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Latino Identities and Ethnicities

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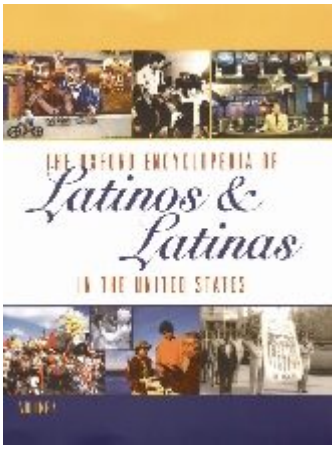

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Latino Identities and Ethnicities.

U.S. Latinos and Latinas are directly and indirectly affected by the terms and labels that identify them both within their communities and in the larger U.S. society. In this essay we define some of these terms and trace the ways they have been used in various historical periods. Our aim is to show the multiple meanings and values they have acquired in different contexts. We point to the complexity of identity in a country in which racial and ethnic paradigms have historically eclipsed class and status considerations. Finally, we present an overview of the ways that Latinos and Latinas have in turn struggled to define themselves through discourse and language against racializing and injurious terms. As we explain below, in discussing terminology it is essential to recognize that Latinos and Latinas are not a homogeneous community. Moreover, the ways in which different groups and individuals choose their identities through the various labels reveal their multiple historical experiences, their political ideologies, their economic and social status positions, and their national and cultural identities. Together, these shape the diversity of the U.S. Latino and Latina community.

Certain labels and terms used to define Latinos and Latinas carry particular connotations, ideologies, and social values. In fact, generally speaking, the labels used to designate racial minorities in U.S. society recreate assumptions about groups that reinforce their socioeconomic, political, and cultural subordination. Conscious that language has been one of the tools of empire and colonization, many Latinos and Latinas articulate a very strong

and clear awareness of the ways that the U.S. government and this society's social institutions and dominant culture use language to subordinate them—whether through English-only policies, census terminology, or racially denigrating insults. Not surprisingly, Latinos and Latinas, like African Americans and other minorities, have struggled both as a group and as individuals to address the impact that words, metaphors, and labels have on their chances for survival and success in this society. In the process, they have created their own terms of self-reference, using them to contest the dominant notions and stereotypes about their communities and themselves.

Labels and terms are flexible. Their varied meanings and social values shift according to the particular historical moment and place in which they are created. The cultural and ethnic labels adopted by and for U.S. Latinos and Latinas have been contingent on regional particularities as well as on the individuals or institutions that have used them.

Both the terms people use to identify themselves and the reasons for adopting them are varied and complex, and their meanings are continuously contested. While for some these discussions of terminology seem to be blown out of proportion, others argue that words have power and that word choice does matter. The fact remains, however, that these often-heated debates and disagreements point to the extent to which social labels have significant impact on people's access to resources, political rights, social visibility and status, and cultural identities. Thus, exploring the meanings and social values embedded in these terms is essential, for these labels play a significant role in the struggle for citizenship rights and social justice in contemporary U.S. society.

Ethnic Labels in Contemporary U.S. Society

In 1977 the U.S. Office of Budget and Management issued Directive 15, creating five racial/ethnic categories: White, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, American (i.e., U.S.) Indian or Alaskan Native, and Hispanic. At the time, there was a specific purpose for creating these five categories—a purpose that seems to have been largely forgotten, but that was and continues to be important for the entire nation. Initially, these categories were created as a tool to measure how well the United States was doing, as a society, in the fight against racism and the social exclusion of racialized minorities that had led to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. How, for example, can we track how many Latinos and Latinas are in fact graduating from high school or college? How do we measure how many African Americans are getting loans or mortgages? How can the society's progress toward desegregating our cities' schools and neighborhoods be evaluated? One way was simply to create categories and start counting. Measuring and trying to track the progress toward becoming a society of equals is a far cry from the creation of a “quota system,” which is the term that the political right pinned on affirmative action soon after it began to be practiced.

Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), President Lyndon Johnson gave perhaps the clearest formal articulation of affirmative action as a policy: “It is not enough to just open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to get through those gates.” In other words, the impetus for creating policies such as affirmative action was not limited solely to ensuring racial minorities' access to full citizenship. Rather it was aimed at finally keeping the promise of citizenship—that is, the promise to create a national community of equals, initially made through the 1866 Civil Rights Act and enshrined in the Constitution through the 14th amendment.

The ability to measure the nation's progress toward full inclusion is perhaps the most important rationale for the ethnic labels created in the mid-1970s. In fact, the categories created in Directive 15 became a cornerstone of affirmative action policy in the 1980s. But the creation of these labels also resulted in two problems that perhaps were inevitable. The first is that these categories or labels—like any other names—acquired lives of their own, beyond either their initial intent or the control of those who created them. And hence their meanings and social value inevitably have changed over time. The second problem is that the labels—again, like any name—fail to capture any individual's experience, let alone the diverse experiences of entire groups. From this point of view, to put it bluntly, all five of these ethnic labels are best described as “masterpieces of ambiguity,” to borrow the expression coined in a different context by Maria Eugenia Matute-Bianchi (1979). The term “Hispanic,” for example, was defined by the 1990 U.S. census in the following way:

> A person is of Spanish/Hispanic origin if the person's origin “ancestry” is Mexican, Mexican-Am., Chicano, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Ecuadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Salvadoran; from other Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean or Central or South America; or from Spain.

(U.S. Bureau of the Census, p. 51)The consequences of differentiating racialized groups through these ethnic categories and putting them in a hierarchy are contradictory. On the one hand, the labels to some extent allow for the political inclusion for which racial minorities fought during the 1960s civil rights movement. On the other hand, as the report by President Bill Clinton's task force on race suggested in 1998, they also reinforce the belief in the superiority of whiteness and “white privilege” in the U.S. socio-racial hierarchy (Holmes, p. 1A). In fact, unlike the past understanding we had of this society as a melting pot, today what we seem to have is the idea that there are insurmountable cultural differences among groups, a point advanced with increasing frequency by conservative scholars, most notably Samuel Huntington (2004), to the detriment of Latinos and Latinas in the United States.

Hispanic vs. Latino

Shortly after the term “Hispanic” was officially coined, the 1980s were proclaimed the “Decade of the Hispanic.” Then, a few years into the 1980s, various grassroots and progressive sectors of Latin American descent began to adopt the term “Latino,” arguing that the label “Hispanic” had European connotations that emphasized the Spanish heritage of Latin America, and that it therefore did not allow for the inclusion of indigenous peoples or descendants of Africans, neither of whom, after all, had any connection to or ancestry in Europe. The term “Latino” began to be used in some (but not all) large cities around the country, such as New York, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles, in which groups from various Latin American origins coexist.

Nationally, the use of the label “Hispanic” versus the term “Latino” has become a sensitive issue for some. There has been an ongoing debate concerning which term more accurately represents the roughly 40 million people of Latin American descent living in the United States, and also concerning who comes under these all-encompassing terms. Some argue, for example, that the term “Latino” is preferred by progressives and is used by many working-class people, while “Hispanic” tends to be associated with those who are more politically conservative and have a higher socioeconomic status. Indeed, in certain parts of the country, the racial and lower-status connotations of the term “Latino” lead some to perceive it as an insult, while others who have lived in the United States for generations consider that its link to Latin America does not acknowledge their U.S. citizenship or longtime residence in the United States. In other words, regional, historical, and cultural legacies also determine the preference for each of the terms, as is the case, for example, in New Mexico, Colorado, and other parts of the Southwest, where the term “Hispanic” is preferred, or in midwestern cities such as Chicago, where people refer to themselves primarily by their nationality (Mexican, Colombian, and so forth).

