs, cultural entertainment and lecture programs, etc. Such a comparison would lead to the conclusion that equality would call for duplication all the way along the line – an impossibility since experts (not only in law but in the sciences and arts) cannot be duplicated. Furthermore, the whole idea of dichotomous education implies ostracism – and its whole spirit is based on the concept of inequality.37

Dichotomous education – segregation – does indeed imply ostracism, the “badge of inferiority” that Plessy v. Ferguson fraudulently claimed was a figment of the African American imagination. However different were their strategies for ending segregation, Mexican Americans and African Americans were determined to make the state acknowledge the badge of inferiority that segregation imposed, and end it in every town and city of every state.

Perhaps it was the narrow focus on legal strategy that made it improbable that Marshall and Sánchez, NAACP and LULAC, might work closely with each other. When Sánchez was told in 1953 that the outcome of the Brown case would be influenced by the Méndez and Delgado decisions, he declared:

There is no connection! Our cases really were on the “due process” clause [that segregation was] ("arbitrary, capricious") much more than on the equality . . . clause – whereas the present [Brown] cases attack the right of the states to legislate segregation (something which has never been done for Mexicans). Does one of the present cases attack Negro segregation where there is no law decreeing such segregation? Only in such a case would we be concerned.38

Sánchez was correct that African Americans were challenging a half-century old Supreme Court decision, whereas Mexican Americans merely challenged school district decisions to arbitrarily segregate Mexicans in the absence of state law. But this legal distinction misses the point that Sánchez himself made years earlier that the “whole spirit” of segregation “is based on the concept of inequality.”
The Politics of Desegregation

Perhaps the single greatest obstacle to Latina/o and black cooperation stemmed from the Mexican American insistence on a white racial identity. In 1958 George Sánchez wrote to the Director of the ACLU, Roger Baldwin, urging continued support for Mexican American civil rights activities: “Let us keep in mind that the Mexican-American can easily become the front-line defense of the civil liberties of ethnic minorities. The racial, cultural, and historical involvements in his case embrace those of all . . . other minority groups. Yet, God bless the law, he is ‘white’! So, the Mexican-American can be the wedge for broadening of civil liberties for others (who are not so fortunate as to be ‘white’ and ‘Christian’!).” He concluded, “I am sorry that Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP have not seen fit to consult with us in these matters.”

Perhaps Marshall had good reason not to. Marshall, after all, did not bless the law that granted white privilege to Mexican Americans but denied it to blacks; nor could he bless a strategy that opposed segregation on the narrow legal ground that Mexicans could not be segregated from other whites.

In more recent times the possibilities for collaboration and cooperation, at least in the political sphere, seem remote. Tension between blacks and Latinas/os surfaced in the mayoral election in Los Angeles in 2001 when African Americans joined ranks with Anglos to elect James Hahn over Antonio Villaraigosa, the former speaker of the California state assembly, thus denying Latinas/os the opportunity to have a Mexican American mayor for the first time since the nineteenth century. It was an especially bitter loss because Latinas/os constitute 45 percent of the population compared to 11 percent for African Americans. Four years later, however, Villaraigosa defeated Hahn decisively, in large part because of Hahn’s extreme unpopularity and the ongoing investigation of corruption during his term, but also because Villaraigosa ran in 2005 as a non-ideological pan-ethnic who played down his ethnic roots and won the support of the African American community. It is too early to predict if this election represents a meaningful political realignment of Latinas/os, Anglos, and African Americans in the nation’s second largest city.

Historically, the Méndez case reminds us of the profound impact World War II had on the civil rights agendas of Jews, Japanese, Latinas/os, and African Americans, and their willingness to forge interracial alliances to win important desegregation cases. Yet it is also true that while they shared the common goal of ending discrimination based on racial identity, tensions nevertheless developed over the most effective political and legal strategies to pursue, given underlying differences in ethnic and racial identity, past history, level of assimilation, and organizational strength. The failed promise of close collaboration and sustained cooperation between George I. Sánchez and Thurgood Marshall reveals why such interracial alliances are rare and difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances.

A few years ago the NAACP and LULAC formally announced their intention to work together on civil rights and human rights issues, including the divisive issue of Mexican immigration. In 2002, for the first time in the long history of
both organizations, the President of LULAC was invited to address the NAACP at its national convention “to explore new strategic alliances” between the two organizations; and in 2006 the President of the NAACP was invited to address the annual convention of LULAC, rallying the attendees under the banner of “Afro Americano y Latina/o Juntos!” – “Black and Brown Together!”

How precisely blacks and Latinas/os propose to come together over issues of de facto school segregation, school financing, immigration, criminal justice reform, racial profiling, affirmative action, and other issues, is still very much an open question.

Notes


7 Ibid.


9 Ibid.

10 See, for example, Summer Welles to W. Lee O’Daniel, Decimal File, 811.4016/304, State Department, Record Group 59, National Archives, College Park, MD.

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16 Quoted in ibid, p. 81.


20 Quoted in ibid, p. 403.


22 Motion and Brief of Amicus Curiae NAACP at 9, *Westminster Sch. Dist. v. Méndez*, 161 F.2d 774 (9th Cir. 1947) (No. 11310).

23 Ibid.

24 UN Charter art. 55, para. c.


27 *Méndez v. Westminster Sch. Dist.*, 64 F. Supp. 544, 549 (O. Cal. 1946), aff’d, 161 F.2d 774 (9th Cir. 1947).


29 Complaint to Enjoin Violation of Federal Civil Rights and for Damages, in the United States District Court for the Western District of Texas, Box 79, Folder 4, Sánchez Papers.


31 Thurgood Marshall to George I. Sánchez, July 1, 1948, Box, 24, Folder 8, Sánchez Papers.

32 George I. Sánchez to Thurgood Marshall, July 6, 1948, Box 24, Folder 8, Sánchez Papers.

33 *Pete Hernández v. State of Texas*, Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, No. 25,816 (1952), Opinion by Judge Davidson at 6. No one has done more to promote scholarship on this important case than Michael A. Olivas (ed.), “Colored Men” and “Hombres Aquí”: *Hernández v. Texas and the Emergence of Mexican-American Lawyering* (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2006).


35 *Hernández v. Texas*, 251 S.W. 2d 531, rev’d, 347 US 475 (1954). Justice Warren also cited an earlier case, *Hirabayashi v. United States*, 320 US 81 (1943), in which a Japanese American was indicted for failing to comply with curfew laws imposed on citizens of Japanese ancestry: “Distinctions between citizens solely because of their ancestry are by their very nature odious to a free people whose institutions are founded upon the doctrine of equality.”

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37 George I. Sánchez to A. L. Wirin, November 18, 1949, Box 62, Folder 15, Sánchez Papers (underlining in original).
38 George I. Sánchez to A. L. Wirin, October 14, 1953, Box 62, Folder 18, Sánchez Papers.
39 George I. Sánchez to Roger N. Baldwin, August 27, 1958, Box 31, Folder 8, Sánchez Papers (emphasis in the original).
PART FIVE

Mestizaje: Revisiting Race
In this essay my primary focus is to examine the mestizo heritage of Mexican Americans. I begin with a brief overview of the common racial history they share with other Latina/o groups. As part of this analysis, I examine the Indian, Black, and White racial heritage of Mexican Americans and explore why their mixed racial background placed them in a legally ambiguous position after the United States acquired from Mexico the present American Southwest in 1848. Specific attention is placed on the era of de jure segregation, as judicial cases on anti-miscegenation illustrate that until the 1960s within the governmental bureaucracy of the United States, the Mexican Americans’ multiracial ancestry became the legal basis to ascribe them different legal rights.

Mexican Americans’ indigenous racial mixture and their longstanding presence in the American Southwest distinguishes them apart from other Latina/o groups. Nonetheless, Latinas/os in the United States share a multiracial heritage shaped by the experience of having been conquered by Spain. Latinas/os descend from three races: Indians, Whites, and Blacks (Aguirre Beltrán 1989; Haslip-Viera 2001; Menchaca 2001). Latinas/os, however, differ in the racial make-up of their ethnic group’s blood-quantum mixture, as the Spanish colonial history of each Latin American country shaped the racial composition of the countries from which Latinas/os originated. For example, Mexican Americans and Guatemalan Americans descend primarily from Indians and Spaniards due to their ancestral countries’ restricted participation in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Spain’s dependence on Indian labor. In both countries, the Catholic Church’s lobbying efforts against slavery served to limit the number of imported slaves. By the early 1630s the slave trade had nearly ceased. Spain’s dependence on Indian labor, on the other hand, encouraged Spaniards to colonize and acculturate Indians, resulting in the survival of many indigenous cultures, many of whom intermarried with Spaniards. In Mexico, this miscegenation led to grand-scale mestizaje (Spanish–Indian ancestry), while in Guatemala miscegenation was not...
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as common and the *mestizaje* process proceeded primarily through forms of acculturation. Furthermore, in Mexico, in the aftermath of the slave trade, the Church set in motion legal procedures to ensure that the children of enslaved Black males and Indian women would be born free, and thereby created the social conditions that released from servitude future generations of mixed race *afromestizos*. By 1650, Spanish censuses indicate that 85 percent of the African-descent population was free (Meyer et al. 2003: 203).

In contrast with indigenous groups in Mexico and Guatemala, those in Puerto Rico and Cuba had been nearly destroyed by the mid-sixteenth century, thus thwarting large-scale Spanish–Indian intermarriage (Wilson 1999). To replace the indigenous labor force, African slaves were introduced in mass numbers. Eventually, this influenced the racial composition of both countries, producing populations that were of mixed African and Spanish descent. Unlike Mexico, however, during the seventeenth century the free Black population was numerically low. In the Dominican Republic, African slaves were also imported on a grand scale. Since the indigenous populations were not destroyed until the mid-seventeenth century, Spaniards and Blacks were able to mix with the Indians and produce groups with a multiracial heritage. Other countries in Latin America parallel these examples, yet each country’s racial composition is dependent upon governments’ historical involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, emancipation laws following independence from Spain, and the policies practiced towards the Indians (i.e., acculturation; extermination).

Culturally, Mexican Americans are predominantly a *mestizo* people, with indigenous roots in the American Southwest and Mexico. Many descend from Southwestern American Indian tribes colonized by the Spanish, beginning in 1598. The main groups colonized by Spain, and later Mexico, include Coahuiltecans and Apache communities in Texas; Pueblos in New Mexico; Pima Indians of the Santa Cruz and San Pedro valleys in Arizona; and Chumash, Gabrileño, Luiseno, and groups of Yuma Indians in California. The American Indian ancestry of the Mexican Americans was an outcome of intermarriage, as well as the forced conversion of entire communities incorporated through war, co-optation, or treaty. This heritage is a historical feature that also distinguishes Mexican Americans from other Latina/o groups.

Although Mexican Americans are predominantly a *mestizo* people, the free legal status accorded to the children of enslaved Black males and Indian women produced a large free Black population that joined the northward migrations into the Southwest. Spanish censuses indicate that in 1793, 30 percent of the colonists in Texas were of African descent (Tjarks 1974: 325) and in California around 20 percent (Cook and Borah 1974: 220; Forbes 1966: 11). Few *afromestizos* settled in Arizona and in New Mexico during the Spanish period. In New Mexico, however, families were dispersed in 76 settlements, with the largest concentration in Santa Fe (Olmstead 1981). In these two territories the demographic size of the mixed population is uncertain, as many local censuses omitted racial categories. In 1821 the enumeration of *afromestizos* throughout the Southwest...
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became more difficult to document, as when Mexico obtained independence from Spain, the new government ordered that racial categories be omitted from censuses. Only the Indians associated with the missions were to be enumerated by tribal or linguistic affiliation.

The ancestors of the Mexican Americans became the first Latinas/os to become politically incorporated within the United States. Between 1845 and 1854 the United States government acquired Mexico’s northern frontier through annexation, conquest, and purchase. In the four border states of Texas, California, New Mexico, and Arizona, the former Spanish and Mexican governments established many communities inhabited by colonists and local indigenous populations. Excluding Puerto Ricans, other Latina/o groups did not establish their roots in United States soil until the 1960s and 1980s. Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States in 1898, and the migration of Puerto Ricans to the US mainland ensued thereafter.

Racialization

When the United States acquired Mexico’s northern frontier, the multiracial ancestry of the conquered Mexicans placed them in an ambiguous social and legal position (see Menchaca 2001). In the US government bureaucracy it became unclear whether Mexicans were to be given the citizenship rights of White citizens as agreed upon by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty brought closure to the Mexican American War of 1848 and it stipulated the political rights of the Mexican population. The United States government agreed in the treaty that Mexicans living in the annexed territories would be incorporated with all the rights of citizens, including keeping title to the land they owned. Within a year of the treaty’s ratification, the United States government violated the citizenship stipulation and began a process of racialization that ascribed to Mexicans different legal rights on the basis of race. Mexicans who were White were given full legal citizenship, while mestizos, Christianized Indians, and afromestizos were accorded inferior legal rights. Prior to the Mexican–American War, Mexico had abolished slavery and extended citizenship to all people living in Mexican territory irrespective of race.

Instead, the US Congress gave the governments of the ceded territories and states the right to determine the Mexicans’ citizenship status. This move had a severe impact on Mexicans because legislators argued that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was unclear as to whether Mexicans of Indian descent should be treated as American Indians, and thus denied citizenship. Congress also barred afromestizos from obtaining citizenship, given that they were Black and also of Indian descent. In California and Arizona, citizenship was only extended to White males. In New Mexico, the Mexican-controlled territorial legislature extended citizenship to all former citizens of Mexico, including Indians and Blacks. However, in 1853, Congress rescinded this decree and denied Indians and Blacks citizenship.
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In Texas, US citizenship was extended to Mexicans as long as they were not of Black descent and they had resided in Texas prior to 1836. Indians who had been Christianized and paid taxes were also extended citizenship without the right to vote. Mexicans entered a new racial order in which their civil rights were limited and were determined by their blood quantum.

Mexican *Mestizos* and Tribal Indians

In the first years after American occupation, the governments of the Southwest politically distinguished people of indigenous descent based on their political affiliations. Spanish-speaking *mestizos* residing in the main colonial towns were assumed to be Mexican and were therefore exempt from federal Indian policies (Haas 1995; Menchaca 2001). Indians who had never been conquered by the Spanish or Mexican governments were placed in reservations or chased out of the Southwest. They were politically labeled warlike, and if they refused to surrender they could be killed. Indians who were peaceful and lived in villages were visited by an agent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to determine if they should be extended the legal rights of Mexican *mestizos*. To determine whether a community was Mexican, agents were sent to investigate if the residents were governed by a tribal council. Peaceful communities that had retained a tribal government were classified as Indian, rather than Mexican (e.g., Tiwa of Ysleta, Pueblo, Chumash). State and territorial governments were then instructed to implement peaceful governance policies and decide if such people were to be allowed to remain in their villages or dispersed to other places (Dale 1951; Heizer and Almquist 1977). States and territories could relocate them in reservations or merely take their land and force them to find shelter. Individuals who lived outside of an Indian community and were detribalized, but were culturally identifiably Indian, were also declared by the federal government to be part of the peaceful Indian populations. Their governance was turned over to the states and territories. The legislatures were given the power to determine if detribalized Indians were to be granted the political rights of Mexican *mestizos* (see *Suñol v. Hepburn*, 1850).

After American occupation, there was a major advantage for Indians who had formerly been colonized by Spain and Mexico to be politically identified as Mexican, regardless of the fact that not all Mexicans had been given citizenship. For example, only Mexicans and Anglo-Americans were allowed to certify their land grants under US law. This was a significant advantage for Mexicans, as most were not displaced from their homes. Excluding the Pueblo of New Mexico, most Indians living in former Mexican municipalities lost their property to the US government. Mexicans also did not have to fear being placed in reservations. For example, in California after thousands of Christian Indians were left home- less due to their inability to confirm their Mexican land grants, the California Legislature decreed in the Act of 1860 that, if an Anglo-American complained
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going against the moral or public behavior of an Indian (that is, loitering, strolling, or begging), that person could be imprisoned and sold at auction (see Heizer and Almquist 1977). And, in 1898, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Wong Kim Ark v. US* that the Fourteenth Amendment had given citizenship to all racial minorities born in the United States, this privilege was denied to Indians.

The Era of *de jure* Segregation and Anti-Miscegenation Laws

Whereas Indians benefited from being legally classified Mexican, it was politically dangerous for Mexicans to be considered Indian. Likewise, it was politically dangerous for Mexicans of African descent to publicly acknowledge their African heritage, because in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico they would lose their right to confirm their Mexican land grants, and they could also be placed under the legal codes governing African Americans (Menchaca 2001).

During the era of *de jure* segregation (1896–1954), dark-complexioned Mexicans became vulnerable to Jim Crow laws. Under the landmark segregationist ruling *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) the US Supreme Court stipulated that each state had the right to select the groups to be segregated and to determine who was White and non-White for purposes of segregation. Because the court gave the states these rights, Mexican Americans of color fell under Plessy when state bureaucrats chose to do so. Following Plessy, Mexican-origin people were segregated in the schools of California, Texas, and Arizona (González 1990; Valencia et al. 2002). In the case of California, anthropologists Robert Álvarez and Paul Espinoza documented the complicated and convoluted strategies used by school districts to segregate Mexican students of different races. Focusing on Robert Álvarez’s family history in Lemon Grove, Álvarez and Espinoza demonstrated how in 1931 the Lemon Grove School Board used race and ethnicity to segregate all Mexican students apart from Anglo-American students (Álvarez 1986; Espinoza 1985). The Lemon Grove School Board treated the Latin appearance of Mexican students as a non-White racial category in means of finding a legal rationale to segregate Mexican students of different races (*Roberto Álvarez v. Lemon Grove School District*, 1931). In Texas, California, and Colorado the states also passed laws to prevent dark-complexioned Mexicans from swimming in pools with Whites (*López v. Seccombe*, 1944; *Lueras v. Town of Lafayette*, 1937; *Terrell Wells Swimming Pool v. Rodriguez*, 1944).

Anti-miscegenation court cases further reveal how the Mexican American’s blood quantum placed them in different legal categories. In California, Texas, and Arizona Mexicans who phenotypically appeared to be White or Black were prohibited from marrying freely. In Arizona, mestizos and Indians were also included within the anti-miscegenation codes. Racial bans were enforced even when Mexican Americans chose to marry other co-ethnics. Anti-miscegenation laws began in Texas after Anglo-Americans obtained independence from Mexico.
in 1836. One year later, on June 5, 1837, people of European blood and their descendants were prohibited from marrying Africans and their descendants (Rep. of Tex. Laws, Marital Rights art. 4670, 2466, in Paschal 1878: 783). A racially mixed person could marry a White person if they had no African ancestors in the last three generations. For Mexicans, the era of marrying freely ended, as their blood quantum determined who they could marry.

In California, the first anti-miscegenation law was passed in 1850 (Act of 1850, ch. 35, sec. 3, in Compiled Laws of California 1850–1853, pp. 175–6). Indians and mestizos were allowed to marry any race, but Whites were prohibited from marrying negroes and mulattos. To be considered White, a person had to be less than one-half Indian or less than one-eighth negro. It was necessary for the legislature to draft blood quantum policies immediately after the Mexican–American War, as the Mexican population was racially diverse and laws were needed to determine who could marry Anglo-Americans.

Arizona passed its first anti-miscegenation law in 1865, two years after the federal government gave Arizona separate territorial status (Ch. 30, sec. 3, in Acts, Res. and Mem., Sec. Leg. Ass., Terr. of Ariz., 1866, p. 58). From 1848 to 1863, Arizona had been governed by the laws of New Mexico and was unable to enact racial marriage prohibitions. When it retained constitutional independence it chose to prohibit Whites from marrying negroes, mulattos, Indians, and Mongolians. As time passed, Arizona continued to add groups to the prohibited marriageable classes, including mestizos. Throughout its history, New Mexico chose not to pass anti-miscegenation laws (Marriages LXXII, New Mexico Statutes Annotated 2nd Session of the Legislature 1915, pp. 996–1000; Shapiro 1998).

By the turn of the twentieth century, judges in Texas acknowledged that due to the mixed heritage of Mexican Americans, anti-miscegenation laws could potentially prohibit them from marrying within their descent group. At that time, however, this was not considered to be a constitutional violation. The first judicial court case addressing this problem was deliberated in Texas and exemplifies the different legal categories Mexican Americans were assigned on the basis of race. In 1909 two Mexican Americans were arrested for breaking Texas’s anti-miscegenation statute (State v. Flores, 1909). F. Flores, a Mexican immigrant, married Ellen Dukes, a dark-complexioned Mexican American who was a native of San Antonio. After they married, they were arrested and Flores was convicted by the District Court of Angelina County for unlawfully marrying a “negro woman.” He was sentenced to two years in the penitentiary. On June 22, 1910, Flores appealed to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals under the basis of procedural errors committed by the district court. In Flores v. The State (1910) his attorney was able to prove that the state had failed to conduct a genealogical study of the couple, as required by law, and had relied solely on eyewitness opinions charging Ellen was Black. This was a serious procedural error because in Texas, Mexicans of mixed-African descent were allowed to marry Whites if within their descent group no one had married a Black person in the last three generations. Although presiding Judge Davidson rescinded Flores’s prison sentence, he did
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not validate their marriage. Davidson reversed part of the district court’s ruling because the lower court had not conducted a genealogical study. This was necessary because Ellen’s parents were relatively light-complexioned Mexicans, and there was uncertainty as to the degree of the family’s African blood quantum. The judge, however, refused to uphold the couple’s right to marry because Ms. Duke was clearly not White. Thus, the Flores case is significant as it illustrates the racialization process and demonstrates that when Mexican Americans were of African descent, they were assigned the legal rights of African Americans.

In the early twentieth century, cases involving Mexican Americans also appeared in front of Arizona courts. However, unlike Texas, the state supreme court justices acknowledged that cases involving mixed-Caucasian Mexican Americans did introduce Fourteenth Amendment constitutional violation questions, as people were prohibited from marrying within their own ethnic group. Before proceeding with the cases, we need to examine immigration events that influenced the inclusion of mestizos within Arizona’s anti-miscegenation codes.

In 1910, thousands of Mexican immigrants entered the Southwest in an attempt to flee their country’s civil war. Three years later the Arizona Legislature revised its anti-miscegenation statute and reworded it so that it applied to Mexican Americans. In 1913, Arizona’s Civil Code 3837 stipulated: “All marriages of persons of Caucasian blood, and their descendants, with negroes, Mongolians or Indians, and their descendants shall be null and void” (Kirby v. Kirby, 1922: 10).

By extending the prohibition against interracial marriage to descendants of “persons of Caucasian blood” and to descendants of “negroes, Mongolians or Indians,” the legislature prohibited people of mixed ancestry, such as Mexican Americans, from marrying anyone, including other co-ethnics. That is, because Mexican Americans descended from Whites, they could not legally marry any other race. Likewise, because they also descended from Indians and Blacks, they could not marry Whites or anyone of that descent.

The revision was aimed at Mexican-origin people, because other groups of color were already included, and the legislation was passed during a peak period of Mexican immigration to Arizona. Due to large waves of immigration between 1900 and 1920, the Mexican-origin population in Arizona grew by 70 percent, and by 1930 the US Census identified 98 percent of Arizona’s Mexican immigrants to be non-White (US Census 1902: 61; US Census 1922: 309; US Census 1933: 84, 90, 135). Thus, by passing a mixed-Caucasian anti-miscegenation provision, Arizona ensured that people of Mexican ancestry would also remain apart from Anglo-Americans. However, the spirit of the law had been drafted in such convoluted language that its restrictions were absurd and potentially unconstitutional.

Marriage in Arizona

In 1922, Kirby v. Kirby introduced the legal arguments to challenge Arizona’s mixed-Caucasian statute. It was defeated, however, because in Arizona a Black
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person of mixed descent was legally a “negro,” and a legal challenge to Arizona’s mixed-Caucasian statute could not be raised by such people. This case, nonetheless, led the path to striking down the absurdness of prohibiting people of the same ethnicity from marrying each other. Likewise, it initiated a governmental initiative to legally define which races could be considered mixed-Caucasian in Arizona.

In *Kirby v. Kirby* a Mexican American woman named Mayleen Kirby challenged the constitutionality of the statute when she appealed her case to the Arizona Supreme Court. Mayleen’s dilemma began after Joe Kirby, her husband of seven years and also a Mexican American, demanded an annulment. Joe asked the District Court of the County of Pima to annul his marriage because Mayleen had concealed that she had African blood. He was given an annulment and Mayleen appealed to the Arizona Supreme Court. At trial, Joe testified he was Caucasian, and presented witnesses to corroborate his statement. Among them was his Mexican immigrant mother, who testified in Spanish that in her blood line there was no Indian blood. In addition, she assured the court that although Joe did not know his father’s family, they were Irish. Mayleen’s attorneys challenged the mother’s claim and argued both spouses were the children of mixed-heritage Mexican immigrants. To support their claim, they proved Joe and Mayleen were both of Spanish descent and Joe at most was one-quarter Spanish (Pascoe 2000). Mayleen’s attorneys then introduced a constitutional challenge to Arizona’s mixed-Caucasian provision. They argued that people who were nearly White were denied their constitutional rights as White Americans and were unfairly treated as non-Whites. They further argued that the statute was absurd, as under the law mixed-Caucasians, such as Mexicans, were prohibited from marrying anyone, including co-ethnics. In the end, the justices upheld the lower court’s opinion and ruled Mayleen was clearly Black and could not be married to Joe. They acknowledged, however, that Arizona’s anti-miscegenation law may be unconstitutional, and if the question was raised by someone who was not Black, the statute could be challenged.

Twenty years later, in *State of Arizona v. Frank Pass* (1942), the Arizona Supreme Court was once again confronted with the question whether Arizona’s anti-miscegenation statute was constitutional. This time the justices offered an empathetic opinion, as the case involved two individuals who were both Mexican American and their different Indian blood quantum became the basis of banning their marriage. The case involved Frank Pass, who had been convicted by the Superior Court of the County of Maricopa for the murder of Sai Hon Ong. The principal witness against Frank was his wife, Ruby Contreras. Frank appealed the decision to the Supreme Court of Arizona on the grounds that the superior court judge had unlawfully nullified his marriage to force his wife to testify. The marriage had been dissolved because although both were the children of White Mexican immigrants, Frank was a mixed-Caucasian because his mother was of partial Piaute descent. In Arizona a person of mixed Indian descent could not marry anyone. Likewise, because Ruby appeared to be White she could only marry a White person. The court in its final ruling offered a liberal opinion
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that paved the road for legislative revisions. Although the judges upheld the lower court’s decision because no procedural errors had been committed, they acknowledged that Arizona’s anti-miscegenation statute was illogical and must be revised by the legislature. The way the law was written prohibited mixed-Caucasians from marrying anyone in Arizona.

Within a few months of the Pass ruling, the Arizona legislature held several emergency sessions to ensure Arizona’s anti-miscegenation statute was made constitutional. To do so, the language of the law had to be revised to allow mixed-Caucasians to marry. Prior to reforming the law, however, the legislature had to first agree upon two questions: (1) what races constitute a mixed-Caucasian in Arizona? and (2) is a White person solely of the Caucasian race? (Hardaway 1986). On the first issue, the legislature concurred a mixed-Caucasian in Arizona was a person of Indian and Caucasian descent with no negro, Hindu, Malay, or Mongolian blood. However, the legislature could not agree upon whether mixed-Caucasians with a low percentage of Indian blood could be classified as White and instead chose to leave the question unresolved. In an unprecedented move, on April 28, 1942 the legislators compromised and removed mixed-Caucasians and Indians from the statute (Ariz. Code of 1939, sec. 63–107, ch. 12, sec. 1, sec. 2., in Acts, Mem., and Res. of the Reg. Sess., 16th Leg. of the State of Ariz., 1943, p. 465). The revisions thus addressed the constitutional dilemma raised by Frank Pass by allowing the descendants of Native Americans and Mexican Americans to marry freely as long as they were only of Indian or Spanish descent. People of African and Asian descent continued to be prohibited from marrying Whites. Malays and Hindus who had been previously added to Arizona’s anti-miscegenation statute were also not released from the mandate. Certainly, the aftermath of the Pass decision was a liberal triumph. On the other hand, however, it speaks to the ideological contempt legislators displayed towards other races (see Haney-Lopez 1996). Mexican Americans like Mayleen remained part of the populations who were perceived by the legislature to be unworthy of marrying Whites.

Desegregation Movements and the End of Anti-Miscegenation Laws

Social movements to desegregate the United States began at the end of World War II, when the United States celebrated the defeat of Hitler’s Aryan philosophy of racial superiority. Unfortunately, when American soldiers of color returned home, their state governments continued to deny them equal rights and supported the social segregation of their families (Menchaca 1995). Likewise, by the late 1940s, 31 states of the original 38 that had passed anti-miscegenation legislation retained their racially discriminatory marriage codes (Sickels 1972: 63). California, Arizona, and Texas were among the states that had not revoked their marriage laws.
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During the postwar era, international pressure influenced the federal government to also take a position against segregation. Hoping to reshape the postwar world in its own democratic image, the federal government was confronted with international disapproval over its segregative system. In particular, during the early Cold War, the Soviet Union gained an enormous propaganda advantage in calling attention to segregation in America. The Soviet’s critique was troublesome and embarrassing and threatened American foreign policy. To promote democracy and to contain communism abroad, the federal government was pressured to begin the desegregation of the military branch. On July 2, 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order No. 9981, ending racial segregation in the armed forces, and called upon Congress to pass federal laws to ensure equal opportunity in employment (Powell 1998: 9, 15). Although the desegregation of the armed forces was of monumental symbolic significance, it did not move Congress to end legalized racism in the United States. Racial divisions persisted.

Civil rights organizations, however, actively challenged segregation. Organizations established by racial minorities such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the League of United Latin American Citizens concentrated on school segregation and employment discrimination, whereas anti-miscegenation challenges were spearheaded by religious organizations and the American Civil Liberties Union (Pitti 2003; Sickels 1972).

Mexican American students and other Latinas/os were finally removed from mandated *de jure* segregation between 1947 and 1954. And in 1954 *de jure* segregation in schools ended when the United States Supreme Court ruled “separate and equal” was unconstitutional in *Brown v. the Educational Board of Topeka*. By the early 1960s the civil rights movement gained momentum to desegregate America. Demonstrations, rallies, marches, and sit-ins against segregation became common occurrences in cities across America, as well as on college campuses. In response to such action, the US Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, religion, and national origin. With respect to marriage, in 1967 the United States Supreme Court ruled that the states had the power to “police” marriage contracts, but could no longer prohibit Whites from marrying people of different races (Sickels 1972: 62).

Complicating *Mestizaje*

Once the legal infrastructure of racism in America was struck a major blow, for Mexican Americans it was no longer necessary to shield themselves from the legal burdens associated with being of color in America. In response to this cultural tolerance, during the 1960s, Mexican American social activists joined the civil rights movement and organized the Chicano movement to address their particular social, economic, and political needs. Within the Chicano movement,
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artists and poets established a cultural agenda to analyze, recover, and understand their indigenous heritage. In particular the concept of Aztlan became one of the most important political and cultural symbols of the movement. Aztlan was used to instill in people racial pride in their brown heritage and create a common sense of peoplehood that could be used for collective political action. Ironically, a similar sentiment was not expressed toward their African heritage, either within academic circles or popular culture. Only recently have Mexican American scholars begun to complicate the meaning and history of mestizaje by decentering their analysis from the Spanish/Indio dichotomy and expanding it to be more inclusive of events that produce different regional experiences and identities based on race, gender, and social class.

Notes

1 In 1880, California legislators added Mongolians to its groups of people prohibited from marrying Whites, and Filipinos in 1930.
2 In California the marriage blood quantum formula was retained until 1948. See Pérez v. Sharp (1948). California’s anti-miscegenation law was declared unconstitutional by the California Supreme Court after Andrea Pérez, a Mexican American, challenged the constitutional nature of the statute (The Open Forum, ACLU, October 16, 1948: 1). Andrea Pérez had been prohibited by the Los Angeles County Clerk from marrying an African American because she was part of the Mexican population whose Indian blood quantum was less than one-half Indian. The California Supreme Court ruled that because the Catholic Church historically had not sanctioned interracial marriages and Andrea was a Catholic she had not been allowed to participate fully in the sacramental life of her religion. This was a constitutional violation.
3 In 1935 a federal report commissioned by the President’s Research Committee found that out of the 1.5 million US residents of Mexican descent, only 65,000 (4 percent) were White (President’s Research Committee 1935: 561).

References

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Looking at that Middle Ground: Racial Mixing as Panacea?

Miriam Jiménez Román

A few years ago, I was walking down New York’s Columbus Avenue when a life-sized advertisement at a bus stop brought me to a halt: a smiling, brown-skinned girl flaunted a tight pair of blue jeans below a grammatically incorrect but nonetheless eloquent caption: “I can’t be prejudice, I’m mulatto.” I was immediately reminded of a day twenty years ago when I looked out on the natural wonder that is Varadero and listened as a proud Cuban described the crowded beach as a revolutionary achievement. Antes del triunfo, he explained; the beach had been racially segregated – los negros no podian disfrutarla – but now anyone could enjoy it. And yes, although he had to admit that Cuba was still plagued by “vestiges” of the old racial order, this would soon be a thing of the past thanks to the widespread mixing that was taking place in the country. With time, he assured me, everyone would be mulatica, como tú, and el prejuicio would be completely eradicated. For both my revolutionary Cuban friend and a wishfully trendy Madison Avenue, racial mixture is presented as a social panacea.

On the face of it, the jeans advertisement would seem to support recent claims by a number of observers of a shift in the United States’ understanding of race and a growing acceptance of racial mixture. The past decade or so has seen an unprecedented engagement with “race” as an idea that no longer carries any “real” social currency. At every level – from the most prosaic of newscasts to the lecture halls of academia – one hears of the death knell of the biological basis of “race.” Assurances that “the idea of race itself is now coming under attack by science” are given by Newsweek, citing the findings of a 1989 survey in which approximately “70 percent of cultural anthropologists, and half of physical anthropologists, reject race as a biological category.” Its demise is heralded in the edited volume The Retreat of Scientific Racism, where Elazar Barkan argues that now that “racial differences are viewed in cultural terms, not biological, xenophobia has become more egalitarian, and the strife is no longer waged in the name of superiority” (Barkan 1992: xii). Race theorist David Theo Goldberg (1995: 237)
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begins an essay by asserting that belief in the notion of “racial purity is a thing of the past,” while in the preface to Racial Conditions, Howard Winant (1994: xiii) declares that “biologistic theories of race no longer retain even minimal credibility.” Indeed, in our times, the mantra-like “race is a social construct” seems to preface almost every serious discussion about race in the United States; it is accompanied by both scholarly and popular invocations regarding the benefits of hybridity – in everything from food products to artistic expression – and multi . . . well, whatever, is touted as desirable. Purity is out; mixture is in.

Claims regarding the death of biological race are invariably linked to changing demographics in the United States, which are making it “the World’s First Multicultural Society.” Even amid complaints from some quarters that the racial discourse continues to be dominated by the Black/White divide, the “new” racial and ethnic diversity of the country insinuates itself, suggesting to many the inevitability of new paradigms for addressing it. The country’s racial heterogeneity, a result of the growing numbers in Asian and Latin American immigration, and to a lesser extent, of interracial marriage, is signaled as both threat and promise – threat to White dominance and promise of racial harmony.

With increasing frequency what has long been referred to as the “Latin American model” of race relations is being proposed as the potential solution to racial division, the underlying message being that Latina/os, in all their racial diversity, have managed to avoid racial discord. Indeed, the very language of the jeans ad mentioned above – with its substitution of the word “prejudiced” for “racist,” and use of “mulatto,” a term that fell into official disuse in this country more than fifty years ago – would suggest that we are moving toward a new racial order, one in which the Black/White polarity that has long defined the United States is being “challenged” by a more fluid understanding of race, and possibly its elimination. Latina/os are constructed as the main embodiment of racial mixture and as the carriers of a framework of theoretical legitimacy.

Latina/os and Latin Americans themselves have been among the most vocal in making this claim to racial exceptionalism, arguing not only that they do not “fit” into the “standard” racial categories, but also that any accommodation to such classifications spells political disaster. Thus philosopher Eduardo Mendieta (2000: 46) pronounces that due to widespread racial mixture Hispanics pose “a new American dilemma” and that “attempts to racialize Hispanics and Latina/os are both inimical to our historical experience and counterproductive to our political goals.” In this formulation Latina/os are configured as racially compromised subjects while simultaneously exempt from racial discourse. And yet, the most rudimentary examination of the history of the Americas makes it clear that Latina/os and Latin Americans have been racialized – both within their national boundaries and vis-à-vis the United States. This racialization is neither a matter of choice nor a new experience and its reach is global in scope.

The discourse of Latina/o exceptionalism, however, rests on a series of erroneous premises – that the Spanish were more “accepting” of racial difference, that they practiced a more “benign” form of slavery, and that their willingness to
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engage in sexual relations with Black and Indian women is both “unique” and “proof” of their greater racial tolerance, to name but a few – each building on the other to create a “model” that leaves us with more questions than answers. The pattern of circular reasoning is buttressed by little more than the very ethnocentrism it claims to reject: at any given moment Latina/os are either all – or at least mostly – racially “mixed” or they are multiracial, that is, to use the language of the US Census Bureau, “of any race.” In both cases, however, there is the presumption of the existence of “pure” races, either as the raw material for the present mixture among Latina/os and Latin Americans or as neutral social groupings with a racial perspective distinct from that of non-Latina/os and non-Latin Americans.

What appears as an oppositional stance, as a rejection of US values and standards, is actually one of conformity and accommodation to the same racial hierarchy. In this sense, the Latin American “perspective” bears striking similarity to the current call by neoconservative forces in the United States for a policy of “color blindness.” According to critics of affirmative action and set aside programs, “race” no longer matters or, at least, it should not, and racially based policies only serve to alienate whites and stigmatize the “others” it claims to benefit (Carter 1992; Schlesinger 1998; Steele 1990). Increasingly, antiracist policies and actions are viewed as the instigators of racial antagonism, the cause of racism and not the cure. That these views are so often phrased in the language of evenhandedness – and too often come from the lips and pens of African Americans, Latina/os and other minorities – only further confuses the issues. After all, on the face of it, how can one argue against the call for a nation that judges us solely on the “content of our character,” the title of Shelby Steele’s book condemning affirmative action for victimizing its beneficiaries; or with the stated goal of the neoconservative think tank, the Center for a New Black Leadership, to oppose “programs that distribute benefits and burdens on the basis of race”; or with the advice offered in an editorial in *The Economist*: “To the well-proved principle that separates church from state, another principle should be added. That is the separation of race and state”? But, just like the rhetoric of racial democracy, these ostensibly laudable sentiments only mask existing structural limitations and practical realities and reduce societal deficiencies to the level of individual failings.

The development of a racial “middle ground” in Latin America responded to the reality of the continent’s demographics. Colonial power rested in the hands of a small European elite and their overthrow came precisely because of the frustrated ambitions of the racialized *criollos*. The Independence Wars were waged by the numerically dominant *castas*, by those who, *by definition*, were not White. The nation-building projects of all the former colonies had necessarily to take into account the *coloredness* of their countries’ populations and to fashion an ideology that would rationalize the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the *criollo* elite, those who, like Simón Bolívar, identified as neither European nor Indian “but a species in between . . . challenging the natives for
title of possession, and upholding the country that saw us born against the opposition of the invaders” (cited in Alcoff 1995: 257). Romanticized notions of mestizaje absolved the new ruling class – those whose European cultural capital made them ostensibly “White enough” – from accountability for their appropriation of land and labor, even as they presented themselves as the embodiment of the potential rewards of blanqueamiento (whitening).8

From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, while the prevailing scholarly wisdom condemned racial mixture and the resulting “mongrelization” that would hinder modernity, Latin American ideologues provided their upper classes with an appropriate response to the positivist views that put into question their intellectual and cultural worth.9 None was more passionate in his defense of mestizaje than José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), writer, philosopher, and ideologue of Mexico’s ruling political party. In La raza cósmica, Vasconcelos explicitly contrasted “Latinism” with “Anglo-Saxonism,” as represented by the United States. Arguing that “the days of the pure whites, the victors of today, are as numbered as were the days of their predecessors,” Vasconcelos envisioned a “fifth race,” a “cosmic man,” as the mestizo ideal, one that would represent the highest achievement of the species by bringing together the very best attributes of all the races. His ostensibly anti-White project, however, places the evolutionary onus on Blacks and Indians who, for the good of humanity, must acquiesce to their “voluntary extinction.”

The lower types of the species will be absorbed by the superior type. In this manner, for example, the black could be redeemed, and step by step, by voluntary extinction, the uglier stocks will give way to the more handsome. Inferior races, upon being educated, would become less prolific, and the better specimens would go on ascending a scale of ethnic improvement, whose maximum type is not precisely the white, but that new race to which the white himself will have to aspire with the object of conquering the synthesis . . . . The Indian, by grafting onto the related race, would take the jump of millions of years . . . and in a few decades of aesthetic eugenics, the black may disappear, together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signaling as fundamentally recessive and undeserving, for that reason, of perpetuation. (Vasconcelos 1997: 32)

Responding to a “mandate from history,” the favored Latin will be guided by “love and a passion for beauty” in the creation of this “new type,” a task that Anglos are ill-equipped to carry out for they lack “in their blood the contradictory instincts of a mixture of dissimilar races, [having] committed the sin of destroying those races, while we assimilated them, and this gives us new rights and hopes for a mission without precedent in history” (Vasconcelos 1997: 17; emphasis in original). Even as Vasconcelos poses an essentialist distinction between Anglos and “Latinos,” one based on an instinctual relationship to the Other that permits mixture and thus the creation of a superior “new type,” he undermines this claim by exposing his true loyalties: Spain and her former colonies are presented as an indistinguishable “we.”10
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In his praise song to Spain, Vasconcelos’s idealized *mestizo* unequivocally privileges European notions of beauty. His racial utopia requires the elimination of Black and Indian peoples and the creation of a perfect type that is “not precisely white” – an “off-white,” if you will. Indeed, given his unequivocal defense of Spain and Catholicism as civilizing agents and his utter disregard of the socioeconomic stratification that condemned the vast majority of his fellow Mexicans/Latin Americans to abject poverty, Vasconcelos’s recipe for racial harmony is nothing if not self-serving. In the final analysis, those who already came closest to meeting the racial ideal envisioned by Vasconcelos were precisely those of his own class and sensibilities: almost White, Roman Catholic, and “educated.” An extension of the “species in between” argument offered by Bolívar a century earlier, Vasconcelos’s cosmic man is positioned to assume paternalistic leadership of the still insufficiently developed masses within Latin America and to stand as an equal – if not a superior – to Europeans and Americans (read White). And for everyone else, there’s the saving grace of past mixture and the hope of future total redemption.11

Vasconcelos’s evolutionary prescription for racial harmony continues to serve as inspiration for more recent engagements with the implications of occupying the racial “middle ground.” Wresting with the extremely complex issue of creating a new way for dispossessed peoples to imagine themselves, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa developed a theory of “*mestiza* consciousness” that comes perilously close to being the female counterpart to Vasconcelos’s “cosmic man.” In her frequently cited book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa (1987: 78–80) does her “own take off” on what she interprets as Vasconcelos’s “theory of inclusivity.” Like Vasconcelos, Anzaldúa condemns the notion of “racial purity that white America (read United States) practices.” Like Vasconcelos, she extols a racial mixture that “rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool.” Anzaldúa outlines a *mestiza* identity that is a “synthesis” of the disparate and multiple identities of the “mixed breed,” one in which “the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts.” A sentiment often voiced by advocates of the multiracial movement (“my child is not merely Black”), it suggests that the parts themselves – and those who embody less than the ideal mixture – are somehow deficient. At the same time Anzaldúa, like Vasconcelos, privileges those whose mixture, whether physical or cultural, is apparent. Clear evidence of hybridity thus becomes the benchmark for acceptability, the new privileged identity that continues, ultimately, to reify race and, by extension, hierarchy.

For Cuban American philosopher Jorge J. E. Gracia (2000: 120), Latina/o “identity cannot be understood apart from *mestizaje*.” Using Fernando Ortiz’s well-known *ajiaco* metaphor – in which he likens Cuban culture to a stew made of a variety of root vegetables and meats but in which each ingredient retains its own character – Gracia distinguishes *mestizaje* from homogenization and poses it as the opposite of purity. More significantly he insists on the reciprocal nature of *mestizaje*, that Spain – and Europe generally – was changed as much as
America by the “encounters.” But Gracia falls into the very cultural relativism he claims to be refuting when he writes that “Mestizaje can be egalitarian and self-assertive, and in fact it has been so in the Hispanic world in many cases, even if in Latin America it has been based, more often than not, on a sense of servitude and inferiority.” This is precisely the point: the racial mixture takes place within the context of social inequality. Amid all the glorification of mixture, some mixtures are valued more than others. And as in the ajiaco, some ingredients are more desirable than others.

Far from being distinctly “Latina/o,” a foreign notion to be counter-posed to the “Anglo,” the concern with mixture and its myriad physical representations is present in all racialized communities. Among Latin Americans and Latina/os, mestizaje – like colorism in the United States – is responsible for the assiduous attention paid to the phenotypical details that “expose” African “genes” and for the elaborate vocabulary that at once confers privilege and derides the subject under scrutiny. The conceptual distance between “high yellow” and “grifa” is truly insignificant and responds to the same historical privileging of certain physical characteristics over others. Among Hispanic Caribbeans this preoccupation with the evidence of African ancestry promotes the development of finely tuned skills for discerning the extent to which we are “Black behind the ears” (a popular Dominican expression) or are hiding a Black grandmother in the kitchen (the Puerto Rican equivalent: “Y tu abuela dónde está?”). In Latin American countries where indigenous peoples are a majority, we find a similar phenomenon: their position of “servitude and inferiority” has traditionally translated into a rejection of Indianness and the striving for the benchmark of full citizenship: Whiteness, or its approximation.

That racial mixture in itself is neither unique nor a sufficiently satisfying identity partially explains the recent Taíno revival movement among so many Puerto Ricans, the prototypical “rainbow people.” Since the late 1980s, a small but growing community of Puerto Ricans, overwhelmingly US-born, has been claiming Taíno identity, even though the historical record demonstrates conclusively that by the seventeenth century the indigenous people of Puerto Rico were no longer an identifiably distinct group. The new “Taínos” are the consequence of the official ideology of Puerto Rico which has constructed the nation as a blend of three “races” – Spanish, Taíno, and African – while simultaneously privileging the Spanish, romanticizing the indigenous, and begrudgingly (and selectively) referencing the African. In the context of more than 500 years of colonialism, the Taíno emerges as the most attractive identity.

Miscegenation is neither “new” to the United States nor does it present a “challenge” to White racial hegemony. Rather, today’s embrace of racial mixture is the most recent accommodation to historically recurring demographic shifts, a concession made precisely to ensure White supremacy. Recent scholarship has conclusively demonstrated the elasticity of racial definitions and how Whiteness and Blackness have been amenable to reconfiguration whenever politically
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expedient. But however elastic and fluid Whiteness and Blackness may appear, the “middle ground” that miscegenation seems to offer can never be neutral since it still depends on acceptance of a racial hierarchy predicated on presumed epistemological, aesthetic, and social values, themselves based on biological criteria. This is particularly important to keep in mind because the assertions of greater racial equality come at the same time that we are witnessing what Kimberlé Crenshaw (2001: 9) has called “Plessy-like reasoning,” an “in-your-face, no-doubt-about-it, smoking-rope brand of racism” that rationalizes social inequities in the name of color blindness. The so-called Latin American model does indeed appear to be taking root in the United States to the extent that it translates into the invisibility of those who are at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. It should be emphasized that the refusal to take race into account is not born of a humanitarian inclination to treat all peoples as equal; rather, it is a refusal to acknowledge the existence of racially constructed systems that produce and rationalize material inequality, and to then assume responsibility for correcting it.

What, in broad strokes, distinguished Latin America from the United States was not the occurrence of racial mixture but the social status accorded the offspring of such unions, and historically, even this difference has not been rigidly defined nor a constant. Crenshaw’s reference to Plessy v. Ferguson is especially noteworthy because it historicizes the shifts in racial definitions; it was not until 1896 – after two hundred years of widespread racial mixture and countless accommodations to the specific racial configurations present in any given place and time, and after Reconstruction threatened White hegemony – that the one-drop rule became codified. Indeed, there seems to have been considerably greater latitude regarding racial ambiguity, at least in conceptual terms, in the pre-Civil War period. Long before Vasconcelos offered up his “Latin” solution, for example, David Goodman Croly cynically proposed racial mixture as a viable path for the people of the United States. Writing in 1864, and making similar references to the dictates of history and destiny, Croly proposed that “all that is needed to make us the finest race on earth is to engrave upon our stock the negro element which providence has placed by our side on this continent.” While we may decry Croly’s motives and acknowledge that this was surely a minority opinion even among the country’s most liberal advocates of Black rights, his words suggest, at the very least, that such thinking was possible in an “Anglo” context. And it was possible precisely because racial mixture was everywhere apparent.

Even a cursory study of the history of the US Census impresses with the elaborate measures taken to identify the degrees of African ancestry discernible among slave and free Blacks. In 1850, for example, enumerators were instructed that “the color of all slaves should be noted” (Wright 1900: 153), a concern with specifics that continued after the abolition of slavery; in 1890, Census takers were still being told to “be particularly careful to distinguish between blacks, mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons” (ibid: 187). Significantly, by 1900 – the first Census after Plessy v. Ferguson – the federal government had reduced classifications to the five “races,” acknowledging no color distinctions among Blacks. As in all
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Racialized societies, the US has engaged in exercises of adjustment, repeatedly demonstrating a capacity for flexibility when the need arises.

