

Why Latino History Matters to U.S. History

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Who are Latinos and why do their stories matter? Latinos represent the largest minority population in the United States, a diverse mosaic in terms of cultural background, generation (e.g. immigrant, U.S. born children of immigrants, grandchildren of immigrants), and historical experience. The term *Latino* refers to all people of Latin American birth or heritage who live in the United States—from Hispanos in New Mexico, who can trace their roots in the Southwest back to the seventeenth century, to recent arrivals from Guatemala. However, there has never existed a single mutually agreed on ethnic label. *Latino* and *Hispanic* are the most encompassing terms, but many prefer specific nationality-based identities, such as Mexicano or Mexican American (Mexican), Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican), or Cubano (Cuban). Others prefer a distinctly regional identification—Tejano is popular in Texas, while in New Mexico and Colorado, Hispano or Hispanic remains the preferred nomenclature.¹

Of the 41.3 million Latinos in the United States, 64 percent are Mexican, 10 percent Puerto Rican, and 3 percent Cuban, representing over three-quarters of this growing population. Moreover, these three ethnicities have long histories in the United States, for Mexicans in the Southwest and Pacific Coast and for other Latinos in Florida and the Atlantic seaboard. It is crucial to understand these histories within and beyond the borders of the United States and to contextualize present and projected demographic realities with the pasts that preceded them. A recent National Research Council study pre-

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dicts that by 2030 one-quarter of all people in the United States will be of Latin American birth or heritage.²

Since the founding of St. Augustine (Florida) in 1565, Spanish-speaking peoples have left their imprint on soil that would become the United States, appearing on the historical landscape before the establishment of English and French settlements. Many Latinos have Native American roots, while some trace their heritage to the rich contributions of the peoples of West Africa, most of whom were brought to these shores as enslaved men and women. Still others descend from Spain and diverse European countries, and in time they have combined their particular experiences with different communities of people in the Americas in the process of *mestizaje*—the blending of Spanish, African, and indigenous peoples. As poet Aurora Levins Morales has aptly surmised: “I am new. History made me. My first language was spanglish. I was born at the crossroads and I am whole.”³

Despite a florescence of scholarship on the Spanish borderlands over the past fifteen years, works that bring to life communities such as Santa Fe, which was founded in 1610, historians frequently give both the region and the era no more than a passing glance. One reason for this erasure is simply structural in nature. Having finite time and space to devote to the colonial period, teachers and textbooks place an understandable emphasis on the thirteen British colonies as the foreground to the American Revolution. But such logic should not preclude discussion of other European settlers, notably the Spanish who arrived in St. Augustine four decades before the British founded Jamestown. Another explanation for the neglect echoes back to the Black Legend. With roots in the Reformation and in the competition for New World empires, the Black Legend counterpoised virtuous English families against rapacious Spanish *conquistadores*.⁴ In a recent *New York Times* editorial, best-selling author Tony Horwitz reflected on the ways in which the Black Legend continues to cast its shadow over America’s Spanish past. Connecting history to current events, he pointedly observed:

This national amnesia isn’t new, but it’s glaring and supremely paradoxical at a moment when politicians warn of the threat posed to our culture and identity by an invasion of immigrants from across the Mexican border. If Americans hit the books, they’d find what Al Gore would call an inconvenient truth. The early history of what is now the United States was Spanish, not English, and our denial of this heritage is rooted in age-old stereotypes that still entangle today’s immigration debate.⁵

From carving out a community in St. Augustine in the sixteenth century to

reflecting on colonialism and liberty during the nineteenth to fighting for civil rights through the courts in the twentieth, Spanish-speaking people have made history within and beyond the national borders of the United States. Certainly in this one article I cannot comprehensively convey the legacies of so many individuals of Latin American origin. Instead, through a panoramic view of the field, I shall emphasize three historical moments pivotal to reimagining an American narrative with Latinos as meaningful actors: 1848, 1898, and 1948. Highlighting these years requires setting the appropriate context or working backward in order to gauge the significance of these thresholds and the trends that followed.

I. 1848

With the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexican War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848 marked the end of the Spanish/Mexican frontier era, an era that remains shrouded in myth and misconception. For example, the popular idea of a prestatehood California controlled by fun-loving, swashbuckling rancheros was also enshrined in an earlier historiography of moonlight and mantillas in which fiestas and fandangos were the order of the day. However, as historian Douglas Monroy has pointed out, the ranching elite represented only 3 percent of the Californio population in 1850.⁶ Typically, people did not preside over sprawling properties but instead tended to small family farms. Legendary nineteenth-century historian Hubert Howe Bancroft described women's labor on these farms in the following manner, "They had charge of the kitchen and of the sewing which was by no means a light task." He continued, "Many of them made the bread, candles, and soap consumed by the family, and many took charge of sowing and harvesting the crops." Indeed, Spanish-speaking settlers lived in a society where "the entire family awoke at three o'clock and men and women worked until dusk."⁷

What does contemporary scholarship reveal about the people who journeyed north from Mexico to regions that would become the American Southwest, people establishing communities such as Santa Fe (New Mexico) in 1610, San Antonio (Texas) in 1718, and Los Angeles (California) in 1781? In short, they were a mixed lot representing a range of colonial *castas* that demarcated to the nth degree Spanish, African, and indigenous ancestries and that significantly determined one's place in life. Over half of the founding families of Los Angeles, for example, were of African heritage. In addition to mixed-race settlers born in Mexico, Jews from the Iberian Peninsula sought refuge from the Inquisition in the far-flung province of New Mexico.⁸

