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LLS/Race

LLS: Consciousness-Raising of the Latino/Communities Diversity

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Franz Boas, one of the founders of American anthropology, is an icon for many anthropologists. Though he certainly presented a tough stance against racism unique for the time period in which he was writing, his complete separation of race as solely a biological phenomenon, versus culture as the environmental learned behavior, marginalized “race” as a productive area of analysis. This dichotomy, race versus ethnicity, has persisted even to this day. However, throughout this collective research process, my group members and I have found that for Latinos/as, this is a false dichotomy. In Latinas/os everyday lives, their culture **and** their race are objectified and marginalized. Historically, this is represented in the assumption that Latin-American culture is “Latino” culture, when their experiences are in actuality quite different. This conflation led to the establishment of Latina/o Studies here at the University of Illinois. All our group members have been students in Latina/o Studies classes, and we have conducted interviews with people in these classes, observed these classes, and handed out surveys to try and discover the reasons behind students’ interest in Latina/o Studies classes. We also asked these students in our interviews about their experiences as Latinas/os in a predominantly white university, the stereotypes they face, and the extra challenges of being a minority student here. Latina/o Studies classes inform people about Latina/o culture and the problems and stereotypes they face today, especially important today considering the ubiquity of racial intolerance and misconceptions.

The establishment of Latina/o Studies occurred in the midst of great racial struggle, with Latina/o students demanding an end to university homogenization and apathy. They scathingly remarked in their list of demands, “university ignorance has

resulted in the stifling of the development of a Latina/o Studies Program (i.e. Latinas/os in the U.S.) due to the fact that they see no difference between Latin-Americans and Latinas/os in the U.S.” (History Appendix A). In an interview with a Latina/o Studies professor, this point was reiterated. “There is no distinction between what is Mexican culture and what is Chicano culture. In high school there is a push that Latin American culture is Latina/o culture.” He said that the purpose of Latina/o Studies was, essentially, to differentiate between the two and create “cultural memory,” especially for Latina/o students. In the surveys handed out to one Latina/o Studies class, though few in number, some identified the reason for taking that class as wanting to learn more about “Latin culture and history” and “my heritage.” One person elaborated, when asked about how s/he identified herself ethnically, that “I define myself as a Mexican person but I’m not quite knowledgable [sic] about my culture.” Two more respondents, when asked about the differences of Latina/o Studies classes, explained that it presented another perspective on U.S. history, the part “left out” of other history classes. Thus, Latina/o studies classes do serve to create consciousness of Latina/o culture as not only different from Latin American culture, but as having hegemonic power over it.

Even in terms of the Spanish department here, it is obvious that the university privileges international teachers, especially those from Spain, over Latina/o teachers. The Latina/o Studies Professor expressed disapproval of this, as he was told once by a student that s/he “wanted to learn real Spanish, not Spanish with a Mexican accent.” The “politics of language” is also discussed in Ramos-Zayas and De Genova’s work Latino Crossings as a major source of division between two distinct Latino populations, Puerto Ricans and

Mexicans/Mexican-Americans working in Chicago. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas explain that “for [Mexicans], Puerto Ricans spoke a debased Spanish, while their own language-- however much inflected by their own usually rural origins and relatively low levels of formal schooling in Mexico, and thus degraded in class terms on some grander scale of value-- was assumed to come out as superior” (152).

Though that student degraded “Mexican” Spanish and De Genova and Ramos-Zayas demonstrate how Mexicans in Chicago privileged “their” Spanish over the Puerto-Rican Spanish, both examples demonstrate the power “good” Spanish has in many Latinas/os lives. The lack of diversity between the many different dialects and styles of Latin Americans’ and Latinas/os’ Spanish in the Spanish department here at the University of Illinois speaks to the homogenization and stereotyping of Latina/o students here. However, this is not the only stereotype Latinas/os face here.

Because of their brown skin and the fact that they are such a minority here, they often find themselves in catch-22 situations. In an interview with a freshman Latina, she opened up to me the major stereotypes she felt there were about Latinas/os here:

there are situations where students will say something rude about Latinas/os or...I am torn between saying something in class because I’m offended or not saying something because I’m the only Latino there, not saying I would be attacked but more people will come at me a certain way or think of me a certain way. I guess the biggest misconception is that we were not smart enough to be here that we were incapable of understanding, that we were behind or that, everyone got in through affirmative action. I know my peers have also dealt with, assuming that we were all affiliated with gangs or that we were all poor.

With brown skin in a classroom of all whites, she has a distinct experience as not being able to offer her opinion without being seen as “playing the race card.” She and her peers are judged, by the color of their skin, as automatically “affiliated with gangs” and “poor.”

Oftentimes, they are also called upon to represent their “race.” In a talk about minority student activism, an African-American student explained to the forum’s attendees that after his class watched “Boyz in the Hood,” a movie about young African-Americans growing up in the “hood,” a student stopped the discussion and said “I want to hear what ----- has to say about this.” He was the only African-American in the class and was objectified as such as having particular insight into “Boyz in the Hood” that the other white students couldn’t have.

