

The Latino Imaginary: Dimensions of Community and Identity

Hispanics? Latinos?

What do we call them? What do they want to be called?

What do they call themselves?

What do they call us? What do we want to be called?

What do we call ourselves?

What difference does it make? We all know who we're talking about. You know, Spanish people.

You mean from Spain?

No, you know, Spanish-speaking people.

You mean they don't speak English?

Yeah, they do, some of them anyway, but, you know, they have Spanish names, they're from Spanish families.

So they *are* from Spain.

No, they're Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, you know, like that.

So people in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other Latin American countries are Hispanics or Latinos?

No, I mean here, in the United States.

Ah, so that's what we're talking about: people from Latin America, or of Latin American background, living in the United States.

Right, just what I said!

Where I come from, in New Mexico, nobody uses Latino, most people never even heard the term. We're Mexicanos, Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, Raza, even Hispanic, but never Latino. Anyone who comes around talking about Latino this and Latino that is obviously an outsider, and is most likely trying to push something.

Hispanic? For me, a Hispanic is basically a sell-out, *un vendido*. Anyone who calls himself Hispanic, or refers to our community as Hispanic, just wants to be an American and forget about our roots.

Bits of conversation like these point up the range of contention over the choice of words to name a people, a culture, a community. Behind the war of words, of course, there lurks the real battle, which has to do with attitudes, interpretations, and positions. In the dismissive indifference of many Americans there is often that undertone of annoyance which, when probed a little further, only turns out to be a shield against other, submerged emotions like ignorance and fear. The gaps among Latinos or Hispanics themselves can be as polarized as they appear here, with one usage thoroughly discrediting the other. But usually the options are more flexible, operational, and mediated by a whole span of qualifying terms, tones, and situations. And over against those who use the words at all, there are many Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Cubans, and Dominicans, who have no use for any such catch-all phrases and would rather stick to distinct national designations.¹

Yet this disparity over nomenclature, sharp as it is in the case of Latinos, should not be mistaken for a total lack of consensus or collective identity, nor as proof that any identification of the group or "community" is no more than a label imposed from outside, and above. Regardless of what anyone chooses to name it, the Latino or Hispanic community exists because for this whole stretch of history, and multiplying geometrically the closer we approach the present, people have moved from Latin America to the United States. Along with their increase in numbers there has also been an intensification of their impact, real and potential, on the doings-and, yes, the destiny of this country.

It is becoming clear that any discussion of the "American community" must be inclusive of Latinos and cognizant of the existence of a "Latino community" intrinsic to any historical discourse about U.S. culture. The real challenge, though, is that the Latino presence makes it necessary to recognize that the very meaning of the word, the concept "community" itself, is relative according to the perspective or position of the group in question: there is both a "Latino community" and a "community" in the Latino sense of the word.

"Comunidad," "común," "unidad": the Spanish word, even more clearly than the English, calls to mind two of the key terms in the conceptualization of this notoriously elusive idea. What do we have in "common," and what "unites" us, what are our commonalities and what makes for our unity? It is important to note that though the two terms point in the same direction they are not synonymous, and their apparent coupling in the same word, "comunidad," is not a redundancy. For while "común" refers to sharing those aspects in the cultures of the various constitutive groups that overlap, the sense of "unidad" is that which binds the groups above and beyond the diverse particular commonalities. The point I am making with this rather willful deconstruction is,

once again, that the Latino "experience," the group's demonstrable reality and existence, includes but is not co-terminous with its self-consciousness: "común" stands for the community in itself, while "unidad" refers to the community for itself, the way that it thinks, conceives of, imagines itself.

The "Latino community" is an "imagined community"—to summon Benedict Anderson's well-worn though useful phrase—a quintessential present-day example of a social group etched and composed out of a larger, impinging geopolitical landscape.² The role of the social imagination and the imaginary in the self-conception of nationally, ethnically, and "racially" kindred groups is of course central, but must always be assessed with a view toward how they are being imagined, from the "outside," and to what ends and outcomes. Distinguishing between interior and exterior perspectives is thus a necessary step, and given that in the case of Latinos the outside representation is the dominant one, any instance of cultural expression by Latinos themselves may serve as a healthy corrective to the ceaseless barrage of stereotypes that go to define what is "Latino" in the public mind.

