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Cooper J. Smith

Eastern Washington University, csmith153@eagles.ewu.edu

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RACISM AND THE LATINO IDENTITY, 1910-1970

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Cooper J. Smith

Eastern Washington University

Faculty Mentor: Martín Meráz García, Ph.D.

Author's Note

Cooper Smith is an Eastern Washington University Student.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Cooper Smith

Contact: csmith153@eagles.ewu.edu

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Abstract

Beginning in the early 1900s and continuing today, there has been mass immigration by Mexicans and other Latin-Americans to the United States, and this has caused a great deal of strife between local Americans and these immigrants. There has been much discrimination on the part of Anglo Americans towards Latinos, claiming the loss of jobs and opportunity, and the increase in a threatening community. The identity of these immigrants has changed significantly over the course of the past century, largely due to the racism they have encountered. This research paper uses peer-reviewed journals and scholarly articles to analyze how the racism directed at Latinos during the twentieth century has affected and shaped the identity of Latino immigrants and Latino Americans, and what role discrimination has played in the evolution of who they are and how it has affected the relationship between their community and that of Anglo Americans.

Keywords: cultural identity, immigration, assimilation, Latino, racism

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Introduction

Latino-Americans comprise nearly one-fifth of the population of the United States of America; as such, they play an important role in the culture and life in the United States (López, 2011). However, Latinos have a history of being discriminated against, from the early 1900s during the Mexican Revolution, to the time of the Cuban Revolution in the mid-1900s, to the era of Cesar Chavez in the second half of the twentieth century. Mexican immigrants, along with Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican immigrants have been systematically shunted aside into slums and poverty, and had their civil rights withheld as well as their rights as citizens of the United States (Bosch, 2013). They were marginalized and discriminated against in the United States by a white government and a white society. There has been racism against Latinos present in all parts of their lives, from the work they were given, to their wages, to where they were allowed to eat and sit, and whether or not they were allowed to vote.

However, Latinos have used this discrimination and racism against those who put them down, and used it to rally support and gain rights and freedom within the country that so many of them called home. The Latino identity in the United States has been forged through years of hardship and discrimination. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the Latino immigrant was largely a worker looking for an opportunity in the United States; however, their identity began to change as they started to see this country as their home, rather than a temporary opportunity (Bosch, 2013). Their identity as a community became that of rightful citizens rather than outsiders. One of the greatest contributors to an identity of resilience and perseverance is the racism and discrimination that they were subject to in the 1900s as immigrants. Many individuals and groups helped forge the Latino identity over the course of the twentieth century. Cesar Chavez and Hector Garcia both fought for the rights of their community by taking the racism

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directed at them and using it to leverage support for their cause (Bosch, 2013).

Latino Presence in the United States

Immigrants from Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and other Latin-American countries have been coming to the United States for more than a century, and have been received with varying levels of enthusiasm on the part of Anglo citizens (Bosch, 2013). Latino communities began to grow in the early 1900s as Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latin-Americans immigrated to the United States. During the Mexican Revolution, from 1910 to 1919, when over one million Mexicans came to America to escape the violence and instability of their country mired in revolution, Latino immigrants were seen as a workforce. Many young men and some young women were welcomed as laborers in the United States, providing companies with cheap, abundant labor (Bosch, 2013). Later, amidst the depression of the 1930s, Latinos were blamed for the economic crisis and forced from their jobs to make room for Anglo workers.

The 1940s saw the United States once again welcoming migrants for labor with the Bracero Program. This program was started during World War II to provide US companies cheap labor while American soldiers were off in the war; it brought thousands of Mexican workers to the United States to fill vacant positions (Blanton, 2009). Many of these Mexican migrants established homes and lives in America during the war, and stayed after the war was over. This created contention when the soldiers came home from war and wanted their jobs back; Mexicans and other Latinos were forced from jobs, or forced into labor with low wages and poor conditions (López, 2011). The Bracero program did not end with the war, but was continually renewed until 1964, and continued to bring in cheap labor and thousands of migrants, driving

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wages even farther down for Latino laborers. And should they complain or ask for better conditions or higher wages, they became replaceable (Blanton, 2009; López, 2011).

