

AZTLAN

A JOURNAL OF CHICANO STUDIES

VOLUME 31
NUMBER TWO
FALL 2006



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Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies (ISSN: 0005-2604) is published twice a year, in spring and fall, by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press.

Microform is available from ProQuest at Proquest.com. Distribution to bookstores is available through Small Press Distributors at spdbooks.com and Baker & Taylor at btol.com.

Annual subscription rates in the United States, Canada, and Mexico are \$30.00 per year for individuals and \$195.00 per year for institutions. For all other countries, the rates are \$40.00 per year for individuals and \$195.00 per year for institutions. Send a check, draft, or money order in U.S. funds, payable to the "Regents of the University of California."

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Theses on the Latino Bloc

A Critical Perspective

Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita

ABSTRACT: Increasing anxieties about the growing Latina/o population in the United States have fueled virulent xenophobia toward immigrants. This essay proposes the need to forge strategic political alliances by constructing this population as a bloc, a nexus of diverse groups that differ at the level of national origin, race, residential status, class, gender, and political views. Only in full awareness of our multiple contradictions and commonalities, presented in this essay as eleven theses, can we as Latina/os come together, construct our own fluid identities, and more effectively address the hostile political environment and polemics of the current moment.

Last spring's historic pro-immigrant marches across United States turned out hundreds of thousands in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC, as well as significant numbers in states like Iowa, Georgia, and Tennessee. Most of those marching were Latino. Predictably, reaction has been vocal, and often virulent. Even before the marches, xenophobes like Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington (2004) worried about the rapid growth of the U.S. Latino population, now officially 41 million strong, but in all likelihood closer to 45 million or even 50 million if undocumented workers are counted. Even more alarming to critics is the fact that the Latino population is expected to more than double by the year 2050, when it will reach an estimated 102.6 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2004). Although the United States is already a multiracial and multiethnic nation, the implications of this Latinization challenge the imagination. For the first time, minorities will become the majority population.

Especially troubling to Huntington and like-minded critics is what they perceive as Latinos' unwillingness to conform to "America's traditional identity"—in other words, to Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. A slew of

recent publications on Latinos or “Hispanics” describes us as a threat to America’s identity, values, and way of life, with most if not all of these critiques arguing as a principal concern that we fail to assimilate into mainstream U.S. culture. But is this demographic change and the cultural ascendancy of the Latino population what really frightens Huntington and others? Or is it rather the specter of a fragmented public—that is, of a lack of unity under the state?

We would argue the latter. Underlying Huntington’s fear of the many, of a heterogeneous body politic with a strong Latino component, is a general dread of fragmentation of the state. Given the demographic configuration of the Latino population, now spread throughout the country, this is not fear of separatism, à la Quebec Province, but an anxiety regarding the population’s failure to abide the authority of the state. Behind this fear of a failure to consent is the construction of the Latino Bloc as a destabilizing presence. What alarms Huntington and others is not, however, as troubling to some Latinos, who dismiss these fears as groundless. Huntington’s essay has compelled Chicano/Latino (Rodríguez 2004) and even Mexican writers (Schwartz 2004; Krauze 2004) to respond defensively, refuting allegations of Latinos as a “fifth column” and stressing that we are, in fact, “assimilating,” as previous waves of immigrants have done before us. Huntington and the country as a whole, these Latinos argue, need not fear ethnic/racial fragmentation or separatism, for we are all already on the way to becoming true “Americans,” whatever that might mean. Clearly, for these Latino writers, unity under the state is taken as a given; a questioning of national identity is not an issue. Is it, however, as simple as that, or is the issue far more complex?

In any discussion of U.S. Latinas and Latinos (hereafter Latina/os), one of the first issues that arise is whether a population marked by multiple differences should be grouped as one ethnicity or bloc. Is ethnicity itself a significant distinguishing category in today’s global society? The irony is that constructing and continually reconstructing this heterogeneous col-

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lectivity on the basis of difference implies going not around ethnicity but rather through it (Eagleton 1990, 23). If one hopes eventually to abolish ethnic, racial, and other social markers, one cannot wish them away; one cannot even legislate them away, as the U.S. experience with racism has made clear. Rather, one has to go through these “estranging definitions to emerge somewhere on the other side” (24), where the need for these markers is eliminated. Arguably, then, the very construct of the Latino Bloc needs to be seen as transitional, as inchoative, to be eliminated when it is no longer operative, when it can no longer be used in connection with some type of emancipatory politics, and when it has made way for alliances with other social blocs or forces. For the present, however, it is clear that one is fighting on a terrain always “already mapped out by antagonists” (26), where one is faced with responding to particular, time-specific political and economic relations and categories in order ultimately to move away from broad, unserviceable rubrics like “American.”

One of these ready-made categories, mapped out by both the state and the market, subsumes U.S. Latina/os or Hispanics under one label, even though we do not constitute one ethnic group if ethnicity is determined by national origin and/or culture. And yet, as we shall see, there are good reasons—all political in nature—for us to construct ourselves as a nexus, an entity marked not by unity but by difference, by a shared sense of dislocation and oppression. It is an identity born in the context of difference and is itself marked by difference. Present national and international conditions call for the deployment of a Latino Bloc identity, even though it is tentative and will in time melt away. The reasons for constructing the Latina/o population as a bloc are examined in more detail below. The term “bloc,” as we argue, is a useful construct that allows us to comment on the diversity and contradictory aspects of this population. It would be foolhardy to claim complete knowledge of a population in flux, but we have a number of critical points to raise in relation to the analytical and political notion of a Latino Bloc. Our strategy here will be to address problematizations through a series of theses or statements that are not meant to be exhaustive but rather to suggest the conditions facing the Latino Bloc. Each thesis will concentrate on at least one site of tension or contradiction within the network of relations. It goes without saying that many of the contradictions that emerge within the social totality are not particular to Latinos and Latinas.

We begin by addressing the notion of the Latino Bloc before moving on to a discussion of particular differences that contribute to the population’s

diversity. With each thesis we proceed from a generalization to a series of concretizations that seek to be explanatory while also illuminating differences or contradictions. The order of the theses is not meant to be significant, and the underlying premise is of course that all the theses are interrelated and intersect.

Thesis 1

The terrain for constructing the Latina/o population as a bloc is from the outset mapped out in negation.

A clarification: what we are terming “the Latino Bloc” is not Gramsci’s “historical bloc,” a term he used to refer not to a bloc of social alliances, as is usually thought, but to the social totality (Boothman 1995, xi). Our use of “bloc” seeks to emphasize the potential for links among various elements of the Latina/o population despite its heterogeneity. The word *bloc* here is more akin to *nexus*, in the sense that it allows for the figuration of a *coyuntura*, a node or juncture of an ensemble of elements. “Bloc,” for us, recalls in part Hardt and Negri’s definition of multitude in *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), although given their rejection of the dominance of class, racial, and ethnic links, their notion of multitude proves inadequate.

