

## *Arroz Frito with Salsa:*

# Asian Latinos and the Future of the United States

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Just as media publications tend to demarcate national and international sections, as if one can be quarantined from the other, discussions of immigrant groups usually isolate the communities concerned. The United States popular media represents Asians and Latinos as separate entities inhabiting separate spheres, presuming no intersection between these groups. An understanding of the history of global migrations would lead us to realize that Asians and Latinos not only have much to share with each other, but have been doing so for hundreds of years in Latin America. Indeed, a portion of the Latino population in the United States is of Asian ancestry. According to the United States Census, 277,704 Latinos identify themselves as Asian as of 2006.<sup>1</sup> If one includes Latinos who claim partial Asian ancestry, the number of Asian Latinos in the United States grows to 460,844.<sup>2</sup> No doubt this constitutes a small proportion of the overall United States population, but it represents people whose cultural and racial identity blends perceived Asian and Latin American elements. These Asian Latinos

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1. See United States Census Bureau, *Annual Estimate of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2006*, available at <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2006/NC-EST2006-03.xls> (last visited Feb. 16, 2008).

2. *Id.* See also United States Census Bureau, [https://ask.census.gov/cgi-bin/askcensus.cfg/php/enduser/std\\_adp.php?p\\_faqid=216](https://ask.census.gov/cgi-bin/askcensus.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=216) (last visited Feb. 16, 2008) ("The federal government considers race and Hispanic origin to be two separate and distinct concepts."). CIA World Factbook—United States, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html> (last visited Feb. 16, 2008) (The World Factbook's Website "Ethnic Groups" section contains the following explanation for not including Latinos: "note: a separate listing for Hispanic is not included because the US Census Bureau considers Hispanic to mean a person of Latin American descent (including persons of Cuban, Mexican, or Puerto Rican origin) living in the US who may be of any race or ethnic group (white, black, Asian, etc.)").

and their numerically larger brethren in Latin America augur the possibility of a new type of cross-ethnic, communal bonding in the United States, one not premised on the mediations of white hegemony. We can re-imagine the future face of the United States by foregrounding the little-known Asian presence in Latin America and the nascent presence of Asian Latinos in the States.

My focus on Asian Latinos stems from an intellectual interest in broadening the categorizations that now constitute the Latin American and Latino racial mix, and in imagining possible cross-racial, cross-cultural interactions in the United States apart from the white and minority paradigm. This interest first arose when I was a graduate student instructor in the State University of New York and it has expanded as an Associate Professor in the City University of New York. Over the years, I have met students whom I assumed to be Asians but who identified themselves as Latinos and who exhibited in their essays writing difficulties common to those whose first language is Spanish. Asian Latinos, though numerically few, constitute significant concrete evidence of the arbitrariness of racial and ethnic categorizations and challenge contemporary myths about the two most swiftly growing ethnic groups in the United States.

## II. DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS IN THE U.S. AND FEARS OF A FUTURE BALKANS

The media occasionally reports, in matter-of-fact, statistic-inflected tones, the steady decline of the proportion of white, non-Hispanics in the United States population, from its peak in the 1970s of almost 90% to its current range of 65% to 70%<sup>3</sup>. The *New York Times* reports that “the number of nonwhite Americans [reached] above 100 million for the first time” in 2007.<sup>4</sup> The same article also points out that this jump in the minority population is due to the growth from July 1, 2005, to July 1, 2006 of Latinos and Asians at 3.4% and 3.2% respectively, and that this population tends to be younger than the white non-Hispanic majority.<sup>5</sup> Even within a brief, fact-driven article, one finds not-so-subtle ideological commentary. The article cites Mark Mather, deputy director of domestic programs for the Population Reference Bureau, who describes the over-sixty population—overwhelmingly comprising Northern European Protestants, Southern European and Irish Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Jews, who all have distinct histories and cultural practices—as “a fairly large homogeneous population.”<sup>6</sup> Leaving Mather’s assertion unchallenged, the article accepts the distinction between a pseudo-homogeneous white majority and a growing minority population. Presenting itself as an unbiased report on demographic statistics, the article fails to contextualize

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3. See United States Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov> (last visited Feb. 16, 2008).