The mass immigration of the mid-1900s saw many places like Miami, Florida and New York fill up with immigrants, many of whom were perceived as threatening and dangerous when gangs began to run the slums in which the majority of Latinos resided (Bosch, 2013). The populations in Latino communities began to grow into the millions, and various places—Miami, Florida; New York City; Little Havana, Florida—were given over almost entirely to these communities as hotspots of immigration and acculturation. In spite of this, and perhaps because of it, there was a great deal of discrimination against these Latinos, both in politics and in society.

Racism towards Hispanics in the United States during the early to mid-1900s

In the early and mid-1900s, Latinos were given second-class status by Anglo Americans, as immigrants and not natural citizens. This led to many Latinos being pushed into barrios and slums run by gangs and full of poverty. While Latinos were not alone in this struggle—African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and other immigrant groups were discriminated against in similar fashion—they were in a strange half-land between black and white, and were “invisible” to the general population of America; the fight for black rights, however, was more widely recognized and supported. Latinos were seen as outsiders and their American identity was questioned, (López, 2011). They were systematically denied rights, education, and equality, and were treated as inferior in a white society.

The discrimination against Latinos is evidenced in the very quality of their lives in the United States. They were often forced into low paying jobs, which resulted in large communities

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of poor, underpaid and overworked families (Blanton, 2011). In addition, Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants were lumped together into a single identity in the eyes of Anglo Americans, and no distinction was made between citizen and immigrant (Blanton, 2011).

One of the most widely influential cases of racism toward Latinos concerned the Mexican-American soldiers in World War II who fought for the United States. Five hundred thousand Mexican-Americans fought and shed blood in the war, and yet many of those who lived—and even some who died—came back to a country where they were still second-class citizens (Rosales, 2011). They were systematically blocked from receiving the military service benefits they were due from the GI Bill of Rights of 1944, and they were no more respected than when they left for war. As Rosales states, “Mexican Americans who served in World War II encountered various difficulties in their attempt to access the bill’s entitlements” (2011, p. 598), meaning that many of these veterans could not support themselves, and ended up in barrios, impoverished and unnoticed. The GI Bill was meant to give veterans training, education, and monetary supplements to help them get back into society after their service. Mexican-American veterans however, were denied hospital services, had checks delayed, were given limited training/educational availability, and were excluded from various housing markets (Rosales, 2011). This is an important factor in the shaping of the Latino identity during this postwar period; as these veterans returned home but were still invisible, the Latino community called national attention to the problem and gathered together to use the poverty, the blood they had shed, and the discrimination they faced to gain rights and recognition (Rosales, 2011). It was not a matter of government recognition—Latinos in World War II received more Presidential medals of honor than any other minority group—it was a matter of social recognition, or a lack thereof, that caused these Latino veterans and the Latino community to fight (Bosch, 2013).

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It was around this time as well that the Longoria Affair became national news. A Mexican-American soldier named Felix Longoria was killed in battle, but in his Texas hometown of Three Rivers he was not allowed a funeral because “the whites wouldn’t like it,” (Bosch, 2013). This kind of blatant racism was present even after the war, and continued to be a problem as the world turned. Longoria’s story became national news when Hector Garcia took hold of it and brought it national coverage (Blanton, 2009). This event became a basis for the fight against discrimination and the blatant racism of white Americans against Latinos.

Reclamation of Racism

By the 1940s, Latinos living in the United States had developed an identity of resilience and perseverance. Living in unideal, impoverished conditions, they could give “little complaint due to economic desperation and fear of a potentially violent deportation,” (Blanton, 2009, p. 306). The discrimination they were facing forced onto them an identity of invisibility—the less they were noticed and the less noise they made, the less discrimination would fall on them, and in the case of undocumented immigrants especially, the less likely they were to be deported.

The discrimination against Latinos in America during the mid-1900s grew to be a national story as Hector Garcia, a doctor from Texas, began to fight for the rights of Latinos. The Longoria Affair of 1948 provided an opportunity for the Latino community to show the nation the racism that was directed towards them. Hector Garcia picked up the story and brought it to national attention through US senator Lyndon Johnson, and it became an important part of the Latino fight for equality. The event showed the everyday discrimination that Latinos were subject to in America even after the war, and for once it was seen by the nation, no longer invisible (Blanton, 2009). The Latino community, largely directed by Garcia’s American GI

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Forum—an organization originally founded to help Latino veterans from WWII get the benefits they were due—used the racism and discrimination against them to bring their issue out of the shadows and into the national spotlight, calling overdue attention to the systematic injustice and inequality that they faced in an “equal” country (Blanton, 2009; Rosales, 2011).

