

Latino, Hispanic, Chicano: Who are you?

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The Latino community is coming of age right at the time when futurists are saying that cultivating diversity and learning to live together on this small planet is *the* critical leadership issue of this time. For humankind to survive, a sense of global community must emerge that assuages the wounds of differences. The young president, John F. Kennedy, saw this vision over forty years ago, and urged people to acknowledge our common human core: “We can make the world safe for diversity, for in the last analysis we all breathe the same air, we all drink the same water, we all inhabit this small planet, we all want what is best for our children, and we are all mortal!”

Si, Es la Hora (It is the time, this is the time!) to make the world “Safe for Diversity”. Because of their history and cultural amalgamation, Latinos *are* diversity and can teach people how to thrive from differences. Diversity is the many colors gathered around the Latino family dinner table – black, white, yellow, brown, mocha, and *cafeciiiito*. Latino hybrids are living reminders of conquest and conflict, but also of resolution and a cultural reconciliation. While the blood of the *conquistador* coursing through Latino veins was born of pain and oppression, there is today a tremendous pride and identity with Spain and its people. There is also an understanding that the vibrancy, resilience, productivity, and energy present in the Latino culture comes not because of genetic isolation – but precisely because of the complex, historically painful, and yet genetically powerful *mestizaje* or mixture.

Because diversity is the life blood of the Latino community, forging a “group” identity has an arduous and slow process. In fact, Latinos were only identified as a “racial category” after the 1970 Census. As an oral tradition culture, Latinos love a spicy story. The “story” of how Latinos were infused into the official racial categorization of the United States Census is a good one illustrating the unique history of the cultural merger commonly referred to today as Hispanics.

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The Naming of Hispanics in America

It was not so very long ago, that America was at war in a country far, far away and many young people saw no justification for the killing of the young, bright men who were their brothers and friends. Many grew their hair long, listened to loud protest music, and marched in the urban streets with Black and Brown people who were just awakening to their need to assert their identity. This was a time when American saw itself in Black and White, and Brown people were in a cultural no man's land trying to figure out, "Who are we?"

About the same time, as was the custom, the census counters scoured the countryside tallying up and identifying the people that made up this great land. From the earliest Constitution, one of the ways the government distinguished its people was by race and color. It was after the national count in the year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy that the census counters, pulling their hair in frustration, went scurrying to the Great White Father, "What do we do with this disparate group, "the Browns," who are describing themselves as all kinds of concoctions and can't be put into one category?"

The Browns were, in fact, identifying themselves as Mexican, Cuban, Spanish, (Because in the Southwest many could trace their heritage back eight generations to the Spanish land grants before the Mayflower.) Others identified themselves by the place they, or their even their grandparents, were born – Puerto Rican, Columbian, Brazilian, Chilean, and El Salvadorian. The list was ver-r-ry complicated, because the Browns had ancestry from twenty-two different countries. "Aye Caramba," said the census takers, "We only have four categories: Caucasian, Black, Asian, or Native American. What are we suppose to do with "the Browns? They were supposed to check the Caucasian box!"

The chaos intensified when many of the Browns embellished and explained exactly where they came from. (Well, they asked didn't they?) Those from California put down "Califas." If they were from Texas, they were Tejanos. Those of Mexican descent who wanted to note they were politically active wrote down Chicano. Browns, who were the offspring of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, noted that they were ChicoRicos (Chico meaning kid and rico meaning delicious, tasty, and sweet!) A CubaNica was a cross between a Nicaraguan and a Cuban. The red haired lassies who were Irish and Chicano wrote Leprecanas. And, of course, those of Chinese ancestry got in the game by noting they were ChinoLatinos. (continued)

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The census takers were quickly finding out that the Browns valued something called personalismo and individualismo which meant that everyone was an individual and everyone had a story to tell. People noted their entire genetic line – French, Spanish, Indian, and Nicaraguan. This, the census takers learned, was a tradition inherited from the Spanish, one of the links holding the Browns together, who had a long history of regionalism. Spain only became a nation through the tenuous marriage of Isabella and Fernando right before Columbus set sail on the Santa Maria. Even today the Spanish continue to identify by their states -- Basque, Valenciano, and Navarreno. The Basques are still struggling for independence and Navarreno continues to have its own foreign policy budget. Imagine one of the fifty American states having their own foreign policy budget! This was un-American. It had to stop. Someone needed to get a handle on “Who the Browns were!”

