

Miguel Vasquez

# Latinos

## ¡Viva La Diferencia!

Unique and rich heritages mark Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the United States. And each of the many peoples and their cultures has, and will, contribute to the evolving U.S. in ways that richly deserve celebration and commemoration by Latino groups themselves and by the nation's heritage institutions. Indeed, attention to the distinctive peoples is imperative if the planning of heritage programs, identification of heritage resources, and development of heritage tourism are to reflect the diversity within this demographically and culturally diverse and significant U.S. population.

My basic point is that there is no real "Latino community." Instead, there are many. At a time when new census figures show burgeoning "Latino" or "Hispanic" populations in places like Iowa, Arkansas, and Georgia, and local, formally homogeneous, or unambiguously black or white populations in these places are struggling to come to terms with their newfound diversity, this is worth remembering.

Diversity is something I am somewhat familiar with. I was born and grew up in San Francisco—where one becomes accustomed to diversity quickly... or you leave; because that is what it is all about. My family background is Mexican, Spanish, Puerto Rican, and Italian. I have been married to a Mayan woman from Guatemala for 25 years. So I am sort of familiar with "life in the hyphen," as Ilan Stavans calls it.<sup>1</sup> I have sort of assumed, naively, that diversity was normal and, for many years, took it for granted.

Hispanics are not a unified ethnic population. Within this "community" is a tremendous diversity: ethnically, racially, socially, economically, politically, culturally, and even, linguistically. The commonality here is obviously the Spanish language and some elements of common history, culture, and religion. But even here there are major differences, since for many newcomers, indigenous people from Mexico, Guatemala, and

the Andean countries, Spanish is not even their first language. It is a *lingua franca* at best. Many, like Mixtec farmworkers around Fresno, forced north by NAFTA, or Kanjobal refugees from the Guatemalan war, now in Phoenix, speak it hesitantly, or not at all. They also are labelled "Hispanics."

### ***Where Do They Come From, Where Do They Go, Why Do They Come?***

Since Mexican Americans (65%), Puerto Ricans (9%), and Cubans (4%) together comprise nearly 80% of the Hispanic/Latino population in the U.S., I will focus on them.<sup>2</sup>

Depending on the place, Central and South American or Caribbean groups also comprise significant portions of local populations. Where once most U.S. Hispanics were rural, today overwhelmingly these folks live and work in urban areas. Los Angeles, now the second largest Spanish-speaking city in the world, is home to a population that is mostly Mexican and Central American in origin, others are from all over Latin America. New York is principally Puerto Rican and Central and South American. Miami is Cuban and Central and South American. Chicago is Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Central American. San Antonio has a population that is two-thirds Mexican. With San Francisco, San Jose, Albuquerque, and Tucson, this accounts for 50% of all Hispanics in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Some have been here since the *conquistadores* first came to the Southwest in the 16th century, and some are arriving at this moment. Why? It is not too difficult to figure out. Social scientists talk in terms of "push" and "pull" factors.

"Push" factors include political and economic crises and limited opportunities for education, jobs, or social mobility in home countries. In the last century, events like the Mexican and Cuban revolutions, or wars in Central America, have pushed hundreds of thousands of people north seeking respite and refuge. Economically, while North Americans ponder a possible recession, the vast majority of Latin Americans have confronted a very real recession for most of their lives—regardless of stock prices and growth trends—and life is often one long struggle. NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) has provoked an urban and northern exodus in many areas, since family farming is no longer economically viable and the cost of staple foods (and everything else) has risen much faster than wages.

“Pull” factors induce migration here to the north instead of to the south, including family ties, labor demand, wage differentials, better opportunities for work and education. If none of these work out (and for many they don’t—we just never hear of them), there remains the continuing myth of success—the “American Dream.” Immigration is simply a function of the larger picture of what is happening in home countries and what is happening here. It is macro-economics lived on a personal level: survival, and each immigrant group brings its contributions.

#### ***Poor Mexico—So Far From God, So Close to the United States***

Living in the only place in the world where a “third world” country shares a border with a “first world” nation, Mexican-Americans, unlike most other U.S. immigrant groups, can constantly renew family, cultural, and linguistic ties. Their contributions, however, aside from cheap farm labor, are seldom recognized by the mainstream. Several years ago, an Anglo student in one of my classes asked “what have Mexicans ever contributed to this country anyway?” (Political correctness is not big in Arizona.) As if chocolate, guacamole, tequila, and my grandmother’s enchiladas, were not enough of a contribution from Mexicans, how about California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of Nevada, Utah, and Colorado? What my student and many others don’t realize is that mining, ranching, and farming—the three economic activities that built the West, came here with Mexicans. Not just the labor, but also the technology. Mining techniques and know-how came into California and the rest of the region from Mexico, where gold and silver had been mined since the 16th century. Ranching and “cowboy” culture did not come west with the pioneers, it came north from Mexico, and Spain before that. (Most of the vocabulary: rodeo, lasso, corral, etc., comes from Spanish.) So even the seemingly most “American” of cultures is really Mexican. Likewise, easterners had no need or knowledge of irrigation for agriculture when they came west. Mexican, Spanish, and Moorish cultures provided that know-how. Today though, the Mexican population in the Southwest is overwhelmingly urban. With the demise of manufacturing in places like Los Angeles and San Antonio, it provides much of the workforce in service industries, as well as most of the jobs and new businesses.<sup>4</sup>