The vagueness of the official definition of “Hispanic” has led to many debates in this country concerning who is a Hispanic, and on what grounds. Are citizens from Latin America's sovereign nations who currently live in the United States as “Hispanic” as those born in the United States? Should this distinction be made? Given this vagueness and its consequences for public policy and social and race relations, as well as for an individual's daily life, it is essential that we acknowledge that the term “Hispanic” is first, foremost, and above all a bureaucratic invention for purposes of data collection and measurement by the Census Bureau and other state offices.

Indeed, in its origins, the term “Hispanic”—like the grassroots alternative designation “Latino”—is in no way tied to any historical, territorial, or cultural background or the identity of any one national-origin population group in the United States. Insofar as ethnic labels are by definition abstractions of reality, it is not self-evident that the discussion over which term to use is actually even valid, particularly in view of the diversity of the populations of Latin American descent in the United States.

Hence, in this essay we use the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably. As the following outline of the various national-origin groups encompassed by the labels “Hispanic” and “Latino” suggests, beyond quite varied national histories, they differ in other important respects—their political status as citizens, exiles, immigrants, undocumented workers, or refugees being perhaps most relevant. For many people of Latin American descent, political status is a

key variable in their life chances and experiences in the United States. Similarly, gender, class, social status, education, language, and generation in their home countries also affect Latin American immigrants' life chances here. Moreover, political ideology and generation shape very different expectations related to integration into U.S. society as well as expectations about returning to their homelands.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that in contrast to African Americans, for example, Latinos and Latinas as a group do not share the experience of a long period of history in the United States. Some populations of Latinos and Latinas have been here a long time; others only began to arrive in large numbers during the 1980s. Generally speaking, the term “Latino” includes two national-origin groups—sectors of the Mexican-origin population and Puerto Ricans—who are U.S. citizens as a result of conquest and colonization and whose respective historical experiences therefore define them as U.S. historical minorities, rather than as immigrants, residents, exiles, or refugees.

In addition, the term encompasses the members of a number of other groups of various Latin American origins, many of whom have been longtime citizens and residents of this country: those documented immigrants who have left their homelands permanently, whether in search of jobs and a more secure economic future for their families, or in search of adventure, or for other personal reasons; political refugees who, as a result of persecution by their governments for their political beliefs and/or actions, have been forced to leave their countries and live in exile in this country; and people known as undocumented workers, or “indocumentados,” a term that refers to someone who has either crossed the U.S. border illegally or who has resided in this country for many years without proper identification papers, such as a passport, a visa, or a Social Security number.

The Historical Minorities

Perhaps the most important difference among the various national-origin groups under the rubric of “Latino” or “Hispanic” is the still unrecognized fact that Puerto Ricans and some sectors of Mexican Americans have never been immigrants. Like African Americans and Native Americans, these two national-origin groups neither chose to become part of the United States nor participated in that decision. Rather, having been conquered and colonized by the United States during the nineteenth century, they are more accurately referred to as historical minorities, or as some scholars have defined them, “colonized minorities.”

Mexican Americans.

Sectors of the Mexican American population are descendants of the conquest of the territories of the Southwest. Although not all Mexican-origin people can claim to be direct descendants of the original populations living in that region at the time of the United States–Mexican War (1846–1848), this historical reality shapes the understanding of the experience of the population of Mexican descent in the United States. Representing roughly 60 percent of the U.S. Latino and Latina population, this national-origin group includes longtime citizens and residents as well as immigrants who may have crossed the border as far back as the Mexican Revolution of 1910 or as recently as a few years, months, or even days ago.

In the course of the more than 150 years of their presence on U.S. territory, the terminology referring to people of Mexican descent has varied enormously and been shaped specifically by the U.S. context. Hence, the meaning of the word “mexicano” or “Mexican,” for example, goes beyond its specific reference to a place of origin. Although strictly speaking it is a neutral term that merely denotes people whose country of origin is Mexico, in the U.S. context the term “Mexican” has long had pejorative connotations. Still, for many, “Mexican” or “mexicano” was and continues to be a term of pride, particularly in midwestern cities such as Chicago.

