

(Re)constructing Latinidad: The Challenge of Latina/o Studies

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Who is a Latina/o?

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

Who is a Latina/o? What constitutes a Latina/o identity? When does a Latin American become a US Latina/o? How do regional, national, and political identities – Chicano, Boricua, Tejano, Central American – intersect with the larger rubric of “Latino”? How do we account for socioeconomic, linguistic, racial, generational, and gender differences? How can we explore the mutual interactions, transculturations, conflicts, and power struggles among the 38 million Latinas/os in the United States, not to mention the power asymmetries between Latinas/os and dominant society? As a multi- and interdisciplinary site of academic inquiry, Latina/o studies examines the multiple factors that affect the everyday lives of US Latinas/os. Such heterogeneity challenges scholars to find new, interdisciplinary approaches that can address our multiple and shifting realities.

Since the early 1990s, Latina/o studies has produced cutting-edge knowledge that responds to the historical shifts witnessed by our communities: colonialism and subordination, border crossing and transnationalism, racism and racialization, gendered identities and sexualities, stereotypes and representations, and the constitution of hybrid identities. These areas of inquiry are also located at the intersections between individual selves, collective groups, and the institutions of civil society, the media and the state. If identity is defined by the dialogic struggles between notions of the self and the constructions imposed from the outside (other individuals, institutions, and discourses), then Latina/o identities need to be understood at the interstices of both.

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

A middle-class immigrant from Venezuela, Sarita came to the US to study English originally in the late 1990s, but decided to stay in Chicago and brought her children over at the beginnings of the Hugo Chávez turmoils. Yet she also stayed because she fell in love with a Chilean man. Sarita and her children are undocumented, but their lives are informed by the middle-class values and aspirations that were part of her life in Venezuelan society. Their preoccupations range from being deported anyday to maintaining their social status through consumerism and social circles. José, a gay, Puerto Rican professor, has been in the United States since he was a graduate student, yet he is still very connected to Puerto Rican Island culture, to Spanish, and to Latin America. His long-term partner is an Anglo man who doesn't speak Spanish. They live in the suburbs and attend the Chicago opera and theater after work when they can. José grew up very poor on the Island, yet he is perceived as an Anglo because of his light skin color and blond hair. His gay identity, however, makes him vulnerable to homophobia and exclusion. Rosario, a Mexican woman in her fifties, a single mother of two young men, has not found full-time employment in years because she does not have a degree, yet she doesn't have enough money to pay for her tuition to complete her bachelor's degree in a continuing education program in the city. She is a citizen, but she cannot afford to pay her gas bills. She has no medical insurance, but she owns a small home in the south side of the city. Her car is always breaking down, and she is constantly struggling to make ends meet. Yet her cultural life is very rich. She has been an active participant of various Latino arts and theater organizations in the city for more than twenty years and she possesses a particular social capital in terms of her knowledge about the

community. Dave (for David), half Puerto Rican, half Mexican, was born in Chicago but raised in the suburbs by his Mexican mother, who wanted to escape life in the inner city after her divorce. Despite his suburban identity, he grew up poor, lacking any sort of luxury and having to work since he was a child. Like many native-born Latinas/os, he speaks English and feels uncomfortable speaking Spanish. Many of his acquaintances assume he is privileged and assimilated because of his suburban, Anglophone identity. Yet he is deeply connected to his biological father and his family, who live in a very poor area of the city. His identity integrates the suburbs and the inner city, for he has been a part of these two worlds, cultures, and families. He knows about gang violence, about inner city high schools, and about unemployment through the experiences of his half brothers. He also knows about middle-class lifestyles, an individualist work ethos, and Anglo families and neighbors. And myself, a Puerto Rican *blanquita* who has lived in the United States for thirty years, been married to two working-class Chicanos, and have felt less and less connected to the Island as the years go by. A single mother of two Puerto Rican/Mexican daughters, and having lived in most regions of the United States, my own experience has connected me to both US Puerto Rican and Chicano/Mexicano cultures. I have in-laws in El Paso, Texas, and sisters in Boston and New York. Chicago is now my home. I call my girls *niñas* (the Mexican term) instead of *nenas* (the Puerto Rican term), I spend more time with my Mexican mother in law than with my own mother, but I definitely love to dance salsa and merengue more than cumbias or nortenas. In my case, class, gender, and cultural identities have all been marked by my personal connections to the Mexican American community.