In a similar vein, the common argument voiced by proponents of the Latin American model regarding the contextual nature of racial classification and the greater emphasis placed on class, echoes the words of one nineteenth-century South Carolina judge:

We cannot say what admixture of negro blood will make a colored person. The condition of the individual is not to be determined solely by distinct and visible mixture of negro blood, but by reputation, by his reception into society, and his having commonly exercised the privileges of a white man . . . It may be well and proper, that a man of worth, honesty, industry, and respectability, should have the rank of a white man, while a vagabond of the same degree of blood should be confined to the inferior caste. It is hardly necessary to say that a slave cannot be a white man. (Cited in Williamson 1980: 65)

The judge’s equating of Blackness with servitude, and Whiteness with free status, and all that each condition permits and circumscribes, has long been the guiding principal of racial ascription. In Latin America, the idea is captured in the expression “Money whitens.” At its most crass, this line of thought has made Haitians the only Black people on the island of Hispaniola, with Dominicans insisting they themselves are “indios.” But in its everyday, commonplace expression, to identify as White – or, at least, not Black – has been the only descriptor available for the assertion of one’s equality. Even when operating within the supposedly more fluid parameters of universal *mestizaje*, the preference for Whiteness, and all the social capital it contains or promises, remains unchanged.

The states of the lower South are frequently cited as anomalies to the one-drop rule but, in fact, throughout the United States, there have been communities of people of known mixed ancestry who have been rejected by Whites and have refused to be defined as Black, people who in practice have occupied a racial middle ground. But this interstitial social space has been a response to and, in fact, conceptually and practically dependent upon, the racial polarity it presumes to refute. The tendency has been to emphasize the “Latin-like tolerance” (Williamson 1980: 65) that characterized race relations in the lower South; a presumably foreign model is called upon to define a domestic (i.e., United States) reality and thus makes historically rooted manifestations appear as alien and disconnected from the real material conditions that shape all social relations.

The seeming convergence in racial ideology suggested by my opening reference to the blue jeans advertisement and the conversation on a Cuban beach is simply that: only appearance. “Convergence” implies the meeting of two distinct phenomena. To frame the discourse as one of “Anglo” as opposed to “Latin” sensibilities – as two distinct and disconnected paradigms – is to ignore the historical specificities that have produced enormous adaptations at local, national, and regional levels throughout the hemisphere over the course of the past five
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hundred years. What we are seeing today owes more to changing social and political factors in the United States than it does to any Latin influence brought over like so much enlightened cultural baggage from lands south of the border. The resilience of race is due to its very flexibility, its ability to adapt to changing social forces; such mutability defies geographic borders and cultural particularities.

The current race discourse continues to privilege the already privileged; not only does it obscure the complex social relations that produce different levels of status and power among Latina/os and Latin Americans, but it blatantly ignores the role of race in the very attainment of status and power. Indeed, mestizaje as a fundamental element of the ideology of racial democracy, functions to silence and invisibilize those at the bottom because, like the critics of affirmative action, it assumes a level playing field. That this is ultimately a self-serving posture was recognized by Afro-Cuban Bernardo Ruiz Suárez in 1922 when he warned against the hypocrisy of “simulated equality of opportunity which permits the whites to absorb and represent every cultural principal” to the detriment of Blacks (1922: 26).

The duplicity is evident in the views expressed by Mexican American Jorge Klor de Alva during a debate on the “uneasiness between Blacks and Latina/os.” Klor de Alva argued “against the utility of the concept of race” and castigated Cornel West – and African Americans in general – for being “more Anglo than most Anglos” and obsessed with racism (West and Klor de Alba 1996). Emphasizing the cultural distinctiveness of Latin Americans and Latina/os, Klor de Alva assumes a non-existent homogeneity while disregarding a hemispheric – indeed, a global – commonality. As James Early points out in a recent article on race and politics in Cuba, “When we strip away the historical variations in social and political constructions of race in the Americas, one glaring commonality remains: general social discrimination based on skin color” (Early 1999: 52). Given this situation, there is no room for the cultural presumptuousness of Latin American scholars such as Gracia, who, echoing Vasconcelos, concludes a chapter on mestizaje with the baseless claim, “We Hispanics are a model for the world to follow” (Gracia 2000: 121).

This uncritical acceptance of mestizaje has more often than not had as its corollary a dismissal of the righteous claims for equality of those who haven’t managed to attain the proper skin tone, those who don’t look “authentically” Latina/o. The normative “Latina/o” leaves no room for the unabashedly Black, Indian, Asian, or any of the other negatively racialized peoples who comprise the Americas. Instead, mestizaje encourages identification with the ruling elite: Latina/os have overwhelmingly elected to identify as White in every Census where the option has been available to them – a clear sign that the “right” race continues to matter (Logan 2003). Thus, even as Latina/os are presented as the metonymy for racial mixture they consistently reject the very coloredness it implies.

Far from being the harmonious solution to racial inequality, mestizaje has not been – cannot be, given the structures of inequality that it continues to support – a panacea. Mestizaje, hybridity, multiracialism, and all similar terms that suggest
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a view of identity as pluralistic and dynamic too often ignore the importance of life-defining processes of inequality and social exclusion.

Not surprising, given that all societies of the Americas have been characterized by the systematic exploitation of certain peoples deemed inferior, it is this inequality and social exclusion that has come to form the basis for group identity. For those most adversely affected by this ideology of disenfranchisement, it is becoming increasingly clear that *mestizaje* obscures the reality of their oppression. Whether in Chiapas (Mexico), or San Juan (Puerto Rico), Chicago, or New York City, a fundamental aspect of their identity is a growing recognition that race does matter; that it has been, and continues to be, the justification for the denial of the rights and opportunities so long denied them. These emerging voices of Indian and Black communities are insisting they will be – as the title of one book announces – *No Longer Invisible* (Minority Rights Group 1995). Understanding racial mixture as a universal reality and not the particular purview of Latin Americans and Latina/os is a vital step in the crucial project of demystifying the role of race and racism – and making all of us visible.

Notes

1 The ad for Levi’s blue jeans was displayed on an MTA bus shelter in summer 2000.
2 The study was carried out by Central Michigan University anthropologist Leonard Lieberman, who seemingly fails to note the disturbing underside of his findings: 30 percent of cultural and 50 percent of physical anthropologists do believe in the existence of biological race. See also Begley (1995). In 1998, the American Anthropological Association issued its “Statement on ‘Race,’” acknowledging that it “does not reflect a consensus of all members of the AAA, as individuals vary in their approaches to the study of ‘race’” (www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm).
3 “The New Face of America,” *Time* 141 (2), special issue (Fall 1993).
4 See, for example, Schlesinger (1998) and Buchanan (2002).
5 One point that requires clarification is my understanding of what constitutes a Latina/o. In spite of the prevailing trend to include everyone who has some link to Spain – including Spaniards – whether cultural or linguistic, I limit its applicability to those who have been formed in the United States and grown up with at least one parent with a Latin American or Spanish-Caribbean cultural formation. My emphasis is on growing up as “othered” within the life-defining realities of US racism, thus placing the emphasis on the historical groundings of their minority status.
7 Until 1820, the Americas received four to five Africans for every European, so that “America was an extension of Africa rather than Europe until late in the nineteenth century” (Eltis 1983: 255).
8 “A racial hierarchy also helped to explain the disquieting phenomenon of ‘successful’ (or elite) castas. If moral and intellectual qualities were transmitted through heredity, those with less tainted, more Hispanic bloodlines should be superior to other castas; their success was only to be expected” (Cope 1994: 25–6).
9 For a discussion of the writings of Argentina’s Domingo F. Sarmiento and Cuba’s José Antonio Saco, among others, see Martínez-Echazábal (1998).
Looking at that Middle Ground

Vasconcelos’s parents were Spaniards, which may explain his ambivalence. By 1939, Vasconcelos had apparently given up on his utopian remedy, and had “passe[d] from the Fifth Race to the Fifth Column, contributing a series of vehemently pro-Axis and pro-Hitler editorials” to a Mexican journal. Earle (1982: 148–9).

On colorism and the more extreme forms of discrimination faced by dark-skinned Blacks, in general, and African Americans, in particular, see Banks (2000).

For a discussion of the historical roots and current expressions of indigenous identity among Puerto Ricans, see Haslip-Viera (2001).


“If any fact is well established in history, it is that the miscegenetic or mixed races are much superior, mentally, physically, and morally, to those pure or unmixed” (Croly 1864: 15). Published anonymously, the pamphlet argued in favor of “interbreeding” and claimed that this was a Republican Party position; in fact, Croly was editor of a Democratic Party newspaper and the pamphlet was intended to discredit the Republicans. Croly is credited with having coined the term “miscegenation.”

The infamous case determined that phenotypic whiteness did not qualify a person of known African descent for the rights and privileges of Whiteness.

Among the better-known examples are the Melungeons and Jackson Whites. The Mississippi Chinese and, until the 1960s, Mexican Americans and certain other ethnic groups occupied a racial middle ground.

According to Klor de Alva, “Blacks are more Anglos than most Anglos because, unlike most Anglos, they can’t directly identify themselves with a nation outside of the United States. They are trapped in America. However unjust and painful, their experiences are wholly made in America” (West and Klor de Alba 1996: 59).

References


Miriam Jiménez Román


Chapter Thirty

Color Matters: Latina/o Racial Identities and Life Chances

Ginetta E. B. Candelario

What are the connections between racial formation and racial identities in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the identities of those societies’ emigrants and their descendants in the United States? How do Latina/os “fit” in studies of race and racialization in the US? How does gender intersect with the legacies of conquest, genocide, colonialism, slavery, and racialization that frame Latinidad hemispherically? How do those historic and disciplinary intersections inform Latina/o racial identity theory and political projects? Drawing on insights offered by key texts in each discipline, this essay will offer a model for approaching the study of Latina/o racial identity in the US. Due to space constraints, I will necessarily offer broad brush strokes rather than fine detailing in that modeling. Whatever may be lost in the particulars will hopefully be gained conceptually.

Latina/o racial identity formations historically and sociologically have developed in the dynamic interactions and intersections between Latin American and US racial orders. Geopolitics, nation building, and domestic racialized minority relations have provided the larger contexts through which Latina/os become and understand themselves to be racialized subjects and members of a racialized minority group. Latina/o racial formations, in other words, derive simultaneously from domestic racial projects – where “domestic” refers to both the homeland and the hostland – and the racialized geopolitics of US–Latin American relations.

It is now a truism that to be Latina/o in the United States is to be non-White and by extension to be barred structurally and symbolically from the privileges of Whiteness: opportunity and advantage in the pursuit of human, social, cultural, political, and economic capital. The racialization of Latina/os as non-White is historically rooted in nineteenth-century US expansionism and imperialism. Following the Mexican–American War of 1846, the northern territories of Mexico were forcibly incorporated into the United States, effectively completing the building of the new country’s “continental empire.” Under the terms of the
Ginetta E. B. Candelario

1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which settled the war, and in subsequent legal battles that sought to define Mexicans’ racial status such as *In re Rodriguez* (1897), Mexican heritage populations in the United States were defined as “White by law.” However, Mexicans and their descendants had been symbolically positioned as non-White from the moment of Anglo-American contact with the populations of northern Mexico (California, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado) in the decades preceding the war. To Anglo-Americans, Mexicans’ visible indigenous and mixed-race heritage clearly marked them as ineligible for Whiteness. Therefore, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo’s legal provisions notwithstanding, and regardless of sustained pursuit of White status into the twentieth century by organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Mexicans in the new US Southwest were socially, culturally, and politically treated as non-White. Since Mexicans were the first, the largest, and the most demographically visible Latina/o group Anglo-America encountered, they became the primary reference group for Latina/o racial categorizations. They were followed half a century later by Puerto Ricans, who were likewise forcibly incorporated into US society following an expansionist war – the Cuban–Spanish-American War of 1898 – and as colonized subjects in occupied territories were subsequently marked as non-Whites.

That Latina/os in the United States are non-White often occludes the fact that in their Latin American and Caribbean countries of origin and heritage, many identify and/or are identified as White. Indeed, certain nations “south of the border” understand their populations and their national identity to be predominantly White – especially the Southern Cone nations of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. At the same time, other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean regard themselves to be largely White even in the absence of outside support for that claim. For example, despite the fact that US government officials and mainlanders alike consider Puerto Ricans unequivocally non-White because they consider Puerto Rico itself a non-White territory, the 2000 Census revealed that 80 percent of Puerto Ricans on the island consider themselves White.

A great deal of scholarship and debate has been produced comparing and contrasting US and Latin American racial orders and systems. The most often cited difference is that while the United States developed and institutionalized a binary White/Black racial order, Latin American and Caribbean countries created racial continuum systems, both products of their respective colonial and national histories. The US binary relied upon the hardening of the rule of hypo-descent – or the one-drop rule – which predicated Whiteness and Blackness upon the absence or presence of a single African and/or “Black” ancestor in what philosopher Naomi Zack has called “the logic of an infinite regress.” This was largely (though not solely) a legacy of British colonialism, a reflection of emerging US demographics, and a response to local economics.

The English settler society from which the United States emerged provided the ideological and material foundations for later articulations and institutionalizations of Whiteness and White supremacy. British colonialism in Europe
had firmly established a binary framing of the English as the civilized antinomy of Irish savages. In North America, notions of Irish savagery framed English perceptions and later treatment of Native Americans as savages, first “noble” and later “bloodthirsty.” At the same time, the explosive growth of the African slave trade during the modern period, the quick predominance of Africans in the world slave trade, and the rise of Blackness as the exclusive mark of enslavement likewise allowed for the imputation of savagery to Blacks in North America. From this British colonial legacy in North America, what came to be US society was structured through a general binary between civilized and savage, understood in race terms as White and non-White. Although non-White became a catchall category for sundry groups, the primary reference group for non-White status was Blacks because of the centrality of slavery and the slave system, particularly during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Demographically, Whites in the United States greatly outnumbered Blacks, even in the states and territories with large enslaved populations, and Whites established foundational settler communities and incorporated subsequent European immigrants into that White society compiled with sex ratios that allowed for endogamous reproduction. This meant that Whites could close their kinship lines, reject any offspring of White unions with non-Whites, and still maintain their numerical majority. Thus, negrophobic ideology articulated well with demographic circumstances. This is best illustrated by consideration of the fact that English settlers in the British Caribbean during the same period did not close their kinship lines and routinely incorporated their non-White offspring into their family lines and body politic because their demographic circumstances — largely male, temporarily settled on the islands, and vastly outnumbered by Blacks — could not afford to sustain rigid boundaries around Whiteness. Instead, they increased their numbers and the strength of White supremacy by allowing Blacks to whiten intergenerationally.

In terms of economics, in the United States slavery and industrialization articulated with hypo-descent as well. The 1807 abolition of the transatlantic slave trade came precisely during a period of increased demand for slave labor in the cotton fields of the South that provided the raw materials for industrialized textile economies of the North. As a result, slave labor would have to be domestically reproduced rather than simply purchased. Hypo-descent expanded Black populations by expelling from Whiteness and relegating to Blackness into perpetuity anyone with a “drop of Black blood.” It also created a hard boundary around White populations that became defined as pure through exclusion and powerful because racial exclusivity allowed for cross-class symbolic, social, and political investments in Whiteness.

By contrast, in Latin America and the Caribbean the racial system has been said to be based upon a White/non-White racial continuum with seemingly porous boundary spaces rather than boundary lines. The racial continuum image connotes a lack of hierarchy and implies that race as an individual status can be transcended. This claim was more fully elaborated in the racial democracy thesis.
expounded by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre in the early twentieth century, who argued that the openness and fluidity of the racial system allowed for harmonious racial relations, limited racial prejudice, and prevented racial discrimination. The racial democracy thesis, however, has been challenged and shown to be more mythical than factual. The racial continuum is hierarchical rather than egalitarian, categorical rather than fluid, and creates systematic disadvantages and lack of access to socioeconomic resources and political power for non-Whites. The legacy of the Spanish colonial Casta system, the demographic predominance of indigenous and African heritage laboring populations and communities, and the development of extractive colonial and national economies increasingly subjected to US expansionism and imperialism account for both the myth-making and social facts of racism and racialization.

Unlike the English in North America, the Spanish and Portuguese were vastly outnumbered by local indigenous populations, even in the aftermath of the genocidal effects of their conquest and colonization of the Americas. While the English relied upon pure extermination, expulsion, and resettling of Native Americans, the Spanish utilized a complex combination of material and symbolic violence and incorporation through religious, political, and social institutions such as kinship systems to subjugate indigenous populations from whom they would extract labor and tribute, and through whom they would establish their power in the colonial world.

At the same time, the decimation of indigenous populations; indigenous rebellion and resistance; continuing indigenous epidemiological vulnerability; increasing demand for labor in the urban centers; the profitability of asientos (slave trade monopolies); and increasingly economical access to the African slave trade, set the stage for the rise of the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, the vast majority of Africans in America were settled in Spanish and Portuguese colonies. Enslaved African labor built colonial cities; extracted mineral wealth in the form of gold, silver, and copper; produced consumer goods in viceroyal factories; sustained agricultural, pastoral, and ranching economies; and even filled the ranks of the military and the novitiate in some viceroyalties. By the end of the Spanish colonial period, Africans and Indians comprised the overwhelming majority population of Ibero-America.

Additionally, unlike the English to the north, the Spanish and Portuguese were a predominantly male conquering and settler society with limited access to European women. That fact, coupled with the daily contact with and unimpeded access to indigenous and African women afforded by slavery and the repartamiento and encomienda systems (Spanish Crown grants of land and Indians to Spanish conquistadors and settlers in exchange for their largely self-financed military service, allegiance to the Crown, and enactment of Spanish governmental authority in the Americas), led to substantial levels of socially tolerated and at times legally sanctioned exogamy and mixed-heritage family formations. That said, the Spanish colonies attempted to order and control the heterogeneous populations that had developed out of Spanish, indigenous, and African contact and reproduction in
the Americas through the establishment of the Casta system. The Casta system attempted to create a “hierarchical society in which each group occupied a specific socioeconomic niche defined largely by race.”

At the top of the hierarchy were the Spanish Peninsulars (those born on the Iberian Peninsula), closely followed by Spanish Creoles born in the Americas. At the bottom were the various indigenous populations, and at the very bottom were the Africans. In between the top and the bottom/very bottom were arrayed all the mixed heritage groups (castas), ranked according to the proportion of Spanish heritage they could claim or to their proximity to phenotypical Whiteness. Because the Casta system allowed for the formulation of intermediate statuses between White and non-White, inter- and intragenerational shifts in caste status for individuals were possible. Thus color (together with hair and phenotype) mattered materially and symbolically. In other words, through reproductive and cultural strategies – mating/marrying lighter; assimilating Hispanic language, dress, religion, and food way; becoming literate and educated – one and one’s lineage could become upwardly mobile in the socio-racial order.

However, the class system as such was seemingly more rigid and intractable. Colonial mercantilist economies based upon the accumulation of wealth through the extraction of mineral resources, the accumulation of land and livestock, and to a lesser degree through agricultural production, created a tiny wealthy oligarchy reliant upon the coerced labor of Indian tributaries and peons, and the enslaved labor of Africans who comprised the mass of the population. Although independence movements and the rise of nation-states generally and significantly also led to the end of slavery and slave economies, national economic systems continued to be based upon the accumulation of wealth, rather than upon the production of capital. In other words, even as the Industrial Revolution fueled the rise of a capitalist economy and class system as in the nineteenth century in the United States and Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean came to be positioned as sources of inputs – from raw materials to migrant labor – for the Industrial Revolution to the north. Domestically, this meant simultaneously the increased concentration of landed wealth in the hands of the oligarchy, the limited development of capital, and hardened barriers to upward social mobility for the (largely Indian and Afro-descended) peasant and laboring classes.

Ironically, as class inequality became increasingly manifest as a collective experience and status, racialized inequality became latent and individualized. This shifted attention away from collective experiences of racialized exclusion that also structured disadvantaged life chances, and oriented individuals toward personal success or failure through racial self-improvement (adelantando la raza). Thus, class-based movements and politics have had a much longer and deeper history in Latin America and the Caribbean than racial redress and civil rights movements because the former have had the prerequisite collective consciousness required for collective action, while the latter has not (with few exceptions, such as Cuba and Brazil). The normalization of efforts at racial self-improvement also naturalized and made invisible the fundamentally White supremacist ideological
principle of the socio-racial system and life chances. Moreover, the social and
to White status privileges (blanqueamiento); racial mixture oriented toward blanqueamiento (mestizaje); fear of Blackness
negrophobia); and color and phenotype hierarchies that privilege those with more
European features (pigmentocracy) initiated under the colonial Casta system
became fully institutionalized and culturally normative throughout Latin American
and Caribbean nation-states as these developed in the nineteenth century.25

At the same time, these new nation-states had to contend with European
and US tendencies “to lump the Latin American countries together as generally
dysgenic and disagreeable places of biocultural degeneration.” Put more simply,
regardless of their local White supremacist orders and systems, to the US and
Europe, Latin American and Caribbean nations were collectively non-White.26
US notions of Latin American and Caribbean racial degeneracy were particu-
larly consequential, as they provided ideological fodder for US imperialism in
the region.27 Anglo-Saxonism, Manifest Destiny, and American Exceptionalism
together held that the United States was not only the “lovely White Republic”
Benjamin Franklin had claimed it would be, but one whose Manifest Destiny
was to assert its hegemony in the Americas.

As they built their nations, therefore, Latin American and Caribbean elites
were forced to contend with this racialized geopolitical disadvantage and threat
even as they institutionalized a White supremacist social order domestically. To
be sure, certain intellectuals such as José Martí advocated racial egalitarianism
as a key distinguishing factor of “Our America” in the South.28 But his vision
was not the reigning one, and racism – both manifest and latent – continued to
structure life chances just as much in Martí’s America as they did in Anglo-
America. The difference was that while Whiteness was exclusive and bounded in
the United States, it was incorporative and seemingly porous in Latin America
and the Caribbean.

Whiteness and White supremacy, therefore, are neither new nor foreign to
the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean.29 Instead, what may be new to
those leaving their homelands is the experience in the host society of being
personally recategorized as non-White and experiencing overt rather than latent
racism, simply by virtue of being from Latin America or the Caribbean and
notwithstanding their particular country’s racial reputation in the region or their
personal phenotype.30 This leads to a “transcontinental experiential dissonance”31
that is significant insofar as it makes salient the structurally disadvantageous
position non-Whites find themselves in because of shifting ontological contexts.
That is, both the socio-racial system through which they are defined and their
own racial categorization (and perhaps their racial identity) changes upon immig-
ration, often in a downward or negative direction.

While traditional sociological literature has focused on how life chances
improve for immigrants to the United States, for Latina/os the putative benefits
of immigration are tempered by systematic barriers to their structural integration
and cultural assimilation. These barriers are exemplified among other things
by persistent residential and occupational segregation; disproportionately high poverty rates, high school dropout rates, military service rates, incarceration rates, teen pregnancy rates, and HIV/AIDS infection rates; low educational attainment levels; political underrepresentation and exclusion; disproportionate exposure to environmental pollution; racist stereotyping; and subjection to racist violence. These experiences lead to diminished life chances that at once express and create the racialized marginalization of Latina/os.

Work has been done on the relationship between Latina/o racial formations and US racial projects. For example, we have extensive empirical evidence of differential life chances of Whites, African Americans, and Latina/os in which the latter are typically worse off than Whites on all indicators of social economic status and in the realization of their civil and political rights, and occasionally worse off than African Americans. Increasingly, care is taken to specify that Latina/os are internally heterogeneous in terms of national origins, culture, pre-migration status, immigrant generation, and citizenship status and to account for that diversity when documenting and analyzing Latina/o life chances in the United States. We also have evidence that some Latina/o subgroups seemingly have better life chances than others. For example, Mexicans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans on the US mainland have higher poverty rates, lower educational attainment rates, and lower home ownership rates than Cubans and South Americans. Cubans, Chileans, Argentines, and Costa Ricans have higher incomes than Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans.

However, differential life chances within Latina/o subgroups remain relatively under-explored. Even as the 2000 Census recognized that Latina/os are a racially diverse ethnic group – specifying for example that “Hispanics could be of any race” and even as Afro-Latina/os organize social movements in Latin America and intervene in intellectual debates around race in the United States, the effect of color and phenotype upon Latina/o life chances is less often considered. Instead, the tendency appears to be to insist that “differences found within Latina/o groups . . . are less pronounced than those between white Latinas/os and non-Hispanic whites.” Is the likelihood of diminished life chances in fact evenly distributed across and within Latina/o subgroups? The evidence suggests not.

Edward Murguía and Edward Telles, for example, have consistently found that skin tone and other racialized phenotype traits play demonstrable roles in educational attainment, income levels, and life chances within Latina/o communities. Likewise Nancy Denton and Douglass Massey have found that Latina/os with visible Black heritage were more highly residentially segregated than “white Hispanics.” Thus, while Latina/os overall are racialized as non-White and are accordingly disadvantaged, Latina/os with visible markers of African and indigenous heritages are more disadvantaged in terms of life chances than their lighter, whiter-looking compatriots. In other words, color (along with hair and phenotype) matters for Latina/os in the United States as much as it does in Latin America and the Caribbean. This evidences what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has called the “Latin Americanization of race relations in the US.”

Color Matters
Sociologist George Yancey has argued that US society is transforming from a White/non-White binary system to a Black/non-Black one in which Latina/os and Asian Americans have been and will increasingly become incorporated into Whiteness. This is so because both they and the majority White society have a vested interest in their whitening. For the traditional White majority the maintenance of White privilege has historically been managed through the granting of White racial status to groups previously excluded from the privileges of Whiteness, such as Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants. According to Yancey, in light of their diminishing demographic majority, White society now has to contemplate granting Latina/os and Asian Americans White status rights in order to sustain White privilege. For their part, Latina/os and Asians who have historically been and continue to be discriminated against, likewise have a vested interest in attaining White status rights and White privilege because these are the defining features of full citizenship (political, economic, cultural, and social). Indeed, though Yancey overlooks it, there is historical evidence that Latina/os and Asian Americans have repeatedly attempted to attain White status rights and White privilege through legal and political means. In addition, Latina/os often engage in symbolic strategies to distance themselves from Blackness, and in life strategies to distance themselves from Blacks.

Recent analyses of the 2000 Census have shown that Latina/o immigrants have varying rates of White self-identification. The vast majority of Cubans, Uruguayans, Argentines, and Chileans identified themselves as White, followed closely by the roughly two thirds of the immigrants from Venezuela, Colombia, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Costa Rica. By contrast, about half of immigrants from Nicaragua, Ecuador, Peru, Honduras, and Mexico considered themselves White. Finally, immigrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama and the Dominican Republic were the least likely to identify as White (see table 30.1). Latina/o immigrants who identified as non-White rarely identified as Black, with the notable exception of Panamanians, and to a far lesser degree Dominicans, Costa Ricans, and Hondurans. Instead, those who identified as non-White tended to choose “Some Other Race,” which many analysts have concluded was a proxy for a mixed-race identity.

Thus far, however, much of this research on color, racialization, and Latina/o life chances has focused nearly exclusively on how color matters without adequate consideration of how gender and color interact in life chances by: researching only men’s experiences in the labor market; overlooking how context frames gender effects; or considering households as a unit. An important exception to this oversight is Margaret Hunter’s findings that lighter skin tone is positively correlated with Mexican American women’s educational attainment, income levels, and marital outcomes. She argues that color and gender come together as expressions of the salient importance of racialized models of beauty in women’s life chances. For Mexican American women, lighter skin tones are equated with beauty and “beauty operates as social capital for women.”
Likewise, my research on Dominicans in New York City similarly finds that Dominican women’s extensive and intensive investments in beauty culture should be understood as a mode of producing “bodily capital,” in that they are working toward normative Dominican looks which privilege Hispanic mixedness over Blackness. Many scholars have been puzzled by Dominicans’ apparent denial of their own blackness, their strong antipathy toward Haitians, their inclination to identify themselves as *Indios*, and their peculiar racial terminology. I argue against simplistic notions of Dominican negrophobia, anti-Haitianism, and indigenism, proposing that it is not a desire for Whiteness that guides Dominican identity discourses and displays. Instead, it is a strategic embracing of Hispanicity as a means of negotiating the historically triangulated geopolitics of race created by US–Dominican–Haitian relations.

For Dominicans, being and looking Hispanic was the lynchpin upon which their nation-state was founded and through which they confronted both Haitian and US expansionist politics in the nineteenth century. Dominican Hispanicity

### Table 30.1 Percentage distribution of reported race by country of birth in South America, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Number in thousands</th>
<th>No answer %</th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>Black %</th>
<th>Some other race %</th>
<th>Two or more %</th>
<th>All others* %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>114.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>457.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>781.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>589.2</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>257.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>699.5</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>411.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>243.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>7,969.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>194.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>250.6</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rico**</td>
<td>1,307.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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* The “All others” category includes American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander race codes.

** Limited to Puerto Ricans on the mainland US.

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allowed for sharp boundary maintenance against Haiti, with whom it shares an island and a history. At the same time, Dominican Hispanicity is a vehicle for negotiating national sovereignty and its disregard by the United States. Historical documents, travel narratives, literary texts, archival photographs, and newspaper accounts indicate that Dominican Hispanicity allowed for both nationalist differentiation from and White supremacist alliances with the United States. In other words, Dominican Hispanicity marked the limits of US imperialism in the Dominican Republic because the Lovely White Republic and the “most Hispanic, Catholic, and White” nation in the Caribbean could come together in their mutual disdain for the Black Republic.

Furthermore, by the twentieth century, museums, beauty shops, and female bodies became important cultural sites for the ideological construction of these official Dominican identity discourses and displays. They are also important vehicles of the “cultural conscription” of Dominicans into negrophobic and anti-Haitianist Hispanicity.

When local circumstances allow for Black well-being and life chances, however, Dominicans have recognized and even embraced their Black heritages and identities. Thus, Dominicans in Washington, DC – where African Americans have attained middle-class status and political power to a degree unmatched elsewhere in the United States – identify as Black and with African Americans much more often than their counterparts in New York City, Providence, or Boston. At stake for the vast majority of Dominicans – both in the homeland and in the United States – is their ability to access symbolic, social, and economic resources they need to survive and to sustain their families and communities. Indeed, these are the stakes for Latina/os more generally. The question that remains to be answered is what strategies will we deploy to meet those needs.

Notes

1 The term “Latina/o” will be used interchangeably with “Latino/a” when referring to both men and women. “Latino” will be used when referring only to men, and “Latina” when referring only to women.
2 Here I am drawing upon Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s framing of racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.” See Racial Formation in the United States, From the 1960s to the 1990s, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 55.
Color Matters


6 See Richard Henry Dana, Two Years Before the Mast (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911); Arnaldo De León, They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas 1821–1900 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

7 See Richard Henry Dana, Two Years Before the Mast (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911); Arnaldo De León, They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas 1821–1900 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).


14 For an excellent study, see Audrey Smedley, Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).


16 This binary allowed, then, for the placement of Native Americans, Irish and Chinese immigrants, Mexicans, and sundry others to be placed in the non-White category, either temporarily (as in the case of the Irish, Italians, and Russian Jews) or permanently (as in the case of Latin Americans and Asians). See Richard Delgado and Jean Stefánic (eds.), Critical White Studies: Looking Beyond the Mirror (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

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24 Following Weber, I use life chances to signal “the typical chance for a supply of goods, external living conditions, and personal life experiences, in so far as this chance is determined by the amount and kind of power, or lack of such, to dispose of goods or skills for the sake of income in a given economic order.” See Max Weber, “Class, Status, Party,” in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 181.
30 See Oboler, *Ethnic Labels*.


36 Bonilla-Silva and Glover, “We are All Americans.”


39 Rodríguez, *Changing Race*, p. 23. Rodríguez makes this claim in the very same paragraph in which she cites research that clearly indicates that Latino/as who identify as racially white are occasionally closer in their experiences of occupational, housing, and educational markets to non-Hispanic Whites than they are to Latino/as with darker skin tones and indigenous or African phenotypes.

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41 Bonilla-Silva and Glover, “We are All Americans.”
42 Telles and Murguía, “Phenotypic Discrimination.”
43 Murguía and Telles, “Phenotype and Schooling.”
44 Massey and Denton 1989.
Between Blackness and *Latinidad* in the Hip Hop Zone

Raquel Z. Rivera

Latina/os and African Americans in the United States most commonly define themselves and are defined by others as two separate groups. Their cultures, histories, and identities are often imagined not to intersect, or at best, to overlap only slightly. The ties that bind Latina/o subgroups (Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Argentineans, Dominicans . . . ) to each other are usually thought to be stronger and somehow more “natural” than those that might bind Latina/os to African Americans.

These two groups are typically viewed as distinct “ethnic” groups, each one having certain cultural characteristics that distinguishes it from the other. They are also misleadingly thought of as distinct “racial” groups where the members of each collective supposedly share genetic ancestry and physical characteristics in common and can be distinguished from the members of the other group.¹

Particularly in the realm of popular culture, it is not uncommon to hear Latina/os be described (or describe themselves) as a race, though technically, Latina/os are an ethnic (or pan-ethnic)² group and can be of any race. To employ the popularly used terms that fuse together race and ethnicity, while African Americans are described as “Black” (emphasis on ethnicity) or “black” (emphasis on race), Latina/os are described as “multiracial,” “brown,” and even “butta pecan.” These racializing terms serve their part in concealing certain realities, among these, that great numbers of Latina/os are black according to this country’s racial standards (“blacker” than many African Americans, for that matter),³ and that most African Americans are multiracial,⁴ often just as brown or lighter-skinned than many Latina/os.

It is important to keep in mind that blackness is anything but a static concept based on biological fact. The same goes for whiteness, multiracialness, and any other racially based concepts. Race is an ever-evolving social construct which has different meanings depending on the context. In the United States, the way race is thought of in the early twenty-first century is very different from racial
thinking in the early twentieth century. Present-day racial categories and dynamics in Latin America are quite different from those in the US.

While the ethnic term “African American” is substituted in everyday speech for the racialized term “Black,” the ethnic term “Latina/o” is often used interchangeably with other ethnic monikers like “Hispanic” and even “Spanish.” Whereas Black is an overtly racial term, Latina/o, Hispanic, and Spanish are not explicitly but implicitly racial. Latina/o, Hispanic, and Spanish overtly point to a cultural group or a geographic region, not to a racial type or skin color; however, it is crucial to recognize that certain racialized physical characteristics and categories (brown, multiracial, mixed, butta pecan, “good hair”) are associated with these terms. (The color/racial descriptions of Latina/os may vary, but “black” is nearly always not one of them.) These varied ethnic terms to refer to people of Latin American ancestry also provide their own share of confusion. Latina/o (derived from the word “Latin”), Hispanic (derived from “Hispania,” another name for Spain), and Spanish all privilege the European dimension of Latin American heritage while slighting its strong Native American and African dimensions – not to mention other ethnic influences such as Chinese, Japanese, Lebanese, and numerous others.

Although as groups both African Americans and Latina/os are multiracial, African Americans are thought of primarily in terms of their African ancestry and Latina/os primarily in terms of their European ancestry or their so-called mixed heritage (as if African Americans do not also have a mixed heritage). This veils the racial and cultural differences among Latina/os as well as the similarities between African Americans and certain Latina/o groups.

Latina/os are most often thought of as not only non-Black (in the ethnic sense), but also as non-black in the racial sense. In the contemporary latinidad/blackness divide, Latina/os of African descent are expected to choose latinidad over blackness. That is not to say, however, that there are or have been no Latina/os who oppose the dichotomy. One of the most famous early twentieth-century examples is Puerto Rican Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, whose work as a researcher and collector focused on the history of Africans and their descendants. In the field of literature, contemporary writers like Piri Thomas, Willie Perdomo, and Loida Maritza Pérez (the first is Puerto Rican/Cuban, the second is Puerto Rican, the third is Dominican) have also put into question the presumption that being Latina/o makes a person non-black. The New York Times published in 2003 an article entitled “For New York’s Black Latina/os, A Growing Racial Awareness”; it explored the intersection of race and ethnicity among people who, ethnically, identify as Latina/o and, racially, as black.

Puerto Rican hip hop and reggaetón artist Tego Calderón puts it succinctly: “I say I’m black first and then Boricua ‘cause it don’t matter where I go, what you see is a black face.” When people hear a statement like his, they may assume one of Tego’s parents must be Puerto Rican and the other African American (as is the case with hip hop artist Noreaga, who describes himself as a “Nigga Rican”). However, unlike Noreaga, Tego is not claiming a double ethnic
identity. For Tego, his ethnic and national identity is Puerto Rican; it is his racial identity that is black.

Do Puerto Ricans have more in common with Mexicans and Argentineans than they do with Jamaicans? Ask Tego and he might answer that he has more in common with a black Jamaican than he does with a white Argentinean, a white Mexican, or even a white Puerto Rican from the elite.

Do Dominicans have more in common with Salvadorians than with Haitians? Not necessarily. It depends on what social sectors (class, race, geographic region, etc.) we focus on and also what cultural aspects are given emphasis in identifying commonalities. For example, if official language is taken to be the defining factor (which it often tends to be), then the existing similarities between Spanish-speaking, Anglophone, and Francophone people will remain unexplored. Although Puerto Ricans, Argentineans, Dominicans, and Salvadorians all share a history of Spanish colonialism, they differ widely in terms of the specific impact that Africans and their descendants have had on their respective national histories. Furthermore, centuries of intense migration within the Caribbean islands, the United States, and the Caribbean coastal regions of Central and South America account for striking cultural similarities among groups like African Americans and Cubans, Jamaicans and Panamanians, Puerto Ricans and Haitians – ethnic groups that are usually placed in opposing sides of the latindad/blacks divide. The often-invoked separation based on language between Latina/os and African Americans also gets complicated by the fact that the first language of great numbers of US-raised Latina/os is actually English and not Spanish.

New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone

I wrote the book *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* with various purposes, among these: highlighting and celebrating Puerto Rican contributions to the development of hip hop art forms; explaining how the experience of Puerto Rican hip hoppers is an important part of the history of Puerto Rican culture; and offering New York Puerto Ricans who participate in hip hop as an example of the similarities and shared histories between “Latina/o” groups and “Black” groups.

“Why are you guys trying to take hip hop away from us?” I was angrily asked by a non-Latino Caribbean (“West Indian”) student at John Jay College during a presentation of my work. I was momentarily stunned by the hostility of her tone and body language, and by the approving nods and comments her statement generated among some of the other students. I had just explained that celebrating Puerto Rican participation in hip hop is not an attempt at undue recognition. I had also explained that carving out a much-deserved space for Puerto Ricans within hip hop history does not take anything away from African Americans or West Indians; on the contrary, it uncovers and celebrates our shared histories. The self-identified Latina/os in the room were open to and curious about my
arguments. But my message was generating anger and resentment among many of the self-identified African American and West Indians students. The gulf that was imagined to separate “us” Puerto Ricans/Latina/os and “them” African Americans/West Indians was thought to be not only immense, but somehow “natural.” Within that context, my arguments seemed counterintuitive and even outrageous. (Would my ideas have been perceived any differently had I been a dark-skinned Puerto Rican? Perhaps, though I will never know for certain, since I can only speak from my light-skinned body.)

Hip hop is most often historically defined in terms of music, visual arts (graffiti), and dance (breaking, popping, locking, rocking). Language, mannerisms, fashion, and other expressions of culture are considered by some to also be defining aspects of hip hop. Hip hop, like earlier cultural expressions, has in many senses served as a bridge between Puerto Ricans, other Latina/os, West Indians, and African Americans. Conflicts have always existed between these groups, but they also share a century-long history of joint political and cultural action. During the 1970s in New York, there may have been ethnic tension among them. Still, together they developed hip hop. Davey D Cook, an African American who grew up during this time in the South Bronx, explains from his popular website Davey D’s Hip Hop Corner: “Hip Hop was multicultural in the sense that it was Blacks and Puerto Ricans who put this whole thing down. We lived next to each other and for the most part shared the same urban problems. We also shared the same legacy of exploitation, oppression and colonization.

Nevertheless, particularly in terms of hip hop’s musical component, Puerto Ricans’ cultural “entitlement” has been a realm of contention, ever since the earliest days of DJing and rhyming in the early 1970s.

During rap music’s earliest years as commercial music (1979 to early 1980s), notable Puerto Rican DJs and MCs included DJ Charlie Chase (Cold Crush Brothers), Whipper Whip and Rubie Dee (Fantastic Five), and O.C. and Devastating Tito (Fearless Four). Many of these artists, plus famous Puerto Rican and Latina/o graffiti artists and dancers, were featured in the 1982 movie Wild Style. This film and its ethnically diverse cast provided an accurate portrayal of the vibrancy of the early hip hop scene, before the musical aspect of hip hop gained supreme ascendancy over the other hip hop art forms – and before hip hop was branded “black” to the exclusion of Latina/os.

There is a scene in Wild Style when the Cold Crush Brothers face off the Fantastic Five in a basketball court. I use it during lectures as an example of how the myth of Latina/os being non-black or lighter-skinned than African Americans gets perpetuated. When I show it, I ask those present to point out the Puerto Ricans. DJ Charlie Chase is always easily singled out from the group of brown-skinned men because of his cream-colored skin and barely wavy hair. But then viewers are at a loss. “Oh, the one with the straight nose is probably Puerto Rican, right?” someone may say, pointing out Rubie Dee. And then there is usually silence. There are more Puerto Ricans in that scene? Which one? How to pick out the other Puerto Rican from the group of black men? So much for the
fabled golden-skinned Butta Pecan Rican! However, it is easy to picture how the
myth gets perpetuated. We can imagine audiences throughout the world watching
the film and assuming that, aside from Charlie Chase, the other men are black.
And they are black, according to racial categories as they are most commonly
defined in the United States. But what cannot be deciphered by the naked eye
is that two of those (racially speaking) black men are not (ethnically speaking)
African American, but Puerto Rican.

In the mid-1980s, as graffiti and the "breakdancing" craze faded into the
media background, hip hop music became commercial popular music and thought
of as almost exclusively African American. Back in the 1980s most people in the
US did not know or care what a Puerto Rican or a Latina/o was. There was no
Ricky Martin, no J-Lo. Latina/os were not yet "hot." Rap was celebrated as "a
black thing – you wouldn’t understand." Black was being used, of course, in its
narrowest ethnic sense. However, that is not to say that there were no Puerto
Ricans involved in commercial rap music during that time. Prince Markie Dee
Morales of the Fat Boys, the Real Roxanne, and producer Ivan "Doc" Rodriguez
were active and had a strong commercial presence during that period, though
their ethnicity was not openly flaunted as became common with other Puerto
Rican and Latina/o artists later on.

A particular commercial space dubbed "Latin rap" was occupied most pro-
minently by non-Puerto Ricans like Kid Frost and Mellow Man Ace in the late
1980s, to mention only two examples. However, these artists were largely per-
ceived not to be doing "real hip hop" but a type of "Latina/o hip hop" catering
to that particular ethnic group. Notice that because his music was infused with
Spanish lyrics and alluded to his Latino identity, Mellow Man Ace, a black man
born in Cuba, was not perceived to be doing "black" music (real hip hop) but a
Latina/o version of hip hop. He was placed in the same musical category as Kid
Frost, a Chicano who has no obvious African ancestry.

How were the record companies supposed to market a Puerto Rican or a
Latina/o rap artist within the realm of "real hip hop"? Back then, not many
seemed to have a clue. Rap’s blackness was a big part of its commercial appeal.
But it was not clear if Latina/os were a lighter version of black or not black at
all. The industry gatekeepers were not often willing to take a risk by signing
Latina/os. That is, until Latina/os, and particularly Boricuas, became a ghetto-
tropical fad in the mid-1990s and then it became trendy for Latina/os and non-
Latina/os to include words in Spanish and references to Latina/os in rhymes
and have Butta Pecan Rican mamis adorning videos. The market was then par-
ticularly ripe for Puerto Rican hip hop artists like Fat Joe, Big Pun, Angie
Martinez, Hurricane Gee, and DJ Tony Touch.

The media “Latino explosion” branded Latina/os as commercially hot in the
latter half of the 1990s. And, suddenly, hip hop became known as a “Black and
Latino” thing. Nowadays, most people recognize that Latina/os have been part
of hip hop since day one. But there is still plenty of confusion regarding what
that means.
When hip hop is described as “Black and Latino,” pioneering DJ Kool Herc, a black man born in Jamaica, is thought of as part of the Black contingent, while black men born in Cuba like Mellow Man Ace and his brother Sen Dog (of the group Cypress Hill) are assumed to be part of the Latina/o contingent. Granted, when Mellow Man Ace and Sen Dog identify themselves as Latina/os within hip hop, they become part of an ethnic group that includes people of much lighter hues. These black Cuban brothers, as Latina/os, are part of a group that includes great numbers of people whose ancestry (genetic and cultural) is heavier on the European and indigenous side, than it is on the African side. Nevertheless, how does a black Latina/o’s ethnic affiliation end up making them perceived as somehow less black? Aren’t we doing a disservice to Afro-diasporic history when we exclude from blackness huge numbers of people of African ancestry, just because they were born in (or their immediate ancestors hail from) lands where Spanish is the official language?

Part of the reason for the somewhat precarious position of Puerto Ricans and other Latina/os within hip hop – particularly its musical zone – has to do with the fact that understandings of blackness and Afro-diasporic cultural identity frequently are fractured along national or ethnic lines. Thus, the cultural connections – past and present – among African Americans, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Trinidadians, and Cubans, among others, remain virtually ignored. Much of the history of political thought, activism, and cultural expression regarded as either discretely African American or Puerto Rican actually has been a product of various Afro-diasporic ethnic groups. However, it is all too common to ignore the complexities of the African diaspora, relying instead on narrow visions of history and identity. The result, unfortunately, is that the connections between those populating what Paul Gilroy has termed “the black Atlantic” are camouflaged, particularly when it comes to Black and Latina/o groups.

Hip hop music’s ruptures in the rhythmic structure, syncopation, repetition of a certain rhythm and/or melodic phrase, and call-and-response patterns, as well as its heavy emphasis on lyrical competition, boasting, improvisation, and commentary on current events are characteristic of most African-derived music in the Americas. However, since hip hop music often is described only in terms of US-based blues-derived traditions and African American oral practices – and from there the historical jump is made to West African cultural sources – the myth of separation between Afro-diasporic cultures in the Americas is perpetuated.

The rise in the 1970s of the particular style of rhyming over a musical background that became known as MCing or rapping is an example of the existing similarities among various Afro-diasporic traditions and the way in which they feed into hip hop. David Toop has noted the variety among rap’s forebears, including “disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, . . . acappella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia.”
Not only have New York Puerto Ricans participated along with African Americans in many of these rap antecedents – such as street funk, doo-wop groups, and children’s games – but island musical traditions like *plena*, *bomba*, and *música jíbara* can be invoked just as easily among rap’s forebears. Verbal duels featuring boasting, trading insults, sexual innuendoes, and improvisation are common in all three. Like rap, they are notorious for historicizing everyday events. DJs use their turntables as percussive instruments whose scratching sounds recall those of *plena’s* and *música jíbara’s* ever-present *güiro* or gourd scraper. *Bomba* shares with rap the use of the voice as an instrument that foregrounds tonality and rhythm as much as – and sometimes more than – meaning.

When New York Puerto Rican youngsters began participating alongside African Americans in the early development of MCing as a lyrical/musical style, they were not exactly “defecting” from Puerto Rican tradition. In terms of social function and aesthetics, Puerto Rican oral and musical styles can be invoked as precursors of MCing as much as African American ones. By the time hip hop surfaced in the early 1970s, there was already a longstanding tradition of Puerto Rican participation in genres most commonly identified as African American, such as jazz in the early decades of the twentieth century, doo-wop and rhythm-and-blues during the 1950s, and boogaloo and Latin soul during the 1960s and 1970s. Even the use of English lyrics among Puerto Ricans was nothing new, as evidenced through these music genres that preceded hip hop.

Then there is the issue of *breakbeats* relying heavily on music thought of as African American. But what would breakbeats be without the decades-old influence of Puerto Rican and Cuban musical traditions on African Americans in New York City? Those timbales and conga solos that were the heart of so many breakbeats got into soul and funk records from Africa via the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

The construction of Puerto Rican identities in New York City often has relied on drawing sharp distinctions between us and African Americans. While the European aspect of Puerto Rican heritage gets highlighted, African Americans are associated primarily with the African side of their ancestry. No wonder, then, that the relationship of Puerto Ricans to hip hop music and dance has been so often misunderstood. What to make of those Puerto Rican youngsters who started rhyming in English and dancing to breakbeats right alongside African Americans and West Indians in the 1970s? What to think of all those English-dominant “Spanish” kids with nappy hair and dark skin who no longer were easily distinguishable from the *morenos*? Unfortunately, many opted for the easy way out by ignoring the areas of cultural overlap – past and present – between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, choosing instead to explain the presence of the latter in hip hop as their treading on African American territory.

The myth of hip hop being an African American realm and representing a rupture in Puerto Rican tradition has served to weaken Puerto Ricans’ perceived entitlement to hip hop; it has prevented young African Americans, Puerto Ricans,
and other Caribbean folks from fully understanding their shared heritages; and it also has perpetuated frictions between these groups. This myth, in turn, is one of the many factors that make us all – whatever our ethnic background may be – more vulnerable to the dictates of the entertainment industry, which has turned the desire for roots, purpose, self-definition, and collective identity of the hip hop generations into a multimillion-dollar empire.

Why My Book Is Not Called “Latina/os from the Hip Hop Zone”

Although the book sounds interesting, I think a more comprehensive look at Latina/os in Hip Hop would give the book more resonance. Cubans for instance have made huge inroads. Kid Frost, a Chicano, in the late 80s until present day. . . . Sounds like the book only presented a piece of the pie when it could’ve served the whole thing. (eseguerrito)

The above is an excerpt from a lengthy chatroom discussion on the website www.migente.com which took place right after my book New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone was published in 2003. Migente.com is a website that caters mostly to young US Latina/os. Many of the entries, like the one above by “eseguerrito,” suggested that not focusing on Latina/os as a whole was a missed opportunity for my book. Some entries even claimed that the book was part of a larger phenomenon of Puerto Rican chauvinism which makes Puerto Ricans think “we” are better than other Latina/o groups.

I use the migente.com electronic conversation as an example of a question and/or criticism I am frequently faced with: Why focus my research and writing on hip hop solely on Puerto Ricans? Puerto Ricans have not been the only Latina/os involved in hip hop. So why focus specifically on them?

