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Defining America: Chicano/Latino Influence

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Author's Note

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### Abstract

With the 2016 Presidential Elections, immigration has become a hot topic of discussion among the presidential candidates as they debate what actions to take with respect to undocumented population residing in the United States. This study examines the ways in which Latina/os and immigrants have defined and redefined the American culture. Using peer review academic sources, this work explores the cultural development of Latina/os in the United States and how this group constitutes a critical foundation of American society. This work illustrates how the United States is known as the melting pot of cultures for many generations and Latina/o immigrants as many other European immigrants have bought into this idea by adopting many of the core American values, yet we deny them the right to call themselves Americans. Finally, this study addresses the importance of the continued acculturation process of Latina/os in the United States and how they will continue to enrich the American identity.

When most Americans think of a Hispanic or Latino/a, the typical picture that comes to mind is that of an illegal immigrant who is rugged, dark skinned and dirty, working here in the United States under a fake alias, who steals money and jobs from the American people. This image emerged through the mainstream media, who create this image as to define what a Hispanic looks like. By doing so they are not only attempting to create a barrier in which to identify 'true' Americans but also it allows for this sense of dehumanization on Hispanic people in America. The truth of the matter is that many Hispanics and Latinos are your average Americans, who were born in this country or brought here as undocumented immigrants. Regardless of whether or not person of Hispanic or Latin descent is here as a documented citizen or not, they are important to the continuation of American culture. In 2014, the Hispanic population in the United States reached an all-time high growing at a 55 million people (United States Census Bureau, 2014). With this we know that they make up 17 percent of the country's population. As 2016 marks an important year in America's history, we will be electing another candidate for President of the United States. It is with great knowledge that many have witnessed the political issues surrounding immigration and the Hispanic/Latino population and in what ways they might affect America. With great importance that we take action in accepting the Hispanic/Latino culture as it is, instead of insisting they be more American, because they have been a vital part of the construction of American culture.

In America, Spanish is the second most spoken language behind English. It is reported that approximately 37.5 million people in the United States speak Spanish (The Most Spoken Languages in America, 2015), which is not surprising considering that for years America has placed such an importance on being bilingual. As young children we are subject to shows like Dora, Barney, Sesame Street and many more, these are some of the various ways that we first

develop our understanding of language aside from our family. According to an executive, they stated how Dora was created to attract Latino markets stating, “a few years ago, we decided to reach out to Latinos... we could not afford to ignore them” (Jimenez, 2005, pp.5). Sparked by immigration and relatively high fertility rates, the number of Hispanics in the civilian U.S. workforce more than doubled, from 10.7 million to 25.4 million workers between 1990 and 2014 (Mora, 2015). The use of Spanish language on mainstream television is especially relevant in the context of the recent debates over immigration, and bilingual education (De la Torre, 2002). This is supported by the recent statistics which shows how the Hispanic population is the largest minority group in the United States (Motel and Patten, 2012). With this being said we would assume marketing teams would shift how they work in an attempt to reach a group who could potentially bring them great profits. At young ages, especially those in early elementary years, being able to count to ten in Spanish is very important; whether it be to outsmart your friends or just to say you are capable of speaking another language, Americans especially take great pride in it. In a graph by the U.S. department of education is showed the number of students who earned college credit in a foreign language class, for Spanish in 2000 the number was at 60 percent, where as in 2009 it was at 70% (Language Instruction in Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2016). There’s a term used in Anthropology which discusses the importance of language within a culture, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis talks about how language structures your concept of reality, and that our reality is too complex for the human mind to process at once and in an attempt to make sense of it we break it up into words to be able to think about it. Another term used in anthropology is the Sapir-Whorf Corollary which talks about the importance of objects to culture and how the more important they are the more words there are and vice versa (Keller, 2015). "Means of becoming more cultured or of equipping oneself with a skill or tool

which could be of use for some future occupation, while showing little genuine regard for the people or culture represented by the other language" (Koltowski, 1992, 42). It is also within those group of people who are bilingual by nature that we see this disconnect by both cultures. As shown in *Legal Alien* by Pat Mora, who discusses the complications that bilingual people face when dealing with the two separate cultures as nether one seems to accept her for who she is a Mexican and American (Ventura, 2005, p.30). However this is a problem many people who learn a foreign language face when translating, words like 'do' and 'did' are not explicitly stated in Spanish which can cause irritation amongst English speakers who are trying to learn it. This is why it is necessary for especially English learners to learn the culture as well in order to gain understanding as to why a culture places such importance on one thing and not another. American culture places status and monetary wealth above many other countries. This is evident in the number of students who choose to take a second language. For young people from non-Latino families that speak only English, there are economic motivations for learning a second language (Cummins, 1996, p.288). Otherwise, when one is not fully competent to fluently articulate a language, there becomes a barrier created by those who do not fully comprehend the language because they are unable to formulate the translation when switching from Spanish to English. Whereas those who have grown up in households where both Spanish and English are spoken, acclimate to the change and can switch between languages without flaw.