Combing an array of colonial documents, including baptismal records, historian Omar Valerio-Jiménez calculated the dynamics of economic mobility in determining racial identification for Spanish-speaking villagers in the Rio Grande region of southern Texas and northern Mexico during the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. Using the notion of “pigmentocracy,” he made the following claim: “Individual examples abound of poor vecinos [neighbors] . . . ‘whitening’ their caste as their wealth increased. Particularly successful individuals not only entered the upper class but also recreated themselves as españoles.”⁹

Inventing or reinventing one’s self, is that not the hallmark of the mythic American frontier? Before we enshrine these settlers as part of the pantheon of western lore, the rugged individuals who trekked the wilderness in search of opportunity, it is critical to recognize that the Spanish borderlands encompassed caste-based communities, with bonded labor at the center of social and economic relations. Indentured servitude was prevalent on the colonial frontier and persisted well into the nineteenth century, with Indians and, to a lesser extent, people of African heritage pressed into bondage. In San Antonio, for instance, in 1735 Antonía Lusgardia Ernandes, a “free mulatta,” sued her former master for custody of their son. In her words: “I suffered so much from lack of clothing and mistreatment of my humble person.” She further declared, “[H]e [the *patrón* or master], exercising absolute power, snatched away from me my son—the only man I have and the one whom I hope will eventually support me.” Admitting paternity, the man claimed that his former servant had relinquished the child to his wife. The court, however, remanded custody of the child to Ernandes on the condition that she provide him with “a proper home.”¹⁰

Studying the contours of power and stratification through the interplay of gender, caste, race, and culture was the intellectual gift of Ramón Gutiérrez in his acclaimed *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*. He describes in intimate detail the lives of captive Indians pressed into bondage, often as children, by New Mexican colonists. After serving their time, these *genízaros* (peoples without moorings to either indigenous or Hispanic societies) created their own communities, separate physically and socially. With imagination and statistical precision, Gutiérrez in his richly textured history of colonial New Mexico, elucidates the confluence of power swirling in and around gendered class relations, focusing on how marriages, influenced by the environment and the economy, created a diachronous society predicated on notions of honor, shame, color, and conquest.¹¹

While Gutiérrez forefronts the rigid construction of caste, James Brooks in

the award-winning *Captives and Cousins* emphasizes a greater fluidity of racial locations within intricate “borderland communities of interest” rooted in slavery. Brooks teases out the possibilities through which captives become cousins across Hispano settlements and surrounding indigenous nations, including the Comanche, Apache, and Navajo. But historian Ned Blackhawk adds a cautionary note: “Forged amid the maelstrom of colonial diseases, warfare, guns, horses, and economic dependency, captivity in the Southwest might have created webs and bridges between peoples, but it did so on the backs of young Indian women and children.”¹²

Borderlands scholars have provided compelling narratives of societies rife with conflict and accommodation, pain and possibilities, effectively destabilizing popular notions of a peaceful pastoral era. With the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexican War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Spanish-speaking settlers confronted dramatic changes in their lives and in their communities. If one includes Texas in the accounting, Mexico lost half of its national domain and 75,000 to 80,000 of its colonist citizens, the vast majority residing in New Mexico.¹³ Yet, the narratives of these frontier settlers remain hidden within the American experience, overshadowed by the national implications of conquest, referred to in one text as “the fruits of victory.” Historians generally focus on the U.S.-Mexican War as “the fire bell in the night” with the subsequent acquisition (not conquest) of new lands, a feat that would open up the incendiary issue of slavery in the territories. With the exception of the California Gold Rush, survey texts turn eastward to chronicle the tortuous path to Civil War.¹⁴

But what happened to those Spanish-speaking settlers who remained in the Southwest, ostensibly citizens after a period of one year? Simply put, Mexicans on the U.S. side of the border became second-class citizens, commonly divested of their property, political power, and cultural entitlements. This transformation did not occur in a dispassionate atmosphere, as violence and vigilante action became commonplace. Taking a long view and marshalling a wealth of quantitative data for southern California, Albert Camarillo in his *Chicanos in a Changing Society* has documented labor market segmentation, intergenerational economic stratification, and barriozation (residential segregation) as the colonial legacies of Manifest Destiny. Camarillo posited that the patterns of racial and occupational segregation in nineteenth-century California would frame the lives of Mexicans (both natives and newcomers) well into the early decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵

Californio elites were fully conscious of their shifting fortunes as they sought to preserve their property and status through familial and business al-

liances with newly arrived European American entrepreneurs and professionals. The first Spanish-Mexican woman writer in the Southwest, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, proved an astute chronicler of this general state of declension in her 1885 novel, *The Squatter and the Don*. In fact, as early as 1859, she made the following lament in a letter to a distant cousin, “[I]t cannot be denied that the Californians have reason to complain. The Americans must know it; their boasted liberty and equality of rights seem to stop when it meets a Californian.” She then declared, “[A]nd now we have to beg for what we had the right to demand.”¹⁶ New scholarly works promise much in examining the ways in which Spanish-speaking women reconnoitered their realms. María Raquel Casas’s monograph on intermarriage gives a fascinating exploration of the definitions of race, privilege, and social position, especially through the story of Hispanicized Native American Victoria Reed, who crossed class and color lines more than once in her lifetime. In *Negotiating Conquest: Gender and Power in California*, Miroslava Chávez-García records how Mexican women availed themselves of the legal system, how they used the courts to hold on to land, to rid themselves of abusive husbands, and to gain monetary support for their children.¹⁷ Working-class people were also cognizant of their new world, with memories of dislocation, violence, and loss inscribed in their minds as Californios and indigenous peoples, memories artfully excavated by Lisbeth Haas in her award-winning monograph, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769–1936*.¹⁸

Concurrently with the economic, political, and cultural upheavals occurring in the Southwest, many Cuban exiles in the east embraced the concept of Manifest Destiny. Rodrigo Lazo in his stunning literary history interrogates the publications of Cuban expatriates from the 1840s through the 1860s in a thriving print culture based in New York and New Orleans that encouraged the United States to set its sights on Cuba. Fashioning themselves as emissaries of liberation, these writers believed that Spanish colonialism should be supplanted by U.S. annexation. In *Writing to Cuba*, Lazo teases out the contradictions of Latin American intellectuals who coveted American ideals of freedom while they acknowledged antebellum slavery and U.S. imperial designs. However, internal debates arose, which led to the founding of an abolitionist newspaper, *El Mulato*.¹⁹

Cirilio Villaverde and Emilia Casanova de Villaverde represented exiles whose views were more closely aligned with those of a younger and more famous compatriot, José Martí. During the Ten Years’ War (1868–78), the first war of liberation that Cuba fought against Spain, Casanova de Villaverde in a letter to Italian freedom fighter Giuseppe Garibaldi asserted that “the

beginning of our revolution means the freedom of our slaves, giving them arms, and incorporating them in our patriotic ranks.” Like the feminist abolitionist Grimké sisters, who grew up on a South Carolina plantation, Emilia Casanova de Villaverde turned away from the privileges of her family’s plantation and advocated for abolition. Only recently have historians acknowledged her role as an early leader in the quest for Cuban independence, a rebel in her own right separate from her husband.²⁰

II. 1898

While 1848 would burn in the consciousness of Mexican Americans during the decades that followed and of Chicano activists a century later, 1898 came to symbolize a similar transhistoric threshold for Cubans and Puerto Ricans. The Filipino-Cuban-Spanish-American War (traditionally known as the Spanish-American War) had its roots both in the jingoistic stories published by the Hearst press and the desire to protect U.S. business interests in Cuba (valued at fifty million dollars). However, historians have been slow to acknowledge the activities of Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the United States who vigorously championed the cause of independence from Spain.²¹

With New York City as his primary base, José Martí established the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892, and within a short span of time over forty branches appeared, including those in New York, New Orleans, Key West, and Ybor City (near Tampa, Florida). On January 29, 1895, Martí was one of four insurgents to sign a declaration of war—the war for Cuban independence had begun. Though he would fall in battle early on in the campaign, Martí’s deeds, poetry, and essays came to assume a life of their own. Revered as an “apostle” of Cuban liberation, Martí left multiple legacies that have extended into the twenty-first century.²²

During the last decade many scholars in Latin American and American studies have also looked to José Martí for inspiration, interrogating the meanings inscribed in his essay “Nuestra América” (Our America) in which he laid out a hemispheric vision of independent nation-states in a concerted dialogue with their powerful “neighbor” to the north.²³ Perhaps portending a century of U.S. intervention in Latin America, Martí expressed the following sentiments:

[T]he pressing needs of Our America is to show itself as it is, one in spirit and intent. . . . The scorn of our formidable neighbor who does not know us is Our America’s greatest danger. And since the day of the visit is near, it is imperative

that our neighbor know us, and soon. . . . Through ignorance it might even come to lay hands on us. Once it does know us, it will remove its hands out of respect. One must have faith in the best in men and distrust the worst.²⁴

For contemporary academics, the concept of *Nuestra América* not only locates recognition of imperialism among those who would feel its weight but also points to a new paradigm of “*the Americas*.” As Sandhya Shulka and Heidi Tinsman explain, such a paradigm “does not emphasize the comparative history of individual countries . . . but the history of transnational interactions—spaces of dialogue, linkages, conflicts, domination, and resistance—that take place across, or sometimes outside, the confines of national borders and sensibilities.”²⁵ On the one hand, Martí’s *Nuestra América* has become emblematic of a truly transnational, hemispheric interdisciplinary discourse, but, on the other hand, Martí, as a person, should be placed within his own historical moment in the United States. As Nancy Raquel Mirabal has so adroitly and succinctly argued, “Martí represents an intellectual tradition of U.S. based Latin American thought and exile that challenges assumed silences and invisibility.”²⁶

Martí’s contemporaries, men and women who had worked tirelessly for Cuban and Puerto Rican liberation, found their hopes dashed by war’s end. Although Cuba gained its independence in 1902, with limitations imposed by the Platt Amendment, Puerto Rico remained under U.S. dominion as a “non-incorporated territory.” “Are we brothers and our property territory or are we bondsmen of war and our islands a crown colony?” was a pointed question directed at the U.S. Congress by a delegation of Puerto Rican leaders in 1900.²⁷ Economic dependency on the United States would significantly recast the lives of Puerto Ricans and Cubans in the decades ahead.