Some participants of the migente.com discussion defended my decision to make the book specifically about Puerto Ricans (and, to get even more specific, about New York Puerto Ricans):

the author focuses on puerto ricans cuz back in the 70s and 80s puerto ricans were clearly the majority in NYC. as far as mexicans and cubans go the book is about NY not the west coast or florida. (nuyorican05)

As for Chicanos being included in this book – why does everything have to be pan-“Latina/o,” let Puerto Ricans have their time to shine. . . . People write books about Mexicans all the time – isn’t it OK to write one about Puerto Ricans? They have their influence . . . you have yours. (La_Manita)

The discussion also included blatant examples of the aforementioned Puerto Rican chauvinism, exemplified in this brief exchange:
The Hip Hop Zone

Boricuas are number 1 when it comes to Latina/os contributing to hip-hop culture and rap music! You can’t deny us, why would you want to you need us. (GULLYseeGULLY)

Ayo Im speakin up for all ma dominican gente..is true as a Dominican we dont get alot of attention..da Boricuas swear they da only ones who know about da game and hey maybe they do but lemme tell ya Dominicanz have helped Hip Hop . . . (HotDominicana)

Dominicans HA, HA, HA . . . you’ve gotta be kidding . . . The only way Dominicans might have affected the Hip-Hop game back in the day was the Dominicans selling drugs to people within the Hip-Hop culture up in Washington Heights. (GULLYseeGULLY)

This last comment generated a heated debate that included an assortment of stereotypes and insults directed at different Latina/o subgroups. A few participants periodically intervened, trying to steer the conversation away from petty name-calling and focusing more on the merits of the historical revisions and thematic emphasis of my book:

Once again, migente posts delve into childish azz debates over which Latina/o group is better. The Bottom line is that Puerto Ricans deserved their shine, as do all other Latina/os in the foundation of hip hop culture. All this other beef is pointless. (power_rule7)

My book documents and celebrates New York Puerto Ricans’ contributions to hip hop. Never does it suggest that other Latina/o groups are unimportant to the history of hip hop. However, it seems that my choosing to highlight and examine the specificities of the experience of one group is automatically deemed by many to be a problem because it allegedly excludes, ignores, or minimizes the importance of other groups. I argue throughout the book that, on the contrary, the gravest danger is ignoring the specificities of each Latina/o group by lumping them all into a pan-Latina/o mass. That is not to say that a book that focuses on Latina/os in hip hop as a whole will necessary slip into this pitfall. My point is that we need books about the general Latina/o experience in hip hop and also about the specific experiences of different subgroups within the Latina/o experience. Because of numerous factors, Puerto Ricans and African Americans have tightly interwoven histories; hip hop is a case in point. Puerto Ricans fit into the Latina/o category and into the African diaspora in very particular ways. Those particularities deserve to be explored with care.

In theory, there is nothing wrong with focusing on specifics. However, we must acknowledge that chauvinism and inter-Latina/o rivalries are strong, dangerous, and debilitating and must be combated. However, we can explore our differences while still acknowledging commonalities, having solidarity with each other and even a common political agenda.
Raquel Z. Rivera

... this is just one of many stories that need to be told. So ya’ll can stop trippin on each other about kid frost vs. big pun, frijoles vs. habichuelas, yuca vs. platanos, whateva!!! (power_rule7)

It gave me immense satisfaction that, though an academic book, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* was being discussed in popular forums such as these. Even people who might never actually read the book were exposed to some of its ideas through this forum.

This chatroom debate, classroom discussions with my students, and plenty of other instances have highlighted for me the importance of furthering a dialogue about race and ethnicity in the United States, particularly in terms of the way these concepts impact Latina/o lives. The richness of our actual lived experiences is too often stifled by the assumption that our realities have to fit into oversimplified identity categories. Thus, we must continue to explore and celebrate the amazing diversity which exists among Latina/os; we also have to seek a greater understanding regarding the intersections and commonalities that Latina/os have with other groups.

**Conclusion**

Blackness and *latinidad* are often imagined as discrete categories that do not intersect. This leads to two related problems: one is that widely diverging Latina/o experiences tend to be homogenized; the second is that the cultural convergences between Latina/os, African Americans, and non-Latina/o Caribbeans are frequently glossed over.

Though blackness and *latinidad* most frequently continue to be misrepresented as mutually exclusive categories, there are scores of hip hop artists, musicians in other genres, writers, educators, and activists challenging that lamentably prevailing view. Tego Calderón is certainly not alone when he claims blackness as an integral part of his experience and identity.

With the increasing growth of the US Latina/o population, there is also a growing tendency to naturalize the ties that bind Latina/os to each other and to gloss over the internal variety within the collective, the specificities of each subgroup, and the historical relationship that each Latina/o subgroup has to other ethnic groups. There is a dire existing need for artistic, activist, educational, and scholarly work that explores Latina/o experiences within the context of the African diaspora in the Americas (as well as within other contexts). There is also a strong need for work that dismantles the myth of racial democracy in Latin America and among US Latina/os. We have yet to adequately confront our lasting legacy of Eurocentrism and racism – a legacy which many still want to deny and which is one of the many reasons why the blackness vs. *latinidad* false dichotomy keeps being perpetuated. As Tego said in his 2003 song entitled “Loíza”: “They want to make me believe that I’m part of a racial trilogy/Where
everyone’s the same, no one receives special treatment/I know how to forgive, the problem is you don’t know how to apologize.”

Within the field of Latina/o studies, I strongly advocate for educational and scholarly work that focuses on the specificities of the different Latina/o populations and institutional support for such work. Currently, academic institutions (and also cultural ones) are under pressure to shift from serving specific national-origins groups to serving a wider Latina/o population. However, though there is a pressing need for pan-Latina/o work and institutions, we must also bear in mind the crucial importance of work and institutions which focus on specific national-origins groups and their connections to non-Latina/o populations.

Notes


4 See Davis, *Who Is Black?*


Raquel Z. Rivera


21 The translation is mine.
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Afro-Latinas/os and the Racial Wall
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Situating Afro-Latinas/os

Afro-Latinas/os occupy a peculiar spot in this country’s ethnoracial bandwagon insofar as the label that names them combines blackness (Afro), as a racial designation that stretches across numerous ethnicities, and Hispanicity (Latina/o), as an ethnic category that encompasses multiple races. Conceivably, an Afro-Latina/o may come from two black parents of Latin American origin, a black and a non-black Latin American parent, a black non-Hispanic Caribbean parent and a Hispanic parent of any race, a US Hispanic of any race and a black African, as well as an African American and a US Hispanic of any race, among other variations of mixed parentages. The variegated nature of the assorted ancestry of Afro-Latinas/os comes to further expose the precarious constitution of the official classification that breaks the US population down into five presumably distinct communities of descent. Since 1977 the US Census has acknowledged one ethnic and four racial branches to catalogue the country’s population. The category of Hispanic or Latina/o, consisting of people who, regardless of race, trace their origins to the Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas, constitute the one ethnicity. Then follow the four groupings that make up the races. American Indian or Alaska Native describes an individual ancestrally connected to the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Asian or Pacific Islander refers to a person with origins traceable to the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including such countries as China, Pakistan, and the Philippines, as well as to Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. Black or African American applies to a person who descends from any of the black racial groups of Africa. Finally, White denotes a person of European, North African, or Middle Eastern origins.

The unstable nature of the classification system currently in place was borne out by the voices that contested it during the 1990s, as policymakers and activists, venting their dissatisfaction with its logic, contemplated the possibility of modifying
it prior to the 2000 Census. A national coalition of Asian Pacific Americans lobbied for the inclusion of Cambodia and Lao under the heading of Asian or Pacific Islander. The Arab American Institute argued for the removal of Middle Easterners from the White category and their placement in a protected category of their own. Hawaiian Senator Daniel K. Akaka advocated the transfer of his people from the Asian or Pacific Islander to the American Indian or Alaska Native box to protect them from the misperception that they, the original inhabitants of the Hawaiian Islands, “somehow ‘immigrated’ to the United States like other Asian or Pacific Island groups.” The National Council of La Raza wished for Hispanics to gain recognition as a full-fledged race rather than merely as an ethnic group (Wright 1994: 2). Still other voices militated in favor of creating a new category for people of multiracial origin. The proponents of a multiracial box did not succeed in getting the new category added to the existing ethnoracial classification system, but the fact that, for the first time ever, the 2000 US Census form allowed people to mark one or more racial groups may be regarded as a small victory on their part. Political scientist Kim Williams’ forthcoming book *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America* examines the long-term implications of the change even though “only about 2.6 percent of Americans identified with more than one race in 2000” (Williams 2005: 3).

However, I do not see the epistemologically ludicrous configuration of the existing ethnoracial taxonomy as justifiable ground for recommending its outright dismissal. Such dismissal, in my view, would entail a reckless disregard for the civil rights agenda that the population headcount came into existence to address. Besides, epistemological dissatisfaction with the existing categories may be prompted by the equally disturbing expectation that some other classification system will achieve an accurate and precise account of the population’s ethnoracial formation. I have made my peace with the labels that classify the US population into distinct communities of descent by accepting them as expressive of a set of sociopolitical aspirations rather than as descriptive of an objective reality. The US Hispanic population, for instance, can undertake to reap whatever practical benefits the Census categories may bring in terms of allocation of federal funds to particular municipalities or school districts without allowing the strictly statistical nomenclature of a federal agency to shape the way the “community” looks at itself. Nothing prevents a leadership that promotes a Latina/o agenda from owning to the unstable and fractious nature of the very concept of Latina/o as an appellation with the ambition to denote the quiddity or core of the collective being of 35 million US Hispanics with histories, heritages, and national traumas of disparate sorts. By virtue of their interlaced ethnoracial and multicultural experience dating back to their colonial roots in the Americas, Latinas/os have the historical wherewithal to discern the fragility of ethnoracial identity formulations and help shake the conceptual edifices of the racial imagination. They can trouble the dominant racial logic, first, by stressing the US Hispanic population’s own multiracial constitution. Foregrounding “the differentiated experiences of White Latinas/os, Indian Latinas/os, Asian Latinas/os, and Afro-Latinas/os,”
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they can contribute to an expansion of the identity terrain currently available to the population, thus trespassing the territorial boundaries of what David Hollinger has termed “the ethnoracial pentagon” (Torres-Saillant 2002: 452). The systematic fracturing of the Latina/o or Hispanic label may have several salutary consequences. A refashioning of the group’s identity space could rid it of the “white supremacist assumptions” that often inform intra-Latina/o relations, potentially increasing the likelihood that the most commonly marginalized subsections of the US Hispanic population will identify with national efforts to mobilize the whole “community” around agendas of collective significance (Torres-Saillant 2003: 147).

Afro-Latinas/os, I would propose, have an even more central role to play in advancing this aspiration. Having borne the brunt of negrophobic practices and discourses in American society as well as in their ancestral Latin American homelands, Afro-Latinas/os may boast of a sharpened outlook. Those Afro-Latinas/os who have been enlightened rather than destroyed by their pan-hemispheric marginalization can muster the necessary wisdom to successfully deploy their deeper understanding of the travesty of racial thought and challenge intra-Latina/o prejudices, foster collaboration with African Americans, and effectively participate in the struggle for social justice, equality, and inclusion on both sides of the Rio Grande.

Seldom experiencing their race as natural, Afro-Latinas/os often feel called upon to define themselves according to one or another of the components of their complexity. Growing up in East Harlem, Roberto Santiago often heard from the African American boys on the block that he did not “act black,” while his lighter-skinned Puerto Rican friends categorically whined “You’re not black. You’re a boricua, you ain’t no Moreno” (Santiago 1994: 46). The prevalent instinct of hypodescent racialization, which would favor blackness as the component that names the person, does not seem to apply unproblematically to Afro-Latinas/os. Evincing the hemispheric dimension of the phenomenon, Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler stress the importance of focusing on the specificity of the life experience of “both Afro-Latin Americans and US-born and/or raised Afro-Latinas/os” since, while “the stigma of blackness” may operate similarly throughout the hemisphere, the various national origin groups (Afro-Colombians, Afro-Puerto Ricans, Afro-Ecuadoreans, US-based Afro-Dominicans, etc.) experience it heterogeneously (Dzidzienyo and Oboler 2005: 16).

The Garifuna of Honduras are among the least “Latinized” and most culturally distinct Afro-Latin American populations. In the United States, however, their insertion into the country’s ethnoracial structure does not occur without ambivalence. Generally, they very clearly assert their blackness, but they also tend to differentiate themselves from African Americans and for the most part settle for an “Afro-Hispanic” identity space (Anderson 2005: 112–13). Afro-Latinas/os also enter the US Hispanic sphere with a measure of disadvantage. For instance, they show weaker socioeconomic indicators than other Latinas/os according to a study done by the Mumford Center at SUNY Albany, and the
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2002 National Survey of Latinas/os conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, DC, interviewed many Afro-Latinas/os who reported suffering discrimination from other Latinas/os (Hernandez 2005: 36). We do not know the size of the Afro-Latina/o population. The 2000 US Census counted over 35 million people of Hispanic descent in the country, making up 12.5 percent of the total population. Since the Census form for the first time gave individuals the option of marking more than one race category, some 2 percent of those who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latina/o also marked “Black,” whereas nearly half marked “White” and 45.2 percent marked “some other race” (Hernandez 2005: 35). Conceivably, the number of Afro-Latinas/os will grow substantially as individuals become more comfortable with the new Census practice of marking more than one ethnoracial category, but it seems that the majority of those who marked “Black” and “Latina/o” trace their origin to the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico, with a contingent of approximately 250,000 individuals of Mexican ancestry also classifying themselves as “Black” (35).

The Advent of Brown

The numerical growth of US Hispanics has elicited the concerns of doomsayers as much as it has emboldened the prophets of a better day. On the neutral side, scholars “agree that a ‘browning’ phenomenon is now more prominent than ever” in major American cities that boast a meaningful portion of non-white residents (Rios and Mohamed 2003: xi). Among the prognosticators of calamity, Harvard University polemicist Samuel P. Huntington awakened his dormant prominence as a public voice by seeking to alarm white and black Americans with such forebodings as this: “One index foretells the future: In 1998 ‘José’ replaced ‘Michael’ as the most popular name for newborn boys in both California and Texas” (Huntington 2004: 44). Linguist Otto Santa Ana has meticulously examined the metaphors prevailing in American public discourse to evoke the “dangerous” growth of the Hispanic population, many of which codified the language that went into the drafting of Proposition 187, the law passed by the California electorate on November 8, 1994 to deny healthcare, social services, and education to undocumented aliens. Depicting the country at the verge of drowning, “awash under a brown tide,” with a “relentless flow” of immigrants who, “like waves on a beach,” threatened to remake “the face of America,” the metaphors compellingly appealed to the citizenry’s fear of browning (Santa Ana 2002: 7).

Apparently fearful of the inundation that a brown tide would bring, the City of Manassas, Virginia, a mere 35 miles from Washington, DC, recently put in place a new zoning ordinance that outlaws “households consisting of a family’s cousins, uncles, aunts, nieces, and nephews,” much to the indignation of the Washington Post, whose December 30, 2005 editorial articulated a sobering reprimand of the regulation. “Like other suburban localities in the region,” the editorial notes, “Manassas is undergoing a demographic shift as Hispanic immigrants,
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legal and undocumented, move into what were once relatively homogenous neighborhoods,” where they often “share housing with their relatives to help out with the rent or mortgage.” While some communities have welcomed this influx, Manassas city officials have opted “to harass” the immigrants, “sending inspectors into selected city households to interrogate hardworking people about the numbers and relationships of the inhabitants.” The editorial mentions the case of Leyla and Juan Chávez, US citizens living in this country since the 1980s who, found guilty of housing a “nephew as well as a renter couple who lived downstairs,” endured “the city’s persecution” and ultimately decided “to leave the area.” Evidently the management at the Washington Post, though predominantly white, one would suppose, does not share the anxiety of the Manassas city officials about a potential darkening of the hue of the population. Similarly, there are those, mostly coming from Hispanic quarters, who herald the demographic change in an unabashedly celebratory tone. Medical scholar David E. Hayes-Bautista confidently asserts that by virtue of their numerical growth “Latinas/os today are defining what it is to be American” (Hayes-Bautista 2004: 176). Tracing the historical development of Hispanics in California and chronicling the uninterrupted presence of a Latina/o civil society in the state dating back to April 1769, this Mexican American academic regards Latinas/os as “the new generation of Americans who will create American society and identity for the twenty-first century,” and he seeks to allay the concerns of those who perceive the demographic shift as corrosive of the country’s core values by suggesting that, far from representing an “un-American” presence, Latinas/os, like Texans, merely represent a “distinctive way of being American” (pp. 4, 11, 178).

Though complicated with conflicting desires and contradictory temptations, the foregoing pronouncements represent a difficult but inevitable conversation about ethnoracial crossing and the future of race in the United States, a conversation in which Afro-Latinas/os ought to have a natural, if not a leading role among the speakers. Afro-Latinas/os, by virtue of their unstable ethnoracial location, are ideally positioned to embody “public admissions of racial impurity,” to escape the logic and the legacy of the “one-drop rule,” subvert the racial imagination, and consequently undermine the very “notion of race” (Rodríguez 2002: 202). In Brown: The Last Discovery of America, his intensely personal and no less compelling meditation on ethnoracial identity, Richard Rodríguez notes that “Race is America’s theme – not freedom, not democracy (as we say in company),” and he envisions a time when the United States will dare to speak the truth about its brownness, the history of cross-racial copulation that the children of John Rolfe and Pocahontas or Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson would seem to epitomize. White supremacy in the United States begot a situation in which only whites could enjoy the freedom to escape racial identity, embodying unmitigated personhood and humanity, while everyone else remains condemned to the prison of their racialized blood (pp. 140–1). Provocatively, Rodríguez says he wants for African Americans the same freedom he would like for himself, namely the freedom “to admit brown” (p. 142). During a 2002 interview on the
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program *Now with Bill Moyers*, Rodriguez gave a poignant example of the country’s resistance to acknowledging its brownness by pointing to the irony that at the ceremony where the film industry congratulated itself for giving an Academy Award to Halle Berry as a “black actress,” the Oscar recipient was sitting right next to her white mother. When we learn further that Berry’s parents divorced when she was only four, and that it was her mother who raised her, the irony that her absent African American father should count as the only racial pro-creator becomes bitter. The episode patently shows blacks and whites colluding in the preservation of a consensus that regards “a white woman capable of giving birth to a black child but denies that a black woman can give birth to a white child” (Fields 1982: 149).

Afro-Latinas/os, again because of the discomfort of their ethnoracial location, bring to the table of conversation a history of necessary familiarity with the reality of brownness, to borrow the useful image invoked by Rodriguez. We should acknowledge, however, an earlier use of the term “brown” which did not overtly denote racial crossing. The Research Institute of the Bureau of Negro Affairs in 1930 began publication in Philadelphia of a periodical that promoted the interests of the black community under the title *The Brown American*. The periodical ceased publication in 1940, and the following year the National Association of Negroes in American Industry revived it as its official organ until 1945, when it finally disappeared, having been superseded by *The Negro Statesman*. But the usage that Rodriguez invokes does have meaningful precedents. In 1931, Edwin R. Embree opened his book *Brown America* with this tiding: “A new race is growing up in America. Its skin is brown. In its veins is the blood of the three principal branches of man – Black, white, and yellow-brown. The new race numbers twelve million in the United States, and other millions in the West Indies and Central America” (Embree 1931: 3). The emergence of the “new race” did not disturb Embree’s quiet. On the contrary, he viewed it as the necessary solution to the race problem in the country: “As to the future of Brown Americans, I am a confirmed optimist. The race problem in the United States, which in the dark decades following the Civil War seemed completely baffling, no longer is among the difficult questions of the nation” (pp. 284–5).

Evidently, Embree’s extreme optimism failed to do justice to the gravity of racial reality in the United States. Today, three quarters of a century after his words appeared in print and a civil rights movement having brought about significant transformations, we still cannot exclude race from “the difficult questions of the nation.” Apart from ethnoracially differentiated statistics about incarcerations, unemployment, school desertion, and substandard housing, the state of race today may be deduced from the figurations of the specialists on the matter. An edited volume entitled *Beyond Racism* presents us with a good sampling of recognized specialists who gathered to explore questions of racial inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States. But rather than heralding the “end of racism,” the volume closes with an appeal by Charles V. Hamilton to the societies in question to upgrade their investment in formal education to
help the disempowered victims of exclusion better to protect themselves from
the legacy of racism (Hamilton 2001: 597). The aspiration seems to be for the
development of appropriate palliatives to treat the victims of a recognizably
perpetual source of stress. But one need not grant racism such a timeless ontology;
one may instead assert that existing as it does in history and within the sphere of
social relations, racism must correspond to the perishability of all other products
of human creation. Perhaps we have never been as well equipped to speed up its
dismantling as we are at present.

Like others before me, I envision a vulnerable spot in the structure of racism,
given its fundamental susceptibility to cross-racial copulation, the process of
browning that Rodríguez has explored. Naming it “amalgamation,” David A.
Hollinger has chronicled its continued growth since the second half of the twen-
tieth century. The 1990 Census reported rates of out-marriage for Latinas/os
at 33 percent, for Asian Americans at about 50 percent, for Native Americans at
about 60 percent, and for African Americans – as defined by the hypodescent
standard – at 10 percent (Hollinger 2003: 1385). The persistence of negrophobia
among the other ethnoracial minorities as well as among whites and a stronger
sense of ethnic self-affirmation among blacks, which may express itself at times
as a reticence to mingle carnally with whites, probably explain the lower rates of
out-marriage for African Americans, but even the 1990 numbers represent a
substantial increase as compared with the 1980 Census figures. Besides, for all
groups involved we need to consider the significance of non-marital cohabitation
at a time when, as Hollinger observes, the percentage of formal marriages has
continued to diminish. Furthermore, the new wave of genealogical research has
begun to shed new light on the history of interracial commingling dating back
to the violence of the slavery period, with approximately 30 percent of African
Americans who take DNA tests to determine their lineage finding that they
descent from Europeans on their father’s side (Willing 2006). Henry Louis
Gates, Jr., who, as host of a 2006 PBS documentary (African American Lives) that
focuses on nine black celebrities who underwent genetic testing, has found his
own ancestry to be 50 percent white (Willing 2006). This discovery confronts us
with the irony of ethnoracial belonging, given the leadership of Gates, as Chair
of Harvard University’s African and African American Studies Department and
champion of successful projects committed to disseminating knowledge about
the black experience, in the process of shaping black identity from the academy.

The idea of proposing amalgamation as an ethnoracial destination for the US
population is not new. To invoke it, says Hollinger, is to reclaim the vocabulary
of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Noting
that between 1913 and 1949, 80 percent of Asian Indian men married Hispanic
women in California, a state with a long history of marital relationships between
Punjabis and Mexicans, Gary B. Nash contends that racial interbreeding has
been a constant in American society from the earliest colonial moment to the
present (Nash 1995: 948–9). Nash draws attention to the attempts by Thomas
Jefferson and John Hancock to promote intermarriage between Indians and

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whites, and he cites the Afro-Indian ancestry of Crispus Attucks as emblematic of the long history of marriage between Native Americans and African Americans (pp. 945–7). Nor could the idea of carnal intermingling have been entirely absent from the mind of Martin Luther King, Jr., who viewed integration as the necessary next step following desegregation. When people of different ethnoracial origins integrate, biology is bound to put on its show. In that respect, the 1967 United States Supreme Court ruling on the case Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia, which put an end to over three hundred years of anti-miscegenation laws on the land, came to complete the fluid interracial mobility of bodies made legally possible by the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education, the legislation that struck down the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson “separate but equal” legislation.

**Knowing Ourselves Ethnoracially**

Latinas/os are no less vulnerable to the deleterious consequences of allowing socially suicidal bodies of lore to determine the way the young understand and affirm their ethnoracial identity. Left to their own devices, unmentored in the difficulty of speaking meaningfully about the social and existential meaning of one’s ancestry, they often fall prey to a sort of representation served to them by the commercial media that reduces their heritage to entertainment figures, symbols, and forms. They thus fail to recognize the insult hurled against them in “positive” essentialisms that celebrate the community’s warm, affectionate, and rhythmical nature, the presumably less flattering qualities of sobriety, calculation, and thoughtfulness staying under the control of the mainstream “Anglo” population. They accept, in other words, a representation that relegates them to the realm of body and feeling in contradistinction to whites who inhabit the sphere of mind and thought. As a result, a situation emerges that often allows the status quo to get away with including Latinas/os only symbolically, granting them space primarily in the realm of expressive culture, the way the 2000 National Convention of the Republican Party clearly evinced. Rhythmical and sprightly Ricky Martin appeared on stage singing “La Vida Loca” and dancing vivaciously as the Party’s nominee, George W. Bush, amid the cheer and applause, braced himself for the upcoming presidential election. Contrastively, the Party flaunted its inclusion of African Americans by more than just bringing them on stage to provide diversion and merriment. As Colin Powell and other conservative members of the Party came to the speaking podium to share with the country and the world a vision of the future for blacks under the aegis of a Republican administration, African Americans received intellectual and political roles.

Largely untutored in the complex matter of ethnoracial identity, young Latinas/os might even fail to see the offense involved in such promotional material as was circulated in connection with the 4th Annual Latin Grammy Awards held in Miami on September 3, 2003. The publicity campaign espoused by the producers
of the show included the poster-size image of a sensually sculpted, scantily clad young woman's body sitting on an unseen bench with her hands resting on a drum placed between her widely open legs. Her bronzed skin oiled to a lustrous glow, the cleavage of her prominent breasts accentuated by slightly hunched shoulders, she has her head bent backwards and leaning gently to the right as her physique reflects the contortion of some powerful surge cruising through her veins, an impression marked by her closed eyes and her total surrender to the erotics of her ineffable sensation. Beneath the image of the alluring body a legend reads: “Feel the Latino.” The slogan’s ambiguous injunction invites at least two interpretations. By watching the Latin Grammy Awards we can share in the Latina/o trance that the young woman is undergoing, or, by consorting with the young woman’s eroticized body, we can experience “the Latino” that she incarnates. Nor is it clear whether the publicity campaign had envisioned the invitation to Latinas/os or non-Latina/o audiences nationwide to “feel the Latino,” since one would suppose the former already had “it” and presumably had no trouble “feeling” it of their own accord.

Most perturbingly, we have no grounds for supposing that young Latinas/os will not embrace the understanding of “the Latino” as something that one “feels” as if possessed by a spirit, especially when summoned by the music’s irresistible power. Their ethnoracial education, I insist, prepared them well to defend themselves from any shame-inducing vilification they might encounter in the society’s surviving white supremacist structures and practices. A 1972 project authored by William E. Cross, Jr. and Manuel del Valle y Colón, which sought to elevate the Puerto Rican population’s self-esteem by adapting to the group an existing model of black awareness, illustrates the vehemence with which the older generation took on the task of inculcating in the young an enhanced sense of ethnoracial selves. The project contemplated that “becoming conscious of one’s Puerto Ricanness may allow the Puerto Rican to program Puerto Rican identity, resulting in that positive self-image which is the prerequisite for Puerto Rican pride and self-determination” (cited in Falcón 1995: 205). Today, the zeal of such a message would seem odd, bordering on the passion of religious conversion rather than on the political strategizing that agendas of community empowerment call for. Perhaps the formidable battle that the earlier generation of marginalized minority leaders had to wage some four decades ago consumed their concentration, depriving them of the serenity to envision a time in the future when the terms of the struggle would no longer call for waving flags of reactive identity, that is, when the young would need to master the skills required for living in a diverse society. Perhaps at the time they could not afford the serenity to instruct the young in the complexity of identity which, a fluid rather than a solid, one should always regard as unfinished.

To do justice to the complexity of identity even at the height of a fierce antiracist struggle one may have needed the vision of a leader with the capacity to imagine eternity. It was probably his religious humanism that enabled King to promote racial self-affirmation among African Americans as a protective shield
against negrophobic racism, but to do so while imagining a scenario in which, the godliness of every individual having been recognized, “‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ pass as determinants in a relationship and ‘son’ and ‘brother’ are substituted” (King 1986: 122). As he made clear in his 1950 speech “The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness,” King celebrated African American racial pride, but he never wavered in his resolve to proclaim “the solidarity of the human family.” He recurrently stressed the message that “All life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny,” and he had the foresight to warn against the danger of becoming “victimized with a philosophy of ‘black supremacy’” (pp. 121–2, 200). King’s atypical vision did not find great resonance in many secular black or Latina/o leaders, who, for the most part, remained absorbed by the tyranny of the historically immediate, seeking merely to instill in the consciousness of their people effective safeguards against present vilification. As a result, they bequeathed to the subsequent generation essentialized, hardened, and therefore simple ideas of identity, which, as in the case of Latinas/os illustrated above, the powerful commercial media have found all too easy to manipulate and trivialize.

Heirs of a hardened and simple idea of identity understand themselves on the basis of a homogenous us whose ontology emerges in contradistinction to an equally homogenous them. Ignoring the barriers of gender, class, and ideology that often set segments apart within differentiated populations, they fail to recognize conflict and contradiction as necessary features of any attempt at approximating a picture of the whole. It is difficult for those who understand their group monolithically to detect inequality and injustices except when these wrongs originate outside the community, the homogenized “them” monopolizing the function of oppressor as the essentialized “us” officially inhabits the rank of the oppressed. Thus, homophobia, misogyny, religious biases, and ideological conservatism have a field day when they occur internally. Anti-Indian practices, negrophobic exclusions, and fundamentalist nationalism go unchecked when they occur internally. Worse still, hardened and simple ideas of identity overlook the inescapable fact that knowing one’s ancestry takes work, and that defending it requires ideological sophistication. During my initial contact with the leaders of the Quisqueya Club at Cornell University in the 1990s, I learned of an initiative to bring to the campus a major figure from the Dominican Republic to highlight the importance of Dominican history and culture. I gasped when a young Dominican student leader mentioned Joaquín Balaguer as the guest being considered. Because of their youth, born after 1966–78, the period when Balaguer ruled the country by means of theft, murder, incarcerations, and widespread corruption, the Cornell students did not share my ideological contempt and moral repugnance for the character. They simply viewed him as a successful statesman who, after accruing under his belt three presidential terms from 1966 to 1978, had returned to power in 1986 to rule the country for yet another decade. With their distance from the ancestral homeland, having been born in the United States or arrived in the country while still too young to have a
political memory, they had no automatic way of knowing the fraudulent means Balaguer had employed to win each one of his elections.

Fortunately, the plan to invite Balaguer to Cornell to boost Dominican pride on campus did not go through, and I most certainly hope my words of discouragement may have contributed to that outcome. But the extremes to which ignorance or ideological indifference can mar celebrations of ethnoracial ancestry that assume monolithic understandings of one’s people became shockingly clear to me in spring 2000 at Syracuse University during a Latina/o awareness week sponsored by the one Hispanic fraternity on campus. Among the salient activities of the week’s program was an exhibit of pictures of great Latina/o and Latin American leaders from different historical periods. Held at one of the lecture halls in the student center, the exhibit included the likeness of heroes going from Benito Juarez, to Jose Marti, to Cesar Chavez, with their respective biographical notes highlighting their achievements. My mouth dropped when I saw the Dominican hero chosen to grace the Latina/o pride exhibit – none other than Generalissimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, whom the biographical sketch at the bottom of his picture lauded for having served as president of his country for 30 years and having brought stability and order to Dominican society. I pulled the Dominican member of the student organizing team aside to ask, with inevitable urgency in my quivering voice, if he knew that the three decades of Trujillo’s “presidency” was actually a dictatorship, that his autocratic, totalitarian regime ran a reign of terror that involved hundreds of political assassinations, thousands of prisoners, many of whom faced lugubrious torture chambers, and that the angel of fear haunted the Dominican population during the tyrant’s 30-year rule. I explained further that Trujillo managed the country as a personal hacienda, appropriating a vast portion of the state’s wealth, and that, among other affronts to humanity, he perpetrated the genocidal massacre of thousands of Haitian immigrants and Haitian-Dominican residents of the border towns in the fall of 1937. I have no way of knowing whether the Dominican student whom I tried to awaken as to the evil of Trujillo and the gravity of including him among the Hispanic leaders whose legacy we ought to memorialize subsequently had occasion to reflect on my words of objection. But, at the time, he resorted to asserting his freedom of choice, formulating the irrefutable retort that probably not all Dominicans felt about Trujillo the way I did.

These identitarian moments, from the Latin Grammy publicity campaign to the anointment of Trujillo, illustrate to me the urgency of conveying to the young in ethnoracial groups that are socially compelled to affirm themselves that they cannot approach the understanding of what they are carelessly. That knowing their identity, which is fluid and complex, is a labor intensive and analytically intricate operation. If they fail to do the homework that the task requires, they put themselves at the mercy of the hardened and homogenized ideas and images fed them by the commercial media and the most objectionably exclusionary ideologues. They also voluntarily collude with the logic and rituals of racism, invigorating its currency and protecting it from extinction. I return to
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Afro-Latinas/os as the one minority group which, by virtue of its unstable location in the existing paradigms of identity, seems uniquely equipped to discredit the presumptions of ethnoracial ontology. Because Afro-Latinas/os, assailed by various corners of their assorted ancestry, cannot achieve comfort in their ethnoracial selves, they lack the luxury of deploying genetic self-confidence in their thinking about what they or others can do on account of their blood. I would speculate that it came as no surprise to Afro-Latinas/os that the Japanese could play salsa and merengue with a verve that many had considered the exclusive property of Puerto Rican and Dominican performers. Many will now recall the rise on the popular music scene of the all-Japanese band Orquesta La Luz. That Dominicans did not hold a monopoly on talent for merengue had already become evident beginning in the 1980s, when a flowering of Puerto Rican performers of that musical form, especially women, rose to the top of the charts internationally. The cross-national or cross-ethnic “intrusion” may cause the chagrin of militant cultural nationalists – the refrain in a plena sung by Lucecita Benítez says “canta la música tuya que yo cantaré la mía” (“you sing your music and let me sing mine”) – yet there is nothing new about the practice if we think of classical European music. The blackness of Leontyne Price did not prevent her from enriching the sound of Italian opera. Nor did the Asianness of Seiji Osawa ever get in the way of his excelling at conducting the symphonic works of a Russian composer named Tchaikovsky. Who would have thought that during the first World Baseball Classic tournament in the spring of 2006 Japan would snatch the victory over the teams representing the United States, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, countries where the sport has attained a near cultural value? All this calls for the affirmation of this simple proposition: there are no cultural genes. Afro-Latinas/os are well poised to understand the overarching implications of that proposition in the realm of social interaction. As such, they enjoy a privileged vantage point to promote the deracialization of all our selves with the hope of corroding the logic and rituals that have for long sustained the racial wall in the national imaginary.

References


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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The (W)rite to Remember: Indígena as Scribe 2004–5 (an excerpt)

Cherrié Moraga

“Not Forever on Earth”

Summer 2001

The moon rising, the sun has hours before vanished behind the high coastal hills. Above us, the sky remains a fading blue. At eye level, darkness encroaches upon the forest. In this hour, the hour of Coyolxauhqui’s return, her triumph over Huitzilopochtli, I uncover the ephemeral that is I. My son, walking at my side, is not my son but his own dream.

The next day he will ask me, as if intuiting my thoughts, “Is life a dream?” I pause before responding. He quickly inserts, “Some people say we are dreaming, don’t tell me ‘yes.’” I remember fearing the same as a child. “Yes, yes, yes, it is a dream we walk, son.” This is what I say inside. Aloud, I give him what he wants. I say we dream at night truths, which teach us for our waking life. (And this is so, but only half-so.) I do not tell him that last night I walked down to the riverbank with him and knew us so clearly dreaming. Dreaming, remembering. We had been here before. A leaf, a trout, a quail. Woman. Indígena. We had been here before.

These visions, primordial ways of knowing, are all of ours since forever. That sudden consciousness that our time is short here on this planet; that our sense of self, that “I” so precious to us, can so suddenly and easily dissolve into the ancient original world around us: the redwood forest, the darkening sky, the silencing of birds for the night.

The Aztec poet Nezahualcoyotl wrote:

Though it be jade it falls apart,
Though it be gold it wear away,
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Though it be quetzal plumage it is torn asunder.
Not forever on earth
Only a little while here.
(León-Portillo 1992: 80)

We try to forget these ways of knowing, this way of the “we,” that necessary humility and reciprocity in relation to the earth’s elements. For so little in our North American lives matters in the face of this way of knowing. Capitalism becomes extinct. Profit becomes extinct. Borders and war become extinct. But, we look away. So much to lose, we think. Instead, we elect to become extinct ourselves and lose all. We imagine we haven’t lost, surrounded by so much stuff. We imagine we are privileged ones, the free ones. And this delusion becomes the measure of our colonization.

I write this from the perspective of someone who has so much, so much more materially than my immediate ancestors. But my privilege belies a profound deficiency, an ignorance, which is taking me a lifetime to undo. My teachers, those figures in my life who have exposed my lack of deep knowledge, are those who suffer constant heartbreak and somehow do not close up their hearts. They are those living very close to extinction that still abide by an old way. Sometimes I find my teachers in a book, sometimes in my own book of daily markings. Sometimes they are a gravelly elder voice on the radio; and sometimes they move inside the body of a 9-year-old kid doing a little hip hop number in my son’s school library, who unwittingly remembers an ancestor’s call in the squeaky rub of his Nike against the linoleum floor.

In the effort to teach the Old Way, my Beloved offers medicine, medicine grown from that high desert ground where our ancestors have resided since forever. It tastes of dirt, holy dirt – this sacrament, more familiar than any flat pale host melting upon my tongue. But I am afraid of this way of seeing, of recognizing my own distance from my ancestors, that collective source of knowing that comes del otro lado. I am afraid of this rite to knowing, as I am of that blessed moment between breaths in meditation where time is of no consequence and the I disappears. Such acts bring one back to a profound place of origin and shared identity, where me is subsumed by we, and the violence against any part of that we becomes unthinkable.

Writing, too, is one of these acts. The best of creative writing, so grand in its particulars, is able to traverse great borders of mind and matter. The distinctions disappear. Our present moment becomes history. History is myth. Myth is story. Story makes medicine. I am in daily search of these acts of remembering of who we once were because I believe they will save our pueblos from extinction. I believe our pre-conquest imaginations offer strategies for building self-sustaining societies today, societies that can disrupt the mass suicide of global consumption, engineered by the Empire of the United States. I believe the United States intends to disappear us and this way of knowing. So, I write.
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I write to remember.
I make rite (ceremony) to remember.
It is my right to remember.

The Right to Remember – Our Villages Returned

For 25 years, my practice as a writer has been integrally tied to my teaching practice. For those 25 years, I’ve continued to confront in myself and my students questions of authority – our personal authorization to be authors and our right to write. I have worked mostly with students of color, of all ages, mostly from working-class backgrounds, and many queer. Throughout those years, I have observed, over and over again, the ways in which the authors and transmitters of the Euro-American imagination deny us the authority to imagine outside of their cultural constraints. What we know does not matter. How we came to know does not matter. The language, gesture, and voice we use to express what we know do not matter. In the end, we disavow what we know. We come to the training ground of writers empty of knowledge. We spend a lifetime trying to imitate what we never knew. This keeps us very busy and unoriginal. We do not transgress.

This is the war we wage every time we sit before a blank page and attempt to conjure in our own words. We must ask ourselves: What do we know? We know more than we know we know. What is the way back to knowing? As Cuban American performance artist Ana Mendieta wrote: “It is always about a search for origins.”

In the early 1990s I organized a community-based writing workshop entitled “Indígena as Scribe.” Over four consecutive years the workshop brought together several dozen women from ages 20 to 60, who were willing to locate themselves (however awkwardly) inside the word “indigenous” and consider writing from that place. The women who showed up were Chicana, Native Hawaiian, Apache, Navajo, Salvadoreña, Lakota and more. A core of 12 of these women met continuously once a week for an entire four years.

What initiated the concept for the workshop was nothing more than intuition. Nothing more than some notion or hope that if we used ancestral or “home” memory as the grounding point in our journey as writers then possibly the literature that would emerge from there might serve a stronger countercultural agenda as US women of color writers than that imposed upon us through university writing programs. Writing from cultural memory could not assimilate, we insisted. The work produced during those four years was a collective gesture in the direction of a literature of resistance. Yes, some work was stronger than others, and on those occasions in which the colonizer mind entered the room through the hand of one of these writers, silence would fall upon the circle. Kind hard words of change would follow. And sometimes the writer would change. Sometimes not. Sometimes she’d leave to go on to make a career for herself and never look back.

Still, the requirement of the class was precisely that: to look back in the effort to recuperate a lost language, a lost sensibility, a lost voice, even as it twisted
itself through our late twentieth-century urbanized multicultural multifocal lens. From our vantage point, we were requiring each sister-writer to move beyond her own self-suppression, no matter how beautifully turned were her phrases, in the attempt to practice what Diné/Muskogee photographer Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie calls “an aboriginal point of view.” Oh, we knew we were ignorant and separated from our indigenismo, but equally hungry to want something more from our writings than a slick ticket to a New York publisher.

As people of color living in the United States, how do we authorize ourselves to write toward what is aesthetically original in us when the majority culture insists that aboriginal thought is useless, most aboriginal peoples are dead or dysfunctional, and to look backwards is to be backwards? How do we counter a dominant narrative that rewrites our history in the effort to erase that history and its peoples?

Today, using a language reflecting a kind of liberal multiculturalism, and parroted by much of academia, the United States ruling class intends to de-Africanize, de-Asianize, and de-Indianize its citizens of color. This is not without purpose. While its domestic economic policies ensure even further separation between whites and people of color, the government’s cultural project is to convince us, mostly through empty rhetoric and tokenism (Condoleezza, the stellar example), that we are somehow white; that is, equal participants in American democracy. Without a United States (read white)-identified people of color population, how will it wage war against the colored nations of the world? This nation-state needs us very badly to believe ourselves “American,” by its monocratic definition. The government proffers to its citizens of color the opportunity to “feel white” as long as we are pointing the finger or the gun at some other “other,” scapegoated by United States foreign policy. The price for such citizenship is our being culturally sequestered from our blood relations around the world. The popular propaganda reads: They are the “others,” the terrorists and potential terrorists. Today it is the “War on Terror,” a generation ago it was the “Cold War.” Call them fundamentalist extremists or communists, the argument is the same: the United States has the God-given right to expand its foreign corporate investments wherever it likes and whatever government disagrees with that position becomes an enemy of the state.

Considering the most recent acts of US imperial aggression – the illegal occupation of Iraq; the coup d’état in Haiti; CIA strategies to overthrow Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and to justify the invasion of Iran; while all along the government keeps its watchful eyes on the final prize of Cuba – do we think our mandate as people of color writers anything less radical than the writings of the 1960s and 1970s? Because Cointelpro and a perverse misogyny destroyed the sovereignty movements of that period, does this mean sovereignty no longer has a place in our vocabulary as writers of justice? Why is it that, for the most part, only Northern Native American writers in this country, including Hawaiians, put sovereignty at the top of their political agendas? Is political autonomy and cultural integrity not a concern for the majority of people of color in the United States? As generations of US people of color move further and further from our
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non-literate backgrounds, does our pre-literate oppositional consciousness, derived from brutal physical labor, displacement, and profound want, depart as well? Has our education made us stupid, forgetful, and even further entrenched in our colonization?

I am a writer. I have the education and privilege to write, to publish, to teach, but how often have my peers and I stopped ourselves along the way and reassessed what we really know and how we came to know it? This is especially true for those of us who have arrived at our middle years. Would it be that we did – all of us – go through a profound mid-life crisis, where we stood before the precipice of our descending years and recognized the small and profound ways we have been complicit in our own oblivion. This government wants nothing less than the complete erasure of indigenous cultures across the planet. As people of color writers and artists, our dis-identification with those cultures ensures their and our own disappearance into the emerging Anglo-Saxon empire.

I grow impatient at having to qualify my words when political urgency propels them. But I will qualify. We are all aware of the obscene appropriation of indigenous traditions and the facile thievery of Native cultural practices for personal profit here in the States and across Europe. But, in the deepest sense, before God (however you define that), you cannot steal what is not yours. So, as people of color, if we are willing to go through the broken places first, to our own acts of self-sabotage and amnesia, we will find our own authentic way home. We may have to borrow or invent, along the way, but we have the right to remember. And I can no longer let the colonizer nor colonized tell me we don’t. I believe Chicano writers’ fear of claiming herencia as indigenous people not as nostalgia, but as a commitment to the recuperation of indigenous principles in our daily life has created a half-literature at best and not the insurgent work we are truly capable of producing. At worst, it is a minstrel-like fakery of who we are, served up for the consumption of Euro-America.

I have always hoped that in my lifetime I would one day write a “free work.” By this I mean, a work that emerged from a profound sense of authority to speak fully and deeply through a voice no longer directed by me. The work would be one generated from someone or somewhere else much more knowledgeable than what the limited chronology of my own mixed-up mixed-blood life could offer. It would foretell our origin story pure and true and as a result, skyscrapers would drop their knees and turn to stone. It’s a great thing to want. Sometimes I believe the best I’ve done, as a writer, is to just to want. Just to keep wanting, stories that bring us to our knees, return us to God, humble us into full recognition of our dependence on one another and a flourishing planet.

There are ways of knowing that transgress the boundaries of time, geography, and biography. But only through time, geography, and biography (including one’s mixed-up mixed-blood life) can we arrive at a meeting place of minds, deeply human and politically transgressive. This is the stuff of our life and our art. We cannot escape the impact of global communication networks, speeding jets traversing hundreds of thousand of miles in a day, nor US military-protected...
profit as the lingua franca of the world marketplace. The world comes together,
crossing borders of topography and tongue. We borrow from one another’s
traditions. We pick and choose and continue to collect, create, and invent cultura.
But the profound project of transgression is only achieved by return. We know more
than we know we know: the aboriginal mind at work. I make no claims to it. I only
collect broken shards of memory and try to shape a bowl that can hold the full
promise of my want.

Artist and linguist L. Frank (Tongva/Ajachmem) expresses it best through
her imaginings of aboriginal California. I want my village back, the work proclaims.2
Yes, going way way backwards and our writing, our art, can take us there if we
require the most of it and ask it the right questions. Our journey of return is not
romantic; it is ordinary. It is the dusty road of our own pitiful colonized preoccupations,
which I have come to call the “mundane.” The marvelous mundane of
our lives, where the hardest truths and the sweetest dreams are revealed.

It happened just days ago when I was awakened suddenly in a writing class by
a student’s voice, softly spoken but completely unapologetic. I woke up because
hers was language seldom heard in the corridors or classrooms or rehearsal
spaces or stages of this elite university’s Drama Department. I woke up because
it was a home language made art, wholly grounded in the nuanced world that is
nuestra gente. And, in its simplicity – a story of five Mexican kids packed onto
a mattress on the floor and a father reading “Clifford” to his thoroughly for-a-
moment-contentos children – it countered the lie of Chicana invisibility.

So, as the story goes, one of those kids grows up to carry a gun and sleep
with it under the sheets, Papi long gone from la familia. But for a moment, the
author chooses to recall life before violence, even while gunshots ring outside her
remembered window. The author: some chubby 19-year-old Chicana in a snug-
fitting Stanford sweatshirt, who, for the most part, passes unnoticed by the
mainstream of her university, but I notice her because I need her so desperately.
There is nothing imitative about the writing. It isn’t trying to be “barrio.” It is
“crumby suburban,” as the writer puts it. It is our “village” returned to us twenty-
first-century style. And I know this girl’s gonna go somewhere if this country
doesn’t stop her first. And that somewhere may not be big publishing houses and
book tours, but a life of writing against amnesia. She will document a people
through an open humility of heart and we will not forget ourselves to one another.

In many ways, I see the project of educating my Chicano students in the
trajectory of the Aztec Calmecac, those institutes of advanced study afforded
the privileged classes of Pre-Columbian México. Although the children of farm,
domestic, and service workers, they are the spirit-descendants of those ancestor-
scribes, who five hundred years ago studied the how and why of our existence.
“Everyone deserves the right to contemplar.” I urge my students que aprovecharan
el momento of their college years; to look beyond conventional career-oriented
concerns toward something deeper, toward the discomfort of real conscience,
which comes, as Pablo Friere understood, through a self-determined, self-defined
education. I never let my students forget that their elite education wants them to
do otherwise, to look away from the self as the source of knowing. Through the practice of the poem, the cuento, the performance, I have found students of color uncovering glimpses of knowledges, heretofore obscured and untouched, laying the path stones to critical thinking, which is grounded as much in the historical and experiential as the intuitive. Writing that returns our villages back to us – this is the work worth doing.

Read aloud what you have on the page, I say, give it voice, give it voice, give it voice enough times until your body takes hold of it and remembers and then you will be able to walk more surefooted in this world. I tell them, you are developing strong armor against lies from the economic class of this country that believes only it thinks and if you want to think you must become one of them but you are not one of them. Because the body remembers what you have written even when you have forgotten the words or where they came from. Believe in your body, its voice, and its history.

I am training my students to identify and respect other ways of knowing, to live a life of learning and teaching that do not engage in ever-inventive forms of intellectual colonization. I am counting on those few, with the rigor to remain conscious to do so, to make strong and clear choices toward free alternate subversive thought that grows out of a living practice of informed non-cooperation with colonization. I do not have a prescription for what this looks like, but I know that it is daily work, that it requires hard choices, that it means speaking up when we are called to and deep deep listening. As a writer with a 30-year-old practice, I have had to learn to listen, to fine-tune my hearing and reading ear for words that proffer living useful knowledges versus words that convolute meaning, weaken me, and promote apathy instead of action.

Each morning I rise in search of those words, that image, the cuento that might – that day – open a small footpath of knowing toward the abandoned villages of our forgotten.

Re-Membering Tribe – Metaphors of Meaning

It is a cheesy Mexican restaurant in Riverside, California. A small group of us, Chicana and Northern Native, has gathered for a post-conference casual conversation. But it is not so casual; it is the work we do when we gather in this way. “Raramuri/Xicana teatrista,” Olivia Chumacero says over a plate of enchiladas. “Chicanos are a tribal people.” I sip from a watered-down margarita and remember the word “tribe.” Remember how it tumbled from my mother’s mouth – just like that “tribe” in English – at those times when she spoke of our extended familia with the greatest pride and cariño. “The whole tribe is coming tonight!” she’d say, feigning irritation. It was a word I would never let go of, one that would return to me in adulthood and become metaphor for something of and beyond my own blood familia. The child scribe had taken note.