The Latino Bloc is, like the multitude, diverse at the level of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, forms of labor, political views, and class. It arises out of an international experience and is also inherently global in scope as a product of U.S. imperialist policies. Yet it is as much local as global in its migration, residential, and labor patterns. Our concept of the Latino Bloc also borrows from the work of Virno (2004, 76), who opposes “multitude” to “the people,” the nation, in effect underscoring the latter’s transfer of its rights to the state and its ascribed unity under the state. “Bloc” here is not meant to suggest “the cohesive unity of the people” but, on the contrary, to point to a population alienated to varying degrees from the state. It is this particular difference, in fact, that is at the root of xenophobic and nativist fears about Latina/os in the United States. This negation of “cohesive unity” is, we argue, at the core of the Latino Bloc itself, given its heterogeneity at every level: social, political, and cultural. Paradoxically, it is this heterogeneity that needs to be addressed even as we construct a collectivity-in-difference, a bloc. While recognizing the diverse class composition of the Latino Bloc, we also note in our analysis that social identity as Latina/os is particularly meaningful for those at the lower stratum of the social structure—that is, for working-class Latina/os

who face antagonisms grounded in their difference. As will become clear, labor and social relations under capitalism define the Latino Bloc's conditions of existence and negation.

Thesis 2

The U.S. Latino Bloc is a late capitalist phenomenon, although its emergence is linked to U.S. expansionism, colonization, and imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The immigration of Latina/os and the growth of the Latino Bloc are in large measure results of U.S. imperialist policies and practices that establish enclosures depriving workers of their means of subsistence, historically and currently (Midnight Notes Collective 1992). Since the nineteenth century, capital has sought what Harvey calls "spatio-temporal fixes" (2003, 43)—that is, territorial expansion that brings access to new natural resources, markets, and cheap labor. Such expansion has been achieved through imperialist policies, designed and implemented by the state, that have often implied the relocation of populations en masse. It is useful to recall that the United States's first socio-spatial fix involved the removal of Indians from their lands either through dispossession and relocation to particular areas or through the practice, if not the policy, of extermination. After the acquisition of the Spanish borderlands, from Florida to Louisiana, the United States used a variety of strategies, including inducements to colonization, filibustering, and war, to gain control of Mexican Texas and the Southwest, and subsequently furthered its imperial project by taking it to the Pacific, the Caribbean, and especially Central America. In the process it also gained a significant, albeit disdained, Latina/o population from the former Spanish and Mexican territories.

A majority of U.S. Latina/os are of Mexican extraction. But the growth in numbers of other Latina/o groups owes much to twentieth-century U.S. interventions in the Caribbean and Central America, as well as to the mid-to-late-century military hostility to liberal or left-leaning governments, from Guatemala in the 1950s to Chile in the 1970s. Likewise, U.S.-backed military coups and reigns of terror in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile have led to the emigration of thousands of Latin Americans to the United States, other parts of Latin America, and Europe. More recently, neoliberal policies throughout Latin America, enforced through trade agreements and conditions on loans from the international financial institutions, have increased unemployment and imposed austerity measures that have spurred millions

to emigrate in search of jobs and subsistence. As a secondary consequence, this has enabled the United States to continually replenish its internal labor reserve through successive waves of Latin American immigration.

Thesis 3

The Latino Bloc is a heterogeneous, transnational, transcultural, multiracial, and multilingual population.

“Latino” cannot operate as a simple ethnic designation because we cannot claim one national origin. Our origin is multinational and multiracial. Our Latina/o identity is trans-American, linked to the continent of the Americas and more specifically to Latin America. In this sense we are a transcontinental and transnational population, deeply divided by class, national origin, race, language, residence, and political orientation. Issues of gender and sexual orientation further divide us. We are not a nation but a conglomeration, a social construction, what Hall might call “a politically and culturally constructed” grouping that is continually reconfiguring itself (1996, 443). We are a composite, made up of multiple positionings—that is, of concrete social locations—and assuming multiple ideological perspectives and identities. We are U.S. citizens and noncitizens, documented and undocumented. The diversity of the Latino Bloc will only increase during the coming decades as even more Latin American immigrants come to the United States in response to the labor shortage brought on by retirement of the baby boomers.

The ethnic and racial diversity of the Latino Bloc is a crucial difference that further underscores the need for the notion of “bloc.” If ethnicity generally designates a national origin, as in the case of Irish Americans, then the Latina/o multitude includes some twenty-one ethnicities: not only the nineteen Latin American republics and the colony of Puerto Rico but also people of peninsular Spanish origin in the United States. The state, for its own purposes, constructs these various ethnicities under one rubric, as Latinos or Hispanics (the latter term being preferred by the U.S. Census Bureau, the press, and marketing experts). This constitutes the population as a macro-ethnicity in relation to geographic and linguistic origin, much as Asian Americans or African Americans are constructed by continental origin, whether those origins go back 500 years or five years. The Census Bureau recognizes the heterogeneous mix of ethnicities when it breaks down the Latino population for comparative statistics into five groups: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central/South American, and Other Spanish.

Racially, the Latino Bloc is unique in that it includes Latin American immigrants who are indigenous, white, black, mestizo, mulatto, Asian, and Middle Eastern. The Census Bureau, recognizing that a number of Latina/os are black, has rather clumsily formulated several new categories including “Non-Hispanic Blacks” and “Non-Hispanic Whites.” Today, however, the “white” designation, so important to Californios who sought the right to vote as white citizens in the nineteenth century and to mid-twentieth-century Latina/o activists who questioned the designation of “Mexican” as a race, is likewise being rejected by many Latina/os who, for valid cultural and political reasons, prefer ethnic or culturally based designations.

Our preference for designating the population as the Latino Bloc and continuing to use the Latino/Latina labels requires turning to the term “Latino” itself. Of course the term is closely linked historically to a geographic area, Latin America, and to the Latin origin of Spanish and other Romance languages. This geographic area has historically been known by various designations: Spanish America, Hispanoamérica, Indo-América, América Latina, Latinoamérica. It was in the nineteenth century, when Napoleon III began seeking to counter Anglo-America’s imperialist designs on the whole of the continent, that French-influenced intellectuals in Latin America, concerned with the danger of conquest by the Anglo *coloso del norte* and wishing to be linked to what was deemed a superior and more kindred French culture, began using the term “América Latina” in opposition to “América Anglo-sajona.”