Although the benefits of annexation included innovations in sanitation, transportation, and medical care, the economic restructuring that occurred in Puerto Rico, with U.S. capital investment in sugar, large corporate land holdings, and the decline of coffee growing, resulted in the massive dislocation of the island’s rural population. Ignoring the impact of U.S. business interests, federal policymakers tended to interpret rampant unemployment as rooted in overpopulation. As a result, they promulgated plans to disburse families away from the island through job recruitment or actual contract labor.²⁸ For example, in 1900 over five thousand Puerto Ricans were sent to Hawaii to harvest sugar cane, filling a labor shortage caused by the Chinese Exclusion Act, and for two decades more families would follow.²⁹ In 1917, with the passage of the Jones Act, Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens; yet, for many, the

free exercise of their rights proved elusive. Unlike cigar rollers in Florida who exerted some degree of control over their labor, Puerto Rican sugar workers in Hawaii found their movements so restricted that they “could not move from one plantation to another without the planters’ consent.”³⁰

By 1920 Puerto Ricans had migrated as contract workers or free agents to forty-five of the forty-eight states, creating communities in such distant locales as Louisiana and Arizona. However, as historian Virginia Sánchez Korrol explains, over 60 percent called New York City home. Indeed, the centrality of New York as a Puerto Rican destination came to resonate in the descriptor given to children born on the mainland—“Nuyorican”—regardless of their actual place of birth.³¹

Luisa Capetillo, the passionate Puerto Rican labor leader and feminist, certainly found New York a hospitable place during her brief residence there from 1919 to 1920. A veteran labor organizer in Puerto Rico and Florida, she used her position as a *lectora* (someone who reads to the workers as they roll cigars) to cultivate and reinforce the consciousness of cigar rollers on trade union issues, socialism, anarchism, and at times women’s rights. In New York, however, she ran a boarding house and adjoining restaurant where she dished up revolution and vegetarian fare. In her feminist manifesto published in 1911, Capetillo stressed a radical version of republican motherhood emphasizing women’s education for their own sake and for the sake of their children. Envisioning a future of women emancipated in every respect, Capetillo declared, “[W]omen are capable of everything and anything.”³²

The Spanish-speaking cigar workers of Ybor City welcomed both José Martí and Luisa Capetillo. Since 1886 Cuban, Spanish, and Puerto Rican cigar rollers and their Italian counterparts had created thriving, militant work cultures in addition to extensive ethnic community networks. In 1892 when José Martí had traveled there to seek support for the Cuban Revolutionary Party, Paulina and Ruperto Pedroso, Afro-Cuban community activists, offered him their boardinghouse as his headquarters. During the 1895 war, Cubans of all colors contributed their wages, savings, and jewelry for the cause of independence. Such solidarity, however, was fleeting.³³

Nancy Hewitt’s sophisticated study of women’s activism in Tampa, illuminates the racial and generational cleavages that surfaced within the Latino neighborhoods of Ybor City. She explains how constructions of race influenced ethnic identification among the children of Cuban immigrants. While these Spanish-speaking immigrants of varying complexions built ethnic community networks, trade unions, and political associations, their children’s sense of themselves became predicated on their own racial location in the Jim

Crow South, where not surprisingly Afro-Cubans developed a greater affiliation and kinship with African Americans.³⁴

Afro-Latinos across generations and regions confronted the color line at every turn. Linda Delgado in her profile of the beloved journalist and civil rights leader Jesús Colón offers insight into the complexities of racial location within New York's Puerto Rican communities. "Unlike . . . Arthur Schomburg, Colón saw himself as a Puerto Rican man, who happened to be black, while Schomburg identified as a black man who happened to be Puerto Rican."³⁵ Moving from the grassroots to the transnational, Nancy Raquel Mirabal unpacks the political import of phenotype among Cubans in the following passage: "Early exile and migrant, annexationist, separatist, and independence movements used negotiated meanings attached to 'blackness,' 'whiteness,' and 'in-betweenness' to define and build a nation."³⁶ I would add that the imprints of these negotiations can be traced across the entire canvas of Latino history from the borderlands to the present.

The first wave of modern Mexican immigration to the United States began at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1900 approximately five hundred thousand people of Mexican birth or heritage lived in the Southwest, but by 1930 this figure increased dramatically, as over one million Mexicans—single men, single women, and families—were pushed out of Mexico by revolution and poverty and pulled by prospective jobs in the United States. In *Culture of Empire*, Gilbert González complicates the standard "push/pull" interpretation of early twentieth-century Mexican immigration that privileges the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) as providing the crucial push north for the mass migration. According to González, the large-scale immigration began before 1910 with the uprooting of villagers, whose common lands were seized as part of a plan by the Porfirio Díaz regime to modernize Mexico by opening the country to large-scale foreign investment, particularly in agriculture, mining, and transportation. González argues that an emphasis on a push/pull model hides the fluid nature of this transnational migration, a migration significantly shaped by U.S. businesses on both sides of the border.³⁷ Instead of Manifest Destiny as territorial conquest that culminated in the U. S.-Mexican War, Manifest Destiny as economic empire building retained (and still possesses) considerable currency.