But the marking off of "us" and "them," though the foundational exercise in "imagining" communities, has its own limits, as it becomes evident that there is as much blurring involved as clear and meaningful bounding. Vexing questions like who is Latino and who is not, and what kind of Latinos/as we are talking about, quickly press in on any too facile dichotomy. Beyond the issue of names and labels, and even who is using them, there are differing levels or modes of meaning simultaneously at work in the very act of apprehending and conceptualizing the "community" in question. "Latino" or "Hispanic" not only mean different things to different people; they also "mean" in different ways and refer to different dimensions of collective social experience.

I would suggest that by distinguishing between a *demographic*, an *analytical*, and an *imaginary* approach to Latino unity and diversity it is possible effectively to complicate and deepen our understanding of cultural expression, identity, and politics without becoming paralyzed by the sheer complexity and contradictoriness of it all. Whether Latinos or Hispanics are thought of as a numbered aggregate of people, an analytically differentiated set of constituent groups, or a historically imagined cultural "community" is at the core of ongoing debates and confusions.³ Not that these diverse approaches are mutually exclusive, or that they are to be considered in any mechanically sequential or hierarchical way. On the contrary, as I seek to describe them it will be obvious that all three are equally necessary, and that they are complementary; they are really different emphases rather than discrete forms of explanation. But scrutinizing them in hypothetical isolation not only helps understand their interrelation, but may also enhance our analysis and appreciation of the images and voices of Latino art.⁴

The demographic conception of Latinos, or of a "Latino community," refers to an aggregate of people whose existence is established on the basis of numerical presence: count them, therefore they exist. Here Latinos—or, more commonly at this level, Hispanics—comprise not so much a community as a "population," a quantifiable slice of the social whole. Shallow though such a means of identification may seem, it is nevertheless the dominant one, serving as it does both government bureaucracies and corporate researchers in setting public taste and policy. This definition of the Hispanic community by official measurement is of course inherently instrumental, since the immediate goal is really to identify, not so much social groups or lines of cultural diversity, but voting blocs and consumer markets. From this perspective, Latinos appear as a homogeneous, passive mass, a "target" public, with any concern for internal differentiation or possible social agency itself geared toward those same incremental goals of electoral or commercial utility.⁵

But it is not only campaign managers and ad writers for whom Latinos are, first of all, numbers. The labels and tallies they arrive at for their convenience—be it Hispanic or Latino, at whatever percentile—are made visible, credible, "real," by means of a whole sensorium of images, sounds, and smells. The demographic label thus aims not only to "buy" the Hispanic package but to "sell" it; it "targets" not only potential customers but merchandise, or even movers of merchandise. Whatever the particular purpose, though, the means and result are the same—stereotypes: distorted, usually offensive, and in any case artificial, portrayals of Latino people.⁶ And these are the only images of Latinos that most people in the United States, and around the world, are ever exposed to, which makes it difficult to test their accuracy. It is important to recognize them as products not just of opportunist politicians or greedy salesmen but of the demographic mentality itself. Numbers call forth labels, which in turn engender stereotypes. According to the same logic, holding economic and political power relies on the work of both the census-taker and the cameraman.

The process of adding up is accompanied by the need to break down, to identify not the sum total but the constituent parts. The analytical approach—the business, above all, of social scientists—is bent on de-aggregation; it presumes to move closer to Latino "reality" by recognizing and tabulating the evident diversity of Latino groups and experiences. Such varying factors as country of origin, time in the United States (generation), region or place of settlement, occupation, sex, and race move into focus as the only meaningful

units or angles of analysis with any cohesion among Latinos referred to only in the plural: typically, there are only Latino "populations," groups, or at best "communities."

This analytical account of Latino multiplicity is indeed often helpful in counteracting stereotypes and monolithic categories, but it is still close kin to the demographic approach. Even the census evidences an increasing official need to break the composite down, with "Hispanics" now grouped into Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban-origin, Central and South American origin, and "Other Hispanic." (It would be interesting to determine how many in the latter category, which numbers more than any but the first two, are Dominicans, and why they don't yet warrant their own label.) Commercially geared demographics are even further along in their analytical enterprise, having persuasively charted both a "pan-Hispanic" as well as regionally differentiated Los Angeles, Miami, and New York-centered markets.