Today, “Latina/o” is likewise used in negation, to distinguish what is not Anglo; more recently it has also been used to signal that one is black but not African American. Nevertheless, “Latino” is never equivalent to “Latin American,” as the former designation is a U.S. phenomenon. The term “Latina/o” is thus geographically, culturally, and linguistically situated, and, for that reason, fraught with issues of misrepresentation. As a socio-spatial-political identity, “Latino,” like “Hispanic,” continues the erasure of indigenous peoples of the Americas. This is nothing new. The term “Latin America” itself reconfigures and disidentifies the pre-Columbian populations that are still very much a part of the continent and whose indigenous cultures and languages have survived widespread mestizaje and even genocide. The term also elides from the equation descendants of African slaves and other people of African, Middle Eastern, and Asian descent in Latin America. The diversity of the Latino Bloc in the United States is closely linked to the diversity of Latin America but, unfortunately, also recapitulates racist practices in Latin America.

Given the heterogeneous composition of the Latino Bloc, there is as yet no amalgamating identity, nor, often, even a willingness to be seen as one group. In its changing taxonomies, the state, too, has used a variety of terms to classify Latina/os as a separate entity. For example, fifty years ago government agencies employed terms like “Spanish speaking” or “Spanish surname.” However, not all Latina/os speak Spanish: some are English-monolingual, while others speak indigenous languages or Portuguese rather than Spanish. The use of the Spanish surname as an indicator is even less accurate, as Asian and European immigration to Latin America, the retention of indigenous names, and intermarriage have all produced many non-Spanish surnames. U.S. Latina/os themselves have throughout the years used a variety of general terms, including designations like “Latin American,” “Spanish American,” “Spanish,” “Hispanic,” and “Hispano.” The Census Bureau’s preferred term, as well as that of advertising and the media, is “Hispanic,” and while some Latina/os approve of this designation, others have a visceral negative reaction to the label, particularly in the Southwest.

Many Latina/os prefer to be identified by national origin, as hyphenated Americans. Some people of Mexican origin, the largest group within the census category of Hispanics, prefer “Latino,” “Chicano,” or “raza,” the latter two being self-assigned and politically charged identities in use since the 1960s. With the growth of the Mexican-origin population the term “la raza” has become increasingly widespread, and it may extend even further as this population moves beyond the U.S. Southwest. Are we suggesting that “bloc” is akin to “raza” in its current U.S. sense? No, the term “raza” is both racially and culturally rooted, but it excludes those Latina/os not falling into the perceived category. Is an Ecuadorian of Korean origin or a Lebanese from Colombia or an Armenian from Venezuela or a Jew from Argentina to be considered “raza”? For some of us, she is, but not for others. The unwieldiness of the “raza” label suggests the need for a more inclusive designation, like that of “Latino Bloc.”

Why then seek an umbrella identification if we are divided by so many differences? The rationale is fundamentally political. We need an identification that will interpellate us to participate in collective action, like the recent nationwide pro-immigrant marches; in this regard strict national-origin identity could prove to be divisive and counterproductive. In some areas of the United States where diverse Latina/o populations are in close contact with each other, there is greater acceptance of the term “Latino.” In that case, why include “bloc”? The term “Latino,” unfortunately, also

suggests a cohesive group. Since this is decidedly not the case, there is need for a classifier that points to a nexus of diverse groups, such as “bloc.”

Most important, such an identity would be of our own making. Historically, we have been identified by others, often in exclusionary if not derogatory terms. We have been subjected to racial profiling by the police, by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (*la migra*), and by white supremacists. We are often criminalized and viewed wholesale as illegal immigrants, as foreign to the body of the nation. Perhaps it is time to assume a self-designation, a strategic essentialism, as it were, for overtly political and social reasons. Perhaps it is time to constitute our own political identity, fully aware that we are a multitude, differentiated by national origin, race, place of residence, generation, class, and political orientation, and deeply divided with respect to fundamental issues such as immigration policy, social and economic domestic policies, and U.S. foreign policy. The underlying and troubling challenge facing us is undoubtedly whether we are capable of uniting in broad and sustained strategic alliances.

Thesis 4

The Latino Bloc is marked by cultural exchange and adaptation.

In the growing Latina/o population, there is no concrete cultural particularity to which we can point. A variety of Latina/o cultures coexist within the United States, distinguished not only by divergent national origins but also by urban/rural, regional, and state residence (Tejano culture, for example, is different from Nuevo Mexicano culture). Is culture really the issue? As Eagleton reminds us, to the colonizer the culture of the colonized or oppressed is never the issue; in fact it is rather unimportant (1990, 29). What about assimilation? Much is made of cultural assimilation, but that issue is ultimately not what troubles nativists like Huntington. Nevertheless, because culture and cultural difference are elements that can be strategically deployed in the building of a Latino Bloc, they warrant discussion, especially in relation to the questionable paradigm of assimilation versus failure to assimilate.

Since immigration to the United States has been a constant from the beginning of the nation-state, scholars have often measured the impact of cultural contact in terms of language acquisition or loss, national and ethnic identification, and cultural values. Often in these studies class-related changes are conflated with acculturation, with some degree of social mobility and acquisition of so-called middle-class values taken as evidence

of acculturation and wrongfully termed “Americanization”—as if there were ever just one culture in the United States.

History teaches us that whenever there is sustained contact between different populations, sociocultural exchange takes place, even between enslavers and the enslaved. While language and culture are not synonymous, the impact of cultural contact on language can serve as a useful example. All languages reveal in their borrowings contact with other populations, be it through invasion, conquest, commerce, relocation, or co-habitation on the same island or continent. Just as there are no “pure” languages in the world, there can be no “pure” cultures. Linguistic borrowing always involves adaptation or translation. Cultural adaptations likewise involve new constructions, like the creation of fictive traditions that in time are taken to be historically grounded. Borrowing within cultural interaction is equally complicated. Often the process involves translation, as occurred during the Spanish colonization of the Americas. For example, native cultural practices or rites were often “translated” by missionaries to hasten conversion to Christianity, as when they constructed an indigenous-looking Virgen de Guadalupe (Gibson 1964). The opposite can also be the case: dominated or enslaved people can engage in translation for purposes of maintaining a culture, as in the renaming of the African *orishas* with Catholic saints’ names, a practice still alive today in Santería. Clearly, in cases where a language or culture is imposed by force, strategic translation may lead to the adoption of elements of the master’s culture in an attempt to resist it. Historically, particular cultural practices have been viewed as suspect and dangerous, as in the case of the Native American Ghost Dances of the late nineteenth century. In these instances, culture becomes a site of resistance (Bonfil 1987, 109), a space for maintaining diversity and difference, and often also a rationale for persecution. But even then the process of exchange continues.

New cultural contacts continue in today’s so-called era of globalization through mass population flows, forced or voluntary. Millions, the subaltern of the world, must migrate to stave off starvation, to seek employment and social mobility, to escape from war, turmoil, and particular political regimes, and to flee natural disasters. In all of these cases, groups coming into contact are never on an equal footing. In fact, contact between different populations in the United States has rarely if ever been peaceful and harmonious; on the contrary, it has been marked by strife and violence. Contact with whites, for example, has been deadly for Native Americans. Blacks endure continuing racism, highlighted most recently when the Katrina hurricane devastation

in New Orleans made the connection between race/class and governmental indifference only too clear. A painful narrative at best, the U.S. history of interracial, intercultural, and international contact continues to be written in equally violent ways, at home and also abroad, as is clear from present-day U.S. military engagements throughout the world.