4. Sam Roberts, *New Demographic Racial Gap Emerges*, N.Y. TIMES, May 17, 2007, at A1.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

the current population shift within the history of immigration to the United States. Whites, or Euro (North) Americans, are currently viewed as one group because memory is fleeting and the short-attention-span media encourages historical amnesia. Like Asians and Latinos today, throughout the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, certain members of today's white majority—particularly Germans, Irish Catholics, Italians, and Jews—were marked as racial “others” unable to assimilate into the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority.

In addition to such “objective” commentary in hard-news articles, one finds pundits and academics forecasting with trepidation a projected white minority by the end of the twenty-first century. Commentators and scholars—from former presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan, to Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington, to the British immigrant Peter Brimelow—worry about the continuing influx of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa.<sup>7</sup> They are concerned that the United States will cease to be a white majority nation with ties to an Anglo-Saxon past. They often use anecdotal evidence to warn about the balkanization of the United States as a result of the influx of non-Europeans who are encouraged to maintain cultural autonomy through the twin bogeyman of multiculturalism and political correctness. For example, in a 2000 speech entitled “To Reunite a Nation,” Buchanan mentions as a foreshadowing of doom the reported 1998 jeering of the U.S. team by Mexican American fans in Los Angeles during a soccer match against Mexico.<sup>8</sup> He claims, “if we want to assimilate new immigrants—and we have no choice if we are to remain one nation—we must slow down the pace of immigration.”<sup>9</sup>

The primary concern of these commentators is not the legal status of current immigrants, but the alleged national instability brought about by the imagined cultural values they associate with these immigrants. This wariness about immigrants reflects fears of future retributive discrimination by a dark-skinned majority against the white minority—a scenario that has seldom, if ever, occurred in any nation where the white population is in the minority. The warnings about a population shift also include racially inflected predictions of a decrease in United States world dominance due to a diminished quality of life brought about by rampant crime and poor education levels. Such worries can escalate to nightmares about the disappearance of the United States as a nation-state amidst warring ethnic factions. For immigration restrictionists, the white majority is the glue that holds the United States together as a dominant nation-state. They worry

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7. See Patrick J. Buchanan, *To Reunite a Nation* (Jan. 18, 2000), <http://www.buchanan.org/pa-00-0118-immigration.html>. See also Samuel Huntington, *WHO WE ARE?: THE CHALLENGES TO AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY* (2005); Peter Brimelow, *ALIEN NATION: COMMON SENSE ABOUT AMERICA'S IMMIGRATION DISASTER* (1996).

8. Buchanan, *supra* note 7.

9. *Id.*

that, as the population of Latinos and Asians<sup>10</sup> continues to grow, the glue will dry up and the country will come apart.

The mainstream national media, furthermore, portrays a United States where little communication and much bickering occur across racial and ethnic communities. Purportedly race-neutral reporting about political topics gives credence to restrictionist nightmares about balkanization. Even liberal-leaning newspapers include reports on ethnic and racial divisions in voting choices and on jousting amongst ethnic minority groups for control of political precincts in the pluralistic Southwest and Northeast.<sup>11</sup> Popular narratives frame ethnic diversity using a binary “white/minority” lens. Through depictions that equate “diversity” with interactions between white and non-white characters, movies and television programs reinforce the ideology of whiteness as foundational to United States cohesion. As long as a white majority upholds traditional American values of hard work, thrift, and independence while arbitrating the behavior of designated minorities, the nation can be deemed safe from disintegration.