To this extent, and in most social scientific "studies," the pluralizing "analysis" of Latino reality is still dealing with a community "in itself," constructed in terms of relatively inert categories with their appropriate labels and stereotypical representations.

Yet Latinos are not just passive objects in this analyzing process, and do not tend to sidestep the task of "telling Hispanics apart." Consciously and intuitively, personally and collectively, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, Dominicans, and each of the other groups project their own respective national backgrounds as a first and primary line of identity and on that basis, fully mindful of differences, distances, and particularities, negotiate their relation to some more embracing "Latino" or "Hispanic" composite. Here the force of analysis, rather than an extension of demographic aggregation and labeling, stands in direct opposition to it, an instinctive reaction against instrumental measuring and its pernicious consequences. Of course there are interests involved here too, but in this case they are the interests of the "object" of analysis itself, the Latino peoples and communities.

From a Latino perspective, analysis is guided above all by lived experience and historical memory, factors which tend to be relegated by the dominant approach as either inaccessible or inconsequential. Rather than as slices or cross-sections, the various groups and their association are seen in dynamic, relational terms, with traditions and continuities weighing off subtly against changes and re-configurations. Differences are drawn among and within the groups not so as to divide or categorize for the sake of more efficient manipulation, but to ensure that social identities, actions, and alliances are adequately grounded in the specific historical experiences and cultural practices that people recognize as their own.

It is this critical, historically based analysis of diverse and changing Latino realities that underlies and sustains the Latino "imaginary," as I call it, another notion of pan-group aggregation that is too often and too easily confused with the official, demographic version. Not that calculation is itself foreign to an "imagined" Latino community; in fact it is from this perspective that the very act and the authority of counting and measuring become issues of vital social contestation. The "imaginary" in this sense does not signify the "not real," some make-believe realm oblivious to the facts, but a projection beyond the "real" as the immediately present and rationally discernible. It is the "community" represented "for itself," a unity fashioned creatively on the basis of shared memory and desire, congruent histories and meshing utopias.

The Latino historical imaginary refers, first of all, to home countries in Latin America, the landscapes, lifeways, and social struggles familiar, if not from personal experience, at least to one's family and people, and in any case indispensable to Latinos in situating themselves in U.S. society. Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba are very different points of imaginative reference, to be sure, and again, it is always through their particular national optics that Latinos tend to envision some generic Latin America or Latino "We." But the features of José Martí's "nuestra América" do stand out in the Latino historical unconscious in that long narrative of Spanish and North American colonial conquest, the enslavement and subjugation of indigenous and African peoples, the troubled consolidation of nations under the thumb of international power, and the constant migratory movement of peoples, cultures, and things which has been attendant to all aspects of the Latino saga. For Latinos in the United States the passage to, and from, "el Norte" assumes such prominence in the social imaginary that migration is often confounded with life itself, and any fixity of the referential homeland gives way to an image of departure and arrival, the abandoned and the re-encountered.

This nomadic, migratory dimension of the Latino imaginary is anchored in the historical reasons for coming here, and in the placement assigned Latinos in U.S. society. Unlike earlier waves of European immigrants, Latinos move to this country as a direct result of the economic and political relationship of their homelands, and home region, to the United States. However much Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico may differ in status and social arrangement—and if we add the Dominican Republic and Colombia the range could hardly be wider in present-day geopolitics—huge portions of their respective populations have come to live in the United States because of the gravitational pull of metropolitan power and dependency at work in each and all of their histories. Since World War II, its economy on a course of shrinkage and transition rather than unbridled expansion, the United States has been tapping its colonial reserves

to fill in its lower ranks, and its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors have proved to be the closest and most abundant sources at hand.

Colonial relations of hemispheric inequality underlie not only the historical logic of Latino migration, but also the position and conditions of Latinos here in this society. Differential treatment is of course rampant, as is most dramatically evident these days in the contrasting fates of Cubans and Haitians arriving on the same rafts from their beleaguered home islands. And today even many Cuban-Americans, recent arrivals and long-standing citizens, are finding the red carpets and gold-paved streets mythical at best, and increasing numbers are coming to resent being cited as the exception to the rule of Latino disadvantage. For the Latino imaginary, even when the relatively "privileged" Cubanos are reckoned in, rests on the recognition of ongoing oppression and discrimination, racism and exploitation, closed doors and patrolled borders. Whether sanguine or enraged, this recognition structures the negotiated relations among Latinos, between Latinos and the dominant culture, and with other groups such as African Americans and Native Americans.