One thing my friend and brother poet Alfred Arteaga helped me to understand is that our task as writers is to create metaphors of meaning that can shape and
change consciousness. His words confirmed for me the task and potential of poetry (and all art forms) in our lives – to use language that matters in a way that matters. This concept was not lost among movement activists in the late 1960s and 1970s and onward. In fact, the development of El Movimiento can be traced through the popular language utilized by students, artists, and organizers of the period.

In 1969, “Aztlan,” resurrected by the poets of El Movimiento, became the dominant cultural metaphor for it. As a Meso-American concept, both myth and history at once, it proffered to Chicanos the possibility of a “Bronze Nation.” Like our Black, northern Native American, and Puerto Rican counterparts, our movement, through Aztlan, could claim a land base, a geographical site of political struggle. The US Southwest – those lands that had once been “Mexico,” which were appropriated by the United States through the Mexican–American War – became “Chicano territory.” “Aztlan” also asserted our indigenous entitlement to the land as descendants of its aboriginal inhabitants, who were believed to have originally departed from the Four Corners region of the Southwest, and over several hundred years, passed through northern Mexico to eventually emerge as the Aztecs (Mexicas) of central Mexico.

Living in the United States, our disenfranchisement as “Mexicans” was (and remains) a palpable daily reality. As emerging revolucionarios in the late 1960s and 1970s we did not need to look beyond the condition of our barrio school system, the disproportionate Chicano deaths in Vietnam, and the leaking and fuelless shacks occupied by migrant farm workers, to know we were oppressed. What we didn’t fully comprehend at that time was the degree to which we were oppressed as Indians. As people of “Mexican descent,” we believed what Mexican modernist José Vasconcelos purported in La Raza Cósmica that we were a Mestizo Nation. As such, we stood in radical opposition to Anglo-America’s internal colonization of us. And that was enough metaphor to make a movement.

Words have history and words shape futures already in the making. In 1925, philosopher José Vasconcelos asserted in his extended essay La Raza Cósmica that the mestizo (as a concept) reflected the perfect synthesis of the white and indigenous races, a kind of “cosmic race,” which would supersede the races of the past. In the essay the Mestizo becomes a valorized metaphor for post-revolutionary Mexico and provides ideological razón for what was an ethnocidal project already hundreds of years in the making and one of seemingly irreversible consequence. For as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla makes clear over a half century later in his México Profundo, the “synthesis” between races is impossible when founded on the political economy of racist discrimination. (The same, of course, could be said of the United States notion of “multiculturalism.”)

By 1970, Chicanos unwittingly resurrected the banner of “La Raza Cósmica,” as a call for political and cultural autonomy from within the belly of the beast of Gringolandia. A decade and a half later, as Chicana feminists critiqued the sexist and homophobic ideology and discrimination of El Movimiento, Chicana filósofa Gloria Anzaldúa adopted “La Nueva Mestiza” as part of her arsenal of cultural resistance. Distinct from the modernist agenda, however, the Chicano Nationalist
movement and Anzaldúa’s reclamation marked a reaffirmation of our indigenous identity, one which had been intentionally subsumed to the point of disappearance through Mexican modernism. Further, Anzaldúa’s work expanded the meaning of *mestisaje* to include mixings of gender and sexual identities outside the rigid borders of mainstream Amerika, an unquestionably radical position. As Chicana historian Emma Pérez writes: “Decades ago Gloria Anzaldúa comprehended . . . that colonization may have destroyed our indigenous civilizations but colonization could not eliminate the evolution of an indigenous psyche . . . We wear it on our bodies, our flesh, our *mestizaje*” (Pérez 2005: 2).

The Chicano and Chicana adoption, and adaptation, of “mestizo/a” in the later twentieth century came at a time in which most of us could never have anticipated September 11th and Bush’s “War on Terror.” Since then, not only Western Asia, but the entire indigenous global South, as well as the colored and discontented of the United States, are perceived as potential threats to United States security. A global cultural war is being waged as virulently and disingenuously as the US War on Terror and the CIA’s War on Drugs.

As we enter a new century marked by the most massive of cultural imperialisms, what is the language of change? What words and images can best resist cultural appropriation and political obliteration? These questions speak to my own ambivalence about terms like “hybridity” and much of the academic appropriation of *mestisaje*, especially when posited as language, which can adequately respond to the deadly conditions of our “postcolonial” lives. So popular today among Latina/o academics, “hybridity” intends to address the cross-cultural collisions of multiple identities (queer, transnational, female, etc.) requisite of a postmodern world. But as a metaphor, is it brave enough to counter the insidiousness of the United States project of a global empire, whose cultural project is to erase our awareness of the bitter realities of social difference? Does not “hybridity,” like the modernist *mestisaje*, assume and succumb to the loss of our aboriginality, with no hope for recuperation? Do they not, however insidiously, reflect another attempt by the Corporate Academy to exploit the rhetoric of democratic multiculturalism at home to engage our support and services for transnational profit abroad and southward?

Such times require other metaphors that challenge the idea that our colonization (i.e., the de-indianization of América) is complete, on one hand, and contradictorily, that as US citizens we are no longer colonized. When did we imagine we became free? Through our enforced displacement and miscegenation or through personal capital? *I am not free if my pueblo is not free.* This sounds cliché, no? How pitiful it is that such true words become “cliché” before we’ve ever lived up to them. Think about the Bush Administration’s current abuse of the word “democracy.”

Maybe the problem here is confusing the language of academia with the language of art and activism. Maybe my confusion stems from witnessing so many language-makers making home exclusively in the academy and not in the public arena. (In this regard, the loss of Gloria Anzaldúa’s public voice of dissent...
es una lástima tremenda.) Maybe because of this we have begun to believe academics are our leaders, our spokespeople, our metaphor-makers for a new world. Maybe they are not.

Aztlán, El Movimiento’s “La Raza Cósmica,” Gloria Anzaldúa’s “La Nueva Mestiza” – each one of these metaphors broke rules, broke convention. They each transgressed in some way against the social order. They reflected the Chicano and Chicana, in spite of an additional 150-plus years of occupation by Anglo-America, authorizing ourselves to claim a history, a mythology, and as such, a free future. The measure of the political efficacy of a metaphor, however, is if a radical living practice emerges from it.

It may have taken the Zapatista struggle in Chiapas que se les prendiera el foco of many Chicano activists to acknowledge that the reclamation of our indigenous identity in the twenty-first century is critical to our participation in the global campaign against the Western appropriation of the planet. Without enrollment card, land base, nor native tongue, the road to re-membering knowledges systematically denied us for generations is fraught with self-doubt, derision from others, and the bottomless grief that comes with the visceral recognition of such grave loss. But we are not alone in this. It requires a movement to make the invisible visible and whatever remnant of “El Movimiento” that exists today among Xicanos is not reemerging through the politicization of our mestisaje nor our hybridity, but through the honest reclamation of our stolen indigenous herencia and our inalienable right to it.

Is it the fecundity of green, a remembered California, a lost and found there that transforms the biography of my life into no more than another tale told? These tales I tell at my desk each morning of this forever and forever-vanishing season, vanishing pueblo.

As writers, metaphor comes to us organically. It feels most often that metaphors choose us rather than the other way around. Our manda as writers is to listen to them, follow the road they take us on and see what stories, what visions, emerge from their usage.

Over ten years ago I described my mother’s generation as a “disappearing tribe” of Chicanos. It was a metaphor to describe the cultural assimilation of generations of familia that follow them. But today I mean it literally; they are a people who are literally dying off, leaving hundreds of quarter-breed and sixteenth-breed vanishing Indians in the wake of their death. I write to remember that tribe of elders, as their children stand dumb and devastated at their gravesites. They don’t know why really they are so sad, so lost. They never thought this day would come.

The Rite of Story – Our Ancestors of Courage

Awakening from a dream, my Beloved tells me, “If we forget our old gods, they will disappear.”
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In my lengthening middle age, I am beginning to understand that writing is a rite, a kind of ceremony. And that rite, ceremonial practice, is fundamental to my writer’s way. They hold a reciprocal relationship. Each one, equally earnest in its effort to return. They depend one upon the other; each act keeps the other honest. In a society hell-bent on forgetting, ritual and ceremony reflect our effort to put ourselves in the position of remembering. The act of writing, like ceremony, is the practice to arrive at something beyond oneself: that antiguo infinite “we” that can sustain us. It is a hard-won prayer to deeply believe you may speak in a way that is not individual to you but passes through you and all the ordinary of you.

In my lengthening middle age, through a kind of prayerful practice, I am beginning to understand the limitations of thought and by that I mean a pure intellectualism devoid of the body. Until head knowledge is embodied, it is not really known. I am beginning to see that disembodied thought can only tell me so much as a writer. Thought is not the smell of sage and sweet grass, burning copal and the ancient history it evokes. It is not la virgen’s face illuminated by my altar candle just beneath the winged angel at her feet. Thought is not the dawn’s full moon that pulled me out of my writer’s chair and out into the porch to make holy love to that light this morning. When I returned to my desk, my writing had changed, transgressed.

Thought is not the fire. The holy fire, sacred enough to capture the spiritual imaginations of even hot dog-roasting camperamericans. They put down their beers. They grow quiet at the sight of the fire’s dance. Even they remember something unspoken, something humbling, and awesome. Something that shuts them up.

Through the most basic and sacred elements of this planet – fire, earth, wind, and water – our intellects are returned to the body and the body enters the act of writing and transforms it. This remains my attraction to performance, its proximity to ritual, the word made flesh. On a daily basis I ask myself what rites do I need to perform in order to remember. At times, I feel I have been educated into spiritual dumbness. I pray in the effort to lose my mind into that site where a grand openness can teach me some thing I hadn’t thought of.

Even Catholicism, the Indian Catholicism of my childhood, is an aperture in the road to return. When I pray with words, I pray in Spanish. It is a way back to an old canto; one I heard sung by las viejitas pobres in every church I entered in México. The flat tinny pitch of their voices penetrated me into a remembrance that predated conquistadores and invaders’ tongues. Spanish in the Chicano household is the language of prayer; it is (to my impoverished ear) the language of the vanquished in the act of remembering. It is Indian prayer, mumbled as a rosary in the back seat of the family car. It always brought us home safe.

My mother was once a holy woman of fierce faith. Recently, my sister had asked me, “What happened to that faith?” She articulated the question I had been holding for many months wordlessly, as my mother’s failing mind had radically reduced her language and increased her rage. True, I had not seen her lips
murmur a prayer in so long. But once, when the kids came in with their guitar and played “Cielito Lindo” for her, she sang softly, mouthing more words by heart than any of us knew. And at the end, she made the sign of the cross. The song, a ritual of remembering, felt like prayer.

Today, I pray in my mother’s stead. I learned just in time. My child, although not Catholic, has almost intuitively assumed the same rituals of faith practiced by my childhood familia. Once, when I idly mentioned how my mother always crossed our foreheads as we went off to school each day, he demanded to know why I had not inherited the tradition. At his request, I now cross his forehead each day before he walks out the door. We both feel better, as I feel better when I bless his body each night with an evening prayer.

When do we grow into the age, the right to bless a child, a sad soul, a cousin in conflict? One day my body began to inhabit the gesture. It is not Catholic; it is a moment of cosmic awareness. We walk out that door, cross a city block, get in our cars, hop on a plane, we lay ourselves down to sleep and death awaits us. We bless one another to ease that passage. It is common, simple, mundane, and transcendent at once.

And the writing, if we recognize it, too, as a rite, if it is a prayer waiting to be answered. It will direct the writer and her reader toward una respuesta. A divine response, which is always a change of life, a transgression against extinction. The writing will change lives, heal wounds, aggravate, agitate, initiate action if it emerges through the rite of remembering. Through (w)riting, ancestors do come to visit and become our informants for a literature of transformation.

I need my ancestors of courage: storytellers who understand that their work is not wholly theirs, but at its best is divinely inspired by history and mythic memory. Toni Morrison didn’t write Beloved, her slave ancestors did. The most transgressive storytelling, like the traditional myths of our pueblos, are passed down to us through rites of remembering. How do we conjure those stories?

For me, the old myths provide for me the source, the grounding for the acts of transgression my writing commits. I am not Mexica, but that herencia was gifted to me through the Chicano Movement. Without my gods – Coatlicue, the mother of creation and destruction; Coyolxauhqui, dismembered daughter; La Llorona, weeping woman of resistencia – without these icons of collective meXicana resistance, my criminal acts, as a Chicana dyke writer, would have no precedent, no history, and no consequence. They would be individual and indulgent actions without a shared calling.

Ironically, the road to unearthing those ancient stories, however, is at times brutally individual and lonely, and requisitely self-indulgent, so hungry we are to know we are not the first nor the only. The mitos that still inform my work today are the outgrowth of my own journeying as a Chicana lesbian writer in the early 1980s. It cost me a great deal to find their stories.

Rather belatedly, in Movimiento terms, I first went south, as other Chicanos had before me, in search of my “raíces” and a cultural connection with a contemporarary México. What I encountered, instead, was the daily, and often painful,
Cherríe Moraga

reminder of my own cultural outsiderhood as a US-born Mexican of mixed parentage. But the templos of México—Monte Albán, Palenque, Tulum, Teotihuacán—told me something different. As I ascended those temple steps, I unwittingly descended into the visceral experience of a collective racial memory that everything about my personal biography rejected, but one that my writer’s soul irrefutably embraced.

It was as much the natural landscape in which those templos were placed, as the buried history contained within the structures, that brought a shudder of recognition to the surface of my skin: the green moss carpet on the steps of del Templo de la Cruz en Palenque; the crash of the Caribe against the walls of Tulum; the splice of sun illuminating the jewel colored turquoise and jade of a Queztalcóatl relief in Teotihuacán. Those templos to the gods were the edification of a history lost to me. Thus began my (re)education process and my (re)turn to Mito in search of a true god and a true story of a people. Through the mutilated women of our Indigenous American history of story—La Llorona, Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue—I came to understand genocide, misogyny, imperialism. And I claimed them sisters, allies in a war against forgetfulness.

I write to remember— *is there no other way to say it?—* because I fear (and hope, in my cowardice) that I will die before any revolution is born blood-red on the horizon. I write to imagine, which is a way of remembering, “We were not always fallen from the mountain.”

How willing are we to remember what Xicana/Tepehuan artist Celia Herrera Rodríguez calls las “Cositas Quebradas,” the broken places of our small life and grand history? Sometimes, while (w)riting, the heart breaks open like a flower. At other times, it just breaks. But therein lies the measure of our work: the risk we are willing to take to speak our truth, where its justification may be nothing more than intuition, a simple cellular knowing it is so. No footnotes. There has got to be a place for this kind of writing by heart. In it lies our own fierce morality to speak the truths we owe to our ancestors. It is an act of justice that can generate justice. By (w)riting, we recreate the nation of our deepest hope and finest imagination. And we will not die out.

Nezahualcoyotl writes:

*I am intoxicated, I weep, I grieve,*
*I think, I speak,*
*Within myself I discover this:*
*Indeed, I shall never die,*
*Indeed, I shall never disappear.*

We will not die out.

Notes

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The (W)rite to Remember

1 From the film *Fuego de Tierra*, on the life and work of Ana Mendieta by Nereyda Garcia Ferraz and Kate Horsfield. See Women Make Movies at info@wmm.com.
2 L. Frank is a Tongva/Ajachem (Native California) artist, linguist, and tribal activist.
3 Part of the historical evidence for this claim resides in the fact that Nahautl, the language of the Aztecs, is part of the Uto-Aztecan language group, which occupies much of the arid sections of present-day western United States.
4 For more discussion on “de-indianization,” see Bonfil Batalla (1996).
5 The preceding three paragraphs are excerpted from the Introduction to my play *The Hungry Woman*, based on the figures of La Llorona, Coatlicue, and Coyolxauhqui.
6 “Cositas Quebradas” as the title of a performance work presented internationally, including at the III Congreso internacional de literature chicana in May 2002, Malaga, Spain.

References

PART SIX

Identidades: Producing Subjectivities
The genesis of this poem began after a reading I gave at a Hispanic festival in Columbus, Ohio, which is why the poem begins with those words. In my sheltered New York-centric poetry life . . . I was surprised and heartened to have stumbled upon a thriving Puerto Rican community in the center of America. I began writing about the festival, so location became content before narrative could flow.

In the van, with this salsa band . . . I was brought right back to my childhood. These beautiful men, each one a version of someone I grew up with, seemed secure in their skin . . . from the outside anyway. As I looked in the rearview mirror, my horn-rimmed “cool” East Village glasses and wild hair seemed so out of place. In that moment of self-scrutiny is where the poem began.

Finding myself in many poetry camps, Performance-Language-New York School-Beat-Experimental-Latina/o, I’ve grown accustomed to not fitting in. This visit solidified for me a sort of “jigsaw other” in the poetry puzzle. How categories are meant to be defied, boundaries crossed, mountains pierced – a continual force where poetry’s language leads the charge.

Growing up surrounded by Boricua culture, with the help of colorful eccentrics and relatives guiding me through the murky navigation of life as a skinny Nuyorican boy in the Bronx, I always felt as if I were watching the show while starring in it. This visit highlighted the separation I’d become accustomed to from Puerto Rico and as I wrote the poem, a secret truth emerged – which was my father.

In looking for the place where I might have felt relegated to “other” status, it came to the point where my father passed away when I was 10 years old. Adolescence and obstacles looming . . . I was to discover how to be the self-sufficient man in the family, which my uncles kept telling me I was. I didn’t get that, I may be the 10-year-old man in the family, but my mom and two sisters wore the pants . . . but maybe that’s another poem.
Edwin Torres

The memory of my father taking me for a haircut just flowed out, with revelations following closely. My thanks to the poetry gods for giving me such a mercurial vehicle. As the poem’s central image became clear to me, analogies to hair and island clarified. Body image as politics, direction as focus, to not belong by being the loner, to find strength in that isolation.

My love for the memory of my dad as a traditionally strict Puerto Rican man somewhat blindly proud, helps me understand what I hold onto now. The poem holds many secrets for me; like unearthed treasure I revisit it often to see what else I can discover about where I’ve been. I’m grateful for the opportunity to have these few words for this special poem without giving away too much. As each reader should bring their own history, their own revelations, and yes . . . their own hair!

I Wanted To Say Hello To The Salseros But My Hair Was A Mess

We were driven to the airport after performing the night before, at a Hispanic Festival in Columbus Ohio.
A salsa band from California and a poet from New York—both Puerto Rican except for my hair.

I had gone too long between haircuts undecided, after a life of short hair whether I had what it takes to look good with long hair. Did I possess the physicality to balance my scrawny calves—which magnified with every pound I imagined—if I had long hair?

After years of Tang milkshakes & individually wrapped american cheese slices, would my non-existent upper-body strength hold up to what I’d always envisioned?

During this indecision, it grew quickly into one lump.

My hair, represented a non-barrio dryness, unkept . . . almost hippie-like, something that just wouldn’t sit too well with the busload of Boricuas I was riding with.

Here were traditional Puerto Rican Men, from 20 years of age to 60—very well groomed with gold watches and wisecracks.

Here I was, feeling out-of-place as my very non-Puerto Rican glasses kept slipping . . . I was having thoughts of fitting in or not.

If you even have thoughts of fitting in or not, you don’t.

my beard may be trimmed
but my hair is disheveled
“How I Learned To Love Salseros”

in my head
is my entire conundrum

The rearview mirror exposed a rear view
of who I was supposed to be in this Latino Age.
All because of my hair . . . adding to my previously
mentioned, generally non-Puerto Rican look.

Thing is, I’m the first to not want to fit in
anywhere! When the moment you’re in—stops
to surround you—with memory and cologne
you take what’s around you, as immediate past
smiling into the future—flowing into the ebb.

On a bus ride with my brethren
us Latinos—we are gracious in our handouts.
Unconscious demonstrators of our plight, whether real
or imagined. It’s convenient to have purpose
if there IS plight . . .

old Salseros never die, they just find another beat.

I’m from here they’re from there
we’re brought to the middle of the land
to show what the edges are like

each coast represents
an island of coasts

obscure
revolving around myself
I can see

each of my coasts
staring me back
in the rearview mirror

an island of who I am
unsteady—
against the land I’m in

Puerto Rican men are all my father, there’s
no getting around that I can’t help it—I know
it’s not true, but the brain tells me
what the music won’t.

And the music tells me
now, what my mother used to then, silent—
as the morning he died.

All Puerto Rican men
are Salseros with impeccable timing,
just like my father—finally
taking me for a grown-up haircut
the day before he died.

Little ten-year-old mop-top
spending the afternoon with dad, first and only
time—meeting his grown-up friends
at my uncle’s store—I need to use
the bathroom, I said.

He winked at the men
and told me where it was.
I turned on the light—all four walls
the ceiling and parts of the floor
were covered with pictures of naked women.
There wasn’t an empty space
anywhere . . . centerfolds, playmates, legs
and hips and who knows what—a sea of flesh
and glossy eyes watching me pee.
I finished quick, and came back to my father.
He said, How was it. I said, Fine. They all laughed.
As we left for my haircut he gave me a wink.
Letting his guard down for a second,
just like—
all Puerto Rican men, and I used to believe
I wasn’t one because I was in touch
with my feminine side—each of my hemispheres
fully occupied, unlike
the uneven beauty of my father.
I discovered that, this world uncovered
is like the soul
of The Puerto Rican man—occupied
by the weight of his balance between
I
and
land

. . . but my vision blurs as my glasses slip.
I’m in regression—against any liberation
that’s happened to the species
since the day he died.
I refuse progress
because then—everyone will have caught up to me . . .
and where will I be!
I’m here
as a Puerto Rican Man of New York Soul . . .
representing my people
by being who I am, confused
and alienated by my own soil—which has now
become my hair.
Reflections on Thirty Years of Critical Practice in Chicana/o Cultural Studies

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano

I wrote the original version of this essay for the 2004 Summer Institute of MALCS (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social), the organization of Chicanas in higher education. I had in mind particularly the younger scholars and students in attendance, who are entering the field of Chicana/o studies as it is today. Reading a dissertation the spring before the conference, I had come across a phrase about “contemporary literary critics,” as opposed to those of the 1970s and 1980s. And I thought, that’s right! This graduate student wasn’t an adult yet during the 1970s. The 1970s and even the 1980s are in fact historical periods for him. And now our incoming students were born in the 1980s. By providing an account of my intellectual work and professional involvements in Chicana/o literary and cultural criticism over thirty years, my aim is to convey a sense of what it was like to participate in the creation of an academic field that hadn’t existed before, as well as of the internal currents that have shaped the field as we know it in the twenty-first century.

In this overview of my professional/personal/political trajectory, I attempt to identify the entry points in my critical practice for Chicana/o, feminist, and then queer methodologies and ultimately how this Chicana feminist queer methodology has shaped my thinking about the various fields in which I locate my work: Chicana/o cultural studies, feminist studies, studies in race and ethnicity, and queer studies. In the process, I will also point out certain watershed moments in my own changing sense of the process of producing my work. I describe my own intellectual history in the hopes that others, especially the younger scholars, might find it useful to assess their own historical position in the field and perhaps to get comfortable with the idea that their own critical practice and research interests will most likely go through different phases.
Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano

Over the decades certain categories of analysis have remained constant in my critical practice, even as the methodologies examining them have changed: namely, an interest in gender, race, and ethnicity in cultural production, and how these representations relate to inequalities of all kinds in social experience deriving in part from layered histories of colonialism. The critical model I employ has been influenced by many disparate experiences, from my graduate training at Harvard to my coming out publicly as a lesbian in 1984. When I began my academic career, I was not lesbian-identified, just as I was not Chicana-identified in graduate school. My work as a scholar facilitated my public coming out and conversely, identifying as Chicana lesbian has profoundly affected my scholarly work.

Since I am offering a personal experience of the field over the last three decades of the twentieth century, and not a history of the field itself, I will discuss the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s mainly by referring to what I wrote and published, with references to my teaching and other institutional experiences in passing. First, I will address my early intellectual formation and writing in the 1970s, marked by institutional struggles, the vibrancy of a Chicana/o public sphere, and an early attention to gender in my work, especially in theater, or teatro. I will spend more time on this decade in part because it is the most distant from the contemporary period, and for that reason less familiar for the younger generation of scholars, and in part because of its importance in the historical development of the field. The 1980s represented a kind of transition period in my work, in which I continued to examine gender and theater within earlier critical frameworks, while being profoundly influenced by the shift in the field spearheaded by Chicana lesbian and other women of color writing, characterized by a new emphasis on sexuality and multiple positionality. In the 1990s I incorporated this new paradigm more fully into my critical practice and expanded my focus to other media besides writing, including visual art, music, and performance. The questions that were on my mind as I wrote this piece stemmed from a fundamental understanding of Chicana feminisms and Chicana/o studies as both a political project and a methodology. What is at stake in our writing as academics? How can literary and cultural criticism constitute a political intervention that is attentive to power relations of all kinds, to nation building, issues of racialization, exclusion and subordination, visibility and invisibility, silence and coming to voice, and, more recently, globalization and transnationalism?

When I began my career as a young professor in 1974 at the University of Washington, the Chicano Movement was in full swing. Trained in the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish literature at Harvard University, I arrived to take up a position teaching “Golden Age” literature and the world of Cervantes and Lope de Vega. As a direct result of the ferment of the movement on campus, I immediately began teaching in the area of Chicana/o literature as well, and continued on this dual track until my departure for Stanford University at the end of 1993. The Chicano Movement provided a context and a motivation for the study of literature as resistance to Anglo hegemony, particularly along the axes of racial, cultural, and economic domination. This was an easy step for me...
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to take, since my approach to literature was already predicated on the relationship between literature and society. As an undergraduate immersed in a sea of courses with formalist approaches, I had been captivated by one professor’s study of early modern Spanish literary texts in light of the social conflict between the dominant Christian group and the descendants of Muslims and Jews. After that, I could not conceive of studying literature outside of a sociohistorical context. In this sense, my early training did have an impact on my criticism of Chicana/o literature in focusing on how literary representation reproduces, resists, critiques, and ironizes power relations and ideologies. It also provided the possibility of forming methodological and theoretical bridges between early-modern Spanish studies and Chicana/o studies, particularly with feminism, critical race theory, and critiques of nation. These bridges helped preserve my sanity throughout twenty years of jumping back and forth between two disparate fields and periods in my teaching, research, and writing.

My self-start into Chicana/o studies is not unique for my generation of Chicana/o studies scholars, especially in the field of literary and cultural studies, though there are some exceptions, such as Tomás Ybarra-Frausto at the University of Washington (1976) and José Limón at the University of Texas, Austin (1978). Outside of the literary/cultural field, a handful of scholars of my generation did write Chicana/o studies dissertations, for example Al Camarillo and Ricardo Romo, both in 1975 at the University of California, Los Angeles. As a rule the literary scholars of my generation were trained in more canonical fields, such as Golden Age, comparative European, or Latin American literature. Once established in their departments, many of these scholars went on to build Chicana/o studies within their traditional disciplines or in Chicana/o and ethnic studies departments, and from there to train graduate students. The study of Chicana/o literature as such did not exist as an academic field until the 1970s.

Unlike studying dead writers in the early modern Spanish period, taking part in the Chicana/o literary and cultural studies of the 1970s meant being part of a living, breathing movement. It was a thrilling experience with a remarkable sense of participating in the creation of a new academic field. Materials were relatively scarce and hard to get, and I still recall the excitement when a mimeographed poem was passed along, or a book or article was published – a far cry from the fingertip facility of ordering books through online resources today. To young scholars faced with a plethora of materials to sift through to produce a coherent syllabus, this early experience of scarcity and rejoicing over each textual appearance may seem foreign indeed. The energy and exhilaration surrounding the circulation of cultural production and its institutionalization relates to a historical reality. This was the period of the coming to voice of Chicanas and Chicanos – through politics, social movement, academia – all part of a cultural revolution of a kind that helped shape a particular social imaginary and an alternative public sphere of discussion and debate.

My first year as a practicing Chicana/o studies scholar saw not only my entry into the field but my baptism by fire into its institutional politics. That spring of
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1974, in the wake of the triple firing of the head of the Educational Opportunity Program, the acting director and the secretary of Chicano studies, the entire Chicano faculty (all seven of us!) resigned our positions in support of the groundswell of protest by students and staff. As a very young, very green assistant professor, I received a crash course in community politics and negotiating. The repercussions of those events were far-reaching for the interaction among Chicana and Chicano faculty, students, and staff, as well as for the trajectory of Chicano studies at the University of Washington.

The 1970s were also a time of designing the very first courses on Chicana/o cultural traditions and literature and struggling to get them approved and inserted into the University of Washington curriculum. In the democratizing literary spirit of those years, I offered a series of creative writing seminars, and students would read their poems at community comidas held in the Chicano Room at the Ethnic Cultural Center, where Emilio Aguayo’s mural Somos Aztlan enlivened the walls. Another outlet for the creative energies of the times was Metamorfosis, a literary and cultural journal of the Pacific Northwest, published out of Chicano studies. Co-editing the first four issues was also a learning experience for me in the politics and practicalities of running a journal.

Teatro was central in the cultural production and politics of the Chicana/o Movement, not least because of El Teatro Campesino’s association with the farm workers’ union. The groundbreaking nature of teatro and the presence of two student theater groups on campus heightened my fascination with the unique features of performance: the direct and public interaction with an audience as a social group, the concomitant potential to change people and move them to social action, and the immediacy and corporality of the body on stage. In dialogue with the dominant cultural nationalist discourse of the 1970s, my analysis was inflected with a historical materialist approach through my work with Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto. Applying this approach to teatro, I attended to interpretations of dramatic texts and performances as well as the material processes of acting, staging, venue, and organization. The annual seminars and festivals sponsored by TENAZ (Teatro Nacional de Aztlan), founded in 1973, enriched my experience of Chicana/o performance traditions, as teatro groups came from all over the US as well as Mexico and Latin America to participate and put on their plays. Within this framework I wrote a critique of Luis Valdez’ and El Teatro Campesino’s shift from the more “political” and overtly activist actos to the spiritual mito form, and my somewhat later analysis of Luis Valdez’ foray into the mainstream with Zoot Suit. As a contrast to what I perceived as El Teatro Campesino’s and Valdez’ move away from the original objectives of the Chicano teatro movement, I wrote an analysis of El Teatro de la Esperanza, whose work in my eyes remained closer to those objectives in theater practice and collective organization.

Early on, gender became an important component of my approach to Chicana and Chicano cultural production. My work on the Chicano teatro movement in the late 1970s involved a two-pronged focus on women in teatro: the “image” of
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the Chicana in dramatic texts or performances and the role of women in Chicano theater organizations. In my work on Chicana teatristas who had formed their own groups in response to the limitations of some teatro collectives, I was most drawn by those who were more confidently women-centered and innovative in crafting generic forms best suited to the representation of Chicanas’ lived experiences.

My early critical perspective corresponded to a general understanding of the role of the critic in the 1970s as a participant in a dialogue with cultural producers, audiences, and other critics, especially in the teatro context of the TENAZ seminars and festivals. This synergy was another important trait of the radical cultural politics of the time. Part of the critic’s function was seen as influencing the production and reception of cultural production. At best, this attitude resulted in stimulating critical dialogue; at worst, it could be arrogant, rigidly binary, and prescriptive.

These early years were highly politicized, marked by terrible institutional conflicts that had severe and scarring consequences. In addition to the firings I referred to above, in the Romance Languages Department these battles concerned the incorporation of the study of Chicana/o literature and culture, Chicana/o degree tracks, and the ever-controversial issues of personnel, amid transparent or turgid manifestations of racism. My own tenure decision was postponed and I was obliged to go through this grueling scrutiny twice due to my decision to split my scholarly efforts between the prestigious field of early modern Spanish literature and the field of Chicana/o literature. In the administration’s eyes only half of my file mattered, a situation exacerbated by my choice to publish some of my work in Chicano publishing ventures and ephemeral venues such as Revista Literaria de El Tecolote or La Opinión. In this charged atmosphere, another area for conflicts was within the growing field of Chicana/o literary criticism itself, concerning ideological orientations and approaches. Unfortunately, these early clashes between critics associated with certain methodologies continue to reverberate today, most lamentably at the expense of graduate students.

By the 1980s my critical practice in Chicana/o studies was entrenched as being Chicana-centered both in publications and in curriculum. My interest in women in teatro led to an analysis of teatropoesía by Chicanas published in 1983 and a piece on ideology and form in Chicanas’ experience in collective theater in 1985. Of course, the major events of the 1980s were This Bridge Called My Back in 1981, Loving in the War Years in 1983 by Cherríe Moraga, and Borderlands/La Frontera by Gloria Anzaldúa. As many have articulated, especially since Anzaldúa’s passing, it would be difficult to overstate the revolutionary importance of these books for women of color, who saw themselves there in all their complexity. While these texts revealed the continuity of certain elements of earlier Chicana feminist discourses, they represented something radically new in the foregrounding of sexuality, especially lesbian sexuality, and the dissemination of a new paradigm for understanding the multiple intersections of Chicana subjectivity and experience: the constantly interweaving categories of race, gender, sexuality,
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class, and culture. The gradual transformation in my critical work in the 1980s also represented the crossing of my personal, professional, and political lives. I had been participating in a feminist theory colloquium on campus since the early 1980s. The combination of the colloquium and the publication of *Bridge* and *Loving* enabled me to make my own sexuality public. I was given the courage by the realization that there was a theory and a politics of lesbian identity and a sense of community in the resonances of Chicana lesbianism. This new stage ushered in a particular investment in looking at what gets constituted as the norm and what gets erased or excluded as deviant from the norm, including representations of Chicano or Chicano Nation.

The mid-1980s saw the beginning of my engagement with Moraga’s writing. Encouraged as we are by institutional and disciplinary pressures to specialize within our fields, I had focused my efforts on theater. I pounced on the opportunity to bring together various concerns offered by Moraga’s first piece for the theater. In this article on *Giving Up the Ghost* I would strive to integrate the theory I had been reading in the feminist colloquium and continue my work on theater in a new mode, foregrounding female/lesbian desire and sexuality and the revolutionary occurrence of putting Chicana lesbian bodies on stage. When I sent Moraga a draft of my article, she critiqued the use of European American feminist theory, commenting that such critical practices “are driving us into the arms of white women.” Since I was living with a white woman at that time, the idea didn’t seem all that bad to me! I relate this anecdote to illustrate the kinds of intellectual issues and politics that I was attempting to iron out in the 1980s.

Moraga’s writing for the theater opened the door for me to combine my interest in theater with newly emerging intellectual and political engagements that ultimately led me to a much broader range of objects of study.

An article I published in 1988 – “Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective” – also shows the transitional character of my work in the 1980s. This piece recaps my thinking about Chicana writing up to this point and reveals initial attempts to incorporate Chicana lesbian feminist interventions (with one paragraph on *Ghost*). The emphasis in this article was on gendered and racialized meanings in Chicanas’ literary self-representation and how their struggle for literary authority relates to their exclusion in economic, social, and political and cultural spheres. A particular notion of community emerged based on the centering of Chicana subjectivity: “the continuing commitment to the political situation of all Chicanas creates a community in which readers, critics, and writers alike participate.”

Together, *Bridge, Loving*, and *Borderlands* and the Chicana scholarship soaring on the wings of these ideas ever since have provided me with a new way of thinking about Chicana/o community, identity, and subjectivity, for example, the focus on internal difference – within the subject and within the social group of Chicanas/os – rather than seeing through a binary of us and them. From this period, too, date the emphasis on productive contradictions, the salience of sexuality, and the critique of the blind spots of earlier Chicana feminist discourses.
that elided issues that we began to call queer in the early 1990s. The ramifications of this new critical approach for me led to a sustained attention to desire, especially when that desire is queer, and an interrogation of “queer theory” as institutionalized in the figures of a few prominent European American thinkers. Conceptually, the great paradigm shifts of the 1980s have opened the way for an understanding of how “chicanaqueer” is constituted by seamless differences of culture, language, race, sexuality, and gender. This understanding provokes both my resistance to the separation of (Chicana) feminist and queer methodologies, or of feminist and antiracist methodologies, and my critique that jotería is not necessarily or most productively articulated with GLBT studies. Focusing on embodiment and corporeality, especially representations of desiring or sexual bodies whose difference may or may not be couched in the language and imagery of nationalism, I came out of the 1980s with an investment in articulating gender, racial, and sexual differences within the Chicano movement and other movements.

These concerns led to three different but related projects in the 1990s. I found it troubling that just like the white women’s movement in the 1970s with its unilateral focus on gender, white gay and lesbian studies ignored race and ethnicity in its discourses of sexuality. This motivated me to write a critique in 1995, together with the fact that this model of lesbian and gay studies was becoming institutionalized and appropriating to itself the authority with which to speak of sexuality in academia. Another gesture of appropriation that concerned me in the early 1990s was the problematic reception of Borderlands by European American scholars. In response to the ways in which the metaphors of the border and the new mestiza were being universalized, in 1994 I wrote about how these concepts are grounded in the material, geopolitical realities of the US/Mexico border. On the other hand, the persistent neglect of sexuality as a category of analysis in Chicana/o studies motivated me to sketch out a critical model for Chicana/o studies that built in the significance of sexuality, which I published in 1999. This critical methodology stems from an understanding that each category of identity is intersectional, not divisible from other forms of difference.

During the second half of the 1990s I brought together several essays I had published on Moraga’s writing, composed additional analyses of her work, and finished a book that appeared in 2001. The critical shift in my study of her writing was initiated with a 1991 essay on deconstructing the lesbian body in Loving. This focus on the body initiated a new involvement with related material zones of sexual practice, desire, and pleasure. The book explored the place of desire within politics, especially racialized desire. In addition to these concerns, Moraga’s work compels me for its aesthetic representations of some of the topics that are the most difficult to talk about in Chicana/o culture, giving us ways to think about them and through them.

In the 1990s I also began working with other Chicana cultural representations than writing and theater, chiefly visual art. In 1989 my participation in CARA,
a retrospective exhibition of Chicana/o movement art, prompted this move to
other media, while I continue to explore the larger methodological and political
questions driving my work. I engage in the analysis of texts through a chicanaqueer
lens, not just for the aesthetic enjoyment of their textual features (though this
pleasure is certainly at the heart of it), but, importantly, to get at the particular
way a photograph or a performance is working through certain cultural, social,
and historical issues, especially the articulation of difference.

Seeing how the work of visual artists about desire and the body complemented
and contrasted with the representations of Chicana writers encouraged me to
write about the lesbian body in Latina cultural production in 1995 and the
self-portraiture of photographer Laura Aguilar in 1998. My ongoing interest in
theater extended to performance, for example, looking at how Latina lesbians
Marga Gómez and Carmelita Tropicana perform masculinity and cubanidad
(2000). Chavela Vargas, fabulous singer of Mexican rancheras, elicited the most
playful and personal of my published work (inspired by an intense affair with her
– via her music – in 1987). Working on the level of fantasy, my femme tribute
to Chavela is less about identity or nationality and more about erotic identifica-
tions and butch/femme desire. On the cusp of the twenty-first century, Lourdes
Portillo’s film The Devil Never Sleeps (2001) beckoned me to work out a queer
reading of the film’s handling of family secrets and how the filmmaker playfully
combines the documentary style and the detective genre to raise questions of
authority and the indecidability of interpretation.

Currently, I see my critical practice as providing an account of how Chicana
and other writers and artists of color employ their creativity to make sense of the
questions that arise from their multiply inflected experience in a society and a
world structured in dominance. Their artistic projects are transformative in both
political and spiritual senses, providing new ways of seeing ourselves and the
world, not in any deterministic or “positive” manner but as a working through
and working toward. In an academic setting, I engage Chicana cultural produc-
tion as intellectual work out of respect for the sophisticated and utterly complex
meanings of the writing, performance, visual art, and films. It is my job to help
unpack those meanings. The politics embodied in this methodology exist in
resistance to and consent with the power dynamics of the university, where our
daily experiences as academics involve us in the ongoing realities of political
interventions.

In some measure my pedagogy and criticism participate in a collective project
of Chicana/o studies scholars to impart knowledges that students take with
them as they graduate to become professionals, artists, and activists, helping to
develop a new social imaginary that extends beyond the university. Taking
advantage of the resources of an institution like Stanford since my arrival in
1994, in my capacity as professor in the Spanish and Portuguese Department and
chair of Chicana/o studies I have complemented my coursework with vigorous
programming bringing Chicana/o cultural producers to campus. The direct
interaction with writers and artists involves students intensely in the social arts
Reflected on Critical Practice

in ways that encourage them to draw connections between their own experience, the university, and the inequalities of the larger world. Also since 1994 I have been developing a digital archive of Chicana/o visual art featuring the work of Chicanas for educational use at Stanford. I was motivated to undertake this project of collecting and storing Chicana art electronically by the same political realities that undergird my cultural criticism and teaching: the lack of representation of Chicano art in the dominant art world and the knowledge that gender makes Chicana artists even less visible. The ultimate goal of the Chicana Art project is to disseminate these images beyond the university, by making them publicly accessible online. It has been a humbling experience. Lack of funds, time, and other resources continue to retard the progress toward this goal, but the project inches forward.

My trajectory in Chicana/o studies is very different from that of younger generations of Chicana/o critics with respect to their entry point into Chicana/o studies through certain key texts and critical practices. I didn't have the experience of beginning my career from a vantage point informed by Bridge, Loving, and Borderlands and all the scholarship inspired by and expanding on these texts. I mindfully did not choose to write the “advantage” of beginning my career from such a vantage point, as I believe that my understanding of the field has been enriched immeasurably by experiencing how it has changed and developed over the last three decades of the last century and into the twenty-first. Hopefully, this essay accomplishes two things. First, I wished to point out how the line of thinking that characterizes Chicana feminisms, methodologies, and studies has a particular history before and after the 1980s and how this work has allowed for a public discussion and debate about the nature of subjectivity, gender, and sexuality. Second, I hope to have shed some light on the intellectual history of the field of Chicana/o literary studies through this highly personal story, and to open the door for others to consider how their entry point into Chicana/o studies has affected their critical practice.
Social Aesthetics and the Transnational Imaginary

Ramón Saldívar

Fifty years before the current focus on issues of coloniality and its relationship to history, power, knowledge, and subaltern modernities, before our focus on processes of globalization and the transnational nature of economic and social forms, and the related questions of imagined communities and the transnational imaginary, Américo Paredes addressed these same issues of the “coloniality of knowledge” in the context of border modernities. The US–Mexico borderlands have long supported a web of relationships that transcend the US and Mexican nations. In both his literary and scholarly work, Paredes attempted to specify what the local conditions of history, border knowledge, and transnational interactions in the borderlands region might be. In his prospective version of subaltern modernities, folklore and history serve as the repositories of border knowledge from a subaltern perspective. Thus, concerning that vernacular knowledge, Paredes would later write that “folklore is of particular importance to minority groups such as the Mexican Americans because their basic sense of identity is expressed in a language with an ‘unofficial’ status, different from the one used by the official culture. . . . [T]he Mexican American would do well to seek his identity in folklore. If the Mexican American will not do it, others will do it for him” (Paredes 1982: 1).

At moments such as this and many others in his writings, Paredes was fully aware that conceptions of identity and subjectivity imparted by the traditional social environment are linguistic in nature. They are contained, as Antonio Gramsci once noted, in “language itself,” in “common sense,” in “popular religion,” and therefore also “in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled under the name of ‘folklore’” (Gramsci 1971: 323). At the time that Paredes began his folklore studies at the University of Texas, the dean of Texas–Mexican folklore studies was J. Frank Dobie. An exponent of folklore as “local color” and the “picturesque” (precisely the way of conceiving folklore that Gramsci and later
Paredes would refuse), Dobie was satisfied if his materials told a good story (Limón 1994). His style contrasted starkly with the more social scientific method of scholars like Stith Thompson, whose “historical–geographical” work consisted of methodological studies on how to collect, select, and classify materials comparatively over space and time. Both techniques tended to slight the importance and historical significance of folklore as an expression of a community’s conception of the world and life in determinate time and space and strata of society. A third strain of folklore studies, especially of the folklore of the West and Southwest, was exemplified by the work of scholars like Aurelio Espinosa. Espinosa argued that the origin of Mexican culture was Spain and that it was there that one would find the meanings of Mexican cultural forms.

Paredes’ scholarly work was unlike that of Dobie, Thompson, or Espinosa in its attention to the nature of folklore as a critical discourse. His work was based on empirical data gathering and ethnographic research scrupulously conducted in reference to its determinate historical context. Moreover, his use of empirical methods was highly informed by what he perceived as the need to qualify traditional ethnographic research by using better sampling methods and striving for objectivity, as an ideal (Paredes “On Ethnographic Work”). At the same time, there was more at issue than simply more careful collection methods. “Closer to the heart of the problem is the matter of language, a truly thorough knowledge of the language, both standard and dialectal,” he claimed (Paredes 1993: 75). The crux of the matter for a science of anthropology as well as for an accurate historical record, according to Paredes, was that all too often it “ignores the nuances of human interaction” (p. 83). It has aimed at compiling data without taking much into account “either the rhetorical and figurative uses of language or the structure of any given speech event, which may demand one response rather than another” (p. 83).

The nature of folklore as the study of the social performance of verbal arts required that it attend to the nuances of performance in specific and variable settings and in relation to the processes alive in the linguistic interaction among individuals. Without an understanding of the contextual nature of any folk utterance, therefore, one could not know what the expression really means to the people who use it. We can find its true meaning only if we know how and when it is used. Words in themselves have no meaning; their meaning is given to them by the particular context in which they are used. So to study verbal context without a thorough knowledge of performance context is a futile exercise indeed. (Paredes 1982: 9)

By their very nature, words have “true meaning” not ready-made internally in the word or even less inside people’s heads, but in “context.” As he conceives it in these studies, “meaning” emerges between people when words are performed collectively, expressing what in Spanish is called sabidurías populares, or dialogized collective wisdoms.
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In contrast to official conceptions of the world and narratives of historical process, folklore offered for Paredes a conception of the world that was not systematic, formalized, elaborated, or centralized. These discourses with “unofficial” status were by definition multiple, performative, sometimes contradictory, and always afforded the possibility of multiple allegiances to truth. Mikhail Bakhtin describes a remarkably parallel situation when he argues that the cultural world consists of both “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces. In contrast to the centrifugal “official” narratives that “seek to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy world,” the “unofficial” centrifugal ones “continually disrupt that order.” Attitudes and feelings, undercurrents of emotion, the messiness of the commonplace proceedings of everyday life that are not recorded in official documents may have profound consequence on events. Like Gramsci, Bakhtin seeks in his theories of language to give individuals and social ensembles (the self as a social historical bloc, Gramsci would say), their due. For both, meaning is a product of a community’s active work of intercourses and social discourses that come wrapped in contextual layers. Folklore thus designates the continuing problematics that are the popular wisdoms and traditions of the folk that do not always line up in neat patterns of organized opposition to the authorized histories of the nation. For this reason, as Paredes once wrote, folklore remembers but not as history remembers; folklore works by “building its own timeless world out of the wreck of history.”

As he sought to know whether folklore could put to order the “wreck of history,” Paredes also had to ask who were “the folk” to be studied. Who possessed folklore? What counted or passed as folklore? In addition, what could folklore do? Antonio Gramsci had already proposed that folklore should be studied “as a conception of the world and life.” Its features were implicit in the “determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition . . . to ‘official’ conceptions of the world . . . that have succeeded one another in a historical process” (Gramsci 2000: 360). At the same time, Gramsci understood that there existed popular norms that in fossilized conservative and reactionary forms reflected the conditions of past life. Still, folk ideas and beliefs did sometimes align as “a series of innovations, often creative and progressive, determined spontaneously by forms and conditions of life which are in the process of developing and which are in contradiction to or simply different from” the norms of the governing strata (p. 361).

In his own analyses, Paredes sought to identify the conservative aspects of traditional Mexican culture even as he attempted to describe those “creative and progressive” folk ideas and beliefs that did give agency to the Mexican American “folk,” las clases subalternas. He wished to elevate their mestizo art forms to the level of respect that was accorded to the stately romance traditions deriving from Spanish Moorish culture. Moreover, for Paredes, folklore was vernacular history in the making, sometimes offering the only surviving evidence of another history, adulterated, dismembered, and mutilated by the official narratives of the nation. This was also the sense in which he considered his own literary work to
be a form of literary archeology, committed to sifting through the highly unstable and dynamically shifting strata of sedimented layers of history, always with an eye for the exposed historical signs of the past, in the hope of re-membering the wreckage of the past.

Thus, concerning the methodology of a proper science of ethnography and folklore, Paredes would claim:

With legendary material and with the self-justificatory kind of performance, it is even harder to distinguish the interpretive from the literal. The ethnographer . . . must be very conscious of the informant as a potential performer. He must also keep in mind the existence of mutual stereotypes in himself and the people he is studying. (Paredes 1993: 110)

Inventing the idea of Greater Mexico as an imaginary social space consisting in transnational communities of shared fates, Paredes allows us to make sense of the new geographies of citizenship in an era of the emerging globalization of capital with its intensified flow of ideas, goods, images, services, and persons. He allows for the possibility of a theoretical repositioning of modern citizenship in new multicultural versions. For this reason, it is a mistake to see Paredes’ Greater Mexico simply in a cultural nationalist context. It represents instead a far more complex imaginary site for the emergence of new citizen subjects and the construction of new spaces for the enactment of their politics outside the realm of the purely national. It takes the special form of the social imaginary that I am here terming “the transnational imaginary.” Current debates on the meaning of citizenship in its historical setting have focused on the ways in which processes of decolonization and migration as well as social identities based on ethnicity, race, and gender point to the existence of other than national identities as the basis for defining citizenship. As an imaginary space of real political and historical effect, Greater Mexico represents an early, direct challenge to the traditional language of citizenship and liberal democratic notions that tie it indissolubly to state membership.

This revised sense of citizenship comes particularly into play concerning the relationship between Paredes’ Greater Mexico and the “transnational imaginary” on one hand and the idea of a “national” polity on the other. What is perhaps confusing to conceive is that both social structures, a nationalist and a trans-nationalist one, can be vitally present in the same historical moment. Today, both trends are present; we are far from abandoning the idea of the “nation” as a viable category of political and personal identity, as almost every item in the news these days confirms. At the same time, however, something else is also visible on the political horizon, namely, a loosening of “national” categories on various levels, including the economic, political, and personal experiential. This loosening has been with us at least since the post-World War II years. We have to live with the one (the nation) even while we see something else also emerging (the post-nation). It is not at all clear which will be the way of the future.
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However, what is clear is that both experiences are with us, almost as social imperatives, and that citizens must respond to both. How, then, do we make sense of the “national” in the midst of an emerging “transnational,” and vice versa? Paredes was addressing these questions with his notion of Greater Mexico.