III. 1948

Approximately five hundred thousand Latinos served in World War II, and this figure does not include the tens of thousands who labored in defense

plants and other industries vital to the war effort, such as food processing. The impact of the war on Latino political consciousness has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Was World War II a catalyst for civil rights for Latinos in the United States? Lorena Oropeza has asserted that their “battlefield exploits” braced Mexican Americans to pursue their rights at home, but in a differing vein, George Sánchez has posited that the political education of the second generation had occurred years before many donned a military uniform.³⁸ Arguing that “the war presented more opportunities than obstacles,” Thomas Guglielmo reinforces the point that “patriotic sacrifice and service only further fired Mexicans’ and Mexican Americans’ determination to gain first-class citizenship.” Conversely, David Gutiérrez forcefully explains that an emphasis on World War II as a civil rights epiphany obscures the political diversity within Mexican communities before Pearl Harbor and creates a fiction of unity where none existed.³⁹

I contend that at the level of the individual in the local community, World War II did signal a significant shift in social relations and daily praxis. Men in uniform challenged seating sections in town theaters, demanded table service at “whites only” restaurants, and desegregated public pools.⁴⁰ Yet these protests did not occur in a vacuum but drew strength from different political traditions forged during the Great Depression as represented by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and El Congreso de Pueblos de Hablan Española (the Spanish-Speaking Peoples Congress).

Founded by Tejanos in 1929, LULAC within a decade developed into a very influential middle-class Mexican American civil rights organization with local councils scattered across the Southwest. Envisioning themselves as patriotic “white” Americans, LULACers restricted membership to English-speaking U.S. citizens. As historian David Gutiérrez notes, LULAC, taking a page from the early NAACP, stresses the leadership of an educated elite “who would lift their less fortunate neighbors by their bootstraps.” He continues, “From 1929 through World War II LULAC organized successful voter registration and poll tax-drives . . . and aggressively attacked discriminatory laws and practices.”⁴¹ One could interpret LULAC’s strategy or performance of whiteness as an organizational orchestration of “passing.” While Afro-Latinos confronted the color line in one way, fair-skinned Latinos could at times situate themselves quite differently. According to Gabriela Arredondo in her work on Chicago, Mexicans with light complexions could capitalize on their skin color to secure better jobs and mainstream social acceptance through acts of passing: “Many of these Mexicans who could ‘pass’ tried to position themselves as Spanish.”⁴²



Labor organizer and civil rights activist Luisa Moreno as a young woman.
(Courtesy of Vicki L. Ruiz)

In 1936 Blanca Rosa Rodríguez de León, a Guatemalan immigrant with a young daughter, could have “passed,” given her complexion, education, unaccented English, and elite background. However, this young radical labor organizer chose to forego any potential privileges based on race, class, or color. Deliberately distancing herself from her past, she chose the alias “Moreno” (dark) as a surname, one diametrically opposite her given name “Blanca Rosa” (white rose). For a first name, she selected “Luisa,” perhaps to honor Luisa Capetillo who had preceded her in organizing cigar rollers in Florida two decades earlier and whose legacy she undoubtedly knew and built on in her daily work. “Luisa Moreno” became one of the most prominent women labor leaders in the United States, comparable in stature to Mother Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and more recently Dolores Huerta. From the Great Depression to the cold war, Moreno journeyed across the United States mobilizing seamstresses in Spanish Harlem, cigar rollers in Florida, beet workers in Colorado, and cannery women in California. The first Latina to hold a national union office, she served as vice president of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), in its heyday the seventh-largest affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Moreno also served as the principal architect of *El Congreso de Pueblos de Hablan Española*.⁴³

On April 28–30, 1939, the first national civil rights assembly for U.S. Latinos was convened—*El Congreso de Pueblos de Hablan Española*. Although the majority of the 1,000 to 1,500 delegates hailed from California and the Southwest, women and men traveled from as far away as Montana, Illinois, New York, and Florida to attend the convention. Over three days, they drafted a comprehensive platform. Bridging differences in generation and ethnic background, they called for an end to segregation in public facilities, housing, education, and employment and endorsed the rights of immigrants to live and work in the United States without fear of deportation. While encouraging immigrants to become citizens, delegates did not advocate assimilation but rather emphasized the importance of preserving Latino cultures, calling on universities to create departments in Latino studies. Despite the promise of the first convention, a national network of local affiliates never materialized; only a few fragile Southern California chapters limped along during the war years.⁴⁴

The stands taken by Moreno and Congreso delegates must be placed in the milieu of the deportations or repatriations of the early 1930s. Between 1931 and 1934, an estimated one-third of the Mexican population in the United States (over 500,000 people) were either deported or repatriated to Mexico,

even though the majority (an estimated 60%) were native U.S. citizens. Viewed as foreign usurpers of American jobs and as unworthy burdens on charity rolls, Mexicans were the only immigrants targeted for removal. They were either summarily deported by immigration agencies or persuaded to depart voluntarily by duplicitous social workers who greatly exaggerated the opportunities awaiting them south of the border. Thus, advocating for the rights of immigrants was a courageous course given this recent history.⁴⁵

While many scholars have profiled the possibilities for social change in the postwar era, the chill of the cold war hastened the demise of ten leftist CIO unions and the deportation of suspected immigrant radicals, Luisa Moreno among them.⁴⁶ LULAC and El Congreso imprinted different legacies; the former created an institutional base, the latter an ideological one. LULAC continued to rely on the courts as the principal venue to redress discrimination, while El Congreso's platform would resonate decades later in the voices of Chicano activists of the 1960s and 1970s.