Memory fuels desire; the past as imagined from a Latino perspective awakens an anticipatory sense of what is, or might be, in store. The alarmist hysteria over the prospect of "America's fastest-growing minority" overrunning the society is directed not only at Latino people themselves, but at the ground shift, however imaginary, in power relations implied in that new calculus. For the desire that these demographic trends awaken in Latinos is directed first of all toward recognition and justice in this society, but wider, hemispheric changes always figure somewhere on the agenda. The Latino imaginary infuses the clamor for civil rights with a claim to sovereignty on an international scale; retribution involves reversing the history of conquest and subordination, including its inherent migratory imperative. A full century after its initial pronouncement, Martí's profile of "nuestra América" still looms like a grid over the map of the entire continent, with the northern co-optation of the name America demanding special scrutiny and revision.

But Latino memory and desire, though positioned as a challenge to prevailing structures of power, are not just reactive. The imaginary articulates more than a reflexive response to negative conditions and unfavorably weighted relations which, though oppositional, is as a response still ultimately mimetic and confined to extrinsically set terms. It is important to recognize that the Latino imaginary, like that of other oppressed groups, harbors the elements of an alternative ethos, an ensemble of cultural values and practices created in its own right and to its own ends. Latinos listen to their own kind of music, eat their own kind of food, dream their dreams, and snap their photos not just to express their difference from, or opposition to, the way the "gringos" do it. These choices and preferences, though arrived at under circumstances of dependency and imposition, also attest to a deep sense of autonomy.

and self-referentiality. Latino identity is imagined not as the negation of the non-Latino, but as the affirmation of cultural and social realities and possibilities inscribed in their own human trajectory.

The conditions for the emergence of a Latino cultural ethos were set around mid-century, as it began to become clear that these "new immigrants" filing in from the southern backyard constituted a different kind of social presence than that constituted by European arrivals of earlier years. Of course the histories of each of the major U.S. Latino groups extend much further back than that: Cubans and Puerto Ricans to the later nineteenth century, when colonies of artisans and political exiles formed in New York and Florida, while today's "Chicanos" were "here" all along, for centuries before the fateful year 1848 when the northern third of their nation was rudely moved in on and annexed by the bearers of Manifest Destiny. In fact, in the long historical view the literary and cultural presence of Spanish-speaking people in the territory now called the United States actually precedes that of the English. And if we add to that the indigenous, "Native American" perspective of "nuestra América," a full-scale revision, or inversion, of the national history results, with the supposed "core," Anglo-Saxon culture appearing as the real intruder, the original illegal alien.

It is a serious fallacy, therefore, to think of Latinos in the United States as "recent arrivals." But despite their long-standing, constitutive role in North American history, sheer demographic growth and diversification point to a markedly new structural positioning and cultural dynamic for Latinos in the second half of the twentieth century. Now more than ever, in the present, "postcolonial" era, Latinos are here as colonial migrants, whose very locations and movements are defined by the status of their "home" countries within the system of transnational economic power. Rather than an ethnic minority or immigrant group, those trusty old concepts of cultural pluralism, Latinos may now be more accurately described as a diasporic community or, more suggestively, a "world tribe." But the term I like best to characterize the social and cultural space occupied by Latinos is "delocalized transnation," of whom it is also said that they "become doubly loyal to their nations of origin and thus ambivalent about their loyalties to America."⁷

Social consciousness and cultural expression of this new geopolitical reality burst out in the late 1960s. Inspired by the Civil Rights movement and the Cuban Revolution, countless movements, causes, and organizations rallied thousands of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to the cries of "¡Viva la Raza!" and "¡Despierta Boricua!" The political momentum of the Latino

imaginary was set in those spirited movements, and found vibrant artistic expression in such diverse forms as wall murals, bilingual poetry and street theater, and hybrid music and dance styles like salsa and Latin soul, Joe Bataan and Santana. *Talleres* and *conjuntos*, readings and *actos* proliferated, lending voice and vision to the fervent political struggles of Latino and Latin American peoples.