Furthermore, since we have to live within the nation, how can we compel it to be responsive to other forms of “national” identity, polity, and rights? These questions too converge on the multicultural issues that almost all “modern” nations today have to face. That is where the ideas of “shared fates” and “cultural citizenship” have their most vital function. They allow for a way of dealing with multicultural politics in our everyday lives. There is really no inconsistency here at all, simply a messy attempt to deal with a confounding complex and evolving process in the current historical moment.

How his personal experiences as an American soldier, journalist, and humanitarian aid worker in postwar Japan and Asia affected his understanding of the social imaginary and transnational sites, the different relations between national and post-national forms of citizenship generally, and between Anglos and Mexicans in the US–Mexico borderlands specifically, is one of the central questions I pose in this work. How may we define communities of belonging and the borders of belonging in the realm of the transnational? What stands between Texas and Japan?

Social Aesthetics

The answer to these questions has everything to do with the terms that my own work has been most centrally keyed: social aesthetics and the transnational imaginary. I have already indicated why “border studies” and “borderland theory” are pertinent to my work. I will have more to say about the significance of “the borderlands” presently, as well as about the role of culture and the cultural arts in social history. For the present, however, it is important to see that folklore is the general form in which cultural production takes on a manifestly social function in Paredes’ remapping of the American borderlands. Fiction, representing the work of the imaginary, especially in its role of figuring an alternative symbolic mediation of the real, is the mode within which the critical work of folklore is enacted. The manner of this relationship is what I will call Paredes’ “social aesthetics.” It partakes in what anthropologist Néstor García Canclini has described as one aspect of culture, namely its assumption of an “indecisive position that attempts to imagine what can be done with quantities which are not overly certain, whose accumulated and expressive potentials are yet to be discovered.” The uncertain quantities whose unexpressed potentials remain undiscovered are the intrinsically sociological ideological formations of the social world. To understand the special form of social communication realized in works of the imagination that attempt to express those formations is for Paredes precisely the task of a social aesthetics. It helps us understand the extraveral import of the imaginary as a way of reorganizing, regrouping, and revaluing values.
The Transnational Imaginary

I should also say a word about the relationship between the “social imaginary” and the “transnational.” I have used the term “social imaginary” in the preceding pages to refer to the intellectual schemes one may use in thinking about social reality. But I also mean by social imaginary something much broader and deeper, such as when political theorist Charles Taylor (2004) uses “social imaginary” to describe “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” Recourse to the ways that people imagine their social existence will continue to be one of Paredes’ most important analytical moves.

Paula Moya and I (2003) have argued that “American” fiction in general is transnational to the degree that it must be seen anew as a heterogeneous grouping of overlapping but distinct discourses that refer to the US in relation to a variety of national entities. Even in the earliest periods of US national formation in the early nineteenth century, American literary discourses were already produced by a large variety of popular forms, genres, styles, and modes uneasily grafted together to form symbols of plurality and representativeness. We point out that “The frontier, the backwoods, the antebellum South, and the Old Southwest provided indigenously heterogeneous idioms that vastly confounded efforts to describe a singular American national voice speaking with a New England accent” (p. 11). Our call in that essay to see American literature as heterogeneous and multiple was intended as a challenge to traditional American literary historiography to shift enough to allow it to respond to a transnational framework within which literary works produced by the diverse range of residents and citizens of this country could be interpreted. As the frontier of the US moved west and southwest (especially after 1848), encountering other nations and native idioms, the transitive nature of American discourses was historically – but not historiographically – established. Indeed, the influences on American literature of nations other than England and idioms that do not originate in the English language have been unevenly and inadequately incorporated into the larger narrative of American literary historiography. My work on Paredes is a chapter in that larger project to see American studies in a transnational context.

That transnational context is imaginary because it focuses on the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings. As Taylor (2004: 23) notes, “this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends.” The “imaginary” figures a very real but fundamentally different syntax of codes, images, and icons, tacit assumptions, convictions, and beliefs that seek to bind together the varieties of American national discourses. It “makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.” Among other codes and symbols formed by the social imaginary, a foundational one is the language of citizenship in which claims of belonging, community, and right are formulated.
and expressed as a discourse of citizenship. The transnational imaginary is thus to be understood not only ideologically but also as a chronotope, a spatial and temporal indicator of a real contact zone that is historical and geographical, cultural and political, theoretical and discursive. The borderlands are populated by transnational persons whose lives form this experiential field within which monologically delineated notions of political, social, and cultural identity simply do not suffice. The geographical particularity and historical specificity of the border region thus mark it as a category of the immediate reality.

Looking West to East and South to North, I focus on the roles that Japan, China, and Korea played in Paredes’ formation as one of the founding figures of twentieth-century Mexican American intellectual identity. History, folklore, and the particular features of border thinking broadly are at the core of his concerns. The interplay among these categories move Paredes’ work in more complicated patterns than the “dialectics of difference” that structure the border corrido normally allow. In my usage of the term here and in my previous work, “difference” is not simply a code word for liberal tolerance and homogenizing complacencies. Nor is “dialectics” here synonymous with synthesis. Our concern is not with the politics of “consensus.” While dialectic in the Hegelian sense can be contained within a single consciousness overcoming contradiction in a monologic view, the dialectic we encounter in the borderlands depends on the centrality of an ongoing dialogue between contending discourses, opposed in contradiction, that cannot be resolved into one voice and thus has no equivalent in other conceptual systems.

**Subaltern Modernities**

During Paredes’ time in Japan, a uniquely Japanese hybridity was emerging from the contact with the American Occupation. From the debris of disastrous defeat, a new national identity was emerging “that could encompass the memories of loss and devastation through the realm of everyday culture rather than through abstract political discourse.” In Japan he witnessed and documented how post-war Japanese society constructed narrative strategies to create continuities that masked the historical disjunction of defeat and transcended the loss it had endured (Igarashi 2000: 11–12). How the experiences of these years and his understanding of those narratives of defeat contributed to the production of Paredes’ writings of the 1950s, and particularly so of his seminal work *With His Pistol in His Hand*, is a matter that has not yet been fully comprehended by scholars of the American borderlands. These experiences and understandings help explain why in *With His Pistol in His Hand* Paredes would offer an ironic parallel between the executions of Anglo-Texan prisoners by the Mexican army under Santa Anna in Texas in 1846 and those of American prisoners by the Japanese army in the Pacific at the end of World War II. “Had Santa Anna lived in the twentieth century,” writes Paredes in 1958,
he would have called the atrocities with which he is charged [by contemporary American historians] “war crimes trials.” There is a fundamental difference, though, between his execution of Texan prisoners and the hangings of Japanese army officers like General Yamashita at the end of the Pacific War. Santa Anna usually was in a rage when he ordered his victims shot. The Japanese were never hanged without the ceremony of a trial – a refinement, one must conclude, belonging to a more civilized age and a more enlightened people. (Paredes 1958: 18–19)

When Paredes finally returned to the United States in 1950, he did so with the experience of having witnessed the emergence of America as a global power. Even at this early point in his scholarly career in the 1950s, Paredes was already aware that conceptions of identity and subjectivity imparted by the traditional social environment are integral in the system of incoherent and often contradictory beliefs, superstitions, and ways of seeing things and of acting, which are “common sense” and “folklore.” In Japan, he had experienced how everyday life was cultural through and through, steeped in traditions from the distant past of the folk in both content and form. Modernity for the Japanese certainly meant the starting point of the new. But it also required the pulsating persistence of a past that was never fully past, requiring a concept of culture as the site of the transformation of life. In his writings from Japan, we can see Paredes working out the deeply imbricated patterns of the interactions between history, folklore, and the particular features of national culture that would carry over to and be the focus of his later, mature, scholarly writings.

The questions he poses in his fictional stories, his poetry, and his journalism from Occupied Japan and revolutionary China are at the core of the matter of conceiving national belonging and the identity of the polity, especially as we are now engaged in what many are calling the era of transnationality and globalization. These experiences in the far away places of East Asia changed the way that Paredes was to regard all fixed notions of national, ethnic, racial, cultural, and folk identity. With reference to China, Korea, and Japan, he came to understand the possibility of a shared Asian culture, bonded by differences and similarities. At the same time, however, he glimpsed the dangers that Japanese folkism had unleashed when yoked to complicitous, uncritical volksch ideologies. Moreover, as he notes in his personal notebooks from the period, as a racialized American he was acutely aware of the effects of racism in Japan itself, particularly about the outcast status of the “impure” Ettah-class and the “primitive” aboriginal Ainu peoples of Japan. When joined with the notion of a broader kind of cultural citizenship that Paredes suggests in his conception of Greater Mexico, it should be abundantly clear that the notion of national belonging he was forming in East Asia was one not based on an unproblematically folkic identity politics. It would be based instead on the recognition of the inescapable conclusion that identity always involves a deep understanding of the raw politics of culture. Living in the complexities of the modern division of labor and an emerging global market would require individuals to forge affiliations beyond ethnicity and to share their
fate as communities of like-minded persons. Conscious unities would have to supersede folkic bonds.

The developing transnational American reality where American identity was becoming more a fluid process and less of a static fact was thus to be understood as a cultural geography, or as a chronotope, in the sense that experiences of particular environments and times interacted with specific kinds of ideology to create a sense of belonging. National identity was thus now to be understood as discursive and real, populated by transnational persons whose shared lives intersected in complex ways with the heterogeneous meanings of the symbols of the nation. The idea of a transnational “imaginary” is an alternative way of describing and accounting for the differential world that Paredes saw developing globally and which he would return to inhabit in the United States. “Greater Mexico” was the name for the specificity of this modern political and cultural formation that in my work I have termed subaltern modernity. It represents a site for the repositioning of citizenship, emergent subjectivities, and novel spaces for politics in the folkic vernacular. Its features were structurally related to the idea of the “Black Atlantic,” as Paul Gilroy has explained it, namely, an attempt “to transcend both the structures of the nation and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (Gilroy 1993: 19) by focusing on the exchanges and transitions of persons across nation-states. Paredes’ version of these alternative modernities – focusing on what Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (2001) describes as “the distinction between societal modernization and cultural modernity” – represented a crucially important moment in the prehistory of the unfolding of late-twentieth century transnational thinking by intellectuals of color throughout the Americas. It continues to exert great influence on the thinking of contemporary US Latina/o intellectuals and scholars of my generation.

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The Taíno Identity Movement Among Caribbean Latinas/os in the United States

Gabriel Haslip-Viera

As a result of the new, more overt forms of racism and elitism that first appeared during the Reagan presidency of the 1980s, Caribbean Latinas/os developed or revived new concepts of personal and group identity to deal with economic, social, and political conditions that became increasingly hostile or indifferent. Government cutbacks by neoconservatives and neoliberals in education and social services at the federal, state, and local level, and the overall progressive impoverishment of lower-middle-class and working-class people from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s led to increased tensions and conflicts among various groups in US society. Confronted by crime, drugs, homelessness, decreased educational and economic opportunities, and the emergence of political and cultural leaders who called for a halt to immigration, affirmative action, “multiculturalism,” “political correctness,” and “handouts for the poor,” large numbers of Caribbean Latinas/os joined various political, religious, and cultural organizations in an often desperate attempt to preserve whatever status or dignity they had in US society.1

Many became “new born Christians,” or joined the Pentecostal Church and other “Protestant” denominations, some of which also had attracted earlier generations of Caribbean Latinas/os with their intense “spiritualism” and their moral and social discipline.2 Those who joined these groups generally continued to define themselves by their national or ethnic backgrounds; however, in many instances, a religious identity would become much more important than an identity as a Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, or Latina/o. In other words, individuals would overemphasize religious identity and spirituality at the expense of ethnic, racial, or even national identity, with their often negative connotations in US society.3 However, Caribbean Latinas/os also joined other groups, some of them religious, that also acknowledged or emphasized identity by nationality, ethnicity, and race. These groups included urban “youth gangs” that emphasized neighborhood
and group solidarity based on nationality, ethnicity, and race, such as the Latin Kings and the Ñetas.4 They also included ethno-racial and cultural groups that attracted both youths and adults, such as the “neo-Tainos,” the Afrocentrists, the Nation of Islam, and a group that can be called “Latina/o Israelites.”5

According to Arlene Dávila, Jorge Klor de Alva, and others, the current United States-based Taino revival movement originated during the period of radical politics and cultural awakening that emerged at the end of the 1960s. However, the interest in the development of an indigenous identity actually began in the Caribbean islands in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Starting in the 1840s, elitist creole advocates for independence in both Cuba and Puerto Rico adopted a mixed Spanish and indigenous identity as part of their efforts to separate themselves from the Spanish authorities and their creole loyalists. A mixed or unmixed indigenous identity was also promoted in the Dominican Republic during the same period as part of the effort to separate Dominicans from their despised Haitian neighbors to the west. These nineteenth-century ideas eventually became the basis for the inclusion of a Native American element in the various official and unofficial concepts that emerged with regard to race on the islands by the twentieth century. They also formed the basis for the grassroots Taino revival movement that emerged in the United States among Caribbean Latinas/os in the later part of the twentieth century.6

The late 1960s and early 1970s were years of political ferment, rebellion, and cultural change throughout the United States. Alienated Caribbean Latinas/os in the Northeast and Middle West changed their dietary habits, revitalized Latin music, invented new art forms, and studied Caribbean history and culture.7 Many of these individuals studied the pre-Columbian Tainos for the first time in their lives during this period. However, others claimed to be “aware” of their Taino “roots” as a result of stories or cuentos they had heard from parents, grandparents, or from other members of their families. Many of these Caribbean Latinas/os became devotees of an idealized Taino culture. Artists, musicians, poets, and other persons interested in Taino culture began to establish study groups and other organizations.8 By the end of the 1980s, a number of Taino “tribes,” “councils,” and “associations” had emerged at the grassroots level in various parts of the country. These were connected to other similar groups that had emerged or were already considered established in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic during the same period. By the late 1990s, they included Nación Taina, Taino del Norte, the Taino Intertribal Council of New Jersey, El Consejo General de Tainos Borincanos, Maisiti Yucayque Taino, and working coalitions or confederations such as La Asociación Indígena Taina and the United Confederation of Taino People.9 In their own specific ways, all of these groups have worked to reclaim or recreate the Taino language, culture, religion, and an essentialist Taino identity for their members and other interested persons.

For example, there has been the attempt to revive the rituals and the polytheistic religious beliefs of the pre-Columbian Tainos based on archeological research and the writings of sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers, such as Ramón
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Pané and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. There also has been the attempt to recreate the lost Taíno language through the compilation of word lists and the development of a Taíno/English “dictionary.” An examination of certain Internet websites also reveals the preoccupation with a Taíno pedigree, which is often articulated at the expense of any African, European, or Asian background or ancestry. There also is the focus on the land, the forests, and the indigenous animal life of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, along with environmental concerns and the attempt to recapture the alleged sensitivity and protectiveness that the pre-Columbian Taínos had with regard to the environment.10

In recent years, claims have also been made that a significant proportion of Caribbean Latinas/os have Native American or “Taíno mtDNA.” However, these claims are usually confused with pronouncements that Caribbean Latinas/os have significant amounts of “Taíno DNA” or significant amounts of “Taíno blood.”11 Based on “random sample” research, Dr. Juan Martínez-Cruzado and a team of investigators from the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez have determined that 61.3 percent of Puerto Rican islanders have “Amerindian” mitochondrial DNA. This genetic material, which is passed exclusively through the female line, has been used in recent years to determine the genetic origins of human populations.12 What has not been said publicly by Martínez-Cruzado and others who have written on the subject is that each individual sampled probably contains trifling amounts of these genes, which probably have their origins in the indigenous population that became extinct or ethnically mixed by the end of the sixteenth century. In his public pronouncements, Martínez-Cruzado has also made only passing reference to the probability that research with the male or Y chromosome will confirm the ethnically mixed origins of Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean Latinas/os.

As most of us know, historical evidence has shown that Caribbean Latinas/os are mostly of African and European origin. Starting in the 1490s, the Amerindian population of the Greater Antilles (currently estimated at about 550,000) began to decline rapidly as a result of warfare, abuse by Spanish colonists, and the introduction of Eurasian and African diseases into the Caribbean environment, among other factors.13 Colonial officials and members of the clergy reported that the Amerindian population had declined to a mere 3,000 on the island of Hispaniola by 1519, 3,000 in Cuba by 1555, and 1,537 in Puerto Rico by 1530.14 With few exceptions, persons defined as “Indian” were no longer recorded in the official documents or population estimates of the Greater Antilles in the decades and centuries that followed. However, a number of Amerindians may have survived in the isolated outlying or interior regions of the islands into the middle or later decades of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, it is quite improbable that these Indians remained “pure” because of the continued influx of European settlers and other persons from Africa and Asia and the ethnic mixing that resulted in the period before 1900.15

Historical evidence shows that substantial numbers of Africans were brought to the Spanish Caribbean from the beginnings of the colonial period up until the
Table 37.1  Population estimates for Puerto Rico by casta or race, 1530–1897

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Europeans or “Whites”</th>
<th>“Free Blacks”</th>
<th>“Free Pardos, Mulatos” or “Colored”</th>
<th>“Slaves”</th>
<th>“Indians”</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1530</td>
<td>426/10.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,264/53.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>2,000/55.6%</td>
<td>600/16.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,000/27.8%</td>
<td>1,537/36.4%</td>
<td>3,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1765</td>
<td>– Free population of 39,846/88.8% –</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5,037/11.2%</td>
<td>44,883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775</td>
<td>29,263/40.4%</td>
<td>2,803/3.9%</td>
<td>33,808/46.7%</td>
<td>6,537/9.0%</td>
<td>72,411</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1776</td>
<td>30,640/41.1%</td>
<td>4,708/6.3%</td>
<td>29,822/40.0%</td>
<td>7,746/10.4%</td>
<td>74,558</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777</td>
<td>31,951/45.5%</td>
<td>4,747/6.8%</td>
<td>24,164/34.4%</td>
<td>7,592/10.8%</td>
<td>70,210</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1787</td>
<td>46,756/45.5%</td>
<td>7,866/7.6%</td>
<td>34,867/33.8%</td>
<td>11,260/10.9%</td>
<td>103,051</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>43,330/38.4%</td>
<td>9,713/8.6%</td>
<td>38,954/34.5%</td>
<td>18,056/16.0%</td>
<td>112,906</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1797</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,312</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>78,281/48.0%</td>
<td>16,414/10.1%</td>
<td>55,164/33.8%</td>
<td>13,333/8.1%</td>
<td>163,192</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812</td>
<td>85,662/46.8%</td>
<td>15,833/8.7%</td>
<td>63,983/35.0%</td>
<td>17,536/9.5%</td>
<td>183,014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>93,747/47.0%</td>
<td>13,605/6.8%</td>
<td>73,540/36.9%</td>
<td>18,621/9.3%</td>
<td>199,513</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>102,432/44.4%</td>
<td>20,191/8.8%</td>
<td>86,269/37.4%</td>
<td>21,730/9.4%</td>
<td>230,622</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>150,311/49.7%</td>
<td>25,057/8.3%</td>
<td>95,430/31.5%</td>
<td>31,874/10.5%</td>
<td>302,672</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>162,311/50.1%</td>
<td>26,857/8.3%</td>
<td>100,430/31.0%</td>
<td>32,240/10.6%</td>
<td>323,838</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>188,869/52.9%</td>
<td>25,124/7.0%</td>
<td>101,275/28.4%</td>
<td>41,818/11.7%</td>
<td>357,086</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>216,083/48.8%</td>
<td>21,491/4.8%</td>
<td>154,300/34.8%</td>
<td>51,265/11.6%</td>
<td>443,139</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>300,430/51.5%</td>
<td>– 241,015/41.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td>41,736/7.2%</td>
<td>583,181</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>411,712/59.5%</td>
<td>39,781/5.7%</td>
<td>240,701/34.8%</td>
<td>692,194</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>471,933/62.5%</td>
<td>36,985/4.9%</td>
<td>246,647/32.6%</td>
<td>755,565</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>573,187/63.9%</td>
<td>35,824/3.9%</td>
<td>289,808/32.2%</td>
<td>898,819</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Indians” and slaves were probably undercounted in the 1530 Census, but there is no agreement on numbers or estimates. See Silvestrini and Luque de Sánchez (1988: 91–2), among others. In addition, slaves counted from 1775 to 1860 were both “Black” and “Colored.”

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1860s either as servants or as slaves to work sugar plantations, cattle ranches, and other enterprises. Significantly smaller numbers of Asians, Middle Easterners, and Amerindians from Mexico, northern South America, and other parts of the Caribbean were also brought or migrated to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Santo Domingo (or Dominican Republic) at various times between the 1490s and 1890s. However, these groups were clearly dwarfed by the Africans and the substantial numbers of impoverished Spaniards and other Europeans (along with a tiny middle class) who came to the Spanish Caribbean in the second half of the nineteenth century. Historical and biological evidence also shows that the population of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic had become thoroughly mixed by the end of the nineteenth century despite the official categorization of subgroups into white, black, and mixed based on racial stereotypes and ideas.

Despite historical evidence to the contrary, the Neo-Taínos have used the recent research into Amerindian mtDNA to justify their privileged and essentialist identity as “Taínos.” Newsletters, Internet websites and chat rooms, and other media have reported on the research by Martínez-Cruzado and his team with gushing enthusiasm. However, there also have been a number of detractors. Academics and other critics have challenged what they see as the exaggerated and flawed conclusions derived from this research. They note that Martínez-Cruzado overemphasizes the alleged importance of his findings. They also note that his faulty conclusions and their misuse may potentially aggravate political and racial tensions in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and their diasporas on the United States mainland.

In actuality, the potential for such political and racial tensions emerged for the first time in Puerto Rico on July 25, 2005 (Constitution Day on the island), when a group of Neo-Taínos led by Naniki Reyes Ocasio, a local lawyer and landowner, broke into the state-run Caguana Indigenous Cultural Center near the town of Utuado in the western interior region of the island. This cultural center, which contains a number of stone monoliths with pre-Columbian carvings and other artifacts, is perhaps the most important Taíno archeological site in Puerto Rico. Wearing alleged Taíno paraphernalia, including feathered headdresses, Reyes Ocasio and some of her followers went on a hunger strike to protest a plan to build a dam near a suspected pre-Columbian burial site. However, of greater political significance was the demand for “an executive order by the First Executive (Governor) of Puerto Rico, the Hon. Aníbal Acevedo Vila, to fulfill the constitutional, civil, human and international rights of the Taíno people,” along with a “constitutional reform to recognize our inherent rights as an Indigenous Nation.” In other words, they were demanding official government recognition as a separate ethnic group within Puerto Rican society.

After a period of 16 days that included litigation in the courts, the establishment of a police cordon, the cutting-off of electricity, water, and access to bathroom facilities, and at one point, a comment from the director of the archeological site that the Neo-Taínos were phonies, the protesters were arrested and removed.
from the park. Despite this setback, the Neo-Taínos declared victory, claiming that their actions had brought public attention to their cause, along with support from several groups of Native Americans, and those claiming to be Native American from several scattered communities on the US mainland and various parts of the Caribbean. They also noted that their takeover of the archeological park would be the first of many such actions that would take place in the future.\textsuperscript{19}

It should be noted at this point that Neo-Taíno identity is articulated and strongly motivated by factors that have been in place in the popular culture of the Hispanic Caribbean for perhaps a century and a half.\textsuperscript{20} These factors have also been reinforced by certain trends that have emerged on both the islands and the US mainland in recent years.\textsuperscript{21} Stories have circulated for decades that certain families or the populations of particular island localities are descended from the pre-Columbian Taínos. Many individuals in these families or groups never tire of saying that their parents, grandparents, and other antecedents claim or have claimed a Taíno pedigree. Many of the Neo-Taínos also have become active in the global and US-based environmental movement claiming, in part, that Amerindians have always had a special sensitivity to the environment.\textsuperscript{22} The ideals of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism as articulated in US society in recent decades have also served to encourage an Amerindian identity. Overall, there has been an increased interest in genealogical research by scientists and the tracing of family origins by individuals and entire households. This vogue has been facilitated by US government policy that permits individuals to self-identify in official Census records and other documents. As a result, the population of Amerindians in the United States has exploded from 546,228 in 1960, to 2,015,143 in 1990, and 4,119,301 in 2000. Demographers are in agreement that this increase is not the result of natural increase, or even the influx of people from Latin America who may identify as Amerindian.\textsuperscript{23} Finally, there has been the growing movement within US society and popular culture that identifies Amerindians as a kind of desirable “model minority” because of their alleged closeness or sensitivity to the land, the environment, and preferred cultural and social values.\textsuperscript{24} Curiously, this vogue has proliferated despite ongoing racism, discrimination, and the continued impoverishment of many Amerindian communities.

At this point, there is no clarity on how many Caribbean Latinas/os have adopted a Taíno identity, or have become active members of this movement. As noted earlier, there are a number of “tribes,” “councils,” and other groups, most of which have newsletters, Internet websites, and chat rooms. There also is some evidence of their increased growth and popularity in recent years. However, additional research will have to be done to determine their actual numbers on the islands and the US mainland. What is clear is that the Taíno revival movement is part of a larger national and even international phenomenon, in which dissatisfied or alienated individuals are attracted to alternative identities, cultures, and lifestyles because of their alleged superiority or exoticism, or because of prevailing discrimination, prejudice, poor living conditions, and severely limited
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economic and social opportunities. Thus, in addition to the groups mentioned earlier, the United States has also seen the emergence or the continued growth of other ethno-racial and religious groups, such as the Church of Scientology, the “New Age” movement, the Norse Revival Movement, the Five Percenters, the Promise Keepers, and other movements of this type.

Notes

1 On government cutbacks and the increasingly hostile social and economic climate for poor people in the 1980s and early 1990s, see Gans (1995), Katz (1989), Piven and Cloward (1997), and Quadagno (1994), among others. Politically conservative or reactionary views toward immigration, affirmative action, multiculturalism, and political correctness were articulated in the 1980s and 1990s by Bennett (1992), Brimelow (1995), Duignan and Gann (1995), Murray (1984), and Schlesinger (1991), among others. For a more recent articulation of these views, see Huntington (2004).

2 On the Pentecostal Church and Latino involvement in other Protestant or evangelical denominations, see Anderson (1979), Díaz Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo (1998), and Poblete and O’Dea (1960).

3 Nominally Roman Catholic for the most part, Caribbean Latinos have also become Jews, Mormons, Buddhists, and orthodox Muslims, or they have joined other religious denominations. However, the numbers converting to these faiths appear to be relatively small in comparison to those who have become Pentecostalists or evangelical Christians.

4 On the Latin Kings, see Brotherton and Barrios (2004).

5 The “Latino Israelites” are part of a larger group that believes that Amerindians, African Americans, and all the “colored” peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean are the direct descendants of the twelve tribes of ancient Israel. At the same time, they claim that Africans from Africa should not be included and that European Jews are imposters. For a discussion of the African American and the English Afro-Caribbean branch of this movement, see Chireau (2000) and Wynia (1994).


8 See Dávila (2001: 34–5, 40–1).

9 See Dávila (2001: 18) and United Confederation of Taíno People (2005).

10 See various articles in La Voz del Pueblo Taíno, the newsletter of the United Confederation of Taíno People (2005). There are also statements and articles on various Internet websites, such as “Presencia Taína (2005), Jatibonico Taíno Tribal Nation (2005), and the Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink (2005). Also see Dávila (2001) and Jiménez Román (2001) for comments on the essentialist nature of Neo-Taíno identity.

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12 See Martínez-Cruzado et al. (2001, 2005).
13 The estimate of 550,000 is a compromise figure (excluding Jamaica) for Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico, which may vary significantly depending on the source. See Moya Pons (1998: 27, 34), Pérez (1988: 20, 30), Silvestrini and Luque de Sánchez (1988: 91–2), and Vázquez Calzada (1988: 1).
15 Haslip-Viera (2006). The 1,642–2,853 individuals identified as “Indians” in Puerto Rico between 1776 and 1797 were in all likelihood resettled persons of mixed background who were brought to Puerto Rico from Mona Island. See Martínez-Cruzado et al. (2001: 492–3). Also see Sued Badillo (1995: 39), who states that the “Indians” of Mona Island were resettled in the hills of Anasco and San German before 1685. He also suggests (p. 40) that the late eighteenth-century “Indians” may have come from Venezuela and/or Mexico.
18 From Roberto Mucaro Borrero’s blog, July 26, 2005, at: www.uctp.blogspot.com (transcript in author’s possession).
22 On the pre-Columbian Maya of southeastern Mexico and Central America and the collapse of their “classic” lowland civilization due to overpopulation, warfare, environmental abuse, and other factors, see Webster (2002).

References

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Gabriel Haslip-Viera


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Looking Good

Frances Negrón-Muntaner

...if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it “at an angle,” i.e., with an “interested” view, supported, permeated, and “distorted” by desire.

Slavoj Žižek

Struggles over what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over how to see.

Donna Haraway

For as long as I can remember, I have been concerned about being seen as small and insignificant. Where I grew up, this anxiety came in the water so to speak; from that transformative moment when a child can make sense of the phrase “Puerto Rico is a small island with no natural resources.” The repetition of this sentence at home, at school, and on television was not so much meant to imply that the island was “small” – a reasonable geographic observation – but rather that those of us who happened to live there could never survive without the wealth and protection of the giant up north. The island’s political location as “below” the United States was then less the product of power relations at a global scale than a direct result of our unfortunate size, an accident of nature that no degree of human effort would ever alter.

This feeling of geopolitical weakness was compounded by a sense of bodily vulnerability. As a physically small “white” girl in a racially polarized context, my parents guarded me with their lives, monitoring my every move and never losing sight of me in public places. Not surprisingly, when new identities were imposed on me in my late teens – and I embraced them – looking (out) for trouble became a critical survival skill. Like other young lesbians, I learned how to read people’s looks to know if I was safe or in danger, and to speak with my eyes when willing to take a risk on desire. When I moved to the United States in my early twenties, I came to understand how racial shame burns in your flesh when others look at you in contempt, and when these dirty looks are a preamble to bodily harm.

My realization that hay miradas que matan made me both a filmmaker and a writer with a heightened concern about looking good. And I do not mean looking good only in the sense of being considered beautiful, an anxiety shared
Frances Negrón-Muntaner

with most of humanity. But rather looking good as a certain way to understand the interplay of glances – and the relationships made flesh in them – that produce us as wanted or devalued bodies, unacceptable or permissible objects of violence, and as worthy or undesirable subjects of any given polis. Moreover, as there is no way to look good without work, the project of looking good is also about investigating how working our looks is a strategy to cover up those aspects that make us feel unworthy and, in doing so, give us hope in our ability to recreate ourselves. In this fashion, looking good is as much a thematic or a tactic as a method in the sense of looking closely, or in Spanish mirar bien, at the received knowledge that shapes how we make sense of ourselves and our relationships to others. By looking both ways, I aim to pose the “small” question of what are the political and cultural effects of not looking good.

Looking Closely (or From Afar)

As many children of left-leaning academics, my first efforts to contest how colonial discourses made Puerto Ricans feel small was by becoming a fervent nationalist. By the time I reached recruitment age in the early 1980s, I eagerly joined as many university groups as possible, including the Federación Universitaria Pro-Independencia (FUPI), and the Comité Anti-Militarista (CAMU). Although politically speaking these groups were largely ineffective as measured by their own stated goals, they did offer relief to the feeling of impotence by providing a solution to the shame of colonialism: independence. Through founding a separate nation-state, Puerto Ricans would no longer be humiliated by being constantly measured against the United States’ size and wealth, nor be forced to depend on federal largesse, or American defense. Having the “nation-state Thing,” to paraphrase the theorist Slavoj Žižek, would allow us to be able to stand tall as a dignified people in the big family of nations.

That the vast majority of Puerto Ricans reject independence as a political option did not bother me much during those years. As part of the pro-independence left, I also learned how to narrate our political failure by alluding to the Puerto Rican majority’s alienation from their true interests. In our view, Puerto Ricans did not pursue freedom because they had a “colonized” mentality that made them unable to see beyond US advantages such as citizenship, minimum wage, and food stamps. Ironically, the fact that the majority appeared to be indifferent or “asleep” to their degradation gave nationalists a special symbolic role: to uphold the collective dignity. While there were independentistas around, we thought, Puerto Ricans would never completely disgrace themselves by petitioning to become an “American” state.

Then the inevitable happened: many American-flag-burning protests, Cuba-solidarity-concerts, and Nicaragua-poetry-readings later, it was time to obtain a graduate university education abroad. While my anti-colonial mind may have been more suited for the boulevards of Paris or Madrid, limited purse strings
made me turn north of Broad Street, Philadelphia. But that was fine. Like many others before me, I would go, obtain a “made in the USA” degree, and return home to continue the work of leading the motherland to its inevitable future as an independent republic.

Ironically, it was in the United States, where I was downgraded to a racialized migrant and became an undesirable subject of both Puerto Rican and American national discourses, where I started to look differently at the majority’s resistance to independence. My nationalist training had taught me that the United States was the source of most – if not all – of the island’s problems and that only when “we” Puerto Ricans would take over our own affairs would the pains associated with colonialism come to an end. The mean streets of migration, however, taught me otherwise.

By way of migration, it was not hard to notice what in Puerto Rico was hard to see: that the Puerto Rican majority had their reasons to view political independence warily. While political nationalists were right in pointing to the ways that American domination had resulted in exploitation and humiliation, the many contradictions produced by the relationship could only be ignored at one’s political peril. For instance, although it is true that Puerto Rican labor had been super-exploited by US agricultural and industrial interests on the island and on the mainland, it was no less true that the “modernization” of the island’s economy after World War II brought higher per capita incomes than most of Latin America, and previously unprecedented levels of consumption that many are eager to safeguard. Likewise, the imposition of citizenship to island residents was a mockery of US democracy, as it made it easier to recruit Puerto Ricans into the armed forces while denying them fundamental citizen rights such as voting for the commander-in-chief. Yet, Puerto Ricans were quick to seize on their borderline citizen status to both fight for civil rights in the US and defend various forms of cultural autonomy on the island and mainland.

From afar, it was also evident that many of the practices of domination associated with colonialism, such as labor exploitation and unequal power relations among national and ethnic groups, did not necessarily disappear in a postcolonial context. Instead, in the name of the nation, the privileged few often inhabited both the hierarchies of colonialism and the technologies of seeing inherited from the colonial era. The result was that the consolidation of a nation-state rarely delivered on the promises of nationalist movements, and at times the elites’ strategies to maintain power by suppressing rights and hoarding resources produced new colonial conditions of their own. Historian Benedict Anderson has famously argued that nationalism imagines the nation as a horizontal brotherhood (of men), but most Caribbean nationals discovered that in the end we are at the mercy of strangers.

In this sense, the post-World War II “colonial state” of Puerto Ricans, characterized by limited local rule, the island’s integration to the US, and increasing participation in the culture and politics of American cities, appeared as relative when compared to that of many nation-states. Puerto Rico’s juridical subordination
to the US, as important as it is to examining power inequities between spaces and peoples, was evidently not the only reason for local undemocratic practices, racism, sexism, and/or the experience of second-class citizenship. Whereas in Puerto Rico the political was equated with the island’s “status,” a broader look suggested that ending juridical subordination was no silver bullet to address the multiple subordinations of Puerto Rican bodies.

Moreover, the cognitive impact of crossing paths with various Caribbean diasporas, particularly Cuba’s, to looking closely at the assumption of Puerto Rican nationalism is incalculable. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Puerto Rican nationalists have looked at Cuba as a model and source of inspiration. The 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro offered the hope of a socialist utopia to the entire world, but especially to the Puerto Rican left who saw the smaller island as the biblical David never liberated from the brutality of Goliath. Looking at the bigger island however through the eyes of the post-1980 Mariel exodus made the enormous gap between the Cuba of the Puerto Rican left’s dreams and this other Cuba especially glaring. Whereas past migrants from Cuba had been dismissed as *gusanos*, or anti-revolutionary, capitalist, pro-Batista elements, many of the *marielitos* were the direct product of the revolution and they wanted out. The blow was substantial, for if the Cuban revolution was not a model for a postcolonial Puerto Rico, what was?

There is, of course, no single answer to this question. Yet, for some of us who came of age politically in the 1980s, it was the AIDS pandemic that made us look in a different direction than nationalist politics. As people with HIV – including thousands of Puerto Ricans – were mistreated in hospitals, feared by the public to the point of rage, and literally avoided like the plague, people of a wide range of backgrounds took to the streets. Autonomous organizations sprung to deal with all aspects of the crisis, the relationship between racism, homophobia, and gender subordination was examined – with a great deal of conflict – and gay and lesbian communities waged their own wars against not looking good as a stigmatized group. The mainstream media, as did the state, singled out gay men as sources rather than sufferers of the virus. The proverbial inclination of gay men to ritualized practices of looking good confronted a crisis that was as much met by critically engaging with the intrusive look of the mainstream press with alternative media as by looking even better through the excessive regimentation of the body in 24-hour gyms.

The convulsions of the 1980s and early 1990s made me look at the body itself closer than ever as a political site. Not coincidentally, I became a filmmaker during this period with the production of *AIDS in the Barrio* (1989), a documentary about the political economy of the AIDS epidemic in a north Philadelphia neighborhood. The imprint of looking like a filmmaker, always in dialogue with other subjects and aware of the power dynamics of any exchange, had a great impact on all my work during this period, including the film *Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican* (1994), where the privileged political site is the body attempting to drain the poison of racism and homophobia from its skin, the
“Radical Statehood Manifesto” (1997), a political treatise signed by six other contributors that invited its readers to consider statehood as a status option that arguably expanded rather than constricted democratic rights for Puerto Ricans, and *Puerto Rican Jam: Re-thinking Nationalism and Colonialism* (1997), an edited volume that startled some by arguing that as nationalism would never simply be the cure of colonialism, to unlock the Puerto Rican jam of multiple subordinations (including those based on the hierarchies of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality), people needed to challenge not only colonialist ideologies but also nationalist ones. Paradoxically, to look this closely, it was necessary to look from afar and disappear from the national picture.

Looking Good

By turning attention to multiple political bodies rather than a single body politic, it was also possible to take note of another overlooked detail: while independentistas tend to think of themselves as the true nationalists given their ambitions to found a nation-state, in the period following World War II cultural nationalism became the local state’s chief ideology. In an attempt to prevent complete political integration the populist Partido Popular Democrático, which governed the island uninterruptedly for nearly two decades (1950–68), launched what was called Operación Serenidad, a campaign to promote Puerto Rican national identity through high culture and folkloric practices. In some ways, this process made state-building nationalism itself obsolete, as Puerto Ricans were able to imagine themselves as a nation through culture, an arena that permits people to engage with the symbolic waste of colonial ideologies without necessarily altering the political and economic ties that bind Puerto Ricans to the US.

In order to better understand what appeared to be a Faustian pact, I started reviewing a wide range of twentieth-century literary and visual texts for a book that would eventually become *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture* (2004). Without quite looking for it, I came across a largely unanalyzed detail: the nearly obligatory mention of the words “shame,” “humiliation,” “pride,” and “dignity” when Puerto Rican identity was spoken or written about. In addition, I noticed how these terms had not disappeared from Puerto Rican narratives over the last century, but, on the contrary, had proliferated with the rise of cultural nationalism as a consensual ideology both on the island and the diaspora. This presented an apparent contradiction that begged for an explanation: the intensification of cultural nationalism and pride as valorizing discourses did not seem to attenuate the references to shame in Puerto Rican identity narratives, but instead to exponentially multiply it across vast discursive terrains.

My first move in addressing this conundrum was to consider a range of narratives about the 1898 US invasion to Puerto Rico produced by the intellectual, political, and literary elites. I concentrated on these writings as state ideology was
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heavily indebted to elite conceptions of nationhood, and these fixed on 1898 as a major turning point in the constitution of Puerto Ricans as national subjects. The shame of these texts quickly became apparent: the juncture of the invasion, which in theory should have offered the perfect narrative materials to affirm the nation, instead presented a queer problem. Rather than affording the raw elements to narrate the epic struggle of Puerto Ricans to resist US colonial domination, these events showcased the myriad interests and internal fissures of the longed-for nation, culminating in the tragi-comic – depending on the point of view – outcome of the formerly loyal Spanish subjects and would-be Puerto Rican patriots embracing the invader and facilitating the US military’s taking of towns and cities.

The ways that many exposed their political desires during this juncture provide an important clue to why from the moment that Puerto Ricans made their entrance into modernity as national subjects they haven’t looked too good. On the one hand, as an emerging world power, the US elites viewed Puerto Ricans as poor, illiterate, and unfit for local self-rule. In addition, not only were they considered too dark and too backward to exercise self-rule, they were also viewed as not manly enough to be granted US citizenship. As either Puerto Rican or American national subjects, Puerto Ricans then looked equally bad. In the succinct words of Congressman Henry Teller, “I don’t like the Puerto Rican; they are not fighters as [are] the Cubans; they were subjugated to Spanish tyranny for hundreds of years without being men enough to oppose it. Such a race is unworthy of American citizenship.” In perceiving Puerto Rican performances as examples of pliancy rather than the affirmation of political desires, US policymakers saw Puerto Ricans as no more and no less than “effeminate Cubans.”

Subsequent political developments, such as the founding of the Estado Libre Asociado or commonwealth in 1952 and the popular desire of maintaining political ties to the US made evident by local status consultations since the late 1960s, did little to make Puerto Ricans look that much better. In each of these instances, Puerto Ricans appeared to repeatedly miss the opportunity to clearly declare themselves as Puerto Ricans and not Yankees in a world where the constitution of culturally and territorially differentiated nation-states has been understood as the appropriately virile response to colonialism. Like fine onion paper, Puerto Rican nationalist narratives have absorbed this shame, a stain not borne only of defeat or violation but also of an ambiguous collaboration that continuously threatens to annihilate the collective self.

Compounding the constitutive shame of Puerto Rican ethnonationality for the male elites, who have largely viewed themselves as white, European, and sovereign, is the impact of US hegemony on local power dynamics. While the Puerto Rican poor suffered the indignity of labor exploitation and other forms of colonial violence, the elite not only had to negotiate with the metropolitan masters, but also with the Puerto Rican masses. Initially, the elites were optimistic: Luis Muñoz Rivera, one of the most influential political leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, told the New York Tribune in 1898: “It is
my opinion that my country can govern and administer itself, and that is what all criollos aspire to. There are very competent sectors to lead and a docile people that seconds them.” Yet, this optimism was unfounded. In addition to the US refusal to relinquish power over local affairs to the criollos, the majority of Puerto Ricans also refused to recognize the elites’ absolute right to represent their political interests.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Puerto Rican elites have then had no choice but to contend with the contemptuous look from the metropolis, one that insists on their political immaturity, inferior culture, and limited resources, and shamefully share the stage with various sectors of the “people,” most notoriously organized workers, women, blacks, homosexuals, and migrants, all of whom have vigorously struggled for a more advantageous place in the American order. Shortly after the invasion, for instance, workers whose immediate class antagonists were affluent Spaniards and Puerto Ricans joined American labor unions to curb the local elites’ hegemony over the economy and to expand labor rights. By the 1920s, the island’s middle-class suffragists became frustrated by the local all-male legislature’s resistance to grant women the vote and decided to mobilize their contacts with white feminists and make a direct appeal to the US Congress, in effect “pitting Puerto Rican legislators and North American congressmen, colonized men against male colonizers.” In this, as in countless other ways, Puerto Ricans knowingly if ambiguously appealed to colonial over “local” authority to advance their interests, even if this meant underscoring the impression that the island’s elites were weak and incompetent.

The insubordination of the majority, the dirty looks from the incoming colonial masters, and their own ambivalent collaboration in the island’s Americanization has produced distinct responses among the Puerto Rican elites. Since the colonial gaze has racialized Puerto Ricans as non-white and culturally inferior, the most conservative sectors have tended to cling to their formerly despised Spanish identifications as a way to distance themselves from both the Anglo elite and the mulatto majority. For most of the twentieth century, the elites have also cultivated nation-building literature as a key line of defense against US mass culture, transforming the text into a trench to redress the shame of 1898. Perhaps the most spectacular example of these strategies at work is the faux historical story Seva (1983) by Luis López Nieves.

Originally published in the left weekly Claridad in 1983, Seva is inspired in the Spanish epic, has an intellectual as a protagonist, and rewrites the invasion narrative itself. In contrast to other nationalist narratives, López Nieves does not bemoan the elite’s lack of foresight in avoiding “el trauma” of the invasion for the elite’s aspirations of self-government as many historians have done. Nor does he vigorously denounce the national lack of virility, as does writer René Marqués in his infamous essay “El puertorriqueño dócil.” What he does accomplish is more significant: in producing a different tale, one in which Puerto Ricans did fight the invading army and were almost completely annihilated, López Nieves puts forth the core nationalist fantasy of looking good as national subjects.
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Yet, since the Puerto Rican majority have much less to cover up than the elites, generally do not even remember what took place in 1898, and tend to prefer the television set to the library, popular performances that challenge dominant ideologies take on different forms. Given that colonial representations of Puerto Ricans emphasize the group’s “weaknesses,” such as the island’s small size, limited economic resources, and unwillingness to fight for the founding of an independent nation-state, sports like boxing aimed at leaving no doubt in the public’s mind as to the nation’s courager and masculinity take on a special value. As a letter to the editor published in a San Juan daily summed up: “We Puerto Ricans, the poorest group among twenty million Hispanics who live under the American flag, can tell the world that we have the best fighters in the world.”

Not coincidentally, one of the main reasons that many Puerto Ricans give to reject becoming a state of the union is that it would threaten both sports and beauty queen sovereignty. The popularity of both practices is directly related to the ways that these allow Puerto Ricans to imagine themselves as a nation without any of the perceived political risks involved in challenging the status quo and becoming either an independent country or a state. World competitions are also means of looking better as national subjects because they provide a stage for Puerto Ricans to appear as normative national subjects, and “win” on equal terms as other, presumably sovereign nationals. In the ring or on the runway, the strength of our men and the beauty of our women make Puerto Ricans look as good – and often better – as any other national.

An example of how boxing and beauty queen pageant victories are explicitly deployed to challenge the shame of colonial subordination can be gleaned from the press coverage given to the wins of boxer Felix “Tito” Trinidad and beauty queen Denise Quiñones over early May, 2001. During the same weekend, Trinidad, a black Puerto Rican man, beat the African American William Joppy to win the WBA middleweight crown and prove along the way that Puerto Ricans were los más machos (even more so than US morenos), while Quiñones, a light-skinned woman, demonstrated for the fourth time that (white) boricua women were the más mami in the globe. That cultural sovereignty is fundamentally understood in relation to national shame is evident in that although Trinidad’s victory could also have been read as that of all black people of “humble” background in Puerto Rico, this view was disallowed by all local commentary.

For the nation, as embodied in corporate, state, and political party interests, their consecutive victories confirmed one thing and one thing only: that Puerto Ricans were not as small and insignificant as they had been told. The consistency of this message was, in fact, astonishing. For Bella Honda, the Trinidad-Quiñones glory proves that “A small country has demonstrated that there is no greater wealth than the quality of its people.” A variation of this theme was also present in Banco Popular’s one-page ad simply dubbed Denise y Tito: Orgullo Nuestro (our pride), in which a map shows the island of Puerto Rico larger than any other land mass, including North and South America. According to the caption: “Thank
you for showing how big we really are.” And in the more dramatic and transparent terms of El Nuevo Día, the largest newspaper in Puerto Rico: ¡Somos grandes! (We are big!)

Ironically, by investing so much cultural effort in not looking like a queer nation, the Puerto Rican desire to look good recalls the classically feminine practice of masquerade. Whereas nationalists protect the nation’s honor by insisting that they are working hard to bring normalcy to it, at least on paper, the Puerto Rican body politic, particularly in their popular expressions, continuously emerges as feminized, diasporic, queer, and/or black, a hysterical and out of control body that cannot measure up to the presumed stability, smoothness, and virility of the US body politic. Not surprisingly, the most enduring memory of the Trinidad-Quinones glory was a photograph taken at the Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport where Denise put her crown on Tito’s head while she wore his majesty’s belt. In showing Tito wearing Denise’s crown and Denise wearing Tito’s belt, the Puerto Rican national body appeared, again, not in the normative terms engaged by the respective monarchs in winning, but as a transracial, transvestite masquerade full of other possibilities. In this sense, as the latest Puerto Rican beauty queen Zuleyka Rivera found out last July, your moment of pride can coincide with a most shameful moment: forty minutes into her reign as Miss Universe 2006, she fainted in a globally covered post-pageant news conference.

Looking Better

The centrality of one or another type of nationalist ideology as a way of addressing colonial discourses partly explains why Puerto Ricans have and continue to invest an enormous amount of individual and collective energy in addressing the politics of looking and being looked at. Continuously looked upon in disgust, unable to control the means of representation, and uninterested in validating their national bodies through conventional warfare, the struggles over size, significance, and dignity are often played out through a wide range of cultural production, including literature, film, dance, painting, and mass mediated performances that call attention to and underscore the value of the Puerto Rican body.

Yet, while on la isla the shame of Puerto Rican identity is plotted against a nationalist narrative where small/big serves as its main axis, in the US it is often on the skin of race and ethnicity that the argument over looking good is fought over. If islanders feel “small” due to Puerto Rico’s status, the diaspora, living in the US mainland and more intensely subject to American racial hierarchies, knows that Puerto Ricans are considered “low” not only due to constructions of nationality but also to class and race. The body and its vicissitudes — size, shape, color, and potential for commodification — become the means through which US Puerto Ricans negotiate shame as a racialized, devalued group in American cities and insist on their inclusion in both the island and mainland body politics.
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Considered the first mass airborne migration in world history, from the 1940s to the 1960s nearly a million Puerto Ricans left for New York and other industrial cities to relieve the island’s economy and serve as an expendable source of labor to the mainland’s manufacturing sector. Although generally disregarded, the dialectic of looking good was an important part of mass migration. At the same time that the economically displaced left the island after the 1940s, US government and corporate investment poured into Puerto Rico. This was part of a campaign to turn the island into a model of development in relation to alternative communist ideologies in the midst of the Cold War. As sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel and poet Chloé Georas have written, “in order to use San Juan [as a showcase] without causing major embarrassment to the United States, it would be first necessary to eliminate San Juan’s huge shanty towns . . . improve the conditions of extreme poverty – and conceal Puerto Rico’s colonial status.” US capital, the extension of US minimum wage laws, federal transfers, and other forms of social investment eventually succeeded in making Puerto Rico look better as a model, that is, more attractive than communism.