Indeed, regional particularities have undoubtedly shaped the ways that people of Mexican descent have referred to themselves over time and continue to ensure a diversity of preferences and politics in the names people choose for themselves. For example, because their families had resided for a long time either on the U.S. side of the United States–Mexico border or in the state of Texas itself, Mexican-origin people in Texas prefer the term “tejano” (42 percent in a recent survey), followed by “mexicano,” and finally by “Mexican American.” On the other hand, in California, depending on whether they are in the northern or southern part of the state, Mexican-origin people prefer first “mexicano or mexicana,” second “Chicano or Chicana,” and third “Latino or Latina.”

The case of New Mexico is also interesting in this respect. In the nineteenth century, New Mexicans used the appellations “español” or “mexicano,” “gente de habla español,” and, interestingly, “español-mexicano” (Spanish-Mexican), but again the context mattered in each case. The user of the term “español” (Spaniard) was not indigenous, was Spanish-speaking, and was probably Catholic. “Gente de habla español” (Spanish-speaking people) was sometimes also used in legal documents filed with the Catholic Church. The third term, “español-mexicano” (Spanish-Mexican), was sometimes also used by outsiders, who tended to refer to all Spanish-surnamed New Mexicans (many of whom were actually Indians or members of indigenous populations) as Mexican.

But by far the most popular choice of self-identification among New Mexicans is the term “Hispano,” which emphasizes Spanish rather than Mexican origin. In the years following the Works Progress Administration (WPA, 1930s) of the New Deal era, large sectors of the Mexican-origin population in New Mexico reinforced this preference. Opting for the term “Spanish American,” they began recording the folklore and traditions of the Spanish-speaking and mostly Catholic society, whose roots stretched as far back as 1598. At the same time, the Alianza Hispano Americana, a mutual aid society popular in New Mexico and Arizona, proudly advanced the two terms “Mexican American” and “Spanish American” interchangeably. It is important to note that although the term “Spanish American” enjoyed popularity by 1940 and until 1970, New Mexicans since then tend to reject the terms “Latino,” “Mexican,” and “Mexican American.” Instead, they indicated on the 2000 U.S. census that their preferred term of self-identification was “Hispano” or “Hispanic.” Their next preferred term was “Chicano,” and the third was “Mexican,” but not “Mexican American.”

Although New Mexicans reject the term “Mexican American” as pertaining solely to recent immigrants and their immediate descendants, in other parts of the Southwest the use of the term “Mexican American” is seen as a means to reduce hatred directed against Mexicans. During the second half of the twentieth century, for example, racial animosities surfaced in towns from Texas to California, leading many World War II veterans, small business owners, educators, and workers of different classes to determine that the term “Mexican American” distinguished them from the more recent arrivals from Mexico. These included braceros and other poor workers who bore severe discrimination even as the U.S. government enticed them northward in a program (the bracero program) aimed at filling temporary labor shortages in the fields of the Southwest as well as in the factories of the Midwest. Hence, during the 1940s and 1950s, people of Mexican origin in places like Texas, Arizona, and California hoped that adopting the label “Mexican American” would help protect their children from the impact of racism.

Indeed, legal segregation and legalized policies of discrimination in place into the 1970s reinforced the idea among significant sectors of the Mexican-origin population that the term “Mexican American” was preferable to the term “mexicano,” which to many signifies “recent immigrant.” In turn, during the 1940s and 1950s, English-dominant people of Mexican descent who attempted to speak Spanish were pejoratively referred to as “pochos” by mexicanos. Confronted by ongoing discrimination from both U.S. and Mexican societies during the 1960s civil rights era, Mexican American activist youth, primarily in the state of California and parts of the Southwest, began to self-identify as Chicanos and Chicanas, in an effort to acknowledge, and name, their unique historical and bicultural experience. In the early years of the twenty-first century, there is no single preferred term among Mexican-origin people, who use several names to self-identify, including “Latino” and “Hispanic.”