U.S. society has always been marked by diversity and stratification. In this context, assumptions about what constitutes “American” culture have been skewed in one direction by politically and economically dominant groups. Through control of education, the media, and political institutions, they have tried to impose one language, English, and the idea of one culture on the rest of the population, fomenting in the process the myth of American culture as one distinct culture. But this dominant construct of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1987) has not erased the regional, racial, ethnic, or social/cultural differences that are most evident in segregation practices. The U.S. mainstream still seems unable to come to grips with this continuing cultural diversity. For that reason, the myth of a “traditional” U.S. culture and an “essential” U.S. identity has been served up to every entering first-grader in U.S. public schools and promoted in both commercial and state advertising, despite recent nods to multiculturalism.

Closer scrutiny of the term “assimilation” itself would reveal the fallacies inherent in this notion, but for purposes of brevity it might be best to simply suggest that there are different types of assimilation. In the case of Latina/os there is no doubt that we have been absorbed as a labor force since the nineteenth century, but to what degree have we been included culturally and socially? The interactional playing field has never been even, given that the particular give-and-take or negotiation is always conditioned by stratified social relations and ideological vectors. Yet the Latino Bloc has responded with vigor, borrowing, adapting, and translating, while still maintaining a series of cultural differences that have enabled it to survive in a terrain marked by labor inclusion and social exclusion.

Let us take a concrete example that turns out to be quite telling. The arrival of U.S. settlers in Texas and the Southwest made wheat more easily accessible in that region and in the northern part of Mexico. As a result, the corn tortilla was exchanged for a “flour tortilla” in these areas. This transfer of resources—the adoption of wheat flour—did not lead to a predominantly bread-consuming population among people of Mexican origin, as would have been the case if Anglo cultural practices had simply been appropriated. Rather, the new resource, wheat, was adapted and incorporated within an existing cultural grammar that called for use of the tortilla, not only for

tacos but also as an implement for eating. The tortilla of Mexican *nortehños* and Chicanos is not an Anglo phenomenon—it is not a pancake, crêpe, or blintz—nor is it exactly like the corn tortilla of central and southern Mexico. The ingredients and the process for making it are different. The flour tortilla is a displaced, transformed corn tortilla, if you will.

Change inevitably occurs within both dominant and minority cultures. The effort to maintain things a certain way, to achieve homeostasis, is bound to fail because no culture that is alive has remained the same permanently. U.S. Anglo hegemony too will see its end, undoubtedly, but what will replace it? The past no doubt has something to teach us in this regard. Arrighi and Silver (1999), examining the similarities and differences in the transitions from Dutch to British hegemony in the eighteenth century and from British to U.S. hegemony in the early twentieth century, suggest that the U.S. era has already seen its apogee. Will the new hegemony be an Asian one? Will it lead to the fragmentation of the western part of the United States? Quite possibly. We have no crystal ball to consult, only history. Like Benjamin's "angel of history" (1968, 257), we are condemned to look back at the pile of ruins before us, the residue produced by the U.S. era of empire, even while being propelled into an uncertain future.

That said, should we then dismiss notions of cultural interaction as irrelevant? Perhaps by the year 3000 that will be the case, and identities as "Anglos" or "Latinos" will be superfluous and nonfunctional. At this historical juncture, however, we simply cannot afford to do so, given social conditions and xenophobic practices persisting in this country. We are compelled to work our way through them. As long as social stratification continues to be constructed on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, native or immigrant status, and class, there will be a need to mobilize in terms of particular identities. Perhaps in the future, geography or political orientation, DNA markers, or, more likely, social location will be the key critical factors to consider, and we can dispense with ethnic/racial markers. But until then, ethnic, racial, and cultural identifications will be important organizing and survival strategies in any political context.

Thesis 5

The Latino Bloc is highly divided by issues of homeland and national origin.

A 2004 student rally in downtown San Diego to protest the raising of college and university tuition brought out youth wearing t-shirts that

proclaimed: “Latino, No. Chicano, Sí.” Students wanted to make a statement about their identity as Chicanos—that is, as persons of Mexican origin. Specific national-origin identification is undoubtedly important and ultimately defining for many Latina/os, especially for first-generation Chicana/os. A border city, San Diego has a large number of first-generation Mexican residents who have immigrated to the United States and continue to maintain close ties with the “homeland.” First-generation Latina/os often have family members still in the country of origin, and many travel as often as possible to and from these Latin American regions. They are often hesitant to take up an identity other than that of national origin. However, this is less true of their offspring. Second- or third-generation Chicana/os do not see Mexico as their homeland; in fact, the myth of the “homeland” no longer holds for those born in this country. Clearly, over time and after several generations, origin itself can be a fuzzy indicator.

“National-origin” identity and adhesion to a foreign state are two different matters. Marchers who waved the banner of another country in last spring’s demonstrations, a gesture often misunderstood, were making a statement more of ethnic pride than of allegiance to another nation-state. National-origin identification can, however, prove highly contentious. Native-born Chicana/os, for example, sometimes find themselves in antagonistic relations with first-generation students of Mexican origin in high school. These divisions within the Latino Bloc are at root class-based divisions, although they masquerade as national-origin and generational issues. On the other hand, crisis situations make our commonalities clear and can bring out Latina/os as a collectivity, as occurred in the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War in 1970, in the march against Proposition 187 in Los Angeles in 1994, and in the recent mass marches that highlighted the working-class character of immigrants (evident in the slogan “Somos trabajadores, no criminales”). While national origin has been foregrounded, other core issues are obviously in play in these cases and beg closer analysis. Class, in fact, is the node or linchpin upon which hinge all the other factors that make up one’s identity as Latino or Latina—national origin being just one among them.

Political identity based on national origin or race is undoubtedly a strategy for organizing, but this approach thus far has not effected significant structural changes or transformed our social location within the system. Nevertheless, one has to recognize that this identity, once constructed, has served various purposes, as is evident in the reforms gained by the civil rights movement. Today, it would seem, politicians on the right see racial or

ethnic identity as running counter to their interests and would like to see it disappear. In California the year 2002 brought failed attempts to limit the state's ability to collect information about an individual's race or ethnicity through Proposition 54 (the Racial Privacy Initiative). Why, at this historical juncture, is this information perceived to be threatening? The reasons are self-evident. Statistics based on identity are the basis for challenges to the state regarding issues of access and distribution: for example, denial of political representation, exclusion or low representation of particular groups in institutions of higher learning, denial of voting rights, and so forth. Clearly, those advocating "merit" as the only criterion for access and arguing that we live in a color-blind society would prefer that we not have official evidence that contests that assertion.