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

Despite the fact that Spanish has been repeatedly hailed as the common denominator among Latinas/os, the linguistic diversity within this sector continues to be hybrid, fluid, and politically contingent. That evening, José refused

to speak in English to David, asserting the dominance of Spanish at the table. If David has been privileged socially and in educational institutions for his knowledge of English and for not having an accent, contrary to José's heavily accented English despite his many years in the US, that evening David became a linguistic minority, silenced by the dominance of Spanish among the group, an experience of exclusion that he has faced multiple times. This moment of linguistic conflict represented the inverse of language politics in the United States, whereby Spanish is usually subordinated and racialized. In this case, José's Latin American subjectivity and linguistic power exerted dominance over a US-born Latino.

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

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

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

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

Redefining Latinidad

In Chicago, as in the other major Latino urban centers in the United States, communities from all Latin American countries live, work, dance, and interact throughout the cities that they are also transforming. Chicago is the third largest city in the US and home to the second largest Mexican and Puerto Rican communities nationwide. It is also home to a growing Guatemalan sector that has become the third largest Latino group in this urban area. As of the 2000 Census, Latinas/os constitute 26 percent of Chicago's total population. Of that, Mexicans

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constitute 70.4 percent, Puerto Ricans 15 percent, Guatemalans 1.8 percent, Ecuadorians 1.2 percent, and Cubans 1.1 percent. The fact that the Guatemalans and Ecuadorians have outnumbered the Cubans suggests that the traditional trinity of the three major historical minorities – Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American – is shifting, creating a much more complex mosaic of Latin American national encounters. Indeed, recent Census figures show that Chicago ranks ninth in the metropolitan areas receiving large numbers of South American immigrants. Certainly, Peruvians have long made Chicago their home. In addition, the so-called “new Latinas/os” – Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and other South and Central Americans – are all represented in the growing Latino demographics of the city.

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

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

Angie Chabrárn Dernersesian coined the term “domestic transnationalism” to refer to the multiple power dynamics that emerge as a result of interlatino interactions. First, there are myriad examples of mutual transculturations among different Latino nationals. From the impact of Afro-Caribbean music in Mexican culture (Carlos Santana’s music), to the linguistic borrowings and influences, let’s say, between Cubans and Nicaraguans in Miami, to the ways in which new Latino cuisine fuses Mexican ingredients with Caribbean ones, Latinas/os from various nationalities are creating new cultural objects and practices that are the result

of two or more national influences. (The combined Puerto Rican and Mexican hanging flags for the car sold in Chicago is another evidence of these transculturalizations). Secondly, there are outright cultural conflicts among Latinas/os, most of which stem from the ways in which we racialize each other. These negative constructions of the national Other are usually fueled and informed by stereotypes and racializations that have been historically shared and internalized, but that also point out differences in behavior that may result from gender and racial subordination and from the larger forces of colonization. For instance, for some Mexican women, Puerto Rican women are "rencorosas" and aggressive; from the perspective of the latter, the Mexicanas seem too submissive and "sufridas" (Pérez 2003). There are also instances in which perceived differences of power inform the disidentification or the gesture toward differentiation from our national others. For instance, public figures in the Cuban American community have rejected any comparisons or analogies to Mexican economic immigrants. This is partly a way of protecting the privileges that the Cuban exile generation has held as political refugees escaping a communist regime. In their case there are also racial (white) and class identities (middle-class, professional sector) that need to be protected and reclaimed. For undocumented Latinas/os, Puerto Rican US citizenship is seen as a privilege, while many Puerto Ricans consider it another reminder of their colonial and second-class status within the United States. At the same time, Puerto Ricans are continuously racialized by many other Latinas/os for their Caribbean Spanish, for their darker skin color, and for their high poverty rates. Many Latinas/os also refuse to be confused for a "Mexican," an attitude that reveals their fear of being racialized themselves as much as their internalization of that very same dominant discourse. Many of these disavowals and discourses of subordination, then, are rooted in larger structural forces rather than in individual prejudices.

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

repertoire of transculturated elements; or making oneself part of a larger group, by either cutting in line or with the assistance of others.

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

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

Conclusion

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

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