The assumption for these particular students to represent their entire race is problematic because it can create an inaccurate view of a group because of this one person. This is one way stereotypes can be perpetuated and can racialize particular groups. We have discussed in class and seen films that address how these stereotypes lead to out right racism.

The film “Farmingville” has shown how stereotypes against a particular group have led to out right racism. This group of migrant Mexican workers who were in America to support their family were being discriminated against because they were “taking over the town.” These men were only trying to make money for their families and get paid a decent wage, but in the process were stereotyped, racialized and marginalized resulting in these workers to be unable to find work. The economic situations people in Mexico face are often times unfair. Much of this injustice is due to the fact that the Mexico and North American Free Trade Agreement works to their disadvantage. Examples like this are prevalent across the United States because people have not previously had contact with people of different backgrounds, and with this lack of contact and understanding creates

fear. This fear has obviously led to some extreme reactions from the residents of Farmingville, when a hate crime happened on two immigrant workers who were brutally assaulted. We noticed that on this campus we see people tending to congregate with people of similar backgrounds. Many of the may see this action and often times think that it will create less tension, when in fact the lack of diversity creates more tension.

This can be seen on our own campus with examples of parties like “tacos & tequila” and “gangsta” parties as we discussed in class where they tried to imitate minority groups based on racial stereotypes. The stereotype of Mexican women to be pregnant and the stereotype of inner city kids to all be in gangs possibly carrying guns, selling narcotics (emphasizing that black culture is “ghetto”) tends to show how these groups are being stereotyped although not necessarily meaning it in a negative way, it perpetuates discrimination on campus. This harkens back to the Omi and Winant discussion of how they defined racism. To Omi and Winant, intentions are irrelevant; it is in the effects of racist activities that racism is defined. Thus, because this is a predominantly white university and minorities have limited access to certain areas of campus life, the Tacos and Tequila party perpetuates this exclusion. This ignorance indicates a lack of knowledge and lack of interaction between groups of different backgrounds within our University.

This is an important reason why minority studies and Latino/Latina studies are important to our campus. One LLS professor we interviewed states the purpose of Latino/Latina studies to, “make people aware of the needs, wants, and contributions of the Latino population in the U.S. and back that information with academic research.” She indicates that awareness is extremely important, and without this awareness we will

ultimately live in ignorance and the perpetuation of stereotypes about particular groups will only continue.

An important concept within this includes the assumptions that white people often group together many people of different ethnic backgrounds and assume they are all from the same culture. For example to call people Asian-Americans is to group them into one group when in fact they all came from different cultures and backgrounds. This panethnic view is also occurring with the Latino community. Many Latinos/as come to the States from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, etc. or their family has before them, but they are all grouped into one category as Latino/a. Observing an LLS class focusing on race and mixed race, many students voiced their confusion with their own self identities and how to categorize themselves. One class specifically focused on how the Census classifies people and as this was distributed to the class, they were to check which box(es) to which they belonged. Many took issue with whether to check the box society put them in (what others thought they were), or to check the box that they considered themselves.

This internal conflict shows the complexity of what Latino/Latina is. The professor I interviewed also discussed the complexity of her identity, “When I came to the mainland for the first time, I was confronted with several identities at once, which I never had to experience in Puerto Rico.” She goes on further to discuss that some of her family considered her to be a “sell out” and she was also considered something different by her American friends and Latin American friends, which were all different than what she considered herself. This is a reason that she got into Latino/Latina Studies as her motivation was to understand identity believing this was the best program in which to do

so. This pattern or notion of realization of race seems to be very common upon arriving to the university. In addition to our group's research, on our personal experiences we have noted that the majority of our acquaintances throughout college have thought that the realization of race is one of their most evident experiences. This conscious raising phenomenon affects the seventy-five percent white/Caucasian<sup>1</sup> majority. In this situation we can note the difference between the intentions of this conscious raising occurrence and the effects the action itself creates. To white/Caucasian students it may not be their intention but the diversity facts effect the realization. Our research confirms that many minority backgrounds within Latino/a community are not taught and rarely ever discussed.

This complexity in the Latino/a community of what Latino really means is the basis of why many students have decided to get a minor in Latino/Latina studies. One student we surveyed who was minoring in LLS decided that she wanted to major in LLS because "LLS classes have always been my most interesting and favorite classes at U of I. I love learning about my culture." As we mentioned earlier, this has been a common theme of which why both students and teachers go into Latina/Latino Studies. The University has yet to establish more than just a minor degree. The Latino/a department staff would really like to see the department grow more within the University and ultimately have a Major program for student to pursue.

The program of Latino Latina Studies I believe would like to be seen to grow by the majority of people that have been involved with even one course, especially the Latino community. One of the professor we interviewed told us that she believes that the

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<sup>1</sup> Many consider white and Caucasian to be the same, but in our research some identified as one and not the other.