By our time, in the 1990s, that heyday is long past, no longer even a living memory for young Latinos. But the Brown Berets and the Young Lords Party, the Chicano Moratorium and the Lincoln Hospital takeover are still an inspiration, a model of militancy and righteous defiance for the present generation of Latinos of all nationalities as they sharpen their social and political awareness. For although the immediacy, intensity, and cultural effervescence has no doubt waned in the intervening decades, Latinos in the United States have just as assuredly continued to grow as a social movement to be reckoned with, nationally and internationally, in the years ahead. This is true demographically in the striking (for some startling) multiplication in their numbers, and analytically in the equally striking diversification of their places of origin and settlement, and as a more differentiated site of intersecting social identities, especially along sexual, racial, and class lines.

But the persistence and expansion of the Latino social movements are most prominent as a cultural imaginary, a still-emergent space or "community" of memory and desire. In the present generation Latino youth from all backgrounds played a formative role in the creation of hip-hop, and its inflection toward Latino expression and experience; though not explicitly political in intention, the Latino contribution to contemporary popular music, dance, performance, and visual imaging has accompanied important signs of social organization and self-identification among young Latinos in many parts of the country. In the case of the "casitas" in the New York barrios—another favorite example from recent Latino experience—entire neighborhoods across generational and many other lines are drawn together by way of sharing in the enactment of collective cultural memory.⁸

Hispanic? Latino? Settling on a name never comes easy, and in the case of an embracing term for Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Colombians, Salvadorans, Panamanians, and a dozen other Latin American peoples in the United States, consensus does not seem to be near at hand. But the search for a name, more than an act of classification, is actually a process of social imagination. And in that sense the search for Latino identity and community, the ongoing creation of a Latino imaginary, is also a search for a new map, a new ethos, a new *América*.

Notes

The opening citations are slightly dramatized renderings of statements I have heard in the course of conversations or interviews or in newspaper accounts. Examples of the abundant published discussion of the terms Hispanic and Latino may be found in Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995); Earl Shorris, *Latinos: A Biography of the People* (New York: Norton, 1992); and *Latin American Perspectives* 19: 4 (Fall 1992). See also my essay "Pan-Latino/Trans-Latino: Puerto Ricans in the 'New Nueva York,'" *Centro Journal* (1996), xxxx.

1. Documentation of this widespread preference for national designations may be found in Rodolfo O. de la Garza et al., "Latino National Political Survey," as published in *Latino Voices* (Boulder: Westview, 1992). For a response see Luis Fraga et al., *Still Looking for America: Beyond the Latino National Political Survey* (Stanford Center for Chicano Research, 1994).
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
3. The range of theoretical accents from strictly quantitative to comparative to ideological is evident in the growing published literature on "Hispanics" or "Latinos," as cited in note 2 above. See in addition writings like Marta Tienda and Vilma Ortiz, "Hispanicity and the 1980 Census," *Social Science Quarterly* 67 (1986): 3-20; Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995); Félix Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985); Rebecca Morales and Frank Bonilla, eds., *Latinos in a Changing U.S. Economy* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993).
4. The present essay was originally intended as a general introduction to the projected catalogue of "Latino Voices," the first international festival of Latino photography, which opened in Houston in November, 1994. The idea of conceptualizing and circumscribing a "Latino imaginary" arose while pre-viewing slides of images by Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban photographers included in that historic exhibition and figuring out how to present their theoretical and cultural significance to a broad United States audience of the 1990s. The catalogue has not yet materialized, but I have presented the paper in a variety of settings across the country, incorporating insights as I went along.
5. The most extended discussion of these instrumental uses of the "Hispanic" label may be found in Oboler, op. cit., note 2 above, though I find the exchange between Fernando Treviño and David Hayes-Bautista in the 1987 *American Journal of Public Health* of interest as well.
6. For examples of "Hispanics" in advertisements and other commercial uses, see Flores and George Yúdice, "Living Borders/Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation," *Social Text* 24 (1990): 57-84.
7. Arjun Appadurai, "Patriotism and Its Futures," *Public Culture* 5 (Spring 1993): 411-29, 424.
8. On Latino rap, see my essays "Puerto Rican and Proud, Boyee!: Rap, Roots and

Amnesia," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1995), 89-98. For an interpretation of the casita phenomenon, see my "Salvación Casita: Puerto Rican Performance and Vernacular Architecture in the South Bronx," in *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality*, ed. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas (Durham: Duke, 1994), 121-36.