Puerto Ricans.

The second-largest historical minority group within the U.S. Latino and Latina population is Puerto Ricans, who were colonized by the United States in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898 and who had U.S. citizenship imposed on them in 1917. Puerto Rico was part of the Treaty of Paris settlement ending the Spanish-American War. The island became a territory of the United States, and Puerto Ricans officially became U.S. citizens through the Jones Act in 1917. The status of the island of Puerto Rico has long been debated within this national-origin group. While Puerto Ricans have fought in every war in which the United States has been engaged since World War I and could if there were a draft be called to join the armed forces, Puerto Ricans living on the island cannot vote for the president of the United States because they do not pay federal taxes. In addition, it is important to note that although Puerto Ricans do have a congressional representative, they have no vote in Congress.

Undoubtedly, U.S. citizenship has ensured the continuous circular flow of Puerto Ricans between the mainland U.S. territory and the island. But throughout the twentieth century, the anomalous status of the island of Puerto Rico in the United States has led some activists and scholars to refer to it as a “neocolonial” state. During the civil rights period,

a number of terms emerged to signify the cultural distinctions emerging between Puerto Ricans on the island and in New York. In an attempt to recapture and acknowledge the indigenous origins of the island, Puerto Rican activists living in New York City adopted the indigenous term “Borinquen” (also spelled Borikén), which the Taínos, the native Indians of the island, used to refer to Puerto Rico, calling themselves boricuas.

“Borikén” means “land of the brave noble lord” and “boricua” means “the valiant people of the sacred house.” The term “boricua” has historically been used to emphasize the anti-colonial sentiment of the Puerto Rican people. It is also used to affirm their sense of cultural strength and nonwhite legacy. Major Puerto Rican institutions such as Boricua College in New York City, founded in the 1970s, as well as Puerto Rican student organizations such as Yale University's Despierta Boricua use the term in this context. Web sites such as boricua.com also attest to the continuing vibrancy of this term in the context of the reaffirmation of Puerto Rican culture outside of the island.

Similarly, the term “Nuyorican,” combining “New York” and “Puerto Rican,” was coined at that time to refer to members of the Puerto Rican diaspora living and/or growing up in New York City. “Nuyorican” refers most specifically to a Puerto Rican from New York, but it also has been used to mean all Puerto Ricans in the U.S. diaspora. It is interchangeable with the term “neorican,” first used by Jaime Carrero in *Jet neorriqueño: Neo-Rican Jet Liner* (1964), which can mean the “new Puerto Rican,” also reaffirming the new identities being forged outside of the island. The term “Nuyorican” is also used to refer to a particular movement of political, cultural, and artistic trends that were politically oppositional and that expressed forms of resistance against the colonial conditions of U.S. Puerto Ricans. The Nuyorican Poets Café, founded around 1973 and located on East Third Street in New York City, is an example of the kinds of institutions and spaces created at the time that still carry the original meaning of the term. The anthology *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*, published in 1975, was a foundational text in the context of literary production. Today, the term “Nuyorican” is still used in the naming of Puerto Rican/Latino artistic productions, even in the more commercialized arena of salsa and Latin dancing. In Belgium there is a salsa dance company, The Nuyorican Company, whose name acknowledges the pioneering role of the Nuyorican dance styles in the creation of the mambo craze. Thus, while originally the term carried very clear political and cultural values against the mainstream, and in many instances continues to do so, it is currently much more generalized. As is the case with the Mexican-origin population, there is no preferred term among this national-origin group. In addition to identifying as Puerto Ricans, they also refer to themselves variously as boricuas, Nuyoricans, and neoricans. Finally, it is worth noting that the term “Puerto Rican American” is a misnomer used by sectors of the dominant society.