### III. ASIANS AND LATINOS: SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL IN THE U.S.

Though constituting a similar threat to the white majority through their seemingly darker complexions and alleged alien cultures, Asian and Latino immigrants are imagined as opposite groups. According to the “model minority” myth, Asians are regarded even by immigration restrictionists as hard working and successful.<sup>12</sup> This view of Asians as self-sufficient strivers is reflected in policy and law. For example, in the lawsuit challenging the University of Michigan Law School’s affirmative action policy, *Gutter vs. Bollinger*, Whites and Asians on one side were set against African Americans and Latinos on the other.<sup>13</sup> Professor Richard Lempert, chair of the committee that drafted the policy, “acknowledged that other groups, such as Asians and Jews, have experienced discrimination, but explained they were not mentioned in the policy because individuals who are members of those groups were already being admitted to the Law School in significant numbers.”<sup>14</sup> Other higher education institutions have similar policies that benefit African Americans and Latinos specifically. The premise of these policies is that Asians can

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10. United States Census Bureau, *supra* note 1.

11. See David Kelly, *They Mix, Not Match; As Vietnamese and Latino Communities Grow Some Predict Strife, Others Peace*, L.A. TIMES, June 24, 2007, at B1; Erin Hoover Barnett, *More Diversity, Less Trust*, OREGONIAN, June 18, 2007, at 1; Aurelio Rojas, *Ethnic Tensions Underlie House Race in South*, SACRAMENTO BEE, May 17, 2007, at A3; Anthony York, “Ethnic Tensions Mark Primaries,” CAP. WKLY, June 15, 2007, [http://www.capitolweekly.net/news/article.html?article\\_id=776](http://www.capitolweekly.net/news/article.html?article_id=776).

12. Buchanan, *supra* note 7 (“The over-representation of Asian-born kids in advanced high school and math classes is awesome, and to the extent it is achieved by a superior work ethic these kids are setting an example for all of us.”).

13. See *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

14. *Id.* at 375.

compete with the white majority academically on an even playing field.

Yuko Kawai, a Japanese American English Professor, has linked this seemingly positive “model minority” image with the old fear of “yellow peril.”<sup>15</sup> Kawai points out:

On one hand, Asian Americans as the yellow peril embody “foreignness” and “masculinity” that threatens U.S. identity as a White, Christian nation; on the other hand, Asian Americans who make an effort to succeed silently and diligently—without demanding or protesting anything—symbolize “the model minority” and “docility” or “femininity” and confirm “color blind” ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Kawai goes on to show how these two elements have recently combined in worries about ascendant Asian nations, such as Japan and China, that may threaten American hegemony.<sup>17</sup> When the focus of intellectuals, pundits, and the media shifts from domestic ethnic relations to geopolitical competition between the United States and Japan or between the United States and China, Asian achievements, first lauded as a model to be followed, are later seen as threatening as the loyalties of Asian Americans come into question.

If Asians are a threat because of their academic achievements and allegedly suspect loyalties, Latinos are a threat because of a similar perception of suspect loyalties and also an imagined lack of academic qualifications. Latinos are perceived as irrational and excessively passionate. This imagined Latino emotionalism delves easily into a view of Latinos as lacking the mental discipline necessary to succeed academically. Latino immigrants are seen as hardworking, but this quality is perversely coupled with the perception that they are willing to work for lower wages, taking jobs from working class Americans while adding to the nation’s social welfare burden with crime and healthcare problems.

A *Mother Jones* article on the “Hispanic Diaspora” highlights the arrival of migrant workers in small-town America.<sup>18</sup> Though appearing in a publication that is generally sympathetic toward migrant workers, the article fuels the impression that this wave of immigrants is larger than and distinct from the now-romanticized wave of white Catholic and Jewish immigrants that mostly affected larger urban areas such as New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee. The article also neglects to acknowledge that Latinos have been present in the United States in significant numbers since the nineteenth century.

The article focuses on local tensions in Siler City, North Carolina

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15. Yuko Kawai, *Stereotyping Asians: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril*, 16 HOWARD J. OF COMM. 109, 115 (2005).

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at 112-116.