At the same time, mainstream academic, state, and media discourses made it their (at times big) business for Puerto Ricans in the US, spectacularly in New York, to look not so good. During the first waves of mass migration, Puerto Ricans were collectively denigrated as non-white, confined to the lowest rung of the labor ladder, condemned to inadequate housing, and routinely humiliated in public discourse. The representation of Puerto Ricans as the newest and worst of New York’s immigrant groups even made them a consumable source of entertainment as the Western movie genre morphed into the urban crime drama. The ways that the political economy of Puerto Rican life in New York produced a parallel symbolic economy of global proportions can be gleaned from the enormous success of West Side Story, a 1961 film based on a 1957 Broadway show of the same name, that became an instant classic.

Given the importance of mass media in imagining the nation, looking good in the small and big screen has been a major political demand made by Puerto Ricans in the United States, most notably since the 1940s when degrading portrayals of Puerto Ricans were common. If for island Puerto Ricans looking good is fundamentally about looking worthy as nationals, for the mostly upward mobile US-based Puerto Rican activists, looking their best encompassed not only respect for their culture but their representation as productive and well adjusted “American” citizens. In tandem with higher incomes and more political representation at the local, state, and federal levels, being “positively” portrayed in the media has been an equally important strategy to gain inclusion, and measure social enfranchisement.

Ironically, even though mass migration was managed by the island’s elites under the assumption that in time the migrants would no longer either be considered Puerto Ricans or reflect on Puerto Rico, the new Ricans were to have a great impact on how islanders looked. Contrary to the assumption of cultural assimilation, the racist hierarchy of cities like New York, New Haven, and
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Chicago reproduced Puerto Ricaness as a stigmatized identity, and it was in this (poor) light that Puerto Ricans became visible as a people to most of the world. In addition, the fact that the majority of Puerto Ricans migrated to New York, the United States’ “cultural” capital, provided more opportunities for making appearances in the national and global mass media, and many Puerto Ricans heeded the casting call. As a result, how US Puerto Ricans appeared to the city often became the most widely disseminated and accessible representations of Puerto Ricans as an ethnonational group.

The overexposure of US Puerto Ricans in relation to islanders had unanticipated consequences for the island’s national look. For many middle and upper-class Puerto Ricans, who as a way to contest the racism of American colonial ideology tended to think of themselves as essentially “Spanish” in culture and language, the bilingual and black-identified masses of US Puerto Ricans were a mirror to what islanders could become if they allowed further American cultural penetration: a “spic.” Until the early 1990s, the shame of being taken for a Nuyorican invaded many migrants upon their arrival to the US, and those US Puerto Ricans who decided to live in Puerto Rico experienced discrimination, ridicule, and rejection. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the stigma of looking like a Nuyorican shifted to the “other” side as the Latina/o demographic explosion of the late twentieth century created new conditions for the marketing of some Latinas/os as global star commodities. A few island-born Puerto Ricans like pop star Ricky Martin were part of this process, but the majority of the stars who came to “represent” were born in the USA or like some of the reggaeton stars had roots in both the island and the mainland.

A by now classic example of how the diaspora has coped with the multiple stressors of looking good to a global audience is entertainer Jennifer López’s cultural workout in the aftermath of her being cast as the slain Tejana singer Selena Quintanilla in the bio-pic Selena (1997). A “Latin”-looking Bronx-born Puerto Rican, López achieved near-instant fame by offering her body as a virtual vessel to mourn Quintanilla’s death. Yet, this relative victory required a concerted effort to alter the politics of looking as Latinas/os. Anticipating a hostile look at her racialized body, López launched a defensive campaign to preempt the covering up of her curves from the US public. As López well knew, the American debate about whether her body was beautiful or overweight was another way of siting Puerto Ricans and other Latinas/os as outside of the norm of American identity, and measuring the value of Latina bodies in world public culture. By insisting on her body’s worth, López, as Selena, initially managed to tap into an enormous reserve of Latina/o desire to look good on the screen.

Importantly, as López’s example suggests, much of the contemporary attempts to look good as Puerto Ricans are mediated by the global marketplace. As marketing an image to the largest possible audience requires access to publicity and capital, stars play an important and complex role in this process. Puerto Rican stars, whether from the island or mainland, arguably provide the group’s most public and visible face to contest the shame (or stigma) of boricua identity,
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often in an explicit attempt to counter the low symbolic capital attributed to this ethnonational body, a “humble people of this small 110-by-35 mile island” and its diaspora. In addition, not only are stars themselves commodities with specific market values, to be public as a commodity is to “transcend particularity, embodiment, and domesticity, the spaces where the disenfranchised have historically been made to dwell.” Ironically, in providing a range of accessible Puerto Rican star-commodities and their accessories, the US-dominated mass media market significantly shapes how colonial subjects show off their bodies in public and measure their value in relation to other national groups.

The invention of a Latina/o market also made evident that the insights of looking good as Puerto Ricans can be useful when looking at other Latinas/os. A less commented but equally powerful example of the importance of looks to Latina/o cultural citizenship is that of the late Cuban exile singer Celia Cruz. If Puerto Rican actress Jennifer López’s overexposed butt surfaced as the most cogent trope in the debate over the value and inclusion of Latina women in the United States and the global culture marketplace during the late 1990s, it was by way of shoes and related accessories that Celia underscored her worth as an Afro-Cuban woman in exile. For Celia, who was born to black parents in Santos Suárez, one of the poorest sections of Havana, and who considered herself “fea de cara pero bella de alma” (ugly face but beautiful soul), shoes served as a way to narrate her success as a black Cinderella, who like a girl in a “fairytale” went from a “poor neighborhood of Havana to a queen’s burial in New York.” In this regard, Celia’s shoes “dressed up” her struggle of upward mobility while insisting that a black woman born in poverty on a small Caribbean island can reach the heights of a transnational singing star.

In looking good according to alternative paradigms of cultural citizenship, Jennifer’s butt and Celia’s shoes underscore that there was more than one way of seeing Latinas/os as worthy. Not coincidentally, these are also “feminine” victories in the cultural terrain, or at least feminine ways to wage cultural warfare, that include “the frill on the dress, the useless ornament, the indulgence to the feminine.” Although the centering of the body may be understood as a logic still trapped in the political economy of slavery where people were exchanged as labor (including entertainment) and femininity, it can also be understood as a way to validate embodied ways of knowing with the ability to resignify what it means to look “good” as a Latina.

Looking Forward

Seeing, of course, is not believing. Not only because as Donna Haraway has suggested, looking is always an embodied practice, and hence always partial, but also because as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan observes, in looking, one encounters the gaze, a sort of “blind spot.” For Lacan, the gaze is how objects look at or “photo-graph” us, literally called into the picture, and represented
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here as caught. In this regard, looking good and looking closely appear as two modalities of the same desire for looking forward, that is, of changing the way one looks in the picture.

In *None of the Above* (2007), a volume that I recently edited and that can be viewed as a farewell book to certain ways of approaching Puerto Rican studies as the study of identity rather than of mutable relationships, my aim was to gather the most exciting work that questioned key analytical categories such as nation, colonialism, conscription and ethnic identity. As the book’s title suggests, its transgressive impulse was partly inspired by the 1998 plebiscite on the island’s political status in which a slim plurality of voters rejected not only the status quo but also all modern alternatives to decolonization, including independence, associated republic, and statehood. Rather than voting for options that in some ways conflicted with their political desires or clashed with the complexities of everyday life, voters disrupted the very logic of the consultation by supporting a dark horse column dubbed *ninguna de las anteriores* or none of the above.

In using the results as a heuristic device, that is, as a way to both explore “Puerto Ricans in the global era” and consider alternatives to addressing the conundrum of status, the book looked forward to making *Puerto Rican Jam*’s intent of going beyond nationalism and colonialism an epistemological reality. Inviting contributors to look closely at any central assumption about Puerto Rican culture and politics, the result was an unpredictable journey through Puerto Rican stories, events, figures, and texts. At times, the gesture of refusal embedded in “none of the above” allowed contributors to challenge the categories through which Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans continue to be produced as racially, culturally, and politically deviant from a national, racial, or linguistic norm. At others, the term’s ambiguity invited alternative ways of thinking about emerging, and sometimes unsettling, cultural and political practices that we may not yet fully apprehend.

Although it is by now familiar to use narratives of globalization to suggest that former framings are outdated, in *None of the Above* I was hoping for much more than that. In fact, I hoped that this move contributed to decolonization by destigmatizing Puerto Rican practices in a different way than through achieving national normativity or critiquing nationalism. For by opening up the frame, it is possible to see that many alleged Puerto Rican peculiarities such as multiple cultural citizenships or bilingualism are not only common to many other groups in different ways and intensities, but in the current context also appear as the norm rather than the exception. In this regard, if some Puerto Ricans remain “traumatized” due to an inability to measure up to colonial standards or national expectations, a global look suggests that to the extent that Puerto Ricans are not the only ones “lacking” in some fundamental way, this is nothing to be particularly ashamed of.

Globalization has also changed Puerto Rican looks in another way. The migration to global cities, and the access to global culture through mass media, has produced a context where people may imagine themselves in ways that defy narratives
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based on fixed identities, including that of colonial. While some may bemoan this development as a weakness, it also offers the possibility of multiplying political spaces. If one of the characteristics of the current juncture is the ways that labor, consumption, and entertainment are impossible to separate even when looking closely, one of the practices that can emerge from the crossroads of body, location, and imagination is a politics of small problems, one that seeks social transformation without the need of totalizing signifiers like nation, God, race, and gender. Continuously engaging with so-called small problems can have far reaching implications on all power structures as culture has become politics; politics, economics; and economics, culture.

An awareness of the “small problems” inherent in totalizing discourses offers a continuous means of critique. By invoking smallness, I am then parodying the still dominant idea that only when the “big” problems of nation building, state founding, and/or capitalist “development” are solved, will “the people” be liberated. Through the lens of a politics of small problems, there is no central problem that explains or gives meaning to all others. The categories of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism, to name a few of the most potent ones of the last century, are no longer treated as autonomous subjects of discourse, but as a web of relations that can be continuously disrupted at different points of articulation.

Cognitively speaking, a politics of small problems is the opposite of a traumatized politics based on national identity: it aims to confront the new as if it was new, seeing it with fresh eyes. The politics of small problems then stands in a productive tension with the practice of looking good. For, ultimately, one shouldn’t always have to worry so much about looking good – even when you are small.
“Chico, what does it feel like to be a problem?”
The Transmission of Brownness
José Esteban Muñoz

What does it feel like to be a problem? This provocative line in W. E. B. Du Bois serves as an opening to consider the complexity of racial recognition, commonality, and belonging. Although the lines are familiar to most who have ventured to think critically about race and racial formations in the Americas, they are nonetheless worth citing:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unmasked question: unmasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in town; or, I fought in Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce to the simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.1

This notion of “feeling like a problem” jumps off the page for African Americans and non-African Americans who consider themselves problematic subjects — subjects that are coded minoritarian in my analysis. Certainly feeling like a problem is about feeling apart, feeling separate. However, in the spirit of African American studies’ interest in the nature of double-voiced discourse and Du Bois’ own theory on double consciousness, one can also ruminate on the ways in which feeling like a problem is also a mode of belonging, a belonging through recognition. Thus feeling like a problem is a mode of minoritarian recognition. Rather than to map belonging through exhausted narratives of identity there may be, instead, considerable value in thinking about the problem of feeling like
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a problem as not simply an impasse but, instead, an opening. Thus I aim to take two tracks – one considers what it means to feel like a problem, the other considers the problem of feeling itself and how it functions in relation to belonging and knowing the other through what Teresa Brennan, in a posthumous text, described as the transmission of affect. More specifically I am interested in making sense of a certain modality of what I will call intraracial empathic projective identification. The larger analysis this essay is culled from hopefully represents an opening in thinking, an opening in theory and, ideally, an opening in feeling.

This essay is also meant to dwell on a field of possibility, what I would call the series of relays between the affective spike of what Blackness meant and continues to mean within the historical field of US culture and what Brownness might mean today. This writing turns to the force of African American studies, especially the component of that discourse that participates in a larger radical Black tradition. I employ that hermeneutic in the field of Latina/o studies which, in my estimation, is still emerging. While I refer to Latina/o studies enquiry as emergent, I nonetheless see it vectoring towards positivism and the empirical. While the empirical has its place and utility, I nonetheless see it as crucial that the far-reaching questions and heuristics that we invoke under the name of theory be applied to the experience and particularity of US Latina/os.

The problem of being a problem resonates within recent Latina/o studies discourse. Suzanne Oboler, in her important interdisciplinary study *Ethnic Labels, Latina/o Lives*, describes the meaning attached to the label “Hispanic”:

While advertising and business concerns are actively seeking entry into what they perceive as a “lucrative Hispanic market,” Hispanics are simultaneously being categorized as “low-income people” who confront “unusual unemployment.” Indeed, Latina/os are increasingly associated with high numbers of school dropouts, rising teenage pregnancies, crime, drugs, AIDS, and other social ills of this society, leading the New York State Governor’s Advisory Committee on Hispanic Affairs to state, “As the full public hearings revealed, and this report describes, the situation of majority of Hispanics in New York State is extremely troubling. The same basic issues emerge again and again.”

In this passage Oboler is mimicking the sociological apprehension of the problematic nature of the Hispanic. They are problems on at least two levels. How can Hispanics be an ideal niche marketing target and, at the same time, be riddled by crime, drugs, and AIDS? This troubling nature – this notion of being a problem – is nonetheless useful if one were to put hermeneutic pressure on the very category of Hispanic or Latina/o.

Identity is indeed a problematic term when applied to Latina/os – groups who do not cohere along the lines of race, nation, language, or any other conventional demarcation of difference. Latina/o identity itself is thus a problem. It is perhaps within this very status as problem that we can begin to understand the
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particularities of the system of belonging and recognition that I am pointing to as Latinidad. To this end Du Bois’ rhetorical parry – what does it feel like to be a problem – is worth attending to closely. I contend that feeling like a problem, and its commonality, may provide us with an understanding of what I call feeling Brown. Feeling Brown is my attempt to frame the particularity of group identification that temporarily displaces terms like “Hispanic” or even “Latina/o.”

Patricia Gherovici, an Argentine psychoanalyst and Lacanian clinician practicing in Philadelphia’s barrio, rejects the more politically palatable term “Latina/o” for the word “Hispanic.” In her fascinating study *The Puerto Rican Syndrome*, Gherovici critiques the current mental health protocols and institutions currently in place to help disenfranchised poor groups in urban areas like the one she herself works with. Her thesis, that the mental health system is concerned with merely suppressing the symptomology of larger social ills, is worth citing:

In the barrio one finds all the hurdles one can expect when dealing with marginalized groups: urban poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, disintegrating families, and the most extreme violence, encountered on a daily basis and manifesting itself in the most aberrant forms. This community provides a privileged context to explore how the American community mental health model can apply. In most cases, services available to the Hispanic community are geared toward simple symptom suppression. The model is functionalist, based on the idea of correcting symptoms with the goal of helping – or even forcing – the patient to comply with the model of capitalist productivity.

It is therefore to Gherovici’s advantage that she uses the label “Hispanic,” a word that does not blend as easily into a multicultural diversity management paradigm as the concept of Latina/o. “Hispanic,” as a term inflicted on communities by the US Census, shows the seams of the systemic state violence that has attempted to classify groups like those she studies and reproduce them as proper cogs in a larger underclass service economy. I understand and admire the conceptual force behind the maverick analyst’s linguistic choice, yet I resist this tactic because I find the category of Hispanic so politically repellant and worry that it disrupts the reparative work that Latina/o studies needs to do in relation to the different communities it attempts to address. But Hispanic, in her distinct and strategic usage, does once again foreground Latina/os’ status as a problem, which is again, the point of this particular meditation, after Du Bois and for Latina/o studies. Indeed, what does it feel like to be a problem?

Feeling Brown, the idea of feeling Brown, is my attempt to begin to conceptualize this mode of belonging that elsewhere I conveniently index as the concept of Latinidad. But feeling Brown is the phenomenon that underwrites this particular concept of Latinidad that I am attempting to describe. Feeling like a problem, in commonality, is what I am attempting to get to when I cite and exercise this notion of feeling Brown. The terminology I am invoking squarely indexes the quasi-militant Brown Power movement which, modeled after Black
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Power, peaked in the 1970s along with other US civil rights struggles like Red Power or Gay Power. While the Brown Power movement is for most a historical footnote, it nonetheless captures a certain political utopian aspiration that does not cleanse the stain of feeling like a problem in the manner in which the cultural detergent of weak multiculturalism does. It also connotes a sense of group identification that I find similarly efficacious. Feeling Brown is feeling together in difference. Feeling Brown is an “apartness together” through sharing the status of being a problem.

Feeling Brown refers to what I describe elsewhere as a manera de ser, a way of being in the world. This is not the same as being seen or perceived as brown. Similarly to the field of visual ethnic recognition, within the affective register there are indeed varied affective shadings within Brownness, whether it be different national experiences among Latina/os or types of colorism that are akin to the physical biases that exists within Blackness. The visual and the affective are different identificatory routes. One can feel very Brown and perhaps not register as Brown as the dark-skinned person standing next to one who is involved in the endeavor of trying to feel white. The reverse is probably more common. The memoirist Richard Rodríguez has used the word as an organizing trope in his book Brown. My project differs from Rodríguez’s in several ways. Most significantly I understand Latinidad’s Brownness to be historically situated, while Rodríguez is at some point prepared to consider the unshaven Richard Nixon of the Nixon–John F. Kennedy debates as “the Brown” candidate. Rodríguez’s identification with Brownness is always mediated with ethnic/racial abjection. When I invoke the concept it is connected to historically specific affective particularity. Brownness registers as a mode of affective particularity that a subject feels in herself or recognizes in others.

This project then calls upon some psychological stratagems to offer a heuristic that is attuned to the place and particularity of minoritarian subjects within the social. Like Gherovici, I understand the underlining problem to be a capitalist ethic that attempts to “manage” groups through socially toxic and racist protocols. Multiculturalism, as many have explained, is the most recent attempt to deal with what we can identify – over a hundred years later, echoing Du Bois – as the problem of the color line.

As I proceed I should clarify that feeling Brown, the theoretical hermeneutic I am offering, is to some degree an internally conflicted term since I am more nearly speaking of affect than feeling. For example, I am persuaded by Teresa Brennan’s description of the breakdown between affect and feeling. While she wrote that “there is no reason to challenge the idea that emotions are basically synonymous with affects (if more an evidently physiological subset) or that moods and sentiments are subsets referring to long lasting affective constellations,” affect’s valence, as opposed to feeling, has a more energetic nature. This is to say that affect connotes a projection out, one’s affect is transmitted and depletes or energizes the social sphere. Yet feeling Brown, for me, begins to get to the question of group identification, a concept that my interdisciplinary analysis
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strives to address. Feeling is meant to index a communal investment in Brownness. Brownness is a value through negation, the negation projected onto it by a racist public sphere that devalues the particularity of non-Anglo Americans. This negation underwrites racialized poverty while supporting other asymmetries within the social. Owning the negation which is Brownness is owning an understanding of self and group as problem in relation to a dominant order, a normative national affect. Brown feelings are the glue that coheres group identifications.

Brown feelings are historically situated and while Brown in this analysis is linked to Latinidad, Brownness and its relation to Blackness is not simply about Latina/o group identification. Vijay Prashad takes another track in his book The Karma of Brown Folks. In that text he thinks through the place of another mode of Brownness, one more nearly associated with a model minority version of Brownness. Like me, Prashad turns to and restructures Du Bois’ question to ask, in relation to South Asians in the US, what does it feel like to be a solution? Which is to say that in the US national imaginary the racist imagination frames South Asians in a radically different fashion. I nonetheless cite Prashad’s different Brownness to point to the way in which group identifications play a larger role in the nation-state’s understanding of normative national character or affect. While these Brownnesses mean radically different things on the register of difference, they both do the work of shoring up normative national affect through their deviations.

Group identification, as described by the Indian-born post-Klein theorist W. R. Bion, is crucial to this notion of feeling Brown. Bion’s notion of projective identification, his unique elaboration on Klein’s formulation, especially his description of emphatic projective identification that is almost directly oppositional to the psychotic’s projective sadism, is key to understanding Brown feelings. Projective identification, a concept whose initial formulation was suggested in the work of Melanie Klein, was primarily a primitive defense employed by the subject to cast off aspects of the self that were toxic. This notion in Klein, perhaps one of her most popular contributions to psychoanalysis, described the mechanism in which the infant dispelled aspects of the self, “bad feelings” (hate, envy, greed) onto the other. In its initial articulation the mechanism known as projective identification linked to pathological practices, most specifically a sadism arising out of what is known in Kleinian thought as the schizoid/paranoid position. Most often it has been associated with negative personality traits. In Lacan’s project, one that emphasized the oedipal in ways that Klein resisted, projection is always neurotic. Bion described another moment, a secondary moment after the abnormal and sadistic aspects of projective identification. He termed this moment normal projective identification, which he understood as being related to empathy, what he called putting oneself in the other’s shoes. It is this notion of emphatic projective identification that I find most useful when describing the coherence of groups and the transmission of affect that facilitates modes of belonging. There is something innately emphatic about this shared affective construct that I am calling Brownness, this response to a
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certain negation within the social that corresponds to this question of feeling like a problem.

Much has been written about the *The Souls of Black Folk*’s structure of address. The text is indeed a call for white sympathy, since it addresses a white liberal subject who is potentially receptive to the idea that the color line is indeed the structuring antagonism of the twentieth century. But, following Bion and others, I read the text as performing a secondary function that is not a call for interracial sympathy but, instead, the work of elaborating intraracial empathy. That is precisely the use value of *The Souls of Black Folk* here and now and within the context of Latina/o studies and the project of imaging and elaborating a politics of Black feeling. The souls of black folks are plural. Du Bois described Blackness via the metaphor of soul – thus rendering the African diaspora as a less than corporeal entity. This depiction resonates alongside the then nascent idea of the psychic.

At this particular moment, when, as I have argued, Latina/os and Hispanics are described as sociological problems, it seems that imagining a psychic life that is structured around intraracial projective empathy is especially a boon. Antonio Viego’s work on psychoanalysis and its potential utility for Latina/o studies is of exceptional importance on this front. In his book *Dead Subjects: Towards a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*, Viego makes the argument that the concept of Latinidad must attend to the mostly neglected realm of the psychic if it is to ever offer a useful diagnosis of the contest between self and other that structures the social and consolidates identarian categories. More specifically, Viego has argued for the use value of a Lacanian understanding of the subject which does not make the same mistakes as American ego psychology, a mode of psychology that posits the potential for a therapeutic conclusion to analysis based on the principle of a whole subject. He persuasively argues that

We need to question further the assumption that the solution to psychological trauma should be to fill out the ego more, plug up the holes, amplify and lengthen its reach. Minoritized folk, in particular, too often instantiated as lacking in the social, must learn to imagine alternative ways of making life pleasurable, tolerable – new ways of accessing the dialectical movement of desire, without being convinced that building the ego’s defenses is the answer.

The counsel offered by this Latina/o studies psychoanalytic thinker is key to the project of imaging Brown feeling. Being “instantiated as lacking” is indeed the condition of Brownness, which is the condition of feeling like a problem. This status of “problem” cannot simply be projected out, dismissed, dumped on the other. Indeed, a more reparative move is required, which is, more nearly, holding on to the problematic, fractured, and negated status of self within the social and working through such a position, striving to find new ways of living in the world that are pleasurable, ethical, and indeed “tolerable.” I am not suggesting that one needs to simply disavow one’s status as injured or traumatized by
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the state, or that one simply give up on imagining political transformation. More nearly, I am suggesting that we be attentive to the psychic vicissitudes of our belonging in difference, which I describe as feeling Brown, and working through that position, not grasping for an ego ideal that, as Viego explains, always leaves us disappointed.

A “group investment” in Brown feeling requires a certain transmission as affect and this happens through various sensory circuits. In Du Bois the most pertinent example is that of the sorrow songs. The sorrow songs are those songs sung by slaves that, on one level, painted a picture of happy servants and the salvation promised by servitude and God. Yet Du Bois’ reading practice, which has been this essay’s interpretive compass, reads these songs for meaning that is not manifest on the level of content but, instead, on the level of affect:

What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that the songs are the articulate message of the slave world. They tell us in these eager days that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy. I can easily believe this of some, of many. But not all the past South, though it rose from the dead, can gainsay the heart touching witness of these songs. They are the music of unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wandering and hidden ways.¹⁴

I step from these lines in Du Bois and turn to my own “archive of feeling,” to invoke Ann Cvetkovich’s useful phrase.¹⁵ Within my own fragmented memory narrative that I call upon to understand my connection to some of my nodes of communal belonging, which are belongings in feeling, a particular moment resonates powerfully for me: an early televisial representation of Brownness in the form of the television program Chico and the Man.

Airing on NBC from September 1974 to July 1978, Chico and the Man, starring Freddie Prinze and Jack Albertson, was set in the barrio of East Los Angeles. Chico and the Man was the story of two men from radically different cultural backgrounds who grew to respect each other. Chico, the enterprising young Chicano, was determined to go into partnership with cranky, sarcastic, cynical Ed Brown. Ed’s character resonated alongside the racist humor/racist as object of humor paradigm pioneered on CBS’s All in the Family through the character of Archie Bunker. Ed operated a small, run-down garage and spent most of his time complaining and alienating people. Chico cleaned up the dilapidated garage, making it into a functional business. He moved into a beat-up old truck in the garage. His efforts brought in new customers. Chon Noriega has suggested that the show transformed the concurrent Chicano movement into a “domestic comedy located in someone else’s house-cum-business.”¹⁶

The role of the Chicano Chico was played by the troubled Puerto Rican comic Freddie Prinze. Prinze, who eventually took his own life, grew up in poverty and
struggled with drug addiction and mental illness until his death. Indeed, he perfectly embodies the figure of Latina/o as problem that I have described at the beginning of this essay. While the show’s troubling premise and Prinze’s tragic iconicity shadow this, the explication of the transmission of Brown affect hinges on the application of a Du Boisian sonic filter as applied to the show’s theme song. The *Chico and the Man* theme song was recorded by the Puerto Rican born folk/pop crossover artist José Feliciano. The tune functions for me as a sonic equivalent to a screen memory. The song’s content, on the level of narrative, is somewhat uplifting. The lyrics echo the show’s narrative premise:

Chico, don’t be discouraged,
The Man he ain’t so hard to understand.
Chico, if you try now,
I know that you can lend a helping hand.
Because there’s good in everyone
And a new day has begun
You can see the morning sun if you try.
And I know, things will be better
Oh yes they will for Chico and the Man
Yes they will for Chico and the Man.

Most listeners of the spare and haunting pop tune would notice the disjunctive relationship of the lyrics to the sonic performance. Some of this has to do with context: this is a show where a white man regularly makes some racist joke about Latina/os and a young Puerto Rican retorts with the catch phrase he popularized, “Lookin’ Good.” *Chico and the Man* was a show about a sly Latina/o who charmed a constantly irritated white racist. On the level of sound Feliciano’s low voice does not bubble with the enthusiasm the lyrics suggest. Though Chico is being asked to resist being discouraged and the promise of a new day hangs in the air the song, nonetheless, indexes the fact of feeling like a problem. The narrative indicates that Chico is indeed a problem that the man does not understand. What does it feel like to be a problem, Chico? This is the question that echoes in my head and it is one that helps one approach this question of Brown feeling.

In my own memory, and in the here and now, I do not hear Feliciano’s song as one of uplift, but instead as something else. I hear something that I want to identify as akin to Brown feeling, this commonality in feeling like a problem. Sorrow songs are of course specific to an African American experience rooted in chattel slavery and later forms of racial violence. By discussing the mass mediated music of José Feliciano I do not mean to discuss it as the same. More nearly, I am interested in the way in which this commoditized musical expression can be understood to function or perform its affective particularity in a similar fashion as that of the sorrow songs.

Still thinking about the blind Puerto Rican singer and his career I turn to one particular affective spike in his life. On October 1968 José Feliciano sang a
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A stylized version of the national anthem during a nationally televised baseball game that incited an uproar and a stream of complaint. The familiar lyrics became something else through the brown singer’s voice. The performance was slow and plaintive. The public responded with scorn to the browning of the national anthem, which is to say the manifesting of sorrow and disappointment that the minoritarian subject feels in relation to the normative affective protocols that make one feel Brown. The song sings America in a way that neither Walt Whitman nor baseball fans ever wanted to hear, it sings America Brown.

Feliciano’s performance severely damaged his rising career trajectory. His styling integrated rhythm and blues traditions alongside the folk acoustic genre. This hybridization functions on the level of soundscape. Returning to Brennan, the question of transmitting affect is especially pertinent in this instance. Brennan argues that the visual should not be considered the primary conduit for the transmission of affect. Affect travels through other routes, like smell or sound. Franz Fanon theorized that racism was often first manifest as a complaint about the other’s smell. One can argue that smell, like sound, is mostly a transmitter of the other’s particularity.

Jimi Hendrix and Marvin Gaye were both performing stylized versions of “The Star Spangled Banner” at roughly the same time. But their versions were not transmitted on national broadcast television like Feliciano’s and the performative effect of those performances did not disrupt the public sphere in the same fashion, with the same intensity. If we think about the scene, both visual and more importantly sonic, of that 1968 baseball game, and look and listen beyond the scorn of disgruntled All-American baseball fans, we are left to wonder what other work that performance did. I want to suggest, echoing J. L. Austin’s notion of a performative utterance, that this performance was a “Brown utterance” that represented a still nascent articulation of a particular mode of belonging-in-difference or particularity for people who felt Brown – for people who knew their self and recognized each other through a particular negation, a negation that is enacted by failing to conform to the affective protocols of normative cultural citizenship.

I have no evidence that this belonging in Brownness was anything other than the potentiality I have proposed here. Yet that lack of empirical evidence is not the point of my avowedly idealist formulation. Du Bois, who studied philosophy with George Santayana at Harvard was, as literary critic Shamoon Zamir has argued, clearly a reader of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, who employed some of the idealist aspects of the German philosopher. According to Zamir, while Du Bois was not an “upbeat Hegelian” like many other American Hegelians, he nonetheless accesses “a complex model of thinking about consciousness and history” through Hegel. This Hegelian mode allows Du Bois to “conceptualize more clearly than before a sense of history and inheritance, of the pressure of the past on present action.” Certainly, the life of Brownness requires a mode of analysis that can think about the intertwined nature of consciousness and history. Brownness is thus a mode of consciousness that responds to the
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historical pressure of the historical. Zamir describes *The Souls of Black Folk* as a psychology of history. Theorizing Latinidad as Brown feeling is theorizing a shared and historicized affective particularity, which is also to say, to some degree, psychology. The transmission of affect is the mode in which historical consciousness is transmitted.

In this essay I have, following what I above called a Du Boisian compass, looked to Feliciano’s musical performance as a powerful circuit of transmission for Brown feelings. It is my contention that Brownness can be heard in my remembrance of moments of childhood when not just another TV theme filled my parents’ living room. It can be heard, more concretely, during those minutes in 1968 when a blind Puerto Rican man’s mournful rendition of what is for many the national sorrow song was sung in a voice that sounded, to a nation in turmoil, like a problem.

Notes

5 For more on the concept of reparative critical work, see Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51.
6 Muñoz, “Feeling Brown.”
17 As of this writing the song can be heard by going to this web address: www.josefeliciano.com/downloads/starspangledbanner.mp3.
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19 Franz Fanon, *Black Skins/White Masks*. Teresa Brennan also makes an argument about the olfactory transmission of affect in *The Transmission of Affect*.
22 Ibid.
Carey McWilliams first coined the term “fantasy heritage” during the 1940s in his trenchant deconstruction of the Mission myth.¹ Most often attributed to Helen Hunt Jackson’s Ramona (1884), the Mission myth entailed reinventing a romantic Spanish history for California—a fictionalized past exploited by Los Angeles “Boosters” bent on transforming the region into the cultural and economic capital of the West.² “Discovered as a tourist promotion in the 1880s,” McWilliams writes, “the Spanish mission background in Southern California was inflated to mythical proportions.”³ “Fantasy heritage” named the selective appropriation of historical fact, the transformation of selected elements of history (e.g., the economic system of missions and haciendas) into a romantic, idyllic past that repressed the history of race and class relations in the region. “Any intimation of the brutality inherent in the forced labor system of the missions and haciendas, not to speak of the racial terrorism and lynching that made early Anglo-ruled Los Angeles the most violent town in the West during the 1860s and 1870s, was suppressed.”⁴

It seems fitting that McWilliams would coin the term “fantasy heritage” in the context of Los Angeles’ Mission Revivalism. After all, Los Angeles (or in the words of Mike Davis, its “alter-ego, Hollywood”) is the palisade of the fantasy dream machine: cinema. As several film adaptations of Ramona and dozens of films about the so-called Spanish pastoral era so forcefully illustrate, cinema played a key role in reworking California history in the popular imaginary, thereby helping to construct a fantasy heritage for the region.

As this discussion makes evident, the “fantasy” in my title does not refer to psychoanalysis, or the notion of fantasy as a psychic process, even though I will argue that fantasy is “directly involved in the constitution of a subject’s identity,” much as it is in its psychoanalytic inflection.⁵ Fantasy, as McWilliams deploys the term, is opposed to reality, and like the imagination, represents the other of reason and rationality.
McWilliams was part of the realist generation who subscribed to a cult of science grounded in the principles of empirical observation. For McWilliams, fantasy heritage undermined the “reinforcement of factuality” that served as modernity’s ground for “reality” or “truth.” The memories of “Spanish” racial purity were not “truth” but an illusion; not observable, but based on an “unbridled fantasy” of racial mastery. Thus, there is a liberatory politics to McWilliams’ deconstruction of fantasy heritage, especially in his reaffirmation of subaltern identities and submerged histories in California – a project that would later inspire nationalists of the Chicano Movement in their disavowal of (white) Spanish heritage and recovery of indigenous and mestizo racial identities for the formation of the nation.

I am interested in the concept of fantasy because I too want to appropriate it for twenty-first century cultural analysis and use it as a pretext for exploring my own ambivalence toward the “cultural opposition between illusion and reality.” I say “ambivalence” because although I reject the fundamental mistrust of fantasy and the imagination expressed by the investment in positivism on the part of modernist thinkers such as McWilliams, I understand the politics and ideology behind their suspicion. After all, “fantasy” in the service of the powerful (forces of domination) means one thing; in the service of the subjugated, quite another. McWilliams’ penetrating study deals fundamentally with this problematic, detailing the ways in which fantasy heritage represented the phantasmagoric convergence of racial, economic, and cultural domination in the region.

I also find the fantasy heritage concept to be useful for interrogating the construction of Chicana/o and Latina/o film history. One of the primary aims of Latina/o film historiography has been to deconstruct the exclusionary practices of mainstream (Eurocentric) film history. In the process, Latina/o historiography has unearthed a detailed account of Latina and Latino involvement in the Hollywood industry. Yet, to a certain degree, Latina/o revisionist historiography is also implicated in the construction of its own fantasy heritage. The meaning of “Latina bloodlines” in the title of this chapter takes me deeper into the problem at hand.

I deliberately chose to use the term “bloodlines” in my title in order to draw attention to the contradictions plaguing my initial desire to undertake a “genealogy,” in Foucauldian terms. For Foucault, genealogy is a historical method that gives voice to marginal and submerged people in their resistance to the forces of power and domination. In the process of retrieving and resurrecting “subjugated knowledges,” the practice of genealogy alerts us to alternative accounts of the resistances, struggles, and conflicts that in fact constitute history. Genealogy is a method reflected in the scholarly practices of feminist, multicultural, queer, and postcolonial historiographers and researchers. Although I initially considered my project to be informed by this notion of genealogy as retrieval of “subjugated knowledges,” in the course of my study I came to realize that my understanding of the term was contaminated by a very literal and archaic notion of genealogy as bloodlines, or descent from a family pedigree. An example
from my initial focus on Latinas in the movie industry will serve to illustrate my point.

I first read about Myrtle González and Beatriz Michelena in Antonio Ríos-Bustamante’s essay, “Latina/o Participation in the Hollywood Film Industry.” I was driven and inspired by his ebullient descriptions of early silent film stars. About Myrtle González, the first Mexican American film star, Ríos-Bustamante writes: “In marked contrast to the experience of later Latinas who used their own names, González portrayed vigorous outdoor heroines”; about the Latina diva from San Francisco, Beatriz Michelena, he tells us: “Motion Picture World featured her picture on its cover with the caption, ‘Beatriz Michelena, Greatest and Most Beautiful Artist Now Appearing in Motion Pictures.’” Prior to this reference by Ríos-Bustamante, I had never heard of Myrtle González or Beatriz Michelena. It was their erasure from mainstream film historiography that initially animated my own desire to track their imprint on the public sphere of culture.

The daughter of a native Californio family of grocers in Los Angeles, Myrtle González was a talented child soprano who sang in local church choirs and performed in theaters throughout the city. In 1911, González debuted in the film Ghosts and later starred in more than forty films for Universal and Vitagraph Studios, delivering a highly acclaimed performance in the film The Chalice of Courage (1915). However, González’s stardom would be short-lived. After six years in motion pictures, she died of heart failure, attributed to a “severe fall suffered three years [earlier] while doing ‘stunt’ riding in a photoplay.” González was 27 years old when she died. Married to Universal Studios director Allen Watt, she was survived by a son from a previous marriage. I was so surprised to learn that Myrtle González was the first bona fide Mexican American movie star and by the fact that she played against type. Yet she remained absent from mainstream film history.

The San Francisco Chronicle embraced the second star in my study, Beatriz Michelena, as a “native, California prima donna.” And her preeminent stature in the performing arts extended well beyond California. In 1914 she was featured on the cover of the premier theatrical newspaper of the time (1878–1921), the Dramatic Mirror. The daughter of Venezuelan-born Fernando Michelena, Beatriz inherited her father’s musical talents, initiating her stardom as a soprano in opera and stage musical comedy in the early 1910s. In 1913 she met and married George Middleton, a member of the San Francisco elite whose wealth derived from interests in the railroad and the motor car industries. Middleton was also executive producer of the California Motion Picture Corporation, an independent studio based in San Francisco with studios in Marin County (years before the movie industry became concentrated in Hollywood).

Michelena’s career in cinema was launched with Middleton’s production of Bret Harte’s bestselling novel, Salomy Jane (1914). In the years she worked with the CMPC, she starred as lead in 16 of their feature-length productions. Unlike many of the early screen stars, Michelena was able to exercise considerable control over the production process, shaping her career by making the “Final
decision in choice of stories and cast,” as well as in the allocation of funds for sets, wardrobe, and locations, largely because of her marriage to Middleton. After a dispute over back wages with the financially strapped owners, she eventually became the company’s executive producer and co-owner when CMPC ownership was transferred to Michelena and her husband.

What most appealed to me about Beatriz Michelena was her coupling of artistic talent with entrepreneurship. Here was the Latina equivalent of Mary Pickford: a screen and stage performer/star and businesswoman. In the late 1910s, Michelena contributed to the city’s unsuccessful campaign to establish the San Francisco Bay Area as the movie production center, working closely with city officials and offering her studios in San Rafael free of charge. Although her work on screen ended in 1920, Michelena’s public stature as operatic star and “internationally known prima donna” continued to be the subject of media attention. In 1927 she introduced the operas Carmen and Madame Butterfly in Latin America, traveling with a company of 30 singers and dancers in a tour that the San Francisco Chronicle characterized as “the first invasion of those countries by an American operatic star in repertoire performances.”

If I left the story here, I would certainly be constructing a genealogy in terms of bloodlines, that is to say, unearthing the histories of Latina stars on the basis of their descent from the family of the Latin race. Just as significant, I would be furthering the making of yet another fantasy heritage. And here I would like to give the meaning of fantasy heritage a different inflection, one that goes beyond the modernist “cultural opposition between illusion and reality,” to talk about fantasy heritage as the process of historical recovery that glosses over contradictions, struggles, and conflicts.

As we know, the recovery of new objects of knowledge is the first phase in the formation of such disciplines as women’s/gender studies, Chicana/o and Afro-American studies, and queer studies. But twenty years after the formation of Chicana/o studies, it seems necessary to go beyond the celebration of “Latina/o participation in the Hollywood industry,” for this kind of Chicana/o and Latina/o historiography is based on an essentialist notion of identity, one that considers ethnicity/race to be the guarantee and ultimately the origin of an oppositional politics. It is not enough to simply enumerate a litany of Chicana and Latina names and faces without specifying the nature, ideology, and politics of their very involvement in the imperially, sexually, and racially charged agenda of the movie industry. I object to a historiography centered on celebratory claims about Latinas in Hollywood because in the end it can lead to the invention of a new myth: a nationalist fantasy heritage.

I too would be constructing a “fantasy heritage” if I simply focused on the participation of Myrtle González and Beatriz Michelena in motion pictures without confronting the nature of their relationship to the industry. What did their presence on the silver screen symbolize? Did their latina-ness matter? Did it disturb the supremacist pseudohistory unfolding as the dominant primal myth of California? Did their bodies “symbolize the nexus of gender and race,” as
Rosa Linda Fregoso

Hershfield writes about Dolores del Río? Did González and Michelena tap into the nation’s growing anxieties around race? Or its shifting imagination of racialized sexuality?

It seems clear from the roles González and Michelena played that both “were more easily able to move in and out of ethnic roles” because they were light skinned. In fact, unlike most of the actors coded as non-white (i.e., Latinas, Asians, and blacks), both women mostly portrayed white characters, thus crossing the color line. And although from today’s perspective González and Michelena appear to us as racialized (“Latinas”/“Mexicanas”), the biographical sketching of their ancestry as “Spanish” meant that, in the early twentieth century, neither was coded as “non-white.” For example, González’s obituary in the Los Angeles Times states the following: “A writer in a Tokio [sic] magazine once called her ‘The Virgin White Lily of the Screen,’ and that was the tribute she most prized of the hundreds she received during her career.” Which explains why, at the height of the eugenics movement, both women were able to evade restrictions around interracial marriage and procreation. Michelena married a wealthy white man; González was married twice to white men.

When we examine the films they starred in and the white characters that these “white” Latinas played, the limits of genealogy as bloodline become even more transparent. The two films I screened at the Library of Congress starring Myrtle González were colonialist adventure films, with González portraying white women who cross the border of “civilization” into the unknown terrain of wilderness or “barbarie.” For example, in A Natural Man (1915) González plays Rose, a modern young woman who, “tired of social hypocrisy” in the city, decides to visit her uncle’s ranch in the country, only to be kidnapped by a young boy called the “wild child.” The dichotomy between the modern and the primitive is also the theme in The Showdown (1917), where González portrays a modern white woman named Lydia Benson, who as the film opens is reading the book Back to the Primitive. Later, in one of those mysterious leaps in plot typical of early films, Lydia is marooned on a Pacific island with her dog and an escaped African slave.

Although the entire collection of the California Motion Picture Corporation’s master prints and negatives was destroyed in a vault fire, two of Michelena’s films survive. I managed to screen Just Squaw (1919) at the LOC and found its colonialist overtones to be even more pronounced than those in González’s films. Michelena plays “Fawn,” a love-stricken Indian described as “just a half-breed squaw” by another character. The object of Fawn’s love is a “white stranger” whom she refuses to marry because it would violate social prohibitions around miscegenation: “No, you’re white. I’m Indian,” she tells him. In the end, Fawn’s unsparing abnegation is duly rewarded with the discovery of her true identity as biologically white. As a child, the Indian woman who Fawn believed to be her mother had kidnapped Fawn from her parents. In addition to reproducing dominant social taboos around interracial marriage and blood quantum definitions of race, Just Squaw ends by reinscribing the ideology of white supremacy.
Tracking Latina Bloodlines

The final scene, in which Fawn discovers that she’s white, ends with a shot of other characters looking up at Fawn, then by a close-up of an angelic Fawn, smiling ecstatically. This framing of Fawn as “saint” or “virgin,” enshrouded in a luminous whiteness, underscores the extent to which Just Squaw deliberately conjures up the association of whiteness with goodness and purity – the hallmark of white supremacist ideology.

My screenings of Latina representations at the LOC were, to say the least, disappointing. And I recount my distress surrounding the roles that these Latina stars portrayed in order to emphasize that the project of historical rediscovery is myopic if it fails to recognize the politics of representation that these Latina predecessors embodied.

In many ways, Latina/o film historiography has appropriately disrupted the Eurocentric bias of mainstream film history, unearthing the hidden presence of Latinas/os in the movie industry since the early days of cinema, as actors, directors, cinematographers, technicians, musicians, and so forth. As part of its corrective to dominant film history, the discourse of Latina/o studies has celebrated both Myrtle González and Beatriz Michelena for their pioneering roles, for playing leading and “diverse roles.” Both women are praised for not conforming to the early twentieth-century cult of femininity and domesticity through their portrayals of “vigorou outdoor heroines,” adventurous women who excelled in the male-dominated activities of horseback riding and fighting. Yet, as I have noted, the project of Latina/o historical recovery has not attended as vigorously to the ways in which Latina actors like González and Michelena were in fact complicitous with the racial ideology of the time, especially the dominant racist colonialism of early cinema.

Notes

2 As Mike Davis writes: “At a New York advertising convention in the early 1930s, the mission aura of ‘history and romance’ was rated as an even more important attraction in selling Southern California than weather or movie industry glamour.” Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 27.
3 McWilliams, *North from Mexico*, p. 42.
5 Ibid., pp. 83, 27.
7 See Luiz Costa Lima, *The Control of the Imaginary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 120.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 206.
11 Moreover, like McWilliams, Mike Davis also details the ways in which the whitening of California history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reinforced white racial and
economic supremacy, just as the erasure of Mexican working-class and mixed-race identities consolidated California’s nativism.


14 Ibid.


16 Ibid, p. 85.

17 “Mayor Drives 6-Horse Team,” San Francisco Examiner, July 29, 1919.


20 Ibid, p. 3.

21 Michelena’s father is described as “member of a distinguished South American Spanish family” (see “Operatic Star Leaves on Concert Tour, San Francisco Chronicle, July 10, 1927); Gonzales’s obituary states she was a “daughter of an old Spanish family” (“Myrtle Gonzales Dead,” Los Angeles Times, October 23, 1918).


23 Roughly 10 percent of the films produced during the early era of cinema survive, mostly in public and private archives. At the Library of Congress, I located four of the 42 films starring Myrtle Gonzales, but only one of the 16 featuring Michelena.

En El Mundo: Transnational Connections
Latinas/os and Latin America: Topics, Destinies, Disciplines

Román de la Campa

The twenty-first century arguably began in 1989, such was the magnitude of a year that unexpectedly brought an end to the Cold War and international socialism as we knew it, a moment now also understood as the dawn for new thinking on area studies. The early 1990s also mark the period in which Latina/o studies came into their own. A pivotal example may be found in the seminal essay “Living Borders/Buscando America: Languages of Latina/o Self-Formation,” by Juan Flores and George Yúdice. Rooting themselves largely in a NuyoRican, east coast experience, the authors took the concept of “living border” to delineate the new social milieu configured by US Latinas/os, which they understood primarily as an ongoing process of “transcreation” in the domain of language use and popular culture. They also questioned whether ethnic theory, as deployed in traditional social science, provided the category within which Latina/o interests would best be served. Briefly put, they found the moment propitious for a “post-ethnic” account of cultural plurality and social formations in the United States.

Another important instance, José David Saldivar’s The Dialectics of Our America (1991), put forth a rather novel framing of Chicano literary history, drawn primarily from Latin American and African American sources. The implications, or stakes, raised by his proposal were clear: Chicano literature could not be explained, or contained, within the parameters of US American literary history as traditionally conceived. Yet, to the extent that Chicano literature was an integral part of the literature written in the United States, Saldivar’s project could be said to aim not only toward a definition of Chicano literature, but even more so toward a redrawing of American literary and linguistic boundaries. In that sense, his work foretold the state of flux American literature would evidence throughout the 1990s, particularly in the postcolonial framing of English as a global language and literature featuring a new archive of writers from former colonies and settler societies. Creative scholarship such as Flores’ and Saldivar’s
began to undermine the stability of area studies, a paradigm specifically framed for the Cold War. Indeed, it could be said that, from that point on, both Latin American and American studies entered a stage best defined as continuous remapping.

The cultural studies turn also responds in various ways to new Latina/o research which focused on the mutual translation or “transcreation” of Anglo and Latina/o cultures within the United States, an impetus that came largely from the arts, popular culture, and the media portrayal of everyday experience. Writing and theory also gathered new meaning for the humanities during this period, indeed they came to be seen as forms of transgression, often with political implications within disciplines. It could be said, however, that Latina/o cultural studies, in many ways a product of new humanistic endeavors, may have taken for granted key questions that social scientists insisted on proving with data, an effort led by scholars such as Rodolfo de la Garza and Louis DeSipio, among others, in books such as *Latina/o Voices* (1992), *Barrio Ballots*, and *New Americans by Choice* (both 1994). Does hybridity really turn into agency? Can the celebration of new American identities translate into political data discernible at the voting booth?

Beyond debates over disciplines, such questions confirmed the limits of disciplinary knowledge after 1989. From that point on one can readily intuit that most, if not all, methods and approaches to the study of everyday experience faced a common challenge of considerable proportions: all disciplines found it increasingly difficult to renew themselves as the web of social, economic, and cultural phenomena shifted away from the old categories of national and international knowledge production. Lisa Anderson, Dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, recently asked whether the still dominant model of American social science could sustain its explanatory power. “The ideas and institutions that animate social science research today,” she states, “grew out of a historically and culturally specific commitment to a sort of traditional American liberalism,” a project “unlikely to be sustained in the next decades in the face of the challenges posed by new entrants around the world in the formulation, advocacy, and management of knowledge.” Social science, Anderson added, “still deploys culture and history as residual explanations, dismissively said to account for virtually everything that is otherwise unpredicted or unexplained by conventional theory and methods, from ethnic conflict to religious revival. Nonetheless, the challenges posed by the varied ways societies outside the United States organize and describe themselves are contributing to the increasing interest in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research.”