The U.S. Armed Forces, on the other hand, see an advantage to retaining these categories and are, ironically, using them to attract "volunteers" from ethnic communities (as when an army recruiter in San Diego decorates his truck with a bumper sticker saying "The Army of Juan"). Business interests have also found the simulacrum of "Hispanic" identity to be a useful marketing tool, especially in the creation of market niches to attract customers to food or entertainment products. The appropriation of difference at all levels by the market has a not-to-be-overlooked consequence: the flattening of identity to the point of meaninglessness. Ethnic identity, manipulable like any discourse, flexible enough to be used against us or in our favor, is yet a tool that we cannot at this point give up as a political strategy. Perhaps when over 50 percent of the population in this country is Latina/o—and that day is fast approaching—the term will become truly insignificant, and other considerations, such as social class location, will be foregrounded as key elements of identity. Until then, it is important that identification as part of the Latino Bloc be an instrument that we implement for redress and progressive social transformation.

Thesis 6

The Latino Bloc, shaped by repeated migratory waves, faces recurrent xenophobia.

The category of national origin is intimately tied to the issue of immigration. As previously mentioned, it is the continuing influx of immigrants from Mexico and Latin America that Huntington and others find especially troubling (Huntington 2004, 32). Of course the Latino Bloc does not consist entirely of immigrants and their descendants: some Latina/os are

the descendants of Tejanos or New Mexican Hispanos or Californios who were here before the U.S. invasion and appropriation of the Southwest, even before the United States was formally constituted. Others descend from early Native American populations that resided in the Southwest and mixed with the incoming Spanish/Mexican settlers; these Latina/os can trace their origins in the Southwest back to the pre-Columbian era. For this reason, as Huntington warily notes, Latin American immigrants, especially those of Mexican origin, proffer irrefutable ancestral claims and do not see their geographic shift to U.S. territory as unprecedented. Nevertheless, in view of the significant number of foreign-born within the Latina/o population (some 40 percent), geographical mobility, relocation, and location mark the Latino Bloc decisively.

One could argue facetiously that all the people of the United States at some point are the product of mass migrations and contact between different groups that go back several centuries, if not millennia. Huntington (33) himself recognizes that the rate of nineteenth-century immigration to the United States, especially from Ireland and Germany, was greater than the rate of Latina/o immigration in the late twentieth century. Most of these nineteenth-century immigrants were of European extraction, but they were poor, unemployed men and women, which made their “whiteness” questionable. They too faced xenophobic reactions, especially the Irish and the Chinese. The “whitening” of these immigrant populations since then (even of the “model minority,” the Chinese) has served to blur that past.

Today, however, the specter of a perceived nonwhite immigrant majority, whether documented or undocumented, is again setting off alarms and leading to cries of “invasion” by ideologues. These neoconservatives are right about one thing: given our numbers and fertility, the Latino Bloc will undoubtedly change the face of this nation, both literally and figuratively. A broader perspective is called for, however. As of 2006, there are more than 42 million Latina/os in the United States, but this population is still smaller than the combined population of German (58 million), Irish (39 million), English (33 million), and Italian (15 million) descent in this country. The statistical difference is enormous, but ideologues like Huntington do not fear the present; it is the future that concerns them, in view of the continued influx and the increase through reproduction. The more salient question is whether the new Latina/o look, this “colorizing,” will be politically and economically meaningful or merely cosmetic.

U.S. Census Bureau statistics (2003) indicate that over half of the estimated 15 million Latina/o immigrants currently in the United States

entered this country after 1990. This rapid increase in immigration in the last decades of the twentieth century, as previously mentioned, is linked to specific economic, political, and social factors. While some immigrants are professionals or artists seeking career advancement, business people with cross-border interests, or political exiles, the majority of the arrivals are “economic immigrants” coming to the United States for wage labor. Among them are the many undocumented workers who face the perils of crossing the Arizona desert, the barbed-wire fence, the Rio Grande River, and the Southwest freeways inside car trunks, trailers, converted gas tanks, door panels, dashboards, and airliner wheel wells, day after day, year after year. They may stay in the Southwest or go to other states where they are not welcome but their labor is. Attempts by undocumented immigrants to cross the increasingly militarized U.S. border are made every day more difficult by the low-intensity warfare that they face and, more recently, by emboldened anti-immigrant vigilante groups.

And yet, despite the continued harassment, hostility, and low-wage exploitation they encounter, these immigrants still fulfill their purpose in going north: they contribute to the sustenance of the families left at home. Remittances by Mexican emigrants worldwide now exceed \$20 billion a year and are second only to petroleum as Mexico’s largest source of foreign exchange (Dickerson 2004). This immigration must be viewed in the context of the unemployment rate in Mexico, so high that 1.3 million more Mexicans are without jobs each year. This situation is not, of course, particular to Mexico or Latin America, but is a worldwide phenomenon with millions of Africans, Asians, and Eastern Europeans also migrating globally for employment and sending remittances home. More important, these immigrants contribute significantly to the U.S. gross national product and, as emphatically noted in the 2006 marches, pay taxes.

The post-1990 immigration influx to the United States has triggered a wide spectrum of xenophobic reactions among certain segments. It has spurred the passage of anti-immigrant legislation such as California’s Proposition 187, intended to deny health and educational services to undocumented individuals. Congressional attempts to deny citizenship to children born to undocumented immigrants in the United States, although unconstitutional, likewise resurface every few years, as do proposals for criminalizing undocumented status, for repatriation, and for extending the border wall. Today, virulent anti-immigrant movements and armed vigilante groups like the Minutemen, the Border Patrol Auxiliary, the Friends of the Border Patrol, and the Save Our State group are multiplying across the

country. This practice of xenophobic scapegoating has ample precedent in U.S. history and has been especially strident in periods of economic crisis (Rosales 1996, 85). Since the 1980s, when economic restructuring led to the closure of many U.S. plants, which were subsequently “outsourced” to Mexico, other parts of Latin America, or Asia, thousands of immigrants have been rounded up and repatriated as well (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, xv). Latina/os, both citizens and immigrants, have long suffered racial profiling, racism, segregation, and discrimination at the level of residence, education, employment, and language use. Today, like other minorities, they suffer from heightened police brutality as well.