Two California court cases, *Méndez v. Westminster* (1947) and *Pérez v. Sharp* (1948), reveal the intersections of Mexican American civil rights issues with the larger African American freedom movement, cases that foreshadowed the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). In 1945 Gonzalo Méndez, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in Mexico, and his wife Felícitas, born in Puerto Rico, joined with four other families to sue four Orange County school districts. Aided in part by LULAC, they challenged the common practice of drawing school boundaries around Mexican neighborhoods to ensure de facto segregation. Indeed, the minutes of a January 1945 Westminster school board meeting referred to this segregation with the oblique phrase "the problem of the complaint from the Mexican speaking peoples was discussed at length." The board, however, voted to admit to the "white" school Japanese American children returning from war-time internment camps. Mexicans who lived in "white" residential areas were also subject to segregation as school officials banned their entry from their neighborhood schools. Renowned California writer Carey McWilliams noted an added precaution taken by school officials—placement based on phenotype: "Occasionally the school authorities inspect the children so that the offspring of a Mexican mother whose name may be O'Shaughnessy will not slip into the wrong school."⁴⁷

During the trial, superintendents reiterated well-worn stereotypes. Referring to Mexicans as a "race," the Garden Grove superintendent flatly informed the court that Mexican children were inferior in matters of "personal hygiene," "scholastic ability," and "economic outlook." The trope of the dirty

Mexican appeared prominently throughout the proceedings. The plaintiffs' attorney, David Marcus, questioned the constitutionality of educational segregation and called in expert witnesses who challenged these assumptions about Mexican American children and the supposed need for separate schools. When she took the stand, Felicitas Méndez poignantly summed up her family's struggles: "We always tell our children they are Americans." Taking almost a year to formulate his decision, Judge Paul McCormick in 1946 "ruled that segregation of Mexican youngsters found no justification in the laws of California and, furthermore, was a clear denial of the 'equal-protection' clause of the Fourteenth Amendment." The school districts appealed the decision. Realizing the importance of this case, the following civil rights organizations filed amicus curiae briefs: LULAC, the American Jewish Congress, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Lawyers Guild, the Japanese American Citizens League, and the NAACP. In 1947 the Ninth Circuit Court upheld McCormick's decision.⁴⁸

Méndez v. Westminster assumes national significance through its tangible links to *Brown v. Board of Education* in five interrelated areas. First, NAACP counsel Thurgood Marshall was directly connected to the case as a coauthor of an amicus curiae brief. Second, according to historian Rubén Flores, the Méndez case influenced a shift in NAACP legal strategy to include "social science arguments." Third, Judge McCormick in deliberating his decision considered not only legal precedent but also social science and education research. As Charles Wollenberg noted, "[M]uch of the social and educational theory expressed by Judge McCormick anticipated Earl Warren's historic opinion in the Brown case." Fourth, "[I]t was the first time that a federal court had concluded that the segregation of Mexican Americans in public schools was a violation of state law" and unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment because of the denial of due process and equal protection. Finally, as the direct result of the Méndez case, the Anderson bill (1947) repealed all California school codes mandating segregation and was signed into law by Governor Earl Warren.⁴⁹

The courtship of Andrea Pérez and Sylvester Davis had all the makings of a 1940s Hollywood movie—pretty Rosie the Riveter strikes up a friendship with her dashing co-worker; he leaves to fight for their country, and on his return they fall in love and plan to marry. Credits roll . . . well, not quite. Pérez was the daughter of Mexican immigrants and her fiancé, Sylvester Davis, was African American. Fully aware that California's antimiscegenation code prohibited their union (as Mexicans were legally classified as white), they hired civil rights attorney Dan Marshall. After a Los Angeles County

clerk denied the couple a marriage license, Pérez filed suit.⁵⁰

In 1948 the California Supreme Court ruled in Andrea Pérez's favor, making California the first state to strike down an antimiscegenation law. As Dara Orenstein has brilliantly argued, this decision hinged, in part, on *mestizaje*. That is, the court rendered the law as "too vague and uncertain" given that it did not take into account people of "mixed ancestry" and that government employees could not consistently determine degrees of whiteness. In addition, Judge Roger Traynor, for the majority, ruled that the law violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. At the time of the decision, Earl Warren was still governor of California. Nineteen years later he presided as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia*, the case that struck down all remaining state antimiscegenation laws.⁵¹ Scripting their own "happily ever after," Sylvester Davis and Andrea Pérez were married for over fifty years.

The year 1948 marked several events of significance to Latino history, including *Pérez v. Sharp*, the founding of the American GI Forum, and commonwealth status for Puerto Rico. This period represented a claiming of public space as Latinos, through protest, politics, and popular culture, attempted to bridge the fault lines of inequality. The three defining moments discussed in this article—1848, 1898, and 1948—are suggestive of the ways in which Latino history recasts and complicates constructions of empire and citizenship. José Martí dreamed of a "new America," a transhemispheric union between north and south, rooted in democracy, dialogue, and equality. "There can be no racial animosity," he wrote, "because there are no races." He added, "The soul, equal and eternal, emanates from bodies of various shapes and colors."⁵² Racism, nativism, and economic imperialism, which shaped Martí's world, have remained with us in the twenty-first century. Contrary to popular media depictions of Latinos as people who arrived day before yesterday, there exists a rich layering of nationalities, generations, and experiences. *Nuestra América es historia americana*. Our America is American history.