Anderson’s commentary does not only pertain to international studies. It applies equally to the nation, a category hardly exempt from revision, precisely due to the new prominence of illegal migration, the Internet, cable television, consumer citizenship, border studies, and the expansive realm of service industries, all of which came into full view during the 1990s. A decade ago Saskia Sassen had already observed the advent of a “process of denationalization of national
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territory, although in a highly specialized institutional and functional way.”

Indeed, in its ever-widening drive for new and unobstructed markets, global
capital construes national identities as somewhat anachronistic, a reality clearly at
the root of Samuel Huntington’s obsession with increased Hispanic migration to
the United States: “The emergence of a global economy and global corporations
plus the ability to form transnational coalitions to promote reforms on a global
basis (women’s rights, the environment, land mines, human rights, small arms)
led many elites to develop supranational identities and to downgrade their national
identities.” The problem thus calls for an uncharted transnational dimension, of
which no topic seems more dynamic and complex than American Latinas/os.

One hastens to add, however, that humanistic methods have no monopoly
on these matters, either. By now the public has grown accustomed to continuous
debates within that culture of research, owing perhaps to the instability of the
subjective realm in an age of unprecedented uncertainty. To some, humanists
have grown bolder with the cultural studies turn, enough to claim a larger role
in knowledge production with an emphasis on theory, new cultural forms, and
consumption; to others, the discipline may have lost its true calling, once properly
grounded in artistic traditions of proven value to Western civilization as we
knew it. But perhaps one could move beyond these highly predictable positions
by taking a closer look at the ways in which the Cold War and area studies
shaped knowledge in the humanities as well. It’s a story full of meaning for both
Latina/o as well as Latin American frameworks.

Spurred by the Soviet launching of Sputnik in the late 1950s, the National
Defense Education Act supplied the initial stimulus for area and international
studies, an investment that spawned a vast research paradigm in both the social
sciences and the humanities. New types of academic intellectuals evolved as
research universities expanded these fields and their corresponding curricula.
One could trace the birth of Latin American studies as a paradigm within the
American academy at this moment, and the study of Spanish language and
literature also gathered new importance in American higher education at this
time. On the other hand, Latina/o studies – historically understood as pertaining
to Chicano and Nuyorican populations – were largely ignored by this paradigm,
given its emphasis on new knowledge defined strictly along national lines and
international competition.

In time, the center of gravity began to move from the Latin American area
studies paradigm toward a broader inclusion of border and US Latina/o issues.
To understand this shift in American academia, however, it would be useful
to review a bit more of the area studies paradigm set during the Cold War. That
epoch saw massive government initiatives such as the Alliance for Progress
which created opportunities for Latin American scholars to visit the United
States as students and faculty, a sort of academic migratory pull fostered by
non-governmental granting agencies and foundations such as the Social Science
Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, Ford, Rockefeller,
and Tinker. In literary studies this moment coincided with the new Latin American
novel, the “boom” that brought worldwide prestige to Latin American letters for the first time, as well as the creation of new professional organizations such as the Latin American Studies Association, largely devoted to social science research at that moment, though later equally imbued by cultural and literary interests.

This thirty year period, roughly demarcated by the rise of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, created a high demand for Latin American topics and brought many foreign students and visiting scholars to the United States. Many of them came from the middle and upper classes of Latin America, though they often understood their presence in the context of historic geopolitical unevenness and inequality that marked the relations between their countries and the United States, as well as tumultuous internal conditions of dictatorship and military regimes from the right and the left. The human and social reality of Latinas/os, however, remained by and large distant if not foreign to these migrating scholars and professionals, even for those who knew or intuited they would ultimately reside in the United States. When Latin Americans met Latinas/os on US campuses during this period, they barely recognized grounds of commonality with each other, as widely different national, racial, and linguistic ideologies stood in the way of their mutual intelligibility. With the end of the Cold War, however, the divide between these two populations began to narrow somewhat, as Latin American studies ceased to occupy a privileged space as the primary embodiment of the “Latin other” in Anglo-America.

Latin American and Latina/o topics – or perhaps even destinies – inched closer to each other from the late 1980s, and they have continued to do so ever since, as one gathers from Néstor García Canclini’s book *Latinoamericanos buscando lugar en este siglo* (2002), which envisions Latinas/os as key players in Latin America’s future.6 Needless to say, some scholars from both sides of this growing nexus will look upon this proximity as a dubious conflation of distinctly different phenomena. But one can’t fail to notice the surge of new grounds of mutual pertinence and respect in both fields, as evidenced in recent anthologies such as *Borderless Borders* (1998), *Mambo Montage* (2001), *Critical Latin American and Latina/o Studies* (2003), and *Latina/o Cultural Citizenship* (2004).7 In any event, as the Cold War paradigm waned, a new stage of unexpected encounters between Latina/o and Latin American peoples and topics has begun to chart new territory.

By the late 1980s, area studies had outgrown its boundaries, as scholars trained in that paradigm couldn’t help but register the unsettling symptoms of neoliberalism, postmodernity, and globalization. For the social sciences, this moment corresponds precisely to Lisa Anderson’s analysis; for the humanities, it pertains to postmodern and postcolonial approaches – particularly in literature and the arts – as well as the advent of cultural, ethnic, and gender studies.8 Many asked or wondered how academic disciplines would register such an unstable flow of linguistic, political, and cultural traditions.9 English, for instance, clearly turned into the lingua franca of globalization at this time. That meant, among other things, that the safely guarded links between language, literature, and nation that inspired Richard Rodriguez’s self-described path to Americanization
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in *Hunger of Memory* (a life story told in the 1980s but corresponding to the 1960s and 1970s) had been undermined as never before.

A new political economy of knowledge came into its own. It witnessed the advent of an array of authors who write in English, but whose cultural and national bearings reside elsewhere (such as in India, South Africa, or the Asian and Latina/o communities of the United States). A new authorship came into being; though difficult to define, one could perhaps think of it as the voice of people who become native speakers of English as a second language, a category formed by those whose Americanism includes a plural sense of being when it comes to language and cultural heritage. In that contradictory terrain, Spanish also awakened to a new – enlarged and uncharted – destiny in the United States, in spite of this country’s deep-seated antipathy toward foreign languages, which continued to intensify in the past few decades even as bilingualism gains ground. Millions of English-dominant speakers of Spanish came knocking on the doors of Spanish language departments, which not only had to brave the fragmentation of their traditional discipline, but also come to grips with the opportunities implicit in these increasing entanglements.

Once the guardians of Hispanism, Spanish departments understandably turned their attention toward Latin America during the Cold War and the area studies paradigm. But now they must also ask themselves what it means – culturally, linguistically, and theoretically – to live and work in the midst of 40 million Latinas/os and Hispanics in the United States, with a buying power projected to approach $1 trillion by the end of this decade. Those who specialize in Spanish language, literature, and culture couldn’t help but entertain the possibilities of a global realm with profound implications for uncharted links between Spain, Latin America, and the growing US Latina/o community. Mapping America on this new canvas demanded a new economy of imaginaries; that is, the capacity to envision oneself beyond the realm of sacred texts – whether historical, legal, or theological – in response to new media representations that continuously reshape the world.

Tracing national bearings, always an arresting point for Latinas/os and Latin Americans, must always traverse multiple territories, be they historical, mythical, or literary. Indeed, an obsession with the nation left behind – by oneself or by one’s forebears – surfaces time and again in both Latina/o as well as Latin American writers who live and work in the United States. How else does one explain Richard Rodríguez’s obsession with his father’s Mexico in *Days of Obligation* (1992), which he thought he had left behind in *Hunger of Memory* (1989)? The same could be said for the mixed emotions spelled out in *Heaven’s Door* (1999) by the Harvard economist George Borjas, who takes pains to celebrate his coming to the United States as a Cuban refugee in the early 1960s, even as his book calls for migratory policies that would basically ban future Latina/o refugees, except the most educated, from entering the United States. Another example might be found in Ilan Stavans’ attempt to exorcize his Jewish Mexican origins through his newly found Yiddish Latina/o ontological pursuit.
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In this transnational sphere, filled with new dreams and ideas, as well as fantasies, Latina/o and Latin American motifs continuously imbue each other. Writers such as Julia Alvarez and Cristina Garcia, for example, probe the forgotten secrets of Caribbean national histories through voices residing in English and in the United States; and the work of Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros shows that retracing Mexican history in the United States always resides beyond strict national boundaries. Yet it seems pertinent to ask how, when, and why the spheres of Latinas/os, Latin Americans, and Caribbean peoples converge and what significant patterns emerge or dissolve in such a rapidly widening nexus. Globalization does not entail an end of the nation in a rigorous sense, as many have argued, but rather a dispersal of the language–culture equation enacted by media industries whose main products include manufacturing desire through television and computer technologies. This points to an intricate melding of citizenship and consumption, a new logic for molding the symbolic capital necessary to enter the middle class. How discourses centered on language use, literature, immigration, and ethnicity – the core themes of Latina/o studies – respond to this challenge remains to be seen.

Historical Latinas/os now find themselves surrounded by waves of Latin American immigrants from different points of origin, in some cases searching for a new identity, as the case of Ilan Stavans indicates, or trying to redefine national identities, as Richard Rodriguez’s Brown (2002) attests. Both groups must confront the advent of a globalized economy that feeds the constant lure of migration northward, as well as the network of Latin American economies dependant on hard-currency remittances from US Latinas/os and the incessant need of labor by American consumers. But the history preceding this moment of proximity between Latinas/os and Latin Americans should not be forgotten, given that it always lent itself to negative representation, as West Side Story reminds us. Latin Americans in the United States may have always understood such casting as a stereotype, but perhaps they also suspected it would not be applicable to them as long as they kept their national bearings alive. But that assumption finds its limit as their stay in the United States grows longer, if not permanent, and as the American Latina/o label crosses their paths of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences. At that point of convergence many unexplored and often painful questions arise for both groups, as Suzanne Oboler’s Ethnic Labels, Latina/o Lives endeavored to show. The two most resistant anchors of the American identity have been race and language, elements that consistently define the path to ethnic assimilation, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the ever expanding search for markets leaves nothing untouched or unchanged, including a cultural identity based on racial and linguistic substrata. But new Latina/o identity formations ought to resist or at least challenge racial phenotypes, even those claiming a truly “brown” synthesis. The same goes for a festive linguistic hybrid, an undifferentiated celebration of academic Spanglish that fails to register racial and social specificity, a history that reveals pragmatic as well as creative accommodation between otherwise
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intractable social variables. The space once known as “the street” now breaks into the fold with a new force and legitimacy; it is no longer just an intruder that overturns the high–low cultural divide. It’s an uncertain context, but perhaps also one that yields possibilities, such as the meeting of cultures in which racial differences and monolingual rule will play a much less prominent role. In any event, it seems clear that in this new terrain the place of the researcher, or intermediary, becomes irremediably more public and ultimately more anxious because capitalism itself demands it.

Future work on culture, the main point of convergence for the social sciences and the humanities, will likely require new insights that carry differential approaches to nations, border zones, and transnational spheres, for global capitalism invokes a radical synchronizing of space and time, even as it calls for greater attention to local domains. Historical understanding continues to wane, but new technologies make it easier to access archives, hence the contradictory pull on knowledge production, which must not only register new data but also forgotten or repressed histories, be they political, linguistic, economic, or literary. This task – difficult but also vital – may entail a type of work capable of conjuring new links between empirical and discursive knowledge; that is, an understanding of the living social text in which social and humanistic endeavors find new common ground. Such are the demands on symbolic capital production in the new century, a time in which Latina/o studies coincidentally came into its own.

Notes

5 Saskia Sassen, Losing Control: The Decline of Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). She draws this quote from an unpublished paper she had written two years earlier.
6 Néstor García Canclini, Latinoamericanos buscando lugar en este siglo (Buenos Aires: Paidos, 2002).
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8 Andreas Huyssen makes a significant attempt to establish the dates of the first stage of postmodernism and to distinguish it from the contemporary moment. See Andreas Huyssen, “Literatura e cultura no contexto global,” in Reinaldo Marques and Lucia Helena Vilela (eds.), Valores: Arte, Mercado, Política (Belo Horizonte, Brazil: UFMG, 2002).

9 The extent of this phenomenon has become quite evident in England, where there is now a new national emphasis on studying the future of English studies. See Elaine Showalter, “What Teaching Literature Should Really Mean,” Chronicle Review (January 17, 2003).

10 This figure comes from television industry calculations as reported by Mireya Navarro, “Promoting Hispanic TV, Language, and Culture,” New York Times (December 30, 2002): C7.

11 Borjas defines an index of skills in which only educated and skilled immigrants would be allowed in the future. See the preface to George J. Borjas, Heaven’s Door (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).


chapter forty-two

Latinas/os and the (Re)racializing of US Society and Politics

Suzanne Oboler

It has often been said, most notably by the British war correspondent Phillip Knightly, that during times of war the first casualty is Truth. Over the past few years, two Chicano journalists, Roberto Rodriguez and Patrisia Gonzáles, have continuously exposed the way that hypocrisy, lies, and distortions have penetrated what we could call the “common sense” knowledge that has thus far organized our everyday life in US society since September 11, 2001. They note, for example, that in the name of patriotism our civil liberties have been curtailed; fear and distrust of fellow citizens are now the accepted norm. Mass roundups of different national origin groups went virtually unprotested by anyone other than the groups involved. Racial profiling is now official government policy, and those who practice it are called true patriots. Dissent, on the other hand, is unpatriotic to the point of treason. And as the two columnists have also observed: “During the Clinton administration, the president had vociferous critics, yet no one ever questioned their right to speak. No one told them that their dissent or calls for impeachment constituted treason, and no one suggested that they be permanently exiled.”

Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall and David Held, I understand citizenship in broad terms as the political expression of national belonging and democratic decision-making. Under the present context of suspicion and crude nationalist propaganda, Latinas/os become an important test of the future course of social integration and democratic rights in US society, which citizenship is supposed to guarantee. What does it really mean for Latinas/os’ daily lives to belong to this society? Given the fear and distrust, the prevailing climate of official lies and distortions, the stock-in-trade of propaganda, is it possible for people – both Latinas/os and otherwise – to belong to anything resembling a community in the US today? Conversely, what does it mean for the well-being of the society as such to identify portions of its citizenry, such as Arab Americans and Muslims more generally, as explicitly posing a potential danger to the society?
Since September 11, 2001, the practice of racism in daily life has undoubtedly changed in the United States. As Chisun Lee recently argued, racial profiling has once again ominously acquired a new acceptance – paradoxically gaining approval by those who have themselves long been victims of this policy – that is by members of minority groups. Henry Ainslee, for example, is a case in point. Described as an imposing, broad-shouldered, 6-feet-tall, black Puerto Rican in a post-9/11 newspaper article, he was interviewed shortly after 9/11 and readily discussed the fact that he had experienced racial profiling. Moreover, he had no problem acknowledging that unlike his vigorous opposition to it in the past, today, in this post-9/11 period, he, like many other Americans – minority and otherwise – is also racially profiling Arab Americans.

Both the types of action that some, like Henry Ainslee, have chosen to follow, and the implicit reasoning and justification behind them, make visible the ambiguous position and ambivalence of Latinas/os in relation to issues of identity and racial profiling in the United States. It also sets the broader context for rediscussing ethnicity and citizenship in this unpredictable post-9/11 new world in which we live. For Ainslee’s change of heart is yet another example that the unrelenting force of racism in contemporary daily life and social relations has turned all US citizens – whether White, Black, or Latina/o, whether of Jewish, Arab, Asian, or Native American descent, whether consciously “racist” or “anti-racist,” rich or poor, male or female, young or old, wielders of power or not – into willing or unwilling accomplices in its ongoing reproduction and perpetuation. Indeed, it is proof-positive that racism in the US context is alive and well, and as such cannot be relegated to a distant past when legal segregation, overt bigotry, and lynching were common. Instead, today, it is above all about the fear and the never-ending possibilities created by the “Maybe’s” and the “What if’s” inherent in the current “national security” doctrine of the US. In some respects this doctrine serves to continue and expand on the national security doctrine that over two decades ago provided the rationale for the militarization of the US–Mexico border – allowing, as Timothy Dunn has argued, “low intensity conflict” until now practiced abroad to be brought home. Today, this doctrine is increasingly breeding distrust among human beings, effectively sabotaging the possibility of creating a community of equals, and its modern synonym, citizenship. Seen from this perspective, Henry Ainslee’s change of heart – like the current government-sanctioned and supported racial profiling policies – reminds us yet again that, while citizenship may be commonly construed as a legal status, it is, above all, both a political reality and a lived experience.

In this essay I raise issues concerning the controversial history and ambiguous place of Latinas/os as US citizens and residents. I do so in the context of the practice of racial profiling that goes beyond the traditional social technology of ethnic labeling under the current ideology of national security. Having explored these issues for over a decade, I suggest that we are increasingly being presented with a distorted mirror reflection of Arab Americans as possessing inherent traits that, beyond any surface commonalities and differences, are almost interchangeable.
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with the traditional stereotyped image and perception of Latinas/os. Notwithstanding their current Census designation as members of the “white ethnic group,” the image of Arab Americans and Muslims appears today to be firmly cast into the traditional Latina/o mold – i.e., dark people, who come from exotic countries and are unbendably foreign – if not primarily in their putative insistence on retaining their particular language, certainly in their adherence to their religious practices and cultural values and backward traditions.

Given this foreignness, it seems to me that the model for the current forms of harassment and/or co-optation of Arab Americans and other racialized groups is no longer to be found solely or uniquely in the traditional black/white racial discrimination framework that has for so long characterized US society. Instead, the policy of racial profiling as integral to the national security doctrine of the Bush Administration can best be understood by reference to the treatment of Latinas/os and, specifically, of Puerto Ricans who, in spite of having US citizenship conferred on them since 1917, continue to be perceived as “aliens.”

Stated in different terms, while Latinas/os are perpetually “foreign” to the image of who is an American, under the present condition of foreign adventurism, the propaganda image explicitly portrays African Americans instead as unwavering “Americans,” supporters of the Bush Administration policies. It is important to emphasize, however, that this is only the propaganda, for the reality diverges as widely as ever. It is sufficient to mention in this respect, the undermining once again of African Americans’ citizenship rights, through the electoral fraud perpetrated through subverting the Black vote in the 2004 elections. In this sense the Patriot Act and racial profiling reinstitute racism in a political way – i.e., through the prism of a wartime perspective in which the notion of the enemy within/without prevails. Finally, then, I highlight some perspectives which seek to address the question of the dangerous possibilities for European-style fascization – i.e., staking out the enemy within. It is becoming increasingly apparent that should things go badly with the purely imperialist adventures which the current administration has committed itself to undertaking abroad, the national security doctrine is visibly being prepared and will be able to find its requisite scapegoats at home. In this context I argue that the present tendency of politicized racialization is diminishing not only the rights of the explicitly targeted groups, but the rights of all US citizens. The question for us all today – as Michael Moore’s brilliant 2004 documentary Fahrenheit 9/11 so poignantly suggests – is whether people will be cowed into acceptance of this regime’s illegitimate actions, or whether there will be some democratic and freedom-loving initiatives beyond the level of individual resistance.

Racial Profiling and Citizenship Today: A Déjà Vu

Prior to September 11, 2001, and indeed even today, many people in mainstream society insisted that racism was no longer the “real problem” – after all, as one
argument went, we’ve had affirmative action for over two decades; and, as Ward Connerly sought to argue in California, race-based policies have no place in government policies. Using his own position as an example, Connerly also suggested that minorities have made progress toward inclusion into the mainstream since the 1960s. Similarly, Tomas Sowell made the point that there are many reasons other than genes and color discrimination why groups differ in their economic performance. These differences ostensibly included demographics such as age and educational attainment, cultural values, and geographic concentration. In this falsely optimistic context, racial profiling stood as the last remaining bastion of the retrograde forces of unbridled racism – a bastion that, once destroyed, would spell the end of this shameful chapter in the official national history.

And so, toward the end of the 1990s, in newspaper articles, academic conferences, television talk shows, and radio call ins, discussions about this most unfair and quintessentially “un-American” act were heard throughout the country. It is worth recalling that the popularity of the debates on racial profiling at that time was matched only by the number of equally heated discussions concerning the need to resolve the status of undocumented immigrants, and the consequent growing momentum of the national amnesty movement. In fact, the issue of immigration gained particular prominence as the month of September 2001 approached, due to the imminent meeting between President Bush and his Mexican counterpart, President Fox. These high-level and high-profile discussions purported to create a more effective, if not more humane, immigration policy between the two bordering states.

By the end of the summer of 2001, both congressional and popular support for the passage of the “End Racial Profiling Act of 2001,” sponsored by Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Rep. John Conyers (D-MI), seemed to be almost certainly assured and, needless to say, was particularly welcomed by both African American and Latina/o organizations. As Raul Yzaguirre, the head of the NCLR, concluded, the anti-profiling bill was “vital to the Latina/o community, which is subjected not only to racial and ethnic profiling by local law enforcement, but also by the INS, the DEA, and the US Customs Service.” The days following September 11, 2001 destroyed all expectations of passing the racial profiling bill in the foreseeable future. Any hope that President Fox might have had of regulating immigration between Mexico and the US also died, even as the amnesty movement was abruptly stopped in its tracks. For, as the Ainslee example suggests, while racial profiling of perceived American citizens continues to be viewed in a negative light, societal condemnation of the practice has been somewhat attenuated by the shift in the acceptable definition of who could and, indeed, should be profiled, to anyone deemed to be a potential “terrorist.” Latinas/os in this context are not being spared. A study released during the summer of 2002 documents that “nationwide, Latina/o teens charged with violent offenses are five times more likely to be incarcerated as white teens similarly charged.” As Fernando Abeyta, 22, a community organizer for the Albuquerque-based Southwest Organizing Project, noted: “Throughout
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Albuquerque, police are harassing, detaining, and arresting young Latinas/os with alarming regularity. . . . They are picking people out . . . by the color of their skin and what they wear.  

Hence the above example of Henry Ainslee suggests that September 11 both halted the societal movement to end racial profiling and also served to affirm the perverse logic of racism. For, today, racial profiling has become a quintessentially patriotic and “pro-American” act, laying bare the extent to which everyone in US society has long been programmed to understand and reproduce at any moment, and almost on command, the mechanisms of discrimination that confirm the intransigent racial bias that lies deep within every aspect of daily life in US society.

In this context, how best to understand the relation between this new, post-9/11 version of racism and the more commonly understood sense of racism in relation to blackness and phenotypical marking? Is it a shift from one to the other? Does the post-9/11 version replace or eclipse the previous one? Does the traditional black/white version continue in a more muted form? Or does it remain in full force with only the addition of the post-9/11 version?

The post-9/11 racial practices and ideology are not a new kind of racism. Despite all the changes throughout the course of the twentieth century, racism in the United States is firmly entrenched as both a reflex and a response to any new situation. In other words, everyone – even those who, like Ainslee, have been subjected to it – responds according to the way this society has “trained” them to respond. Racial profiling in this context reveals the depth of racism as a means of orienting oneself in US society. Instead of disappearing, it has become synonymous with “Americanism” and can even be used as a means of affirming belonging by previously excluded groups.

It is important to emphasize that this “Americanism” is today being constructed not as a society of equals, but rather as a hierarchical society grounded, as the Clinton Race Task Force noted in 1998, in the belief in the superiority of whiteness and “white privilege” in the US socioracial hierarchy. In this society, each group invariably “knows its place.” It is a place that is reinforced by the post-9/11 racial order, which is currently being grafted onto an ethnoracial hierarchy whereby US citizens are being redefined, within a global context, as the privileged who rightfully belong to this “homeland.” Moreover, as the Executive Report of the Pew Foundation recently concluded, “The Latina/o experience demonstrates that whiteness remains an important measure of belonging, stature and acceptance. And, Hispanic views of race also show that half of this ever larger segment of the US population is feeling left out.”

Like Henry Ainslee, many who want to claim belonging do so by choosing to adhere to their patriotic duty by enlisting to fight a new enemy – at home if not abroad: a foreign Asian or Arab “other.” The choice of the latter two groups is not fortuitous. Consider, for example, the case of Wen Ho Lee, the Asian American scientist falsely accused of stealing government secrets and detained in solitary confinement, which ended only a few months before 9/11. This case...
confirmed yet again that, as in the past, US citizens of Asian descent are still being “branded as perpetual and unassimilable foreigners.” Similarly, the Bush Administration has been both applauded and criticized for its witch hunt, arrests, and illegal detention of hundreds of citizens and legal residents of Arab descent.

Undoubtedly, there have been obvious benefits to the affirmation of ethnicity – cultural citizenship or ethnic membership in an age where belonging is disappearing as a community experience being a key example. Yet, while it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this point, it is also important today to ask ourselves: Beyond the cultural dimension of ethnicity, what are the social and political consequences – for the referent population and for society as a whole – of the persistence of the political practice of ethnic discrimination?

Channeled through ethnicity, the mechanisms of discrimination today are affirmed again and again in at least two ways: first, through the officially sanctioned ethnic labels originally created by Directive 15 of the OMB in 1977; and second, and equally important, through the appropriation and redefinitions of these labels by the various minority groups and individuals in their struggle for social justice. In this context, ethnic labeling is clearly a social technology, used to reinforce the reliance on the fear and distrust which can redefine all third-world immigrants as potential “foreign terrorists.” In a sweeping throwback to an ugly past, the current hegemony in the United States is contriving to portray racial divisions if not as “normal” at least as inevitable.

Unfortunately, this practice does not stop at the governing elites. A social technology means that it is reproduced in the lives of the members designated by ethnic labels. Thus, those who have been or are currently discriminated against eagerly accept to discriminate against the newly targeted group. While these actions may lack solidarity, they nevertheless see in them a means of asserting their belonging to the larger society – i.e., by accepting its principle of injustice as a birth right. Hence the rather pathetic case of Henry Ainslee, which suggests that actions based on “a little racial bias” so-to-speak, are justified, for they can and should go a long way toward protecting us from the scourge of terrorism. In contrast with the “terrorist-free paradise” we apparently lived in prior to September 11 (notwithstanding the actions of Timothy McVeigh, and the fates of Martin Luther King and the Kennedy brothers), this Afro-Puerto Rican, like many of his fellow citizens, is now willing to submit both himself and others to the “patriotic duty” of being profiled, searched, and even harassed, if this will protect us from our enemies – i.e., the “cunning foreigners” apparently stalking US streets and airports. Although the new post-segregation context has meant that the racial hierarchy of inequalities, and racism itself, is not as crude as it used to be through legal segregation, this does not mean that the consequences of the particular forms that racism is taking in this post-segregation age are any less virulent. Hence the ongoing reinforcement of racial bias as inherent to the organization of the society.
From Ethnic Bias to Racialized Fragmentation

Until September 11, 2001, ethnicity did contribute toward overcoming the worst of the racial conflict in US society, even while it simultaneously assured inequality for the designated groups. Indeed, the “normalcy” of ethnic labels as a social technology is what has constituted to date the “permissible discrimination” which to some extent is found in identity politics. Stated in different terms, it is becoming increasingly apparent, particularly since 9/11, that these labels have as their core an inherent racial dualism whose prototype comes from the traditional black/white divide and whose consequences inevitably go beyond struggles for social justice. On the one hand, the struggle to overcome racism allowed anti-discrimination policies such as affirmative action to have far-reaching consequences in terms of individual strategies for overcoming disadvantages.

On the other hand, the inherent racial dualism, camouflaged through ethnic labeling, has also allowed the mapping out of any new radicalizing conflict in the same “us-versus-them” belligerent framework as the traditional racial paradigm. The renaming and transposition of the black/white binary into the American/alien binary through the Patriot Act, and the consequent reinvigoration of racial profiling against “Arab-looking persons” and Muslims, has been facilitated by the pervasiveness of ethnic categorization. In other words, just about any group could eventually conceivably be singled out as such, and turned, for whatever reason, into the next “enemy within” by the Patriot Act. After all, the Patriot Act does spell out the current national security doctrine of the US government.

Just about any group – but not quite. For here the weight of the nation’s racial heritage can now be better gauged. The color ambiguity that permeates ethnic labeling is also important. In fact, it is uncanny how the profiling of Arab Americans coincides with and almost substitutes the previous stereotype of the knife-flicking Latina/o. While the first and immediate enemy has been the Arab American community, it is not surprising that the Puerto Rican José Padilla was next in line in the capture of “enemy combatants” at home. Behind the illegal detention of José Padilla, a Puerto Rican and US citizen who has been stripped of his most basic rights since his arrest three years ago, lies the issue of national security which has long justified the curtailment and loss of rights suffered primarily, but not solely, by Chicanos along the border in the Southwest. Puerto Rico has long been an anomaly in the world’s history of colonialism. In this context, Padilla’s arrest can also be understood as a test of the extent of the potential Latina/o response, if any, to the construction of the Latin American/Latina/o as the new enemy within. After all, Padilla isn’t just “any ol’ Puerto Rican.” Rather, he is also an ex-gang member – a status which automatically refers us to the image of drug-infested lawless expanses south of the border. According to Ted Rall, “government officials admit ‘that they’ve got
zero evidence’ and that Padilla is at best a ‘small fish.’ Nevertheless, they plan to
detain this American citizen indefinitely, without trial.”

As Luis Falcón once reminded us, “there is much in the Puerto Rican past
that we can find in other people’s futures.” Given the decline of the citizenship
scenario I describe in this essay, it is important, minimally, for us to raise if not
also address the following question: Who is going to speak up for the present and
future José Padillas – be they Puerto Rican, Latina/o, or of any other ethnic or
racial background in this society?

According to our contemporary ethnic hierarchy, and as I have argued else-
where, it seems to be up to each group to speak up solely for its own members
– in the case of Padilla, for example, it would be up to the so-called “Hispanics”
to be the main driving force of protest, although of course other groups could
also play a supporting role. The fact that it is primarily up to each group to
protect its own means that the principle of divide and conquer is alive and well
and continues to mutilate democratic citizenship for all, now as in the past.
Given the declining economy and the continuing impact of 9/11, as well as
Latinas/os’ ambiguous color status, their putative insistence on speaking a for-
eign language, and their ties to what are consistently portrayed as lawless and
disintegrating countries (e.g., most recently, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina),
Latinas/os could easily be turned into the next pariahs of this society, as the case
of José Padilla suggests. As Samuel Huntington has emphatically argued: “The
persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States
into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. . . . The United States ignores
this challenge at its peril.” Hence, Latinas/os could be targeted by the national
security doctrine which is already enforced at the Mexican – although not at the
Canadian – border. In short, this most primitive national security doctrine has
already started identifying which racial/ethnic groups can be legitimate pariahs
in society. This too points towards a dangerous depoliticization of citizenship
and hence of ethnic labels such as African American, Hispanic, etc., in favor of
the government’s repoliticization of phenotype.

Part of the problem is that the 9/11 terrorists outdid themselves – apparently
producing an almost perfect Hollywood-style implacable enemy of the United
States – i.e., as a dark alien coming from exotic and poor lands far from the
civility and safety of the US “homeland” and able to perform incredible acts of
unrequited evil. This performance has allowed for a new twist in the history
of racial discrimination in the United States. For one thing, the unambiguous
divide – alien versus citizen – has now been inextricably tied to the typology of
skin color. Whites, whether from Europe, Canada, or South Africa, are not the
kind of “foreigner” we mean when we talk about the “enemy alien” from abroad.
Among African Americans, mostly black Muslims are currently singled out as
potential enemies of the state and the nation. And of course, in this context, the
case of Wen Ho Lee was not only prescient, but also paradigmatic. It is thus
instructive for us to keep in mind that whatever other legal mechanisms it may
have relied on, the virulence of the discrimination historically practiced against
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blacks in this country in the past has rarely gone under the label of national security.

Our perception of racism, the definition of what constitutes racism, its uses, abuses, and rationale, have all been changed by the climate created by the Bush Administration in the years since 9/11. While we all openly abhor the days of lynching and Jim Crow segregation, as a society we are increasingly complacent and indeed supportive of a new form of overt discrimination – this time, perpetrated in the name of “patriotism” against US citizens and residents at home, as well as against others abroad.

Stated in different terms, today, the meaning of belonging is being defined at home, such as to project the patently imperialist logic of superiority/inferiority with which the Bush Administration is pursuing its expansionist actions abroad. The current ambiguities concerning the values of citizenship and belonging are creating faultlines both outside and within ethnic communities. While the old divisions in the broader society between rich and poor are dangerously reflected in, for instance, the class composition of the military on duty in Iraq, within the Latina/o community there is a growing distinction between foreign and US-born, visible, for instance, in the split political support for the Iraq War, as well as to some extent in the Latina/o vote of 2004. These internal divisions within ethnic groups as well as in the society at large, both reinforce and are to some extent the result of the tolerance to racial profiling and discrimination. Undoubtedly, this can only lead to a further deterioration of the value of democratic citizenship, understood in the terms defined by William V. Flores as “an active process of claiming rights rather than the passive acquisition of an arbitrary and limited set of rights.”

In this context, then, beyond its significance in terms of overcoming dangers from abroad, today, the meaning of fighting the “war on terror” must ultimately also be understood to be a struggle against attempts at eliminating the perpetration of divisive practices such as racial profiling, as well as contempt for and repression of citizens and residents in contemporary US society.

Notes

Suzanne Oboler

12 Patently aware of the impact of the practice of racial profiling on Latin American immigrants, the National Council of La Raza denounced racial profiling of Latinos in the following terms: “A March 2000 GAO report found that Hispanic female US citizens were four to nine times more likely than White female US citizens to be subjected to X-rays after being frisked or patted down. Moreover, a 2001 New York Times study of INS enforcement files in New York found that the agency explicitly used ethnic criteria to target its enforcement activities.” “NCLR Endorses the End Racial Profiling Act of 2001” (June 6, 2001), at: www.aclu.org/congress/1060601o.html.
Racial profiling in the post-9/11 period undoubtedly resonates in US historical examples. See Leti Volpp, “The Citizen and the Terrorist,” *UCLA Law Review* 49 (2002): 1575–600. It is also interesting to note that the extent to which the singling out of people of Arab descent is related to the foreign policy initiatives of the US rather than to any fear of terrorists per se was not lost on the *New York Times*, which explained the change of policy in the following terms: “The increased scrutiny comes as President Bush tries to build support for an attack on Iraq, for which Saudi Arabia has said it will not allow use of its territory unless the attack is under auspices of the United Nations.” Associated Press, “Photographs and Fingerprinting of Saudis Will Soon Be Required,” *New York Times* (September 24, 2002), at: www.nytimes.com/2002/09/24/national/24SAUD.html?ex=1033871348&ei=1&en=a68d03842e676ea8.

On the evolving relationship between drugs and terrorism, see Nicole Davis, “The Slippery Slope of Racial Profiling: From the War on Drugs to the War on Terrorism,” *Colorlines* (December 2001).


Since the nation’s founding, millions of people have migrated to the United States for political reasons, escaping war, upheaval, and/or repressive state policies. While the term “refugee” appeared in government hearings, documents, and publications as early as the nineteenth century, Congress did not establish a distinct refugee policy until after World War II, when foreign policy objectives and humanitarian concerns mandated exceptions to the restrictive national origins quotas. The Displaced Persons Act, for example, allowed for the immigration of 415,000 refugees from 1948 to 1952, as part of larger state policies to stabilize Western Europe; and the 1953 Refugee Relief Act facilitated the migration of 200,000 people fleeing the Eastern bloc countries. Throughout much of the Cold War, the Executive Branch used a loophole in immigration law – the “parole power” – to admit refugees when it was deemed in the national interest, and most of those admitted came from left-wing or communist regimes. In 1965 the new Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) established a permanent refugee quota, and officially stated what was already in practice: a refugee was defined as a person fleeing a “communist or communist-dominated country.” However, in 1980 the Refugee Act tried to eliminate this bias by adopting the UN’s broader definition in its amendment of the INA: a refugee was someone who

owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country.
Nevertheless, in the years following the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, admissions continued to favor those fleeing leftist regimes. By 1990, 2.5 million immigrants had been admitted as refugees; and over 90 percent came from communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.3

By 2004, the United States had admitted over a million refugees from Latin America. Over three quarters came from just one country: Cuba. Smaller numbers were admitted from Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and various Central American nations. While refugee policy reflected the United States’ humanitarian concerns and international obligations, it also reflected how immigration often becomes a tool of foreign policy objectives. Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the US response to those fleeing left-wing and right-wing regimes in Latin America and the Caribbean. The following are three case studies of the various ways the United States has responded to Latin American immigrants displaced by war or political upheaval.

The Cubans: Beneficiaries of the Cold War

The Cubans benefited from the bias in US refugee policy which favored those fleeing a Marxist state. Cuban migration to the United States has occurred in distinct “waves” since 1959, each responding to the state policies of the Castro government as well as a changing US immigration policy.4 The first wave of Cuban migration, from January 1, 1959 to October 22, 1962, brought in 248,070 Cubans to the United States; and the second wave, the US-sponsored “freedom flights” of 1965–73, brought 297,318 refugees to the US.5 Thousands more immigrated through other channels, migrating via third countries or arriving illegally across the Florida straits. However, unlike other illegal immigrants, US law facilitated their stay in the US. By September 1977 the total number of Cubans to arrive in the United States (since January 1, 1959) through legal and illegal channels reached 665,043.6

The migration out of Cuba followed a logical socioeconomic progression. As happens in most revolutions, those of the elite classes were the first to leave, followed by members of the middle class, causing a “brain drain” that could have undermined the state. The fact that Cuba’s most educated citizens chose to leave their homeland was perceived as an indictment of the revolutionary government: a discourse that was circulated by the US government at home and abroad. The US popular press celebrated the Cuban refugees’ democratic spirit and their “Horatio Alger” drive to succeed. However, most of these earlier arrivals viewed themselves as “exiles” and not immigrants; they hoped to return to their homeland once a more democratic government replaced Castro’s. With each passing year, the migration became more representative of Cuban society as a whole: in race, religion, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic class. The fact that the United States had maintained a strong political, military, and economic presence...
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on the island in the decades prior to the Castro revolution made accommodation to the US somewhat easier for the Cubans, especially those who had consistent contact with American institutions on the island.

As part of their geopolitical campaign to rid the hemisphere of a Marxist presence, the US government tried to assist the refugees’ quest to return to their homeland. As early as March 1960, Eisenhower authorized the CIA to prepare an invasion of Cuba that would overthrow the Castro government and replace it with a coalition of democratic, pro-US leaders hand-picked by the administration. As they prepared for the change in Cuba’s government, the president released one million dollars from the contingency funds of the Mutual Security Act to help resettle the Cubans who had concentrated in south Florida. This act had tremendous significance, since in invoking the Mutual Security Act Eisenhower officially recognized that Cuba was a communist state and that the Cuban exiles were refugees. The Eisenhower Administration also established a “Cuban Refugee Emergency Center” in downtown Miami to coordinate the relief efforts of all the voluntary relief agencies.

US financial support for the Cuban refugees increased after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, since the Cuban refugees now faced a lengthier stay in the United States. The “Cuban Refugee Program,” under the umbrella of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), provided funding for resettlement, monthly relief checks, health services, job (re)training, adult educational opportunities, foster care for unaccompanied children, aid to public schools, and surplus food distribution. By the time the program was phased out in 1975, the US government had spent over $950 million dollars to help the Cubans retool for life in the United States: one of the most comprehensive refugee aid packages in US immigration history. However, while helping the Cubans to assimilate, the government also continued to pursue its geopolitical agenda, first by sponsoring paramilitary campaigns designed to undermine popular support for the Castro government, and later, by tightening the trade embargo.

The Cubans who migrated as part of the 1980 Mariel Boatlift encountered a very different reception. Unlike the previous two waves of migration, where the US played a direct role in encouraging and sponsoring the refugees, the terms of the third wave of migration were determined unilaterally by the Cuban government. Some 124,776 Cubans were “encouraged” to migrate to the US from April to October 1980: some did so willingly, to reunite with families; but others were essentially forced to do so because their dissidence or “unrevolutionary” lifestyles made them “undesirables” or “troublemakers.” Also included in the boatlift population were some 3,100 people with serious physical or mental health problems, as well as some 2,000 felons who were transported from penal installations throughout the island to the port of Mariel and forced to board the ships that transported Cubans to Key West, Florida. Although these felons constituted a very small percentage of the Cubans who arrived in the US – and were detained by federal authorities after their arrival – they commanded a
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disproportionate amount of media attention. Americans resented both the Castro
government for dictating US immigration policy and the Carter Administration
for its inability to control the migration. Consequently, the entire boatlift popula-
tion was branded “undesirable” by default, and the Mariel crisis proved to be
one of the factors that led to Carter’s electoral defeat later that year.

Unlike the Cubans who immigrated from 1959 to 1973, the Cubans of Mariel
were not considered legitimate refugees, but instead were portrayed by the popular
media as troublemakers and opportunists who were taking the place of worthier
immigrants. Despite the fact that the Mariel Cubans cited political reasons for
their emigration – and that administration officials commonly referred to them
as “refugees” – the Justice Department determined that under the terms of the
recently passed 1980 Refugee Act (which came into effect a month before the
boatlift), the Cubans did not qualify for refugee status, nor for the special
assistance that status entitled them. This marked the first time since the Cold
War began that the government denied refugee status to a group leaving a com-
munist state. Instead, for their first four years in the United States, the Cubans
were categorized as “entrant: status pending”: an ambiguous status that allowed
the US to symbolically uphold their “open-door” policy, while appearing to take
a harsher stand against “illegal” immigration. It was not until 1984 that the
Cubans of Mariel were finally allowed to regularize their status and apply for
permanent residency.

In the two decades since the Mariel boatlift, thousands of Cubans have
migrated to the US, but not all of them have been granted asylum. During the
1990s, the number of Cubans who emigrated clandestinely on rafts and small
boats (the so-called balseros) increased dramatically as a result of the worsening
economic conditions in Cuba. The fall of the former Soviet bloc countries caused
even greater shortages in basic consumer goods, and forced the Castro govern-
ment to become increasingly dependent on tourism and remittances to keep its
economy afloat. Cubans, desperate to improve their situation, took to the seas on
homemade rafts. The crisis peaked during the last two weeks of August 1994,
when the US Coast Guard rescued an average of 1,500 balseros each day.

Fearing another Mariel, the Clinton Administration announced a new policy:
Cubans detained at sea or who reached US shores would no longer be auto-
matically admitted into the US. When the announcement failed to discourage
the boat traffic, the administration negotiated another migration out of Cuba,
for humanitarian concerns, as well as to exert some control over who immigrated
to the United States. Under the terms of the 1994 accords with Cuba, the US
committed itself to accept a minimum of 20,000 new immigrants per year, and
in turn, the Castro government agreed to intercept any balseros, but without
reprisals against the would-be emigrants. However, the illegal boat traffic to
the United States has not altogether stopped. The long waiting lists at the US
Interests Section office mean that some of the more adventurous continue to
risk their lives sailing across the Florida straits. Chances of remaining in the US
increase if they reach US shores, especially since hearings and appeals can drag
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on for years. Journalists now euphemistically call the US’s policy towards Cuban refugees the “wet foot/dry foot” policy.

The Chileans: Challenging the Traditional Model

During the 1970s, thousands of Brazilians, Uruguayans, Argentinians, and Chileans took refuge in other countries to escape the authoritarian military governments in their homelands. Most of them did not fit the United States’ general profile of refugees because they were not fleeing a communist government; rather, they were suspected of being Marxist sympathizers, which did not attract the sympathy of Cold War politicians in the United States. Consequently, the numbers admitted to the US were comparatively smaller than for the Cubans.

Such was the case with the Chileans who fled their homeland after September 11, 1973, when General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende. The United States welcomed these political developments. Through Operation FUBELT, the United States had engaged in covert operations to try to prevent Allende’s election; and when they failed to do so, worked to undermine his government. In order to buttress Pinochet’s pro-US military government, US aid to Chile increased dramatically, from $10.1 million in 1973 to $177.3 million in 1975, despite overwhelming evidence of human rights abuses committed by the military.

Pinochet’s military government targeted Allende supporters. The more fortunate were simply fired from their jobs and publicly harassed; but thousands were imprisoned, raped and tortured, and in some cases, executed. Also targeted were the estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Latin Americans, mostly Brazilians, Argentinians, and Uruguayans, who had taken refuge in Chile during Allende’s brief government, fleeing their own rightist regimes. Thousands of people took refuge in foreign embassies in the capital city of Santiago, or fled to other countries. But even exile could not offer total protection; there were cases of Chilean refugees who were kidnapped in the countries where they had taken refuge, and returned to Chile for interrogation.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) tried to rescue the detained, negotiating with the Pinochet government to relocate them to other countries. Hoping to improve its international reputation and rid the country of dissidents, political prisoners, and troublemakers, the Pinochet government passed Decree #504 in 1975 that allowed sentences to be commuted if the prisoners were exiled to other nations. Dozens of European and Latin American countries assisted the UNHCR’s efforts, either through funding or agreeing to accommodate a share of the refugees. Some 30,000 Chilean refugees were resettled in Europe and Latin America by 1979.

According to most accounts, the United States delayed participating in the resettlement program for fear of alienating Pinochet’s government, which the United States considered a necessary ally in the Cold War. Congress was also
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wary of these pro-Allende refugees who they worried might be communists and pose a security threat. Early congressional bills to sponsor Chilean refugees, introduced by Rep. Robert Drinan and Sen. Edward Kennedy, failed to gain support in either house. However, the news media kept the human rights abuses in Chile on the front pages of US newspapers and this public pressure – as well as the pressure exerted by international organizations – forced the State and Justice Departments to act. In 1976 the United States enacted a limited parole program for the Chilean refugees. The United States agreed to accept political prisoners as long as they did not claim membership in the Communist Party. The Inter-Governmental Committee on European Migration (ICEM) acted as liaison between the prisoners and the US government, assisting them to fill out the necessary paperwork. The deliberation process took months and sometimes years: applicants were subjected to rigorous security screenings by US Embassy personnel; the INS had to locate a sponsor for each refugee and his or her family; and the Chilean government had to provide exit permits. Once approved, the Chileans received “parolee” status, but they received no assistance comparable to that offered by the Cuban Refugee Program. They had to sign a declaration of non-intervention in the political affairs of the United States, and had to agree to reimburse the US government for travel expenses once they became economically self-supporting. By 1977, only 1,100 had resettled in the United States.

The Central Americans: Using the Courts to Secure Protection

During the 1980s the United States became a reluctant host to refugees from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, who were fleeing the civil wars in their countries. Migration to the US was not a new phenomenon; Central Americans had traveled to the US as sojourners and immigrants since the nineteenth century, albeit in much smaller numbers, but their numbers increased exponentially because of the wars. The relatively open borders, the low cost of an overland journey, and the significantly greater stability and economic opportunity served as magnets drawing them to the United States. By 1987, over a million Central Americans were believed to have entered the United States illegally, and only a small fraction had received asylum.

Officials of the Reagan Administration argued that there was little need for Central Americans to travel all the way to the United States. The fact that so many chose to come to the US when there were ample opportunities for safe haven south of the US–Mexico border suggested to administration officials that these migrants were economically rather than politically motivated, and thus were not true refugees. However, to admit that the Salvadorsans and Guatemalans were refugees was to admit that the countries that the US was assisting with hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars were victimizing their own citizens.
Likewise, the administration’s assumption that the refugees’ needs could be satisfactorily met in other countries or in UNHCR camps was unrealistic. The criteria for asylum and safe haven varied across the region. The UNHCR estimated that they were able to assist less than 10 percent of all those they estimated to be displaced within the region. The proximity of the United States, then, and the opportunities available in this society encouraged thousands to risk it all and come to the US.

The majority of Central Americans did not qualify for asylum in the United States under the terms of the recently passed 1980 Refugee Act. Ironically, members of the Reagan and Bush Administrations clashed with UNHCR officials over this very definition. The UNHCR generally favored a more lenient response towards the so-called non-convention refugees: those who did not meet the strict definition of the term but who had fled their homes, crossed an international border, and were living in refugee-like conditions. UNHCR officials readily admitted that the 1967 Protocol no longer addressed the realities of today’s world. More realistic definitions were offered elsewhere (e.g., the Organization of African Unity and the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration). As early as May 1981 the UNHCR recommended that all Salvadorans who had left their country since the beginning of 1980 be considered bona fide refugees under a prima facie group determination because they had been displaced by political events and were likely to suffer if physically returned to their homeland. However, officials of the Reagan Administration advocated a tougher response. In a letter to the New York Times a spokesperson for the State Department’s political asylum division wrote:

It is not enough for the applicant to state that he faces the same conditions that every other citizen faces. [Under the terms of the 1980 Refugee Act we ask] Why are you different from everyone else in your country? How have you been singled out, threatened, imprisoned, tortured, harassed?

Thus, while in some countries refugee status was extended simply by membership in a particular group or “class” of people, in the United States during the 1980s the burden of proof was placed on the individual applicant. Asylum applicants had to offer evidence of persecution that was often impossible to secure or quantify. The Justice Department regularly rejected asylum petitions of individuals that UNHCR officials, church workers, and legal counsel commonly regarded – and referred to – as refugees. From 1983 to 1990, only 2.6 percent of Salvadoran asylum applicants were successful, and only 1.8 percent of Guatemalan applications for the same period were granted.

The Justice Department instructed the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and its Border Patrol to increase its surveillance of the US–Mexico border and expedite deportation of the undocumented. Of particular concern to the Justice Department were the “frivolous” petitions for asylum that bureaucratically tied up the courts. Bail bonds were gradually raised from $100 to as
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much as $7,500 per person in some INS districts to prevent a detainee’s release into society, where s/he might simply disappear.  

Detention centers along the US–Mexico border filled to capacity with the people the Border Patrol called the “OTMs” (“Other than Mexicans”). Immigration attorneys and representatives from religious and human rights groups reported a systematic violation of civil liberties on the part of INS officials. In some detention centers the list of abuses was considerable: women and children were sexually abused; private correspondence was photocopied for government prosecutors; money and property were stolen; phone calls were taped; refugees were denied access to translated legal forms and documents; and many were denied access to legal counsel. Central Americans were regularly tricked into signing deportation papers. One common tactic was to separate family members and tell one spouse that the other had already signed a request for “voluntary departure.” Some refugees were drugged with tranquilizers and then coerced into signing the I-274A form that waived their right to counsel and a deportation hearing, and then immediately scheduled for “voluntary” departure. And in particularly tragic cases, information about the deportees was sent to security forces in the homeland, leading to the detention, torture, and murder of some deportees.