Xenophobic reactions, of course, are not deployed with surgical precision and often do not distinguish between documented and undocumented immigrants, nor between foreign-born Latina/os and those born here. The entire Latino Bloc is seen as foreign, and in the process it is criminalized, much as happened in the past with Asians and as is still happening today with people of Middle Eastern descent. In this post-9/11 period, fear of penetration of the U.S. homeland and the ostensible security vulnerability at the southern border figure prominently on TV news programs and radio talk shows. Worrisome too is the xenophobic logic at work in the pernicious conflation of foreigner/Latino/terrorist/gangbanger. Racist stereotyping of Latina/os, as if all were potential terrorists, might unintentionally serve to build greater group solidarity and identification as Latina/os. But it has also served to divide the Latino Bloc further, as some nativist Latina/os join vigilante movements against immigrants. What is crucial, however, is that all Latina/os, whether documented or undocumented, foreign-born residents or native-born citizens, are subject to subordination, discrimination, and harassment. Ultimately, the status and the rights of each one are linked to the status and rights of all (Gutiérrez 1995, 174). In developing contestatory political strategies to counter racism, discrimination, and exploitation, it might prove useful to consider border crossing as a human rights issue and even as a radical act of civil disobedience.

Today, as in the past, immigrants to the United States face varying degrees of hostility and rejection on arrival. The reception is clearly better if one is European or Canadian. But even among immigrants from Latin America, there are marked distinctions that further divide us. Puerto Ricans, titularly U.S. citizens, are “free” to move between the island and the U.S. mainland, often in a continuous migratory cycle; when settling on the mainland they join a community of close to 4 million Boricuas in the United States. Then there are Cuban immigrants, who are considered

“refugees” because of Washington’s anti-Castro policies and are granted asylum once they reach U.S. shores. On the other hand, Salvadorans and Guatemalans who left their birth countries for political and economic reasons had to survive here as undocumented immigrants for up to two decades, until 1999, when they were allowed to petition for permanent residency as political refugees.

Issues of migration, place of origin, and residential status (first-generation, second-generation, third-generation, etc.) have always been important and, as noted earlier, have served not only as divisive wedges within the Latino Bloc but also as key concerns for a population subject to harassment and discrimination by mainstream society. For this reason, an awareness of the history of immigration has been a necessary first step in raising our consciousness of being part of a transnational Latina/o community in the United States.

Thesis 7

The Latino Bloc is primarily an urban population.

Latina/os now reside in every state of the union, although they are still heavily concentrated in particular cities, states, and regions. The largest group, the Mexican-origin population, has a long history in the Southwest and is still concentrated there, but people of Mexican descent are now found all over the country, including in the Northeast, where they live alongside Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Central Americans, South Americans, and Cubans. The prominent position now accorded to the Virgen de Guadalupe in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City attests to the growing numbers of Latina/os, especially *mexicanos/as*, in the area.

In a shift from past patterns, Latina/os are now primarily an urban population, with nine out of ten living in metropolitan areas (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2003). The numbers are striking in some cities, like San Antonio, Texas, where Latina/os already represent a majority population. Within these metropolitan areas, however, the neighborhoods where Latina/os tend to reside are highly contained, ethnically and racially. Thus, whether residing in the inner city or outside the urban core, Latina/os tend to live in segregated neighborhoods, in enclaves that are often distinguished by the geographic origin of their inhabitants—a particular nation, a state or province within that nation, or even a specific city, town, or village. Place of origin is thus a critical aspect of identity for first-generation Latina/os, as residing in place-linked enclaves allows for cultural familiarity.

Residential segregation is not only racially or ethnically marked, but also class-determined. If urban residence often means living in run-down, overcrowded homes in areas marked by poverty and violence, it also affords access to low-income housing and low-wage work opportunities. These jobs, once mainly in manufacturing, especially in garment factories, are increasingly found in the service sector, where Latina/os work as hotel staff, janitors, domestics, gardeners, and restaurant workers, often the only jobs open to them. In the past, Latina/os, like African Americans, were unable to rent or buy property in particular neighborhoods, as much for racist as for economic reasons. Many of these inner-city areas have since become predominantly low-income and Latina/o, whites having exited to less diverse and more affluent suburbs. Opposing forces can also be at play, however, when low-income inner-city areas become gentrified and trendy. As real estate prices rise, Latina/os are pushed to the margins, outside the central city and out of long-established Latina/o communities, as has happened in the Mission district in San Francisco, Echo Park in Los Angeles, and Spanish Harlem in Manhattan. Ethnic enclaves also suffer fragmentation when city planners zone these areas for the construction of freeways, waste dumps, junkyards, factories, and other industrial and commercial establishments. Concentration of the Latino Bloc in these metropolitan areas undoubtedly foments resentment and hopelessness, but, ironically, it also generates survival skills and a broader sense of the complexity of the world.

Spatial fragmentation is further compounded by territoriality. Urban gangs, through which youth seek identity in a hostile environment, carve out their own “turf” in urban areas. The existence of gangs, while symptomatic of a need for urban youth to belong, is also, unfortunately, closely linked to intragroup and intergroup violence. Youth and location also link up in other problematic ways, because poverty and unemployment inevitably facilitate access to the informal economy and alternative moneymaking opportunities, such as theft and drug dealing, that pay much more than minimum wage. These practices land our youth in the prison system, where racism, gang affiliation, and the drug trade exacerbate tensions and polarize inmates. The gang factor is often sensationalized and used to justify racial profiling, police harassment of youth, and the all-too-frequent cases of police shootings in our barrios and ghettos. Gang affiliation is increasingly being used as well to target undocumented youth, both Mexican and Salvadoran, who are then repatriated back to their countries of origin; the urgency of these deportations is torqued up with claims of a potential for “terrorism.” Deportation or prison is the only option open to many immigrant youth,

both men and women, but native-born Latinos (and increasingly Latinas) do not fare much better; they, like African Americans, are more likely than whites to end up in prison for similar crimes (Davis 1997, 267). Little progress has been made in creating new options for the young. Nor has the justice system become any more just, as it is still more likely that a court will find a person of color guilty than a white person, and the sentencing practices of the courts are likewise skewed by the melanin factor.

Thesis 8

The factor that most divides the Latino Bloc is social location—that is, class.

As suggested earlier, social position or class, more than race or national origin, cuts across and divides the Latino Bloc in crucial ways. In the United States, class is generally both an economic and a political category, and class issues are often skirted in favor of a focus on race or ethnicity. In a multiethnic society with a dominant white population, the slippage from class to race is easy to understand; after all, the two are intimately interconnected. Class, in fact, is viewed more often than not through the lens of race or ethnicity. But within the multiracial, multiethnic Latino Bloc, class differences serve both to fragment us and at the same time to unite us across ethnicity (that is, national origin) and race. It is thus a strategic category that we can use to maneuver politically, especially now that the myth of a classless U.S. society is being called into question even by the mainstream press (Kinsley 2005; Wessel 2005).