18. Barry Yeoman, *Hispanic Diaspora*, MOTHER JONES, July-August 2000, <http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2000/07/diaspora.html>.

regarding Latinos who come “to work in Chicken factories and textile mills.”<sup>19</sup> While the dark-skinned immigrants are “welcomed—and often actively recruited—by meat packing and poultry companies,” they are derided by whites in the economically disadvantaged community as “mongrels.”<sup>20</sup> The article clarifies the class issues at the core of the Latino immigration debate:

Hoping to avoid unions, both industries have set up shop in rural areas, but cannot attract enough local workers with the low wages they offer. Blue-collar *Latinos* from the border states, by contrast, are eager for the pay—and less likely to seek medical care or protest dangerous working conditions.<sup>21</sup>

As the article explains, some of the antipathy about immigration is directed at corporations who are perceived as selling out the community and the country “for a quick buck.”<sup>22</sup> Local white workers, powerless vis-à-vis corporations, direct their resentment toward Latinos, whom they see as a tool used by corporations to depress wages.<sup>23</sup> In nationwide debates about the influx of job-seeking immigrants, similar resentments are directed by working-class whites against immigrants rather than against the corporations that abuse both groups.

At first glance, the image of Latino migrants as unskilled, uneducated, low-wage workers seems unrelated to the Asian “model minority” stereotype. The first image is associated with the popular complaint “that the U.S. borders are being violated daily by hungry, dirty, illiterate and unskilled hordes from Mexico who work illegally for a pittance.”<sup>24</sup> This view of illegal immigration as exclusively Mexican or Latino, popular in the United States media over the last few decades, overlooks the many undocumented immigrants who fly into this country and overstay their visas, including many from Africa, Asia, and Europe. Recycling images of Mexican border-crossers, the media simplifies the issue of undocumented immigrants as a Latino problem. Thus the brown skin and Spanish surnames associated with Latinos are branded as innately foreign and “illegal.”<sup>25</sup>

The “model minority” stereotype, on the other hand—popularized by media and codified through affirmative action policies—casts Asian immigrants as the striving, self-sufficient minorities. This image has

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19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. Ramón Gutiérrez, *Hispanic Diaspora and Chicano Identity in the United States*, 98 S. ATLANTIC Q. 203, 204 (1999).

25. Yeoman, *supra* note 18 (For instance, he reports in his article that the U.S.-born Ruth Tapia insisted, “No, I don’t speak-ee . . . I speak English” to a health clinic worker who believed that the best way to communicate with a Latina was in broken English.).

persisted at least since two articles appeared in 1966 in *The New York Times Magazine* and *U.S. News and World Reports*, praising the Asian community's economic and educational success.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Latinos, who are viewed as hardworking but too dissolute to be trusted, Asians are viewed as disciplined and upwardly mobile.

The "model minority" myth has been used to contrast Asians, who are seen as playing by the rules and succeeding, and Latinos, who are seen as uneducated and as undermining white workers by taking jobs for lower pay.<sup>27</sup> Opponents of affirmative action describe Asians as a shining example of what diligent people of color can attain in a "colorblind" society. Meanwhile, proponents of affirmative action see Asians' prominent representation in institutions of higher education as an example of what can happen if those institutions stop striving after racial diversity and rely exclusively on grade-based admissions criteria. By this logic, Asians become a sub-group of whites, and racial diversity is understood exclusively in terms of African American and Latino representation.

#### IV. NON-EXISTING RACES: ASIANS AND LATINOS AS RACIAL MYTHS

The "model minority" myth, pitting Asians and Latinos against each other, generalizes about two groups that, prior to migrating to the United States, do not see themselves as monolithic races. As our country becomes home to more and more immigrants who in fact do not define themselves primarily by racial markers, other demographic categories such as national origin and religion become racialized by scholars, pundits, media products and society at large. Nicholas De Genova states:

Against an "American" national identity historically produced to be synonymous with racial whiteness and pervasively identified as such by many migrant communities of color, and in the face of a hegemonic degeneration of the Blackness that has been reserved as the distinctive and degraded racial condition of African Americans, Latinos and Asians have long found that their own *national* origins come to be refashioned in the United States as *racialized* (or *reracialized*) identities inimical to the 'American'-ness of white supremacy.<sup>28</sup>

This perspective, which racializes "Asian" and "Latino" origins, groups together neighboring nations with cross-cultural influences and shared histories of colonial oppression. These categories in fact connote arbitrary

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26. See Kawai, *supra* note 15, at 113; James Lindgren & Miranda O. McGowan, *Testing the Model Minority Myth*, 100 NW. U. L. REV. 331, 335 (2006). (According to the myth, "Asians are supposed to be extremely hard working—more hardworking than whites.").