NOTES

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¹ For more information on nomenclature, see Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and Politics of (Re)presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and Clara E. Rodríguez, *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the*

History of Ethnicity in the United States (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

² U.S. Census Bureau, "Facts for Features—Press Release: Hispanic Heritage Month 2005," Sept., 8, 2005, http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/005338.html (accessed March 30, 2006); Marta Tienda and Faith Mitchell, eds., *Multiple Origins, Uncertain Destinies: Hispanics and the American Future* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2006), 3.

³ Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, *Getting Home Alive* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1986), 50.

⁴ For an introduction to the Black Legend, see David J. Weber, ed., *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973), 59–60, 68–71.

⁵ Tony Horwitz, "Immigration and the Curse of the Black Legend," *New York Times*, July 9, 2006, Section 4.

⁶ Douglas Monroy, *Thrown among Strangers: Mexican Culture in Frontier California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For a sampling of this earlier historiography, see Nellie Van de Grit Sánchez, *Spanish Arcadia* (Los Angeles: Powell, 1929); and Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

⁷ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, vol. 34, *California Pastoral* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1888), 312; Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 19.

⁸ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: Norton, 1998), 32–37; Weber, *Foreigners in Their Native Land*, 17–19, 33–35; David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821–1846: The American Southwest under Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 214–15. For a historical analysis of the Sephardic legacy in New Mexico, see Stanley M. Hordes, *To The End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁹ Omar Santiago Valerio-Jiménez, "Indios Bárbaros, Divorcées, and Flocks of Vampires: Identity and Nation on the Rio Grande, 1749–1894" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), 60–74, esp. 71.

¹⁰ "Child Custody, Mulatto Woman," (typescript, August 9, 1735, Bexar Archives, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin).

¹¹ Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹² James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 79; Ned Blackhawk, "Review of *Captives and Cousins*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2004): 89–90.

¹³ Population estimates were compiled from the following sources: Weber, *Foreigners in Their Native Land*, 140; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 206; Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), 138.

¹⁴ As an example, see Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty, *American Destiny: Narratives of a Nation*, vol. 1, to 1870, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006), 350–58, esp. 350.

¹⁵ Weber, *Foreigners in Their Native Land*, 143, 163–64; Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821–1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Douglas Monroy, *Thrown among Strangers*; Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

¹⁶ Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita, "María Amparo Ruiz de Burton and the Power of Her

Pen,” in *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72–83; Madie B. Emarpán, *The Vallejos of California* (San Francisco: Gleeson Library Associates, University of San Francisco, 1968), 316–17. *Gracias a Howard Shorr for sending me this source.*

¹⁷ María Raquel Casas, “*Married to a Daughter of the Land*”: *Interethnic Marriages in California, 1820–1880* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007); Miroslava Chávez-García, *Negotiating Conquest: Gender and Power in California, 1770s to 1880s* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Rodrigo Lazo, *Writing to Cuba: Filibustering and Cuban Exiles in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²⁰ *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Villaverde, Emilia Casanova de”; Lazo, *Writing to Cuba*, 130–35, 170–91.

²¹ For examples of how U.S. survey texts cover the war, see James Roark et al., *The American Promise: A History of the United States*, vol. 2, from 1865 (Boston: Bedford, 1998), 789–95; Jacqueline Jones et al., *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States* (New York: Longman, 2003), 630–35.

²² Virginia Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1917–1948*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 13, 167–68; José Martí, *Our America by José Martí: Writings on Latin America and the Struggle for Cuban Independence*, ed. Philip S. Foner, trans. Elinor Randall (1891; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 35–60; Lillian Guerra, *The Myth of José Martí: Conflicting Nationalisms in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 4–5.

²³ For further elaboration, see Jeffrey Belnap and Raúl Fernández, eds., *José Martí’s “Our America”*: *From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Special Issue, “Our Americas: Political and Cultural Imaginings,” ed. Sandhya Shulka and Heidi Tinsman, *Radical History Review* 89 (Spring 2004).

²⁴ Martí, *Our America*, 93.

²⁵ Shulka and Tinsman, introduction to “Our Americas,” 2, 4.

²⁶ Nancy Raquel Mirabal, “‘Ser de Aquí’: Beyond the Cuban Exile Model,” in *American Dreaming, Global Realities: Re-Thinking U.S. Immigration History*, ed. Donna R. Gabaccia and Vicki L. Ruiz (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 449.

²⁷ Guerra, *The Myth of José Martí*, 118, 224–25, 258–59; Carmen Teresa Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship, and the Making of the Puerto Rican Diaspora: An Introduction,” in *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Carmen Teresa Whalen and Victor Vásquez-Hernández (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 12.

²⁸ Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, 17–28; Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship,” 6–8.

²⁹ Iris López, “Borinkis and Chop Suey: Puerto Rican Identity in Hawai’i, 1900–2000,” in *Puerto Rican Diaspora*, 44, 48.