#### ***Living “La Vida Loca”***

There can be no question of the major influence of Puerto Rican music on U.S. culture, and not just Ricky Martin or Jennifer Lopez. But, starting with sugar, and later through industrialization, the island has long produced inexpensive consumer goods (without balance of trade deficits). Whether we recognize it or not, the Puerto Rican experience, under Spanish or U.S. rule, has for 500 years been a quintessentially colonial experience. The island has always belonged to someone else and its value has always been strategic—a gateway to the rest of Latin America. With few resources and little arable land, even with industrialization, the island’s economy could not absorb a growing population. This provoked enormous migration to New York City and other urban areas. Once here, factory closings effectively eliminated many of the “middle rungs” of the economic ladder that earlier immigrants had used to build their lives here. While some Puerto Ricans have become visible, “acceptable,” and prospered, and as many as 15% have more than a high school education, for most, “la vida loca” has never transcended their dreams, or the stereotypes still in place. Easy access from the island, generally substandard education, and poverty, and the maintenance of the very survival mechanisms (community and cultural ties, and language) that have made this unfulfillment bearable at all, have led to lingering over representation in lower socio-economic strata and a high degree of identifiability and continuing discrimination. As with other easily-identifiable groups, this discrimination can be overt and direct, as with “profiling,” anti-immigrant and English-Only initiatives, or attacks on bilingualism; or it can be more subtle—by banks and realtors in housing, by low educational expectations on the part of teachers, and biased hiring on the part of employers.

#### ***Viva Cuba Libre***

Cubans are a much different group. In fact they are two groups essentially: one group quite successful and one not. While both are exiles, the earlier group arrived on these shores with economic resources, education, entrepreneurial skills, political clout, and white skin. They have come to own and run much of Miami, and other communities, as well as much of the Spanish-language media in the U.S. and have achieved relative prosperity compared to other Latino groups.

They have maintained enduring family, cultural, and language ties. Their fair complexion and education have somewhat lessened their distinct identifiability and the level of discrimination they experience. The other, more recent group, the *Marielitos*, came here as ex-convicts from Cuba, with no family ties or resources and a darker skin, to a very different experience. They have tended to stay poor, uneducated, and powerless.<sup>5</sup>

Miami, the city where both make their home, with its beaches, music, and food is the vibrant crossroads of the United States and Latin America. Its entrepreneurial, shopping, and entertainment scenes help us recapture some of our balance of trade with countries to the south, since thanks to Cubans, many Latin Americans feel they are still in Latin America.

### *¡Viva La Diferencia!*

Perhaps what we most need to remember is that neither the U.S. nor Latin America and the Caribbean is monolithic or static. Each is diverse and changing and vary greatly in response to circumstances. Each culture in the hemisphere is a product of social relations between different groups, and they are constantly changing in response to the requirements of demographics,

changing technologies, and economic arrangements. Appreciating this complexity, and associated diversity, can only benefit our cultural resource programs.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995),
- <sup>2</sup> *Newsweek*, "Latino Americans: The Face of the Future," [http://newsweek.com/nwsrv/issue/02\\_99b/printed/int/us/latino\\_1.htm](http://newsweek.com/nwsrv/issue/02_99b/printed/int/us/latino_1.htm)
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Poor Mexico... So Far ....A quote attributed, ironically enough, to Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz, a staunch ally of the U.S. from James Diego Vigil, *From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican American Culture* (Prospect Hts., Illinois: Waveland Press) 1998.
- <sup>5</sup> Earl Shorris, *Latinos: a Biography of the People* (New York: Avon) 1992.

This paper derives from my presentation on diversity among Latinos in the U.S., given at the NPS ethnography training course in Miami, in May 2000.

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## Fazendeville

### Highlighting Invisible Pasts and Dignifying Present Identities

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**T**wenty years after the razing of the community of Fazendeville, the headline of an October 1, 1989, article in *The Times-Picayune* said: "Community Lost Its Life on Chalmette Battlefield." One of Fazendeville's former residents, Val Lindsey, Sr., remembered that when he closes eyes and thinks about what happened on that grassy field, he doesn't see what most people see—he doesn't see Andrew Jackson holding off the British in the Battle of New Orleans. Instead he sees his yesterdays—families, friends, and the remnants of his own personal battle. He sees the clean, quiet village of Fazendeville sacrificed on the altar of historic preservation 25 years ago.

Another resident, Evelyn Minor, noted that "it really was a unique place... Everyone knew each other. They were there to help each other...."

Henry Cager said, "it was the most beautiful place to live... it was a family affair." But perhaps Mr. Lindsey summed up the feeling of most of the residents, "I didn't have the money to fight it. There wasn't no yelling with the federal government. They didn't care. I had no choice. If I did, I'd be down there now."<sup>1</sup>

This historic African-American community known to many as Fazendeville or simply "the village"<sup>2</sup> existed from 1867-1964 on the site of the Chalmette National Battlefield in St. Bernard