27. Lindgren & McGowan, *supra* note 26, at 341 ("Over the last two decades, affirmative action opponents and proponents have used the example of Asian Americans to support arguments in a way that unmistakably pits Asian American's interests against blacks' and Latinos'.").

28. Nicholas De Genova, *Introduction: Latino and Asian Formations at the Frontiers of U.S. Nationalism*, in RACIAL TRANSFORMATIONS: ASIANS AND LATINOS REMAKING THE UNITED STATES 1, 11 (Nicholas De Genova, ed., 2006).

boundary making.

The term “Asian,” like the term “American” as applied to people in the United States but not to people in Mexico or Argentina, appropriates a geographical adjective exclusively for a discrete segment of an entire continent’s population. In the U.S. media, “Asian” usually applies to people from countries such as China, Vietnam, and Korea, located on the eastern side of the largest continent on Earth. It seldom refers to Muslim immigrants from the Middle East or Central Asia, especially when used in the “model minority” context connoting the positive attributes of academic achievement, law-abidance, and entrepreneurship. Even in its selective grouping, the term “Asian,” used in this essay to challenge stereotypes rather than to denote “biological” traits, conflates cultural distinctions and varied regional histories. For example, one forceful critique of the “model minority” myth is that it conflates divergent ethnic groups such as Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Filipinos. Each of these groups has a distinct history of immigration and a unique narrative to tell about its place in U.S. society. Lindgren and McGowan point out that any generalization about Asian American social and economic status “masks differences between subgroups with high poverty rates among Cambodians (29.3%) and the Hmong (37.8%) and low rates among Filipinos (6.3%) and Japanese (9.7%).”<sup>29</sup> The common conflation of ethnicities from East Asia obscures both distinct histories and divergent current realities.

If it takes a leap of imagination to ignore physical, cultural, linguistic, and historic distinctions among those collectively designated “Asian,” it takes almost a willful desire to ignore cultural and phenotype differences among those labeled “Latino.” The latter term purports to encompass those of Latin American origin or descent, just as “European American” and “African American” purport to encompass, respectively, those of European and African origin or descent. Yet, unlike Europe and Africa, Latin America occupies the same global hemisphere as the United States. If most United States residents imagine themselves as descending from part of the “Old World,” so do most Latin Americans. As Gutiérrez notes, “Mexico and all nation-states of Latin America are settler societies in which immigration and emigration, borders and boundaries have been constant themes and at the center of national mythologies.”<sup>30</sup> Since the “discovery” of the “New World” by Europeans, waves of immigrants have arrived from different locations in Europe and Asia to different Latin American countries. It is not as accurate to say, “America is a nation of immigrants” as it is to recognize the Americas as a hemisphere of immigrants. Latin America, a vast region encompassing most of the countries in the Western Hemisphere, is populated by peoples of all races and colors, including

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29. Lindgren & McGowan, *supra* note 26, at 336.

30. Gutiérrez, *supra* note 24, at 205.



Asians whose primary languages include Spanish, Portuguese, and French.

Mainstream segments of the United States categorize individuals as Asian and Latino in order to “make sense” of the nation’s ongoing population shift. As Kawai puts it, “[M]aking difference is crucial for making meaning. Meanings are made through making a boundary between things in order to classify them.”<sup>31</sup> By lumping individual immigrants into broad categories like “Asian” and “Latino,” U.S. scholars, pundits, journalists, and politicians can tell themselves, each other, and the larger population, alarming or inspiring stories about immigration as they see fit. They have the privilege of quantifying and classifying the newcomers. After all, as Kawai states, “people are not equal in deciding boundaries; a certain dominant group has more power to do so, and the meaning (stereotype) that the group creates tends to win consensus.”<sup>32</sup> Classifying newcomers as “Latinos” and “Asians” is a way of separating the two largest groups of immigrants since the Immigration Act of 1965—from each other, from their predecessors, and from the rest of the mainstream population. It is a way of policing the possibilities of political and cultural alliances. Indeed, if Latinos can be Asians and vice versa, the “model minority” myth—which elevates Asians over Latinos—cannot stand. This myth, which works as an instrument of cultural division, is in fact belied by the existence of millions in Latin America and the United States who self-identify as both Asians and Latinos.