While some theorists might view class as an outmoded category, there is an increasing, even mainstream, recognition that class hierarchies and divisions characterize the U.S. social fabric. For the most part, class is defined in terms of income, or degree of access to goods and services. Varying notions of “poverty” are more likely to be studied than class inequality. While these economic indicators do provide a sense of social location, it is the increasingly transnational capitalist relations of production that are crucial and that allow us to see the Latino Bloc as a primarily working-class population. After all, it is the labor capacity of Latina/os, along with their potential for consumption, that concerns capitalists, for despite mechanization, informational technologies, and finance capital investments, capital “must still depend on workers to make a profit” (Midnight Notes Collective 1992, xiv). Latina/o workers have undoubtedly felt the impact of deindustrialization, unemployment, de-unionization, and subemployment,

like other U.S. workers. It is this crucial positioning as labor that places Latina/os in a particular relation to capital.

The distorting effect of media-constructed images notwithstanding, class location serves to organize the experiences and practices of everyday life. For that reason the class location of Latina/os says a good deal about our level and quality of education, our place of residence, our access to opportunities and to consumer goods and services, our access to health care, and our cultural capital. Analysis of social issues strictly on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, or language often leads to limited, band-aid solutions. Even affirmative action struggles were a limited effort, and our trust in state measures to at least partially ameliorate glaring disparities proved misplaced. Poor educational attainment in the context of racism and segregation led in the past to our focus on the desegregation of schools. "Integration programs" in many cases involved the bussing of students and led to a renewed segregation through the integration solely of minority students. Critics have since recognized the need to rethink both causative factors and solutions for low educational performance. As critical race theorists like Bell have noted, in the past we expected too much from school integration, as if such measures alone would ensure racial equality and opportunity (1995, 305). The problem, then as now, is that we need schools with excellent teachers, conscious of the language and social needs of our communities, and solid programs to prepare our children for success, not to ensure their educational failure. Neither desegregation nor resegregation, unfortunately, provided a remedy. Quality schools are likely to remain out of our reach because of our social location, the lack of political clout that comes with our particular social standing, and, more broadly, the ongoing neoconservative trend against public spending on educational programs.

Even the social ills that we suffer are not evenly distributed, for class status determines who gets the proverbial short end of the stick. Consider, for example, the racism suffered by blacks or Latina/os of different classes. The racism that an African American professional might be subject to has little in common with that endured by Rodney King as he was beaten by the Los Angeles police in 1991 or by James Byrd, dragged by a pickup driven by members of the Aryan Brotherhood through the streets of Jasper, Texas, in 1998. Even within our own communities, we are not all equal and class can be more significant than race or ethnicity. A wealthy Latina/o or Mexican often has no problem oppressing or exploiting a working-class Latina/o or Mexican. In fact, national origin or race tends to become increasingly irrelevant for capitalists, managers, and higher-income individuals, unless

these traits can be manipulated opportunistically. And yet the fact that one cannot axiomatically find refuge or empathy within one's own racial or ethnic community can also lead to a sense of resentment and awareness, and as such can signal a step in the development of a broader, more critical class perspective.

Social location or class is obviously intrinsically tied to all the previously mentioned theses regarding the Latino Bloc. It is intimately linked to emigration, immigration, residence, education, employment, unemployment, language choice, and everything else, including racial/ethnic identity. Our class contradictions divide us as Latina/os, inasmuch as the Latino Bloc is socially heterogeneous and includes more than working-class Latina/os. But class location can also serve to unite us across race and ethnicity with other working-class collectivities. It is this transracial, transethnic perspective that is called for to find viable solutions to our social problems.

Thesis 9

Like other racial minorities, the Latino Bloc is subject to “not feeling at home” within the United States.

Across time, immigrants have come to the United States with hopes of having more options and making better lives for themselves and their offspring. The children and grandchildren of these immigrants, however, do not necessarily share these expectations to the same degree as first-generation immigrants. Second- and third-generation Latina/os are in fact less likely than their grandparents to see the United States as an unrestricted “land of opportunity.” Like U.S. blacks, by the second generation young Latina/os no longer harbor illusions about the United States being a color-blind society, and they see notions of equal and unrestricted access for all as myths. Critical race theorists, among others, note that the dominant society and the state proffer notions of meritocracy, pretending that racial remedies of the civil rights era have worked, but those of us who are Latina/os, African Americans, and Asian Americans are painfully aware that racism is constitutive of this society and is not a thing of the past (Bell 1995, 306). Increasingly, as well, U.S. Latina/os, like other minorities, are beginning to see the close relationship between policies and practices at home and policies and practices abroad. Identifying as part of the Latino Bloc may make a broader transborder/international awareness possible.

Racism and class stratification contribute to disidentification and a sense of feeling like “a foreigner in one's native land,” as Tejano Seguín

noted in 1858 (1973, 177). This sense of rootlessness, of not feeling at home, is not a nineteenth-century phenomenon but an ongoing reality (Mosely 2005; Moraga 2002, 44). It is in part linked to the particular social and economic conditions encountered within this economy. Global capitalism makes fearful strangers of us all, as noted by Virno (2004, 34). It is the very experience of not feeling at home and the absence of a viable sense of a national community that make us seek protection “among our own,” especially when our very citizenship is placed in question if we happen to be the children of undocumented workers. When Huntington criticizes Latina/os for forming enclaves, he loses sight of the fact that within an alienating society there is a demonstrable need for an alternative space, a refuge, that will enable individuals to protect their cultural practices and traditions, a place where they might feel more at home. In these communities Latina/os create social spaces where they are able to retrieve practices rooted in their past or produce new cultural practices in response to emerging contexts. These spheres are political as well as cultural sites and are potentially spaces of resistance, for in these local communities unity and identity can be redefined, if not outside the state, then parallel to it.

For most U.S.-born Latina/os, “not feeling at home” seldom triggers a desire to migrate to the homeland of parents or grandparents. Often the parents’ homeland is foreign to them. For some Chicano cultural nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s, the sought-after refuge was the mythic homeland, Aztlán. It was a “homeland” within the U.S. nation-state and was meant to legitimize one’s roots in the region of one’s residence—that is, the U.S. Southwest. In fact, the Chicano movement of the 1970s was primarily linked to struggles for entitlements under the state and did not advocate secession or a return to Mexico.

Disidentification with the state and society at large undoubtedly leads to a search for alternative forms of identification, as for example in gang affiliation and loyalty. There are also other types of alternative identifications that are generated by participation in social movements that go beyond the local. It is perhaps through transnational, transracial, and transethnic political struggles that members of the U.S. Latino Bloc can address and counter the feeling of not being at home in the United States and begin to feel at home in the world.

Thesis 10

The Latino Bloc is divided by issues of gender, sexism, and sexuality, and by patriarchal structures.

One of the key internal differences dividing the Latina/o multitude is gender, which cuts across all other differences of national origin, race, and class. Internationally, the last few decades have seen a growth in the number of women migrating, in contrast to the pattern of previous decades, when immigrants were more likely to be male. In a period of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1992, 147), labor-intensive low-wage industries in the United States employ large numbers of women, particularly Latina and Asian women. It is thus no surprise that women, especially from Mexico and Central America, are migrating in larger numbers to fill these jobs. In fact, official estimates of recent undocumented immigration from Latin America indicate that these immigrants have been disproportionately female (Sampaio 2002, 53). The influx of women has clearly increased the number of Latinas in the United States, whether immigrant or native-born. Because not all employment is officially reported, especially among domestic workers, the actual numbers are undoubtedly higher than the official estimates.