State policies toward the Central American refugees inspired a staggering number of lawsuits during the 1980s and early 1990s. (It also inspired one of the most important acts of civil disobedience of the late twentieth century – the sanctuary movement, a grassroots resistance movement that protested US foreign policy through the harboring and transporting of refugees, in violation of immigration law.) Abuses at detention centers in Texas and California prompted several lawsuits against the INS in the 1980s, including Nuñez et al. v. Boldin et al.; El Rescate Legal Services, Inc. et al. v. Executive Office for Immigration Review et al.; and Orantes-Hernandez v. Smith. US judges hearing these cases ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, ordering the INS to inform detainees of their right to petition asylum, to meet with legal counsel, and to have their legal rights explained in Spanish and English. According to the courts, no one could be deported or coerced to sign voluntary departure forms without being informed of these rights. But despite these injunctions, over the next few years, civil liberties were repeatedly violated. None of these lawsuits halted the deportation of Central Americans; it just delayed the inevitable.

The decisions handed down in the various lawsuits against the INS did serve to buttress a larger class action lawsuit against the United States government in 1985 filed by 80 religious and refugee assistance groups, with the goal of securing asylum for Salvadorans and Guatemalans: the American Baptist Churches in the USA et al. v. Edwin Meese III and Alan Nelson (popularly known as the ABC lawsuit). In January 1991 a settlement agreement was reached: Salvadorans and Guatemalans still in the United States, whether previous petitioners for asylum or not, were entitled to a new adjudication process to be overseen by a newly trained corps of asylum officers; petitioners were entitled to work authorization...
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while they awaited a decision in their case; and asylum officers were not allowed to consider prior denial of asylum in their deliberations, nor the petitioner’s country of origin, nor the State Department’s opinions and recommendations, but were allowed to consider human rights reports from non-governmental agencies such as Amnesty International. The settlement agreement stipulated that

the fact that an individual is from a country whose government the United States supports or with which it has favorable relations is not relevant to the determination of whether an applicant for asylum had a well-founded fear of persecution. 32

The ABC settlement overturned more than 150,000 cases, barring the deportation of all Salvadorans present in the United States as of September 19, 1990 and all Guatemalans in the United States as of October 1, 1990, until their asylum claims were readjudicated.

As a parallel development, Congress passed the omnibus Immigration Act of 1990 that included the statutory basis for safe haven through a status called temporary protected status. Over 200,000 Salvadorans living in the US registered for TPS. 33 When their protected status was set to expire in June 1992, the Salvadorans became eligible for a new status, Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), which delayed deportation for one year. In 1993 DED was once again extended, first to December 1994 and then to March 1996. Under the terms of the ABC settlement, Salvadorans were eligible to apply for asylum once their DED status expired.

Through TPS, DED, and the new asylum adjudication process Salvadorans now had the vehicles through which to negotiate their legal stay in the United States—at least for a period of time, perhaps until conditions in their homeland improved, making it safe to return. For sanctuary workers, legal counsel, and all those involved in the protests of the 1980s, these developments were a significant victory. In 1997 Congress passed the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), which offered a suspension of deportation (and the opportunity for some to regularize their status) to Nicaraguans who could prove that they had been continuously present in the US as of December 1, 1995. Although the law primarily benefited Nicaraguans, Cubans, and nationals of the former Soviet bloc countries, Salvadorans and Guatemalans benefited to some extent as well: they qualified for “cancellation of removal” if they could prove seven years of continual residence in the US, good moral character, and that deportation would cause extreme hardship to oneself, or a spouse or child who is a US resident.

Latina/os and Refugee Policy in the Post-9/11 World

As a consequence of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US government reduced the worldwide admissions ceiling from 80,000 in 2001 to 70,000 in 2002, and most of that quota remained unfilled. Concerns over national security
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affected the number of refugee approvals and admissions. In 2002, for example, of the 89,726 applications for refugee status filed, only 18,652 were approved (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cuba were the two largest source countries). However, the number of asylum cases (petitions made within the US or at an entry point) increased by 4 percent to 63,400, with the largest number of claims by nationals of the People’s Republic of China, followed by Mexico and Colombia.

Given the linking of immigration control with national security, Latina/os who hope to secure asylum cannot afford to delay filing a petition. The legal process continues to be streamlined to expedite deportation without due process. The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) granted illegal aliens apprehended by authorities the right to an interview to determine if they had a “credible fear” of torture or persecution if returned to their homeland. However, after 2001 such rights were rapidly eroding in part because of concerns over national security. Border Patrol agents were given substantial leeway to decide whether a detainee had a legitimate fear meriting an asylum hearing, or should be expedited for deportation. And under the terms of IIRIRA, undocumented aliens could be barred from reentering the United States legally for 3–10 years, regardless of whether they had US-born family. These policy changes have had enormous consequences for Latina/o families across the United States, forcing long-term separation when a family member is deported. And in linking immigration policy to national security, communities become divided as Latina/o immigrants and long-term residents are pinned against each other over issues of citizenship and access to US institutions and resources. In 2006 the US Congress was debating an omnibus immigration bill which most certainly will include further modifications of refugee and asylum procedures.

Over the past sixty years, US refugee and asylum policy has tried to be fair, consistent, and humane, but has often failed to meet these goals. In the post-9/11 era, the challenge remains even more daunting. Latina/o studies scholarship can help reframe national debates about immigration, document the abuses of states, and ultimately provide a voice for the displaced and the excluded.

Notes


See White House Press release, February 3, 1962, in Papers of President Kennedy, President’s Office Files, Countries (Costa Rica-Cuba), Box 114a, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. The embargo was later tightened by the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996, and more recently, by the 2004 Bush Administration policies.


Until 1994, leaving Cuba without authorization brought a lengthy prison sentence.

On the 25th anniversary of the coup, the National Security Archive released declassified documents acquired through the Freedom of Information Act detailing the US’s role in “Project FUBELT.” See the National Security Archive webpage at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/.


According to declassified documents, Chilean refugees in Argentina were kidnapped in 1976 and returned to Chile for interrogation, torture, and execution. That same year, former Chilean ambassador to the US during the Allende government, Orlando Letelier, was assassinated in Washington, DC. See “Five Cubans and an American Figure in the Letelier Case,” *Miami Herald* (May 6, 1978): 11A; “A investigación aspecto chileno del caso Letelier,” *El Nuevo Herald* (September 24, 1990): 1A. See also Telegram from US Embassy in Buenos Aires to Secretary of State, June 1976, National Security Archive at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/.


Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, pp. 95–6.

Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, pp. 98–9; see also Eastmond, *The Dilemmas of Exile*, pp. 43–6.


Refugees or Economic Immigrants?


Speaking from San Salvador, then 27-year-old deportee from Los Angeles Weasel explains his situation this way:

I’ve got this document right here. It says my full name and it has a little box right here that’s checked and it says deportable under section blah blah blah. Removed from the States. Anyways the bottom line is that I’ve been banished from the US, you know, like they used to do in the medieval days, they used to banish “fools” from the kingdom . . . people who did something that was considered a threat to the crown (in my case society). Anyway, that’s how I felt. They kicked me out of society [the United States] and sent me into the jungle [El Salvador] to live alone in my own solitude.¹

But Weasel is far from alone. He is surrounded by “fools,” “homeboys” from “Elay” . . . “banished from the kingdom.” Indeed, El Salvador is now host to a new social formation built on this puzzling relationship between space and identity.² Deported Salvadoran immigrant gang youth – banished from the United States after spending the better part of their young lives in this country – are returned “home” to a place where, in their memory, they have never been. As Bulldog exclaimed five days after his rude return to El Salvador: “Shit, homes, I’ve never been here. I mean, I know I’m from here, homes, but I’ve never been here.” And then with disbelief, “You from here too?”

¹

²
Deported immigrant youth\textsuperscript{3} clearly pose a number of methodological and representational challenges to Latina/o studies. They elicit a whole set of research questions. For instance, how does an ethnographer work at the borders of Latina/o and Latin American studies? Where does one draw the boundaries around these ethnic and area studies so as to constitute a possible field? How does an ethnographer construct a research methodology adequate to the complexity of emergent cultural processes at this historical juncture in the long history of globalization? What is an inter-American ethnography? These are the questions that I would like to pursue in this essay. What follows is a brief retrospective of my experience as an ethnographer of transnational cultural flows between El Salvador and Los Angeles, my coming of age, if you will, in the midst of debates about ethnic and area studies as they relate to questions of how to conduct fieldwork in an era of global restructuring and transnational migration.

Globalization and transnationalism are both highly contentious terms and concepts. Yet together they are the main shifts marking off the present context of Latina/o and migration studies from previous concerns with the national concept as its foundational narrative (Flores 2003: 194), on the one hand, and linear assimilation narratives, on the other (Basch et al. 1994; Kearney 1995; Mahler 1998; Omi and Winant 1986; Poblete 2003; Rouse 1991). Anna Tsing (2000) has offered one of the most cogent critiques of the turn to the global, and the seduction of what she terms “global futurism.” She rightly argues that we should not accept globalization as a definitional characteristic of an era without examining and locating these global dreams and projects ethnographically. Exasperated with researchers’ quickness to adopt David Harvey’s (1989) metaphor of time-space compression and its attendant imagery of flows, circulation, and interconnection, she asks us to examine critically “how . . . we know the shape of time and space” (Tsing 2000: 341).

Ethnographers have been grappling with these “boundary problems” and with how to construct differently spatialized ethnographies since the late 1970s. It almost goes without saying, but bears repeating, that anthropological fieldwork has traditionally been understood as a “spatial practice of intensive dwelling” in one place (Clifford 1997). However, this bounded notion of the field has come under considerable pressure. Drawing upon de Certeau’s (1984) notion of “practiced space,” Clifford argues that there is nothing given about a “field,” and that the field must be worked and turned into a discrete social space by “embodied practices of interactive travel” (Clifford 1997: 186). Haraway (1991), who emphasizes shifting locations over bounded fields, asks us to develop new methods for building web-like interconnections between different social and cultural locations.

This essay then charts my own efforts to track the compression of time and space between the US and Central America on the ground, albeit the moving ground between the Americas. My own project is an attempt to perform and produce something of the effect of a politics of simultaneity of this particular...
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inter-Americanscape. To be sure, I set out to track this movement, and developed a research methodology based on following the multiple paths of circulation outlined by George Marcus, who urged us to “follow the people, the things, the narratives, and the conflicts” (Marcus 1995: 106–11), or what de Certeau (1984: 100) might term the “way” or “paths of operation.” But it was the uncanny coincidences, the unexpected (re)encounters and resonances across this expansive terrain that allowed the phenomenon to emerge from inside the story itself. Tracking along thus in the wake of Salvadoran transnational migration, El Salvador and Los Angeles became a dense intertextual field, a field of connection and contact.

That said, as will become clear, these “flows” are not unimpeded. Rather, they are characterized by a dialectic of mobility and immobility. Indeed, what I want to focus on in this essay is the “friction” in these transnational flows (Tsing 2005). As such, this essay examines a curious and troubling “nexus between migration and security” (Tirman 2004: 3) – the deportation of Salvadoran immigrant gang youth and young adults alongside the exportation of US zero tolerance gang abatement strategies to El Salvador. My own entry into what John Tirman terms the security-migration nexus or the securization of migration (2004: 3–10) emerges from the increasing interconnection between US criminal and immigration law as it impacts documented and undocumented Latina/o immigrant youth and young adults, that is the immigration consequences of criminal law – deportation.

In arguing that “organized violence and security cultures are also important facts of translocal [or transnational] life,” Jutta Weldes et al. have called for the inclusion of “security” within the extant mappings of Arjun Appadurai’s globalscapes of finance, ethnicity, technology, media, and ideas (Weldes et al. 1999: 8). I want here first to map, albeit somewhat schematically, elements of this securityscape, and to consider how that transnational space is produced along particular “tracks, grounds, scapes, and units of agency” (Tsing 2000: 337). I then consider the significance of this securityscape for Latina/o studies and its engagement with Latin American studies. I do so by drawing on some of the research I have conducted and continue to conduct with Homies Unidos, a transnational youth violence prevention project with programs in San Salvador and Los Angeles.

El Deportado

Each week, up to three US Marshall aircrafts fly into El Salvador’s national airport bearing planeloads of handcuffed deportees. Anywhere from two to six hundred Salvadorans are forcefully repatriated in this manner each month – among them gang youth. As I have described in detail elsewhere, the siphoning off of immigrant gang youth and young adults through incarceration followed by deportation has come to serve as a key management strategy for the North...
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(Zilberg 2004, 2007a). US zero tolerance gang abatement strategies combined with changes in immigration law as a result of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) have resulted in the automatic deportation to El Salvador of thousands of Salvadoran immigrant gang youth after they have served their prison terms. They include legal permanent residents, many of whom, like Weasel and Bulldog, have lived the better part of their lives in the US, and some of whom are deported for non-violent crimes.

The images of these deported gang youth walking the streets of El Salvador calling themselves “homies,” deported back to a place which in their memory they had never been, are the shock effects of nationalism as it combines with globalization. While the literal mobility of these subjects has been arrested, contained, and reversed, their (deportation) narratives leak beyond the bounds of the nation-state like no others. Indeed, San Salvador is now deeply linked to spaces inside Los Angeles. Take, for instance, Weasel, the deportee whose narrative opens this essay. On my first encounter with Weasel, his eyes lit up when I told him that I lived in Echo Park, his old stomping grounds. He joked about me being his homegirl, and from then on he always introduced me as “Elana, she’s from my ex-barrio.” We talked about the park where he used to hang out, and where I would walk every morning. When I returned to Los Angeles, the first time I walked along the gang-graffiti covered wall to Echo Park Lake, the park had become enlivened by Weasel’s stories and haunted by his absence. I felt this not just as time-warp but space-warp, much like the sensation of riding the bus through the streets of San Salvador with two deportees from 18th Street territory in Pico Union.

Their stories of the geography of their everyday lives in Los Angeles captured on my tape are filled with the booming sounds of street life in San Salvador. As they recount the genealogy of their criminalization as illegal immigrant, gang member, and then deportee, they guide me through the landmarks of Los Angeles’ built environment – Pico Union and Westlake in particular. Los Angeles’ urban landscape became saturated with the narratives of these people, who I had encountered in El Salvador, and – even more hauntingly – by those who had since died in the streets of San Salvador.

These narratives of forcible return do not simply function as residues of past lives. They do more than refer back to or recollect their barrios in Los Angeles. Banished though they may be from the US, these deported youth and young adults remain linked to that landscape through, among other things, ongoing ties with family – be they actual or fictive kin. Far beyond the literal return of the repressed – the frequent “illegal reentry” of those excluded from the nation – deportees remain an integral part of the “structure of feeling” (Williams 1992: 128–35), the barrio, of its internal relations and the everyday practices of its residents.

While the barrio has long been a key site for the articulation of Latina/o identity in the US (Dávila 2004; Leclerc et al. 1999; Phillips 1999; Romo 1983; Vigil 1988; Villa 2000), my work with deportees led me well beyond the traditional
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sites of ethnographic practice to the Pan American Highway, borders, shelters, and the airport. The deportee returns on a US Marshall flight with a provisional passport stamped “Deported.” Before being interviewed and fingerprinted by the National Civilian Police, he is ushered into a welcoming office for deportees.

Driving south from Texas to El Salvador, I stopped in Tapachula at the Mexican–Guatemala border. There I visited the Albergue Belén, a safe haven and shelter for Central Americans heading north for the United States, where I ran into a young Salvadoran man, whom I felt sure I had met before. As we spoke, it came to me. I had met him in the aforementioned Comalapa National Airport welcoming office for deportees in-bound from the US, just one month before. Yes, he corroborated, he had been deported and processed through that office about a month ago, and was now heading back north, hoping to make it back across the Mexico–US border. We wished him well on his northbound trip, and headed south for the Guatemala border.

These uncanny and coincidental meetings were not peculiar to me as a researcher. Indeed, the transnational reencounter scene is a central part of the narratives of even those seemingly most immobilized of subjects – deported gang youth. Take Homies Unidos’ then co-director, Weasel, and his account of his first visit to Homies Unidos’ San Salvador office some months after his deportation:

I came to the office one day and I see this guy walking down the street. And I said, “Damn, that guy looks familiar, ’ey.” I got closer and closer, and then I said, “Damn, I know that fool.” “Hey fool,” I say, “what’s up?” And it was Grumpy, and me and Grumpy had been locked up together, so that even, so that even made the bond stronger, ’coz I already know, you know, I know this guy from prison. So like we’re cool. I ran into other guys I knew from prison: Alex, Frank, and Rabbit. It was like I’d found my family.

This reencounter scene happens outside the formal arena and in the everyday. Bullet, another member of Homies Unidos, tells of encountering homeboys from LA long before his affiliation with the organization: “I was walking along and I heard this voice. It was like music to my ears – my homeboy from Los Angeles.”

But in addition to happy “family” reunions, these reencounter scenes have their dark and insidious side. It is not unusual to encounter a former enemy, who carries a vendetta from the streets of Los Angeles to those of San Salvador. Tattoos and other identifying marks can also lead to the reemergence of old conflicts, or precipitate new ones. As one deportee put it, “I thought I’d have some time to relax, but the war [that he thought he had left behind in the US] started up again [in El Salvador] two days after I got there.”

These stories of violent reencounter have a counterpart in the 1980s in Los Angeles, when political differences between the Salvadoran left and right traveled in the opposite direction. That genre of violence – the death threat – traveled from Central America to Los Angeles, where it was not uncommon for Salvadoran
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activists to receive similar warnings from which they had fled in El Salvador. Indeed, today’s securityscape has a powerful prehistory in the Cold War, when the US and El Salvador again shared discourses of illegality and counter-insurgency tactics. The School of the Americas (SOA) trained the Salvadoran military. Today, members of El Salvador’s National Civil Police are hosted by US police departments to share models and strategies for crime control. US gang abatement strategies find form in new Salvadoran law enforcement campaigns in the form of El Plan Mano Dura, now Súper Mano Dura. El Salvador is now proposed as the site for the new US International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA). Most recently, the US and El Salvador have been considering a transnational prison system where Salvadoran immigrants convicted in the US would serve their sentences in Salvadoran prisons. The attendant US funding and private investment could quite conceivably enable the globalization of the prison industrial complex.8

El Plan Súper Mano Dura is reproducing very similar belligerent strategies of abatement to US zero tolerance policing models,9 but with these important differences: deportation is not an option for the Salvadoran state, and the campaign is jointly enforced by the police and military. This remilitarization of the policing function in El Salvador is a troubling reversal of a key post-civil war reform, which was precisely the separation of those functions and institutions, and the creation of a civil police force.10 Over 30,000 youth accused of being gang members were arrested by these joint forces between July 2003 and July 2005 (Cruz and Carranza 2005: 25).

How are such strategies working out when deportation is not a viable arena for state action? Deportation (notwithstanding disappearance through incarceration and assassination) may not be an option for the state, but undocumented migration is still a possibility, albeit a perilous one, for gang-affected and affiliated youth. Many deportees who have attempted to build new lives for themselves in their strange but native countries are choosing to illegally reenter the US as their best available option, even though they risk reimprisonment in the US if caught.11 There are entire prisons, managed by private security corporations, devoted to housing deportees doing time for illegal reentry. Moreover, many youth are fleeing El Salvador for the first time to avoid forced recruitment into gangs and the heavy presence of the police and the military in their neighborhoods.

Might these gang members and unaffiliated youth, pushed out of El Salvador by the combined pressures of the gangs, the police, and the military, constitute a new class of refugee – many of them the children of civil war refugees? These “refugees” are a most curious emergent social formation and legal subject in California’s immigration courts. Immigration attorneys now file withholding from deportation and, where possible, political asylum claims for their clients on the premise that they have a well-founded fear of persecution from the Salvadoran state and from the gangs. This ironic twist at work in the emergence of deported gang members and those fleeing the combined pressure of the gangs and the state, as a new, albeit unlikely, class of refugee brings us back full circle to the 1980s and to the return of the repressed: the ongoing participation of the US in
the production of violence in El Salvador and of undocumented migration to the
US, this time through the simultaneous deportation of gang youth and exporta-
tion of its zero tolerance policing strategies.

**Inter-American Studies**

The securityscape, which emerges at the nexus between migration and security
policy between the US and El Salvador, provides powerful ethnographic evidence
in support of the relatively recent call to critically examine the relationship
between ethnic (Latina/o) and area (American and Latin American) studies. On
the one hand, it clearly demonstrates the need for multi-sited fieldwork, since
the complex flows and the multiple geopolitical scales of analysis at work in the
urban barrio make it impossible to engage with the cultural politics of one side of
this social field (Los Angeles) without simultaneously accounting for those at play
on the other side (San Salvador), and vice versa. On the other, it makes the case
for a dialogic mode of analysis in order to explore the shared or “contrapuntal”
histories (Said 1993: 66) of the Americas. After all, transnational youth gangs and
policing strategies reveal a structural interdependence and complicity in both
state policy and identity formation between the United States and El Salvador.

The need to cross geopolitical lines between the Americas to grasp the blurred
cultural zones that people inhabit has, of course, been the defining tenet and
contribution of borderlands theory and “its guiding metaphor,” *la frontera* (Flores
2003: 198). The case under consideration here suggests the need to extend the
analytical power of borderlands theory beyond the US–Mexico border region,
and to consider how *la frontera* extends beyond literal geopolitical boundaries
into immigrant barrios in Los Angeles or *barrios populares* (working-class
neighborhoods) elsewhere in Mexico and Central America.

Salvadoran gang youth point to yet another level of “representational ambiva-
lence” (Arias 2003: 185) between Latina/o and Latin American identity. In the
North–South relations under consideration here, deported Salvadoran immig-
rrant gang youth oscillate between “home” and “abroad,” where both home and
abroad are themselves unstable locations. At the same time, Salvadoran gang
youth who have never been to the United States construct their identities around
imagined urban geographies of cities like Los Angeles. As with Arturo Arias’s
“Central American-American” hybrid subject, the identity of the deported gang
member “cannot be designated univocally as either Latina/o or Latin American,
but – to draw on Juan Flores – speaks rather of life lived ‘off the hyphen’” (Arias
2003: 171), where the hyphen is a sign of both conjunction and disjunction.

Ironically, by constructing bridges between Latina/o and Latin American
studies, and by unsettling the boundaries of area studies, an inter-American
ethnography of Salvadoran transnational migration joins in Martí’s political project
to “make the Americas whole again” (Saldívar 1991: 5). Such a project, however,
is not merely “the belated expression of out-of-touch Bolivarian desires,” but is
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rather “one of the possible mappings or articulations demanded by already existing sociocultural processes” (Poblete 2003: xxii–xxiii). Moreover, while I invoke Martí, the inter-American scape I have drawn for you is hardly utopian. The transnational figure of the deportee and securityscape in which he is embedded push us beyond that now much maligned metaphor of mobility in globalization studies – flows – and its tendency to obscure, naturalize, harmonize, homogenize and so serve as, what Mary Louis Pratt (2004) calls, the official legitimizing language of globalization. Clearly, the deportee reveals that these flows are not unimpeded, but that globalization is better characterized, as Inda and Rosaldo (2002) have argued, by “complex mobilities and (uneven) interconnections.” Moreover, these “flows” are hardly inherently democratizing but are rather induced by nationalism and the entrenchment or policing of national boundaries when the deportee is forcibly repatriated after incarceration, or when Salvadoran youth are made refugees by the combined effects of gang and state violence in El Salvador.

But deportation works in the obverse direction, too. Much like neoliberal trade agreements and the material density of the commodityscapes that they generate, security policies also rest upon and provoke flows across borders. These securitiescapes, thought to entrench the nation-state and to arrest flows, also enable the globalization of violence – in this case through the formation of transnational gangs and the globalization of US zero tolerance policing strategies. In other words, securitiescapes not only constrain but also fuel mobility.

The inter-American travels of the deportee speak powerfully to the politics of the production of transnational space at the nexus of migration, violence, and security, and to the dialectic of mobility and immobility structuring that space. The study of the Salvadoran transnational gangs contributes, therefore, important new knowledge to critical ethnic and area studies, and to an emergent inter-American literature focused on meeting the methodological, representational, and political challenges posed by the contemporary global cultural economy, to and in which the US and El Salvador are inextricably linked and complicit.

Notes

1 This quote is excerpted from “Radio Diaries,” This American Life, National Public Radio (May 21, 1999). The show was produced by Joe Richman and narrated by José Huezo Soriano (AKA Weasel).

2 This phenomenon extends to several countries with diasporas in the US, including Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Belize, and South Korea, among others.

3 I use the terms “youth” to include young adults. While gang-affiliated Salvadoran immigrants can technically only be deported for criminal offenses committed as adults, that is to say at age 18 or above, the United Nations defines youth as those persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years inclusively.

4 Please note that I am here using the term “el deportado” to refer to deported gang-affiliated youth and young adults. I am further gendering the deportee male. I do so, not because all gang youth are male, but because during the period of my ethnographic study, the vast
majority of those gang-affiliated youth deported for criminal offenses were male. Clearly, there are many other categories of deportees.

5 For a more detailed treatment of these narratives, see Zilberg (2004).

6 For a more detailed account of this co-production of the Los Angeles and San Salvador built environment and of street violence, see Zilberg (2004).

7 “Illegal reentry” is the term used by the immigration and courts criminal. For a critique of state-centric notions of il/legality, see De Genova (2002) and Abraham and van Schendel (2005).

8 In this sense, the “gang crisis” becomes productive for the Salvadoran state, which once relied heavily on US military funding. Since El Salvador’s cooperation with the US War on Terror as well as a regional war on gangs (sic terrorists), El Salvador has topped the list of Latin American recipients of military aid, with almost $23 million since 2002 (Berrigan and Wingo 2005).

9 For a discussion of these belligerent strategies in relationship to Los Angeles Police Department’s Rampart’s CRASH scandal, see Zilberg (2002a, 2004, and 2007b).

10 The proposal to deploy the US military at the US–Mexico border is arguably a similar move.

11 Weasel, who was caught reentering through the San Ysidro crossing in 2004, is a case in point.

References


Tracking Salvadoran Transnationality


CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

From the Borderlands to the Transnational? Critiquing Empire in the Twenty-First Century

María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo

Chicano studies can largely be credited with pushing scholars to focus on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and for training our eyes on class, race, and gender conflict in this bi-national zone. The “new” borderlands history pushes the boundaries even further, emphasizing multi-country archival research, a focus on ethnic, gender, and labor history, a broad historical span from the pre-Columbian era through the present, and finally, and perhaps most importantly, attention to the stories that fit poorly into national narratives. For the “new” borderlands history to take the next step, we must broaden our horizons beyond the US–Mexico border region, and beyond a nation-center view of the world.

Elliott Young, unpublished essay (emphasis added)

Walter Benjamin wrote memorably in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.” Following Benjamin . . . if one seeks the futures of American studies, it may well involve, however delayed, partial, or allegorized, a tireless reckoning with America’s past – its past as empire, its international past.

Lisa Lowe (2002)

I begin this essay on Latina/o studies with these two quotations not simply for their content, but also for the tenor of each author’s observations. Elliott Young, the historian, nevertheless calls for a new border history that gazes ever forward, in search of scholarly paradigms to move us beyond the limitations of nations and national time. Meanwhile Lisa Lowe, the literary critic, calls for a future American studies that turns its gaze resolutely backward, in a reexamination of the United States’ imperial past, a reexamination that might help us to better critique the interminable national present. Surely, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina makes the importance of Lowe’s call painfully clear, as the United States’ past of racial exploitation and segregation vibrantly informs the present.
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Only by coming to terms with the country’s historic dependence on a racialized labor force, subject to extra-economic forms of coercion, can we fully analyze the meaning of the tens of thousands of impoverished blacks waiting at the Superdome, on rooftops and balconies, waiting to be counted as citizens while news images laid bare their disenfranchisement and the Bush Administration’s calculated indifference to it. And yet, even as the media focused our attention on the racialized structure of class hierarchy in this country, news anchors fully participated in the representational racism undergirding it. For how else to explain unsubstantiated rumors of widespread raping and killing (“looting”) throughout the city, which later proved to be completely unfounded, repeated as fact by grim-faced news anchors?

This demonization of black masculinity and sexuality is so ritualized in the national news media as to have become banal.

Meanwhile, the very scope of the tragedy made evident the inadequacy of the nation-state as a unit of analysis. The government of the “wealthiest nation on earth” was itself inadequate, incapable of behaving like a truly national government, inept at rescuing its own citizens. Unparalleled military power could not protect US borders from the resolutely global effects of global warming; an administration accustomed to deriding the United Nations was forced to accept relief aid from it. Moreover, even as the predominantly African American and impoverished white victims of Katrina suffered the catastrophic effects of racial and class violence in the local, state, and federal government’s failure to evacuate them before or too long after the hurricane, many rejected the internationally used term “refugee” to describe their condition. Rev. Jesse Jackson, NAACP president Bruce Gordon, and members of the Congressional Black Caucus all denounced the term as racist and as discounting blacks as citizens. Three major US papers (Washington Post, Miami Herald, and the Boston Globe) immediately banned the use of the term.

Yet, the very anxiety expressed over the use of the term belies its uncomfortable suitability, drawing our “attention,” as Young insists, “to the stories that fit poorly into national narratives.” A transnational ethnic studies scholarship would analyze this anxiety by elucidating the lack of US exceptionalism, as well as its integration into a world system. If the use of the term “refugee” was technically incorrect, substantively it hit the mark. The 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations defines a refugee as “a person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [sic] nationality.” Although the use of the term “refugee” has loosened in the last half century to include victims of natural disasters (and women!), the majority of victims of hurricane Katrina are undeniably US citizens who remain in their own country. Nevertheless, what were these victims fleeing when they finally fled New Orleans, if not the effect of generations of formalized racial and economic disenfranchisement? The abandonment of the predominantly poor and black population in New Orleans by the federal government after hurricane Katrina only made evident an active structure of political violence faced daily by
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racialized populations in the United States, not just in New Orleans, but in all major US cities. Indeed, this abandonment – the very poverty and racism it exposes – “fits poorly” into the narrative of the universal privilege of US citizenship. In the face of this, one can imagine that, in the hey day of black nationalism and black Marxism, black leaders might have articulated their demands for enfranchisement precisely by emphasizing the similarities between the treatment of African American hurricane victims and African political refugees. Instead, the objections expressed by African Americans toward the word “refugee,” as if it were a derogatory term, reveals a national minority finely attuned and attached to a global hierarchy of racial differentiation and nationalist privilege.

What hurricane Katrina made evident in August 2005 was that the periphery persists in the heart of the metropole. Unsurprisingly, it was Latina/o pundit Richard Rodriguez, a child of immigrants, who made this astute observation:

It is insufficient to say that the first world population got out of town and left New Orleans to become a third world capital, flooded and stinking and dangerous. It is truer to say we discovered that New Orleans, like any other city, had been in the third world all along. These faces of terror and want and despair and menace and stoicism are faces from the third world. They are American faces.” (Emphasis added)

In Rodriguez’s words a transnational Latina/o scholarship should hear the echo of the “internal colonialism” paradigm deployed by minority nationalist movements in the early 1970s with such political acracy and force to articulate their demands before the state. Indeed, this internal colonialism paradigm provided the theoretical impetus for Chicana/os to create Aztlan as mythical homeland and for Native Americans to reclaim Alcatraz as sacred ground.

A transnational Latina/o scholarship, however, would hear a call toward a post-nationalist analysis as well. For Rodriguez’s statement “that New Orleans, like any other city, had been in the third world all along” shakes the United States out of the false comfort of privileged dichotomies, out of its quaint exceptionalism, reinserting it into a continental history of labor flows.

New Orleans, like any other global city in the Americas, has always depended on peripheral populations whose racialization facilitates their hyper-exploitation. Indeed, New Orleans, like other global cities so dependent on undocumented immigrants, contained its very own international division of labor. Indeed, the Mexican and Honduran governments had to establish “mobile consulates” in the region, in the hopes of locating tens of thousands of undocumented Mexicans and Hondurans who worked in the oil, agricultural, and service industries in and around New Orleans, but who were too afraid of deportation procedures to seek government aid. According to a News Standard article from September 28, 2005, New Orleans was a veritable “Organization of American States”:

Hondurans and other Central American immigrants made up the bulk of the service sector working in casinos and restaurants in the New Orleans area, while Mexicans and other Latin American immigrants also constituted a large
agricultural workforce in the surrounding region. The immigrant population in areas affected by Katrina included the 150,000 Hondurans and 40,000 Mexicans along with about 9,600 Salvadorans, 10,000 Brazilians, and immigrants from Perú, Venezuela, Chile, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, and Costa Rica, according to numbers provided to the press by consulates.\(^7\)

Lowe and Young suggest a transnational American studies, and by extension ethnic studies, must flourish in a temporal paradox, one that seeks to move beyond the nation as the sole unit of analysis, even as it must revisit the past of the United States to continue to understand its trans(post?)national present. To step into this temporal paradox, I begin a deliberation of transnational Latina/o studies with a necessary diversion into hurricane Katrina. The racial logic revealed by hurricane Katrina returns us to an examination of the militant and filial origins of African American and Latina/o studies. (After all, behind every image of a lascivious black man poised to take advantage of an innocent’s sexuality at the Superdome lurks the image of a cunning “illegal” Latina/o immigrant poised to take advantage of hurricane relief at the Astrodome.)\(^8\) Over the last thirty years Africana and Latina/o studies have too often evolved into the guardians of \textit{petit} national cultures that serve to round-out the “American” student’s liberal education; however, Katrina reminds us that the radical student movements that led to the founding of these departments were deeply \textit{internationalist}, taking their cues from anti-colonial national liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Through walkouts and sit-ins, student coalitions in the 1970s demanded minority knowledge production within the university; but they also demanded a counter-hegemonic scholarship that would dedicate itself to the analysis of the structural inequalities impacting subaltern peoples beyond American borders. I suggest, then, that a call for a transnational Latina/o studies is but in part a return to these early militant origins of African American and ethnic studies: it is a call to the analysis of a past and present \textit{process} of racial and economic peripheralization of minority populations as it unfolds within – but always exceeds – the boundaries of the United States.

**Beyond Border Theory**

Border studies and border theory, which emerged with such scholarly and theoretical force in the 1980s, have been central in precipitating the move toward a transnational American studies focused on the empire-building origins of the US, as Young indicates. And yet, border theory and scholarship, precisely because of the binomial focus of their central trope, too often serve to reinforce a “nation within a nation” model of Latina/o studies: the focus of such scholarship is almost exclusively on the historical and cultural “contact zones” which occur along a border where two national cultures meet. Generally, the focus is the US–Mexico border, which produces a third space occupied by a hybridized, liminal...
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Chicana/o culture. On occasion, the focus may be third spaces like Borriqua New York or Little Havana in Miami. Thus, though there have been invaluable titles in the area of border studies, the question still pertains: what might a truly transnational Latina/o studies look like? How might it differ from the contemporary bi-national focus of Puerto Rican, Chicana/o, Cuban, or Dominican scholarship, and why might we desire such a reformulation of the field?

A transnational Latina/o studies is necessarily comparativist and deeply historicist. However, it is not simply the comparison of Latina/o cultural production by group “X” with the cultural production of Latin American country “Y,” as necessary and valuable as this kind of scholarship continues to be for our field more generally conceived. Rather, the call for a transnational Latina/o studies should be a call to Marxist analyses of the active production of “Latina/o” identities – identities produced as a consequence of the constantly renovating and ever-expanding force of US-based capitalism in its hegemonic arena, the Americas. It is a call for a totality critique that moves beyond the nation as a unit of analysis precisely because “Latina/o” identities begin their formation not in the US but in Latin America, as an effect of US intervention and compulsory neoliberalism. A transnational Latina/o studies, like transnational American studies, must proceed from an analysis that

- foregrounds United States nation-formation as an expansionist project in the Americas, with neocolonial interventions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that have generated wave after wave of “Latina/o” immigration;
- demonstrates the continued dependence of the US economy on Latin American markets, natural resources, and undocumented immigrants whose racially marked bodies are easily subjected to extra-economic forms of exploitation;
- compares the distinct racial legacies of the Anglo-American and Spanish colonial governmentality, and analyzes how Latina/o subjectivity is forged between these competing racial ideologies;
- analyzes the improvisation of resistive identity and cultural production in the wake of this history of racial migration.

When seen from this angle, African Americans and undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans, equally displaced by hurricane Katrina, are no longer populations vying for resources. Instead, these are populations sequentially racialized in the service of both an expanding rate of profit and the reproduction of US nationalism. An expanding rate of profit and nationalist sentiment inevitably pit racialized laboring populations against each other. Thus, a transnational Latina/o studies would provide a coherent analysis of the seemingly contradictory positions taken by the Bush Administration in the immediate aftermath of the storm. On one hand, President Bush, in his September 15 national address, attempted to re-suture the nation’s racial divide at the expense of the undocumented (and predominantly mestizo) immigrants. He assured an American public – reunited by the iterative gesture – that undocumented immigrants would be...
ineligible for temporary housing, subsidies, Social Security checks, or even the mail delivery promised to legal residents displaced by Katrina. Furthermore, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), going against standard procedure following natural disasters, “declined to promise that immigrants would not be placed in deportation proceedings if federal authorities find them through relief efforts.” On the other hand, Bush suspended the 1931 Bacon-Davis Act, which would have required federal contractors rebuilding the Gulf region to pay the local prevailing construction wage, and the DHS simultaneously suspended penalties imposed on employers who hire employees without documentation of citizenship, presumably to facilitate the hiring of US citizens who lost their documents in the storm. These apparently opposing policies actually work in concert. Bush reassured his right-wing constituencies and segments of the African American community by refusing aid to undocumented immigrants and threatening to deport them, while he shifted reconstruction jobs to those very undocumented immigrants by suspending labor standards. Unsurprisingly, undocumented immigrants were among the first employed in clean up after the disaster struck. The lack of relief services and threats of deportation serve to create docile brown bodies on site and desperate for work. Inevitably, these immigrants were represented as being at odds with blacks and poor whites, even by sympathetic allies. Gregory Rodríguez, a Latina/o political columnist, stated it thusly: “No matter what all the politicians and activists want, African Americans and impoverished white Cajuns will not be first in line to rebuild the Katrina-ravaged Gulf Coast and New Orleans. Latina/o immigrants, many of them undocumented, will.”

Hence, slavery, segregation, and continued racial violence against blacks can be placed on a continuum with the “voluntary” immigration generated by US-backed genocidal regimes in Central America during the 1980s; by the IMF’s structural adjustment policies imposed on South America during the same period; by the neoliberal reforms that have reformed away the livelihoods of Mexicans in the 1990s. I do not mean to suggest that a transnational Latina/o studies would indiscriminately equate the experience of US slavery and segregation with the experience of political exile and economically driven immigration produced as a violent consequence of US neocolonial and neoliberal policies in Latin America. However, such an approach would require us to place the slavery, genocide, and racial violence experienced inside US national boundaries within the larger context of US colonialism in the Americas, so that slavery and segregation are properly seen as the antecedents of the contemporary extra-economic forms of coercion (threatened deportation, debt peonage, repatriation of the costs of labor reproduction, vigilante violence) employed against undocumented immigrants from Latin America in the US today. Then and now, these extra-economic forms of coercion depend upon a racial economy of visibility and invisibility, or more accurately stated, the (in)visibility of racial labor. Then and now, such forms of subordination have produced cultures of resistance improvised precisely in that paradoxical space of (in)visibility, which at once
obliges the brown laborer to disappear into the landscape of restaurant kitchen or agricultural field or hurricane debris, but also summons him or her to loom large as threat to white nationalism and black equality. Between such untenable imperatives, Latina/o immigrants use subaltern knowledge, queered spaces, mutual aid networks, weapons of the weak, rhetorical inversion and perversion, parody and humor, to produce both spectacular and speculative identities that enable them to resist this subordination and, under optimal circumstances, transform what it means to be human in the United States.

A transnational approach to the study of US Latina/o populations corresponds to Lowe’s suggested approach to the study of Asian American populations:

(R)acialized immigration is indeed, along with American empire, part of a longer history of the development of modern American capitalism and racialized democracy, a longer, more notorious past in which a nation intersected over and over again with the international contexts of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Korea, or Vietnam. The material legacy of America’s imperial past is borne out in the “return” of immigrants to the imperial center, and whereas the past is never available to us whole and transparent it may often be read in the narratives, cultural practices, and locations of various immigrant formations. (Lowe 2002: 76)

Transnational Latina/o studies, like its Asian American counterpart, should provide such a critical consciousness of empire, a critical scholarship that is “tirelessly reckoning with America’s past,” but also with its present, through an examination of how displaced cultures of racialized immigrants trouble national narratives of democracy and equality. It requires less a fluency in multiple languages than a fluency in multiple Latin American national histories as they intersected with the United States’ bloodied quest for hegemony in the region.

“¡Oye ese, ya no estamos en Kanses!”

While Mexico may still predominate as country of origin for new Latina/o immigrants to the United States, the last thirty years of immigration from Central and South America have permanently decentered Chicana/o studies’ dominance in the field nationwide. Similarly, the sheer diversity of Latin Americans immigrating to the east coast of the United States (including unprecedented waves of Mexicans) has dethroned Puerto Rican studies from its position of prominence in the region. Demographically, the Latina/o population in this country demands different approaches from us in our teaching, in the organization of our departments and programs, and in our hiring plans. We can no longer think within a cumulative model of Latina/o studies, where Chicana/o or Puerto Rican history and culture form the core of the curriculum, with other Latina/o experiences seen as providing variety to these paradigmatic cases. These changing demographics require us to reconsider the pedagogical reasons for and implications
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of internationalizing our approach to the study of Latina/o culture, politics, and history.

“Traditionalists” in Latina/o studies often object to a transnational approach because, they argue, such a comparative approach would dilute the militant origins of the field in the Puerto Rican and Chicana/o brown power movements. Furthermore, as these militant movements emerged directly out of Chicana/os’ and Puertoriqueños’ unique experience with US colonialism (with direct territorial annexation) and racial segregation, such scholars insist this doubly privileges these two groups within Latina/o studies. Meanwhile, in departmental discussions of curricular innovation, traditional scholars object to organizing requirements according to transnational themes (rather than by national origin), though such an approach would demand a fully comparative model for the teaching of various Latina/o histories of immigration, racialization, and cultural production. Instead, traditionalist scholars insist that the history and cultures of Central/South America and other Hispanic Caribbean immigrants should be added to the field as sub-specialties (the cumulative model). The inevitable result of such recalcitrance to transforming our curriculum is the marginalization of these “other” Latina/o histories and cultures to the final two weeks of the syllabus. More problematically, it usually means prioritizing the hiring of scholars who work on Chicana/o and/or Puerto Rican history and culture first, before all other “subspecialists.” In these times of faculty downsizing, this all but guarantees that Latina/o studies scholars with other specialities are rarely hired in Latina/o studies programs and departments.

While one could attribute such hostility to intellectuals’ proclivity for reproducing ourselves, or to protectionism in a time of institutional scarcity, I think there is a more insidious reason for resisting the comparative approach demanded by transnational Latina/o studies. A conservative approach that insists on the centrality of Chicana/o or Puerto Rican studies to the field paradoxically reproduces the exceptionalism prevalent in traditional American studies. Mexico and Puerto Rico are indeed the only Latin American entities to have directly experienced US annexation. However, no Latin American country is left untouched by US intervention, and as such, there is no Latina/o immigrant population in the United States which does not bare the trace of this imperial legacy. Between 1898 and 1933, US governments landed marines in different Central American and Caribbean countries on a yearly basis, including a 20-year occupation of Nicaragua (1912–33), a 19-year occupation of Haiti (1914–34), and an 8-year occupation of the Dominican Republic. With notable exceptions, US administrations rarely deployed troops in the hemisphere after the mid-1930s. Nevertheless, CIA-directed covert operations to overthrow progressive Latin American governments or to repress progressive social movements occur on an almost yearly basis during the second half of the century. Such covert operations culminated in CIA-directed and US-financed counter-insurgency movements of the 1980s and 1990s and generated the latest waves of immigrants from the Central American countries. Neoliberal programs, which followed the success of these
covert operations, have only exacerbated immigration to the US. Thus, while Chicana/o and Puerto Rican experience with US colonialism is unique in form (direct annexation), it is by no means singular.

A transnational Latina/o curriculum, then, would be organized thematically rather than by national grouping, with requirements and introductory classes that emphasized a comparative approach to (1) the history of immigration from Latin America, (2) the experience of Latina/o immigrants with racial and sexual forms of governmentality in the US, and (3) the innovative and resistive cultural and political practices developed by Latinas/os in response to this context. One thematic rubric, then, could be “Neocolonialism, Globalization, Labor, and Migration,” in which the history of Latina/o immigration would be organized around flashpoints of US intervention and political upheaval in Latin America. Such a rubric would include not only history and political science classes on military and covert interventions, but also classes on economic penetration, from “Operation Boot Strap” in Puerto Rico to this latest round of interventionist, neoliberal policies and trade agreements with Mexico, Chile, and Central America.

A comparative introductory course modeled on this rubric, furthermore, would provide the context for teaching the very real ideological differences that divide our “Latina/o community.” Such an approach would highlight the political, racial, and class differences which divided immigrants in their countries of origin, and continue to divide them here.

A second thematic rubric would be “Comparative Racialization,” in which Spanish, Portuguese, and Anglo-American racialization projects in the Americas could be studied comparatively, given that Latina/o immigrants encounter a different racial order in the US than in their home country, and are often reracialized here. Such a class would critically examine the legal and cultural history of the rise of the political tropes of “racial democracy” in Brazil, racial caste in the Hispanic Caribbean, *mestizaje* in Mexico, Guatemala, and the Andean countries, and “white supremacy” in the United States. It would enable us to better understand the racial divisions within Latina/o communities, but also the divisions between Latinas/os as a political grouping and other minorities. Because this rubric could encompass comparative history classes on, for example, racial enfranchisement in the US, Mexico, and Brazil, it would make evident how “underdeveloped” and “premodern” the United States was in extending its constitutional guarantees of liberty and equality for all when compared with Latin America.

Another rubric would have to be “Latina/o Gender and Sexuality,” which again would examine these categories in a comparative framework. Latinas/os are often stigmatized by commonly accepted stereotypes about our “machista” culture, with its oppressive options for females and gays, so that immigration to the US is often figured as liberation. But how exactly is sexuality and gender lived in different parts of Latin America? What is the gendered division of labor like in urban cultures in Latin America, as opposed to within rural and indigenous communities? What are the legal guarantees granted to men and women on the
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basis of their gender and sexual orientation in Latin American countries versus in the US? What does it mean to be “gay” in Mexico City, in Managua, in New York? Courses organized under this rubric would critically examine categories of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and homosexuality as they are lived across the cultures of origins and the US, challenging “liberation” myths around migration to the US when necessary. Indeed, classes in the rubric would also examine how sexuality and gender categories develop in tandem with racial categories, in Latin America and in the US. Requirements that included courses in such a rubric would finally place the study of gender and sexuality on an equal footing with race and labor in Latina/o studies.

The final rubric I would suggest concerns cultural production. Though this would clearly have overlap with the other three, a “Latina/o Aesthetics” rubric would provide a space for the comparison of Latina/o aesthetic practices as a response to the experience of migration to the US. On the one hand, such courses would consider the possible artistic origins of aesthetic practices in Latin America, tracing connections, disjunctures, and exchanges between Latina/o and Latin American artists. On the other, these courses could critically interrogate the very notion of “Latina/o” art: what artistic concerns and practices unify Latina/o aesthetics across generation and across different national origins? Alternately, what are the differences registered among Latina/o groups, and how might different aesthetic practices be related to the different immigrant experiences with US imperial politics and racial practices? Such a course would critically examine and compare Latina/o aesthetics while highlighting our common and paradoxical experience with US colonialism abroad and racial citizenship at home. This is a transnational approach to teaching Latina/o studies which loses none of its critical edge, and which is true to the militant, counter-hegemonic origins of our field.

I would like to end my plea for a transnational and comparative model of Latina/o studies by underscoring what it is not. While I firmly believe that our field needs to move towards a transnational approach in order to confront the challenges of US empire in the twenty-first century, I do not mean to frame this plea as an “either/or” choice. In other words, a transnational approach would not require that each and every Latina/o scholar change his or her research to a transnational project. Clearly, projects which focus on the experiences of particular Latina/o immigrant communities – their labor histories, their artistic practices, etc. – will always be essential to the field as a whole. Similarly, a thematic and comparative organization of the requirements for a Latina/o studies major or minor would not preclude classes with much more particular focus. Nevertheless transnational Latina/o studies does require that some of us start promoting and directing comparative dissertation projects among some of our graduate students. I am suggesting a paradigm shift, one that would permanently decenter the petit nationalisms that still dominate our field. However, such a paradigm shift is just that, a decentering rather than a dismissal or a disparagement. What a transnational Latina/o studies would do would be to put comparison and the critique
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of US empire at the center of our field, because we’re not in Kansas anymore. Or more precisely stated, Kansas, like New Orleans, is no longer Kansas. Like the rest of the country, its major cities are an “Organization of American States” in miniature. Chickens do like to come home to roost.

Notes

3 From the Newshour with Jim Lehrer webpage, Richard Rodriguez link (September 6, 2005), at: www.pbs.org/newshour/essays/july-dec05/rodriguez_9-06.html.
6 These immigrants’ fears were well founded, as deportation proceedings were begun against five Mexicans who did report to aid centers in Texas and West Virginia. See Kari Lyndersen, “Some Immigrants Suffer Doubly After Hurricane Katrina” (September 28, 2005), at: www.newstandardnews.net/content/?action=show_item&itemid=2410.
9 Kari Lyndersen, “Some Immigrants Suffer Doubly After Hurricane Katrina” (September 28, 2005), at: www.newstandardnews.net/content/?action=show_item&itemid=2410.
12 These two projects converge in the area affected by Katrina, as Vietnamese and Mexican immigrants together made up fully one quarter of the foreign-born in the affected region.

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