Hispanic Origin Population by Detailed Group: 1990 and 2000

Hispanic Population by Origin Response	1990 Census		Census 2000		Change 1990 to 2000	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	21,900,089	100.0	35,238,481	100.0	13,338,392	60.9
Mexican	13,393,208	61.2	20,900,102	59.3	7,506,894	56.1
Puerto Rican	2,651,815	12.1	3,403,510	9.7	751,695	28.3
Cuban	1,053,197	4.8	1,249,820	3.5	196,623	18.7
Dominican	520,151	2.4	799,768	2.3	279,617	53.8
Central American	1,323,830	6.0	1,811,676	5.1	487,846	36.9
Costa Rican	57,223	0.3	72,175	0.2	14,952	26.1
Guatemalan	268,779	1.2	407,127	1.2	138,348	51.5
Honduran	131,066	0.6	237,431	0.7	106,365	81.2
Nicaraguan	202,658	0.9	194,493	0.6	−8,165	−4.0
Panamanian	92,013	0.4	98,475	0.3	6,462	7.0
Salvadoran	565,081	2.6	708,741	2.0	143,660	25.4
Other Central American	7,010	0.0	93,234	0.3	86,224	1230.0
South American	1,035,602	4.7	1,419,979	4.0	384,377	37.1

Argentinean	100,921	0.5	107,275	0.3	6,354	6.3
Bolivian	38,073	0.2	45,188	0.1	7,115	18.7
Chilean	68,799	0.3	73,951	0.2	5,152	7.5
Colombian	378,726	1.7	496,748	1.4	118,022	31.2
Ecuadorian	191,198	0.9	273,013	0.8	81,815	42.8
Paraguayan	6,662	0.0	8,929	0.0	2,267	34.0
Peruvian	175,035	0.8	247,601	0.7	72,566	41.5
Uruguayan	21,996	0.1	20,242	0.1	−1,754	−8.0
Venezuelan	47,997	0.2	96,091	0.3	48,094	100.2
Other South American	6,195	0.0	50,941	0.1	44,746	722.3
Spaniard	519,136	2.4	112,999	0.3	-406,137	-78.2
General Hispanic	1,403,150	6.4	5,540,627	15.7	4,137,477	294.9
Hispanic	390,945	1.8	2,316,515	6.6	1,925,570	492.5
Latino	1,577	0.0	411,559	1.2	409,982	25997.6
Spanish	444,896	2.0	765,879	2.2	320,983	72.1
Other Hispanic response	565,732	2.6	2,046,674	5.8	1,480,942	261.8

Source: US Census Bureau, Census 2000 and Census 1990

Immigrants, Residents, Exiles, Refugees, andU.S. Citizens of Latin American Descent

Along with the Mexican-origin and Puerto Rican populations, the term “Hispanic” or “Latino” also encompasses populations from Spanish-speaking countries in Central America and South America as well as from the Spanish Caribbean. It is important to add that for many people in this country Brazilians are considered “Hispanics” too. While some Brazilians are gradually beginning to recognize themselves as “Latinos,” most do not identify with the term “Hispanic” and have difficulty doing so, to a great extent because the land that is today Brazil was colonized by Portugal in the 1500s. Hence, Brazilians neither speak Spanish nor share the Spanish colonial heritage of the rest of Latin America.

These various populations of Latin American descent are all voluntary or involuntary immigrants, many of whom have become U.S. citizens or are longtime residents who, like the more recent arrivals albeit in different historical periods, crossed the border in search of jobs or a better standard of living. Indeed it is important to note that while most Latin Americans arrived and settled in this country in the latter half of the twentieth century, many of the members of these populations have long been present in the United States. This is very much the case, for example, with Chileans and Peruvians, who went to San Francisco during the gold rush of 1849; with the Cubans living in Tampa, whom José Martí turned to in his efforts to raise funds for Cuba's struggle for independence in the latter part of the nineteenth century; and with the Dominicans, whom Pedro Henríquez Ureña found well established in New York City when he arrived in 1901. As such, the term “Hispanic” or “Latino” brings together the two historical minorities discussed above and recent political refugees, such as the Salvadorans, fleeing U.S.–backed wars in Central America, as well as older political refugees who have lived in exile since fleeing their homelands many years ago, such as sectors of the Cuban population.