Global capital is, in fact, what draws these women to the border and beyond. Women provide the bulk of the labor in the maquila industries along the U.S.-Mexico border. Once there, and facing cyclical layoffs at these plants, more and more of these women make their way to the United States to work as domestics, janitors, seamstresses, and nannies. Many are housekeepers or live-in maids, often earning less than the minimum wage. Hondagneu-Sotelo notes that over 68 percent of the estimated 100,000 domestic workers in Los Angeles are Latinas, a situation mirrored in other metropolitan areas of the country (2001, 17). Often working “off the books” because of their immigration status, these domestics earn poverty wages and are subject to abuse and discrimination.

The need to send remittances home is primarily what drives these women north, despite the risks. In light of the growth in remittances from immigrants to their families, clearly labor exportation—increasingly gendered—has served as a sort of “spatial fix” for Latin American economies burdened by high rates of unemployment and debt. Nonetheless, the outflow of women from Latin American communities has negative consequences as well. Recent reports indicate that more and more women coming to the United States from Central America and Mexico are leaving

their own children behind with relatives and neighbors, often for extended periods of time (Nazario 2002). Once the mothers are able to obtain legal residence, they often take steps to have their children join them in the United States.

In some cases, as noted by Nazario, domestic violence at home, compounded by economic factors, leads women to migrate. This, ironically, subjects them to further abuse and violence on the dangerous road north, and once they reach the United States, they often find the same patterns reproduced. Well into the twenty-first century, patriarchal structures continue to dominate our homes, and Latina women continue to be subject to both physical and psychological abuse, not only at home but also on the street and in the workplace. Among Latina/os, incidents in which rejected lovers or husbands kill their women and children are all too numerous, although admittedly violence against women is not Latino-specific. Women's work outside the home, however, has made many less willing to endure machista practices and more aware of marginalization and abuse.

While Latinas' experiences are multiple, diverse, and complex, it is important to develop a critical awareness of the dilemmas faced by Latinas and women in general in both the domestic and labor spheres. In part because of transformations in their social location and in family relations, Latinas are increasingly unwilling to put up with sexism, domestic violence, and subjugation. Growing awareness of domestic violence as a crime is leading Latina women to speak out against the rape and abuse not only of women but also of young children, violence often perpetrated by family members, friends, or clergy. They are also more apt to unite with other women, working-class or otherwise, gay or straight, both locally and internationally, across racial, ethnic, and national lines, to fight oppression of any type. Class, however, like race and ethnicity, continues to divide women, and Latinas are not exempt from participating in the exploitation and oppression of other women, whether Latinas or not.

Thesis 11

The Latino Bloc is marked by internal political and social contradictions.

As the U.S. Latina/o population grows, it also becomes more diverse politically, with political differences frequently tied to differences in social positioning or class status. Upwardly mobile Latina/os are often more apt to accept neoconservative policies advocating retrenchment and increased repression at home, along with higher military spending and intervention

in defense of the interests of oil corporations and military contractors. That these policies should bring destruction to hundreds of thousands and lead to the recruitment of Latina/o youth to die on the front lines seems of little interest to those whose middle-class children are unlikely to “volunteer” for military service.

Along with the general U.S. population, the entire Latino Bloc is, of course, subject to government and corporate-sponsored disinformation. The warping effect of the dominant ideological mindset becomes evident when Chicana/os cheer the nomination of Alberto Gonzales, a legitimizer of torture, for U.S. attorney general simply on the grounds that he is a Texas Latino. There is still a strong if misguided belief that a Latina/o in higher office is there to serve “the people” and therefore is good for Latina/o interests. Those who believe this will no doubt ultimately be disabused of this notion. If ethnicity blinds us to the point that we cannot distinguish between those who serve the interests of ethnic minority communities and those who do not, then clearly our ethnic identity is being used against us. Increasingly we see how easily black, brown, and Asian individuals who advocate hegemonic policies (the Ward Connerlys, Clarence Thomases, and Alberto Gonzaleses) make their way into the higher echelons of power. A real danger lies in thinking that matters will be different once the Latino Bloc constitutes a majority. It would behoove us to remember what material conditions were like for blacks in apartheid South Africa, where they were in the majority.

If the wide spectrum of ideological positionalities within the Latino Bloc appears to negate any notion of political unity, the social location of the majority of Latina/os does perhaps provide for and map out a different story. It is this multitude’s labor and its productive and reproductive power that will allow it to transcend its political and social contradictions.

Conclusion: Multiple Internal Contradictions and the Utility of Building Blocs

For some, the specter of a Latino Bloc is haunting the United States. Yet at this historical juncture, it is an entity that cannot be legislated, exorcised, or wished away. We are here to stay, as are all U.S. minority and majority populations. The numbers, cultures, views, tastes, and languages of the Latino Bloc will undoubtedly profoundly affect the United States, just as in another era the Arab presence in the Spanish peninsula had a lasting impact. Our numbers suggest that we will eventually tilt the scales in the

direction of a Latina/o ascendancy, but not completely. This will never be a homogeneous land; it never has been and it never will be. Heterogeneity (cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic) will continue to define it.

But cultural diversification in and of itself is nothing to cheer about if social stratification and racism persist; if the state wields power in ways that pit one sector against another as we struggle to survive in the same violent economic/geographic spaces; if some of us are oppressed or oppress others, are exploited or exploit others. Even acceptance of cultural diversification within the United States is meaningless if it comes at the cost of exploitation and military intervention abroad. Our problems are at bottom not cultural; they are social, economic, and political, and however much we might think that culture is constitutive of the world around us, it is time to see that culture is not genetic or inherent but is shaped by our daily reality. Unemployment, lack of health care for all, violence in our schools and streets, domestic violence in our homes, hawkish politicians in power, war mongering, racial profiling and police brutality, exploitation of cheap labor here and around the world, homophobia, prostitution of children, and the rapid destruction of the environment and thus our planet—all of these and more are problems that we need to address collectively. We must not allow these issues to be facilely reduced, as they historically have been, to “cultural differences,” or taken as a “clash of civilizations.”

The future of the Latino Bloc is open, but, we would argue, its construction and utility are likely to be closely tied to the productive and reproductive power of its members. Given their history and racial/ethnic heterogeneity and the critical role of the labor they provide, we would like to envision these Latina/os as agents of resistance—that is, following Linebaugh and Rediker (2000), as the “motley crew” of history that challenges the colossus of capital and, in the process, the current configuration of the state. To this end, building blocs will be crucial.

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