Hector Garcia’s focus was not on the Longoria Affair alone, though that is one of the most famous of his endeavors. He founded the American GI Forum “to provide critical leadership in the postwar struggle for civil rights by linking citizenship to military service,” (Rosales, 2011, p. 600). Mexican-American veterans after World War II were treated with indignity and injustice, in spite of the support they had given to the United States. They were denied hospital admittance, checks were delayed, and educational opportunities were less than ideal. The delaying of checks was an important factor, because it often-times meant that veterans could not pay for education, or other necessities (Rosales, 2011). Garcia and his American GI Forum helped to bring awareness to these issues and fight for the rights that many were due. He worked to call attention, both politically and socially, to the racism and discrimination that was aimed at the Latino community, and the Forum succeeded in getting legislation passed on various counts that furthered the Latino Civil Rights movement (Bosch, 2013; Rosales, 2011).

The Bracero program brought in thousands of willing workers, and US companies gladly hired the cheap, readily available work-force. However, this was a burden on those Mexicans and Latinos who were already in the country, and who needed paying jobs. There were also a great number of undocumented workers, whose fear of deportation kept them from complaining at abuses like extremely low wages and terrible working conditions (Blanton, 2009). These laborers, despite the deplorable conditions, continued working, which meant that other, documented Latinos could not get the jobs they needed to survive while there was such an

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abundant source of cheap labor to be had (Blanton, 2009). The first real step towards getting rights for these workers was through Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Together, they worked with and helped organize farmers and laborers in California to get higher wages, safer working conditions, and end child labor in the fields (Blanton, 2009; Bosch, 2013). It was only by ending the Bracero program and organizing workers that Chavez and Huerta could fight back against the injustices done to their community. In the end they got much of what they and the Latino community wanted, and it was a crucial step towards equality for Latinos (Bosch, 2013).

The Latino identity is often cited as being resilient and resistant to assimilation, as is evident in the perseverance they have shown in the fight for their civil liberties and equality. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Latino immigrants came to the United States primarily for jobs, and saw their stay as temporary and Mexico remained their home (Bosch, 2013). As decades passed and they began to establish lives and homes in the US, this sentiment changed, and many of these Latinos began to see themselves as American. Given the time they had spent in the US, and the service they had given the country, they felt entitled to rights and equality and citizenship. When they were not given this, they fought back in order to be recognized (Rosales, 2011). However, one thing that has never changed is the Latino connection to their homelands; as López puts it, “Mexicans stay connected to Mexico,” (2011, p. 575). One of the key factors in Latino identity is the lack of assimilation. Latinos have been resilient in keeping their culture, especially their language. America may not be officially bilingual, but Spanish is spoken in many areas of the country—evidence of the perseverance of the Latino identity.

Conclusion/Discussion

The Latino identity has changed over the course of the twentieth century because of the

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influence of Hector Garcia and Cesar Chavez, and their work in bringing the injustices against the Latino community into the national spotlight and leading the fight for civil rights and true equality. Latinos in America in the early 1900s typically considered themselves immigrants and temporary occupants of America, but as they began to stay longer and longer, establishing homes, businesses and families in America, the identity began to change from immigrants to citizens. Because of the discrimination and racism that they faced in America, the Latino community became resilient and persevered through the injustices done to them, and from a community mired in poverty, they forged an identity of strength and passion towards justice. Through the work of Garcia and Chavez, these communities gained the equality they were due as United States citizens. It was by the work of Garcia and Chavez, among many others, that the Latino community was given the equality they were due, and the opportunity to rise up from their nation-wide poverty and into society.

There is still discrimination against Latinos in America today, however they have far more rights and there is far less discrimination than was present fifty years ago. The fight for rights for many minorities is an ongoing struggle against history and tradition, especially for Latinos, as their struggle as immigrants has been a continuous news story and never ceases to be a point of contention for Americans and politicians. Stereotypes are still present towards Latinos, but great progress has been and is being made towards equality and acceptance.

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