Referred to as El Exilio, this first post-Castro generation of *cubanos* began to arrive in the early 1960s, settling primarily in Miami immediately following the Cuban Revolution. In Cuba, this generation was called “gusanos,” a derogatory term that referred to the one duffle bag they were allowed to take with them when they left. The term literally means worm, or lowlife. A brief thaw in United States–Cuba relations during the late 1970s resulted in both governments agreeing to grant permission for Cuban Americans to travel to the island. In Cuba, the gusanos were now called “mariposas” (butterflies). Officially, the Cuban bureaucracy referred to them as “Cuban community on the

exterior.” In the United States, exiles were now sometimes referred to as the “Cuban community.” A later wave of Cuban refugees is known as “Marielitos,” after the name of the port of Mariel from which they left in 1980. In addition, another wave of Cubans known as “balseros” arrived on rafts in large numbers in 1994. In contrast to poor Cubans who came on rafts, the sons and daughters of government officials who had the means and the possibility to travel abroad started defecting in the late 1990s. Many stayed in Mexico and Spain, and some even made it to the United States. This group was known as “el exilio de baja intensidad” (low intensity exile) and were sometimes referred to as “gusanos de terciopelo” (velvet worms) for their desire that change come to Cuba through peaceful means, as had happened with the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. In the community, those born there but raised in the United States are referred to as “one and a halfers.” Those from “Generation X” are referred to as “Generation ñ.” Some born in the United States refer to themselves as Cuban Americans, and the parallel to “yuppies” is “YUCAs,” for young upwardly mobile Cuban Americans.

Consideration of political events in their countries of origin contributes to a better understanding of both the causes of immigration and the changing status of Latinos and Latinas in U.S. society. For example, Guatemalans, or Chapines as they are also called in the U.S. context, have spent the years following the brutal dictatorship in Guatemala in search of justice and retribution for crimes that the Guatemalan government has left unacknowledged to this day. Other exiles from Central America have become economic immigrants, like some of the Nicaraguan “Contras”—a term coined by the Reagan administration to refer to those who opposed the Sandinista government and left Nicaragua during the 1980s. This is also the case for sectors of the Dominican population who arrived in the aftermath of the 1965 U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic. Many Dominicans settled in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. Although some Dominicans refer to themselves as “quis-queyanos,” they do so only to the extent that they might call themselves “quisqueyanos” in their homeland. “Quisqueya” was the Arawak Indian name for the island, and it is actually incorporated into the Dominican national anthem, which opens thus: “Quisqueyanos valientes alcemos/nuestro canto con viva emoción … ” (Brave Quisqueyanos, let us sing with strong emotion). “Dominicanyorks” is a term coined by the middle class in the Dominican Republic as a strategy of “othering” and targeting the émigré population. It is used as a term of self-affirmation only by certain members of the Dominican elite but does not correspond to a collective instinct of the diaspora.

It is also important to consider the fact that the use of the term “Latino” or “Hispanic” overlooks many different linguistic and ethnic groups in each Latin American country. These include: various indigenous populations, such as the Quechuas of Peru, the Aymara of Bolivia, and the Maya of Guatemala; the Afro-Latinos or descendants of African slaves, including, for example, the Garifuna of Honduras; and the waves of immigrants from every country in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. People representing all of these groups of Latin Americans are also coming to the United States. As soon as they cross the border into the United States they become “instant Hispanics” (or “Latinos”) in the eyes of the dominant society—but not necessarily in their own.