The bureaucrats who ran the census were running around in circles when one of them had a bright idea. Let’s ask them what they want to be called. So a big Pow Wow was called in the capitol and leaders from the “Browns” were flown in. One was Dr. Leo Estrada at UCLA, a leading American demographer, who the census takers believed should know who these people were, since he was one of them. The leaders deliberated for a very long time, they went back and forth, lunch was brought in and then dinner. The census counters began to pace. Finally, in the wee hours, a compromise was reached. The government could use the term Hispanic. Hispanic refers to Hispana or the old name for Spain -- one of the “Browns” connecting points. It was an English not a Spanish word so the census takers were contento (happy!)

The head of the Census Bureau hurried to the Office of the Great White Father and urged him to make this official before the Browns changed their minds. And so it came to pass that President Richard Nixon’s O.M.B Statistical Directive 15 came into being. From then on there would be five colors in the American palate. The conglomerate of people, spanning 500 years of the Mestizaje (the mixing up), was baptized Hispanic.

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Check the box

The internal debate within the government, however, continued vividly illustrating the inherent diversity in the Hispanic culture and the difficulty of finding the one communion wafer everyone could believe in. Many preferred the term Latino, even though historically this referred to the Roman occupation of Spain many centuries before the settlement of this hemisphere. Latino is politically and culturally a more useful term because it emphasizes the cultural and kinship connections Hispanics have with Central and Latin America.

The complex story of the *Naming of Hispanics in America* did not stop with the adoption of the Statistical Directive 15. Since Hispanics are an ethnic group and came in all four American flavors: Black, White, Yellow and Red, the census bureau, taking out their racial microscope, surmised that all their categories needed to change if they were to really capture the essence of America's racial potpourri. The census bureau now began to categorize people – White *not Hispanic*, Black *not Hispanic*, American Indian, Eskimo, and Aluet *not Hispanic*, Asian and Pacific Islander *not Hispanic*. The whole spectacle of the race based census was becoming a circus under the multicultural tent top. Hispanic, which was once a strange mutt that needed a name, now became the standard for all other racial delineations. The Hispanics' tug of war with the census bureau gave new meaning to the Biblical phrase, "The last shall be first."

Yet an antidote for the American infirmity with race was brewing. Hallelujah! The 2000 census appeared with the category "multiracial". Unlike African-Americans or Native Americans whose blood content defines who they are, and Asian who come from a distinct area of origin, Latinos are the only group who *self-identify*. It could be said then, as an ethnic group and culture, to identify Latino, "you check the box on the census." Culture it must be remembered is learned and is not inherited. The interchange with Raul Yzaguirre, President of the National Council of La Raza, that follows speaks of how this could revolutionize America's race consciousness, "My definition of Latino is anybody who wants to be a Latino -- welcome to the family."

Latinos hold the promise of a new American reality, one with inclusiveness and diversity at its core. Latinos challenge Americans to look beyond race to the cultural, spiritual, and historical bonds that hold people together. Likewise, Latinos bridge the old world and the new, link yesterday and tomorrow, and act as the cultural portal that connects the Northern, Central, and Southern Hemisphere. They stand as witness that the basic human experience, as John F.

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Kennedy so eloquently noted, is no respecter of persons and in the final analysis begins and ends in the same way for all people. As Raul Yzaguirre has noted, for those who are hankering for cultural identity, welcome aboard.

The Latino immersion is waiting. When it is time for the 2010 census, just check the box!

“My definition of Latino is anybody who wants to be a Latino -- welcome to the family.”

--Raul Yzaguirre, President of the National Council of La Raza



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