³⁰ Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship,” 13–15; López, “Borinkis and Chop Suey,” 47.

³¹ Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, 28; Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship,” 18–21; Vicki L. Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, introduction to *Latina Legacies*, 5.

³² Nancy A. Hewitt, “Luisa Capetillo: Feminist of the Working Class,” in *Latina Legacies*, 120–34; Luisa Capetillo, *A Nation of Women: An Early Feminist Speaks Out/Mi Opinión sobre las Libertades, Derechos y Deberes de la Mujer* (My opinion of the liberties, rights, and duties of woman), ed. Félix V. Matos-Rodríguez, trans. Alan West Durán (1911; Houston: Arte Público Press, 2004), 103; *Latinas in the United States*, s.v. “Latinas in the Northeast.”

³³ *Latinas in the United States*, s.v. “Cigar Workers”; Robert Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882–1936* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 43, 56–57.

³⁴ Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women’s Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s to 1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

³⁵ Linda C. Delgado, “Jesús Colón and the Making of a New York City Community, 1917 to 1974,” in *Puerto Rican Diaspora*, 68–87, esp. 80.

³⁶ Mirabal, “Ser de Aquí,” 443.

³⁷ Gilbert González, *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, and Mexican Immigrants, 1880–1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

³⁸ Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Sí! Guerra No!: Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 13; George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 256.

³⁹ Thomas A. Guglielmo, “Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas,” *Journal of American History* 92 (March 2006): 1216–17; David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 117–18.

⁴⁰ Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez, ed., *Mexican Americans and World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); María Eva Flores CDP, “The Good Life, the Hard Way: The Mexican American Community of Fort Stockton, Texas” (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2000).

⁴¹ Benjamin Márquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 17–38; Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 1930–1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 35; Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 74–87; Guglielmo, “Fighting for Caucasian Rights,” 1212–37.

⁴² Gabriela F. Arredondo, “Cartographies of Americanisms: Possibilities for Transnational Identities, Chicago, 1916–1939,” in *Geographies of Latinidad: Mapping Latina/o Studies into the 21st Century*, ed. Matt García, Marie Leger, and Angarad Valdivia (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

⁴³ For more information, see Vicki L. Ruiz, “Una Mujer sin Fronteras: Luisa Moreno and Latina Labor Activism,” *Pacific Historical Review* 73 (February 2004): 1–20.

⁴⁴ For differing interpretations of El Congreso, especially on the extent of Communist Party influence, see García, *Mexican Americans*, 154–57, and Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 246.

⁴⁵ The most comprehensive survey of the Mexican deportations and repatriations during this period is Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 103–23. See also George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁴⁷ José Pitti et al., “A History of Mexican Americans in California,” in *Five Views: An Ethnic History Site Survey for California* (Sacramento: California Department of Parks and Recreation, 1980), 238; *Latinas in the United States*, s.v. “Méndez v. Westminster”; Carey McWilliams, “Is Your Name Gonzales?” *Nation*, March 15, 1947, 302. The plaintiffs included Gonzalo Méndez, William Guzmán, Frank Palomino, Thomas Estrada, and Lorenzo Ramírez. For more information on Mexican Americans and school desegregation, see Vicki L. Ruiz, “Tapestries of Resistance: Episodes of School Segregation and Desegregation in the U.S. West,” in *From Grassroots to the Supreme Court: Exploration of Brown v. Board of Education and American Democracy*, ed. Peter Lau (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 44–67.

⁴⁸ Charles Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools 1855–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 127–28, 131–32; McWilliams, “Is Your Name Gonzales?” 302–3; “Reporter’s Transcript of Proceedings, *Gonzalo Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.*,” 5, 85–88, 116–19, 120, 122–23, 468, 563–65, file folders 4292-M, box 740, Civil Cases 4285–4292, RG 21, Records of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of California, (Calif.) Central Division (National Archives and Records Administration Pacific Region, Laguna Niguel, CA).

⁴⁹ Rubén Flores, “Social Science in the Southwestern Courtroom: A New Understanding of the Development of the NAACP’s Legal Strategies in the School Desegregation Cases” (BA thesis, Princeton University, 1994), 105–16, esp. 116; Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed*, 128, 131–32, esp. 132; Guadalupe San Miguel Jr., “*Let Them All Take Heed*”: *Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910–1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 119; Pitti, “A History of Mexican Americans,” 239.

⁵⁰ Dara Orenstein, “Void for Vagueness: Mexicans and the Collapse of Miscegenation Law in California,” *Pacific Historical Review* 74 (August 2005): 367–408; Alex Lubin, “What’s Love Got to Do With It?: The Politics of Race and Marriage in the California Supreme Court’s 1948 *Perez v. Sharp* Decision,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18 (July 2004): 31–34; Peggy Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of ‘Race’ in Twentieth-Century America,” *Journal of American History* 83 (June 1996): 44–69; *Latinas in the United States*, s.v. “*Pérez v. Sharp*.”

⁵¹ Orenstein, “Void for Vagueness,” 370–71; Lubin, “What’s Love Got to Do With It?” 31–37. Note: Unlike the *Méndez* case in which LULAC and the NAACP made common cause, both organizations ignored this case, perhaps out of preoccupation with school desegregation or perhaps out of unwillingness to tackle such a controversial issue as intermarriage.

⁵² Martí, *Our America*, 93–94.