The Geography of Labels

While it is important to specify the particularities of the national-origin populations under the rubric “Hispanic” or “Latino,” this does not mean that people of Latin American descent have little in common when they come to the United States. Latin Americans do have a long history of internal differentiation beyond their national experiences—differences of class, race, and gender and of various ethnic, religious, generational, and linguistic values. And undoubtedly these differences have been serious obstacles to achieving unity on the Latin American continent since the first republics were created there in the 1820s and 1830s. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that people of Latin American descent do share a history of hemispheric political and economic relationships between their respective countries and the United States. These relations date back as far as the early nineteenth century when the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 effectively unified the continent's history by declaring the hemisphere off limits to European powers. Many scholars believe that, beyond language and culture, the region's relationship with the United States is one of the main factors influencing the cultural identity of Latinos and Latinas in this country because it extends beyond individual national histories of conquest, economic exploitation, colonization, and political dictatorships.

Indeed, the creation and re-appropriation of cultural terms and labels are very much part of the political power struggles that have characterized U.S.–Latin American social and racial dynamics. These power struggles are one

reason why many people of Latin American descent, for example, consider that the use of the term “America” to signify solely the United States is an affront. After all, the term “America,” named after the voyage to the continent in 1501 by the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, refers to all the countries located in this hemisphere. As a Colombian immigrant observed in the early 1990s:

> “I never call people from this country ‘Americans.’ I use that word for everyone from Alaska to Patagonia. … I only know one America,” she explained. “Its geographical position may be North America, Central America or South America. But we're all American. Colombia isn't located in Europe, it isn't located in Asia, and it isn't in Africa either. So, if they [i.e. the United States] take the name of the entire continent for their country, what is left for ours? What is the name of the continent that Colombia is on?”

(Oboler1995, p. 151)Yet, although the term “American” is contested, this does not mean that Latin Americans' identity in continental terms is any clearer. Rather, the term “Latin America” too is still being debated and has yet to be fully forged. Hence, it is not surprising that some people of Latin American descent in the United States, particularly those who are recently arrived, would not understand or accept the notion of a *shared* identity—whether that identity be “Hispanic” or “Latino”—with all its attendant meanings and values.

Undoubtedly, labels, like names, have a life of their own, beyond the intention of those who create them. Since their emergence, the ethnic labels are increasingly serving to build on and/or reinforce what Benedict Anderson called “imagined communities” within each respective ethnic group, in effect allowing minorities to redefine the respective political reality of each label. Thus, for example, in recent years sectors of the Latino and Latina populations are reinterpreting the labels' reach in broader hemispheric and transnational terms. In so doing, these populations are both redefining the meaning of belonging and enabling minorities to engender a collective response to the particular incidents and issues affecting the group—including, but not limited to, attacks against racially marked individuals. Indeed, as the children of immigrants grow up and marry, new forms of cross-national relations are emerging as Mexicans marry Puerto Ricans and Chileans marry mexicanos, for example, resulting in new generations of “Mexi-Ricans” and “Chilicanos.” This in turn is leading to the creation of a new terminology that acknowledges the (multi)cultural coming together of groups from various Latin American origins, and hence the construction of *latinidad* by the new generations. This sense of latinidad constitutes, then, a shared experience inflected by the specific place, the various groups, and the particular icons that are used to display the various identities that come together on specific levels. Contexts such as media, popular culture, urban space, political organizations, school curricula, and personal relationships including those with spouses, friends, neighbors, and coworkers are all revitalized with new interactions and social and cultural dynamics that lead Latinos and Latinas to have an influence on each other.

In other words, by emphasizing their cultural commonality—their latinidad—the label “Hispanic” (or “Latino”) contributes to a sense of what Flores and Benmayor have called “cultural citizenship” among growing numbers of disenfranchised people of Latin American descent. Politically, this process is in turn allowing for the gradual emergence of pan-ethnic alliances, and hence for the growth of what Félix Padilla first termed “Latinismo,” the political coming together of the groups of various Latin American origins in the United States.

See also Affirmative Action; Bracero Program; Brazilians; Central Americans; Chicanos and Chicanas; Cuban Americans; Decade of the Hispanic; Dominicans; Latinidades; Latino; Mexican-Origin People in the United States; Nuyorican Poets Café; Public Policy; Puerto Ricans; and South Americans.

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