Latino/Latina studies department purpose is to promote the studies of Latino history; history that has been left out. Typically there is more taught about European and black and white. We believe this is the greatness of the Latina Latino Studies program; to show the history and let people on campus decide for themselves without relying on stereotypes which discriminate minorities. The “Culture of Poverty” by Oscar Lewis demonstrates to us how misconceptions of a culture or subculture are created. Lewis’ focus on the poverty of Mexican culture of poverty affects the Latino culture and generates a general stereotype which can further lead to discrimination and racism. As previously mentioned the Latino/Latina minority often times feel put down by the majority due to things such as Affirmative action where they are not given enough credit to their intelligence. Oscar Lewis concludes that “on the level of the individual, the major characteristics are a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependence, and of inferiority.” More often than not the ideas of incapability get put into peoples’ minds and not the sources of where the problem might derive from. A Student that we interviewed in a Latino Latina Studies course expressed to us the reason for taking the course on race and mixed race. Being a Latino student on this campus himself, he said that judging by the title of race and mixed-race he knew that there would be a good diversity on different backgrounds. He was looking forward to discussing issues happening on campus, but specifically mentioned that he would like to defend the Latino community as far as using false negative stereotyping. As we can see the Latino Latina studies program is working to many extents in raising awareness, students understand that ideas are misconstrued and actions should be taken.

The Latino Programs on campus serve to enhance the understanding of the different ethnic roots that have gotten lost in the dominant curriculum. These buildings and the people within them on campus carry Latino ideas, Latino experiences and serve for history in the making. They serve as safe-spaces for many first generation Latino students, International students, and those that desire to learn about the diversity that resides within a homogenized community.

As we continued to delve into more research and more interviews, we found that students were quite aware of their position as a Latino/a at the university level even if the term itself was new to them. The youngest of my interviewees informed me that she had never been exposed to terms like Latino/a and Hispanic. It arose from her experiences in college where she found herself amidst a much larger culture that was not as accepting to her as her community back in Chicago. She found some comfort within the existing Latino structures and explained that was why she chose to reside in them more often than “less-safe” spaces. As she clearly states, “I know that I’m not white.” For students like my interviewee these places are proof that Latino programming serves as conscious-raising instrument. Therefore we see that although Latinos have a desire to express their diversity to the larger community, they also learn about themselves and others within the programming.

Latinos on this campus have, through great struggle, accomplished programs like Latino/ Latina Studies, and La Casa Cultural Latina. My interviewees all expressed various ideas as to what they believed to be the role of the Latino/Latina Studies Program on campus. Answers vary from being acknowledged by the dominant culture to educating

either other Latinos/as about each other. One student explained to me that the purpose of the Latino/Latina Studies Program is to educate the Latinos and every other non-Latino that takes them, but this becomes problematic when the retention rate of Latinos at the University of Illinois is at stake. “We’re the only ones taking these classes. When we aren’t around to take them, who will take them?” From his response we can see that there is an understanding amongst the Latino community that in being part of an underrepresented group there is a constant responsibility to exist and be acknowledged.

Students on campus have taken stances on being underrepresented and have made use of the term Latino. They have, under common struggles, become one. Students have felt the need to create footprints of their own identities through many different ways such as politically based organizations, fraternities/sororities and newsletter organizations. Many of these registered student organizations foster the ideas of what is it to be a person of Latin American descent. They carry ideas that are valued amongst Latinos such as a communal sense, respect, the importance of family and education. Therefore much of what they learn through their experiences, they take back knowledge to their original communities or Latino communities experiencing the similar difficulties.

We have mentioned various authors, but one perhaps that resides most with what is occurring with the Latino population on campus is the argument that Omi and Winant proposed. They argued that race develops from social and political conflict. As this racial formation begins to exist, consequently so do organizations and Latino structures. The Latino Programming that we see is a result of racism, a racism that was produced by conflict between the dominant culture and those of Latin American descent. Latinos have

not been acknowledged a race, but do suffer the same effects as a race. It is because of these common struggles that students, faculty, staff, all who compose the Latino Community, have come together in forming the existing programs. Although, Latinos are very diverse, they have undergone similar discriminations which have led them to ultimately unite. Thus, our project has gone full-circle into the existence of the Latino Programming on Campus.

The knowledge that we share with the reader is based on our findings, our learnings, as well as our own experiences. We have come to the conclusion that ethnographic research on the Latino Community is challenging and fruitful, although we have only begun to scratch the surface. There are so many aspects to being “Latino” that the array of possibilities cannot be fully determined. We have, however, discussed the challenges that Latinos face in terms of education, stereotypes as well as racisms. These struggles and other factors have contributed to the origins and existence of La Casa and The Latino/ Latina Studies Program. We would like to thank all those who contributed to this paper, interviewees, the Anthropology Department, EUI, The Latino/Latino Studies Program, and Professor Rosas. Hopefully, our research leads to more interest in the Latino community and diversity-awareness on campus.

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