All cultures have some type of art or leisure. The American culture values music and television especially. As the years progress we see a vast majority of people looking to social media either through television or online outlets such as twitter or Facebook. These outlets have changed the ways people see and view news. There's this assumption by many that as time has gone on, generations are being taught less and less by parents and more by what they see on

social media. In an interview in 2007, Jennifer Lopez stated “I am incredibly proud of my culture and I think I am a woman who is totally defined by my culture. My temperament, my body shape, the way I am is all very much Puerto Rican” (Lugo, 2015). Social Media has been a huge influence on the positive and negative outlook on body type. Within the last decade and a half we have seen society’s embracing of things like the derriere, the fact that they have curves. People are embracing what they were born with because celebrities who are built in similar ways are not trying to change who they are. Sofia Vergara, Jennifer Lopez, and Selena were embraced for the acceptance of what their Hispanic or Latina heritage and culture had taught and given them. Now we can thank people like them who created this positivity that shifted from this idea that women had to look a certain way in order to be accepted by society. On the other hand this goes for other cultures as well, we see it in the media all the time this hyper-sexualization of women from all parts of the earth. While some Hispanic women view these celebrities as a negative portrayal of their culture, one must remember that this has become more common with women from all different backgrounds. This goes to show as well that every person has their ideals as to how a person of ‘similar’ background should act, and it is because of this we cannot deny the images we see of such celebrities in the media. Despite this we see the influx of the Hispanic culture through celebrities like J-low, Shakira, and Selena who brought forth things like the cumbia, or belly dancing. While that is in part due to other cultures they helped to create a knowledge and acculturation in America, because of the people who were amazed by typical things done in Spanish culture.

On the other hand we see the negative effects social media can bring to Hispanic culture. In US English-language media the erasing of distinctions between Latinos is facilitated by the fact that Latino characters often speak accented English instead of (regionally specific or class-

specific) Spanish. This separation of Spanish language from national origin or Latino subgroup membership allows for the social construction of a Latino subject lacking historical, national, and linguistic specificity, yet there are unflattering depictions of Latinos in the mainstream media, as lazy and uneducated, as criminals and drug dealers (Navarrete and Kamasaki, 1994). The media continues to depict this despite the untruths in what is being viewed. It is because of the media that there is this stereotype as to how a Hispanic or Latino will act. In U.S. Latino Literature today there is a story about *Los Vendidos*, which translates to the sellouts, is about the stereotypes within Mexican-American culture and how Americans view each one (Ventura, 2005). Along with this is the way that regardless of how acculturated a Hispanic become with 'American culture,' they are never good enough for American standards. Another example of this is with Sofia Vergara, a television actress, who is known for her outrageous words and dramatic representation of Latina women. She is often portrayed as loud, obnoxious another negative portrayal to how Hispanic women act. These are some of the stereotype that many continue to associate with the Hispanic community. The problem with this outlook is that there has been this creation as to how Hispanics are expected to act, what jobs they should take, the education they should achieve. Yet, many people disregard the importance of the cultures in which some of our most influential politicians identify with today. People like Sonia Sotomayor who was appointed the first Latina Supreme Court Justice in American history. Or Alberto Gonzales who was appointed the United States Attorney General under former President George W. Bush. Lastly, some of our U.S. senators like Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz who ran for the republican ticket in the 2016 presidential campaign. It is understandable that many Hispanics and Latino/as are bothered by the images they must live up to due to many politicians and celebrities that are seen in mainstream media today. While this stereotype might fit some, it has become a



definition for every single person of Hispanic heritage to attempt to resist the very things that hold them back in openly engaging in what is the American culture. And in reality it is a definition that is outdated and flawed. When we have people of such educated backgrounds making decisions that will undoubtedly effect the country, shaming them becomes a terrible idea. In a report by the U.S. department of Education it shows the graduation rate of white students in 2015 at 85% where as a Hispanic student was 76%. Another report broke down the different college degrees completed by 5 races/ethnicities. Of those who identified as Hispanic and earned an associated degree the percentage was 13.5, compared to its Caucasian counterpart who was at 66.3 percent. When we look at this information and compare it to those who achieve a professional degree such as a Ph.D. or a law degree Hispanics fell to 5.6%, where Caucasians rose to 74.3% (D, 2012). This is important to note as it shows fewer and fewer Hispanics compete for higher levels of education as it gets harder or more expensive to achieve these objectives. These two factors could vary much be the reason for such a drop in numbers. Where a Caucasian who completes school is by these statistics most likely to stick it out and pursue higher education. This information should be viewed as important because it reminds the minority groups like Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans that they too are capable of overcoming obstacles pushed on to them. Regardless of their background they are role models for all types of people who want to change their lives. They too are the real life definition of the 'American Dream,' in the sense they created a successful life desired by many people. Yet, despite the classifications that we break people into, it shows people all over the country that they have the ability to do whatever they desire to achieve, and that is what helps to identify them as Americans.

Hispanics and Latinos have affected the ways of American society. By doing so they as a group have changed the way language is taught and learned, and along with that the way media and influential figures have helped to bring forth some of the positive ways in which the Hispanic culture is changing the way American society works. It is because of these very changes, that it is relevant we recognize what Hispanics and Latinos have brought to the table when it comes to defining the ways America has changed, especially over the last decade. In order to prevent this ethnocentric ideology, that America is superior we must rid ourselves of the phobia that Hispanics are foreigners, and instead embrace what they have to bring to the continued acculturation of the United States of America. The United States culture was created upon this idea that those who were of lower status would have an opportunity to do and be better for themselves. It is because of this that America has and always will be a melting pot for various cultures throughout the world. A place where Mardi Gras, Cinco de Mayo, Thanksgiving, can all be celebrated, a time when Americans as a whole embrace the vary things tied to our culture and we owe that in part to Hispanics.

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