#### V. ASIANS IN LATIN AMERICA

The history of Asian migration to Latin America is a seldom-told story. Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and other East Asian ethnic groups have migrated to different Latin American countries, at different historical points, seeking economic and political opportunities. Asians have been welcomed or treated with benign neglect in most host countries. Exceptions have occurred where powerful competing economic interests within the majority population have stood to benefit from fostering xenophobia, as with the Chinese merchant community in Northern Mexico in the early twentieth century and the Japanese communities of Peru and Brazil during World War II. Social and racial discourses around these migrations reflect the host countries’ progression from colonial regions attached to European metropolis economically and culturally, to independent nations imagining themselves as heterogeneous populations linked to global communities. Elite thinking about the presence of Asians in Latin America has generally reflected a broader cultural conflict between two perspectives: one that sees Latin America as an offspring of Europe, and another that sees it as a complex amalgam of European, African, and Native American influences.

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31. Kawai, *supra* note 15, at 118.

32. *Id.*

Just as the United States has had to incorporate into its national imagination the presence of those who do not fit neatly into the U.S. white and black divide historically policed by the “one-drop” rule that classifies anyone with traceable African ancestry as black, Latin America has incorporated Asians who do not readily fit in the locally predominant color spectrum of race, the application of which is governed by grades of skin complexion. Though at first glance Latin America’s “color-spectrum” paradigm might seem more tolerant of “others” than the United States’ stark “one-drop” rule, the historical presence of Asians in Latin America has not been without conflict. For instance, the majority population in Brazil has had a love-fear relationship with the two million ethnic Japanese in the country. At times, the majority of Brazilians have seen the country’s considerable Asian population as a source of progress and advance. At other times, it has seen the Asian minority, particularly ethnic Japanese, as a source of imperial threat.

## VI. BRAZIL

The history of Asian migration to Brazil, a nation often called “the racial democracy,” began in 1888 when Brazil became the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery.<sup>33</sup> Brazilian plantation owners had long known that this day would come. Due to the British Empire’s abolition of slavery in 1833 and the Royal Navy’s enforced ban on the slave trade, slave trafficking into Brazil had been on the wane for half a century.<sup>34</sup> This blockade, coupled with ongoing unrest among local slaves, gave rise to a perceived labor shortage and a demand for workers from Europe. In his in-depth historical account of immigration to Brazil, Jeffrey Lesser describes how the labor shortage was viewed as an opportunity to “whiten” the nation by way of increased immigration from European nations besides Portugal.<sup>35</sup> However, imported European workers faced conditions only relatively better than those faced by slaves. Many of these immigrants, especially those holding radical political beliefs about class struggles, quickly rebelled and fled to the cities.<sup>36</sup>

The elite’s call for immigration soon shifted in emphasis from a desire for white newcomers to a demand for subservient workers.<sup>37</sup> As Lesser notes, “one São Paulo state deputy complained that the Italian immigrants

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33. UNESCO—Brazil, [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=8161&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8161&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (last visited Feb. 16, 2008).

34. Royal Navy, “Royal Navy and the Slave Trade,” <http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/server/show/nav.5937> (last visited Feb. 16, 2008) (“In 1845 Lord Aberdeen had introduced an Act to enforce the provisions of a much disregarded 1826 treaty with Brazil, and allow the Royal Navy to seize suspected Brazilian slave ships.”).

35. JEFFREY LESSER, *NEGOTIATING NATIONAL IDENTITY: IMMIGRANTS, MINORITIES, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ETHNICITY IN BRAZIL* 82 (1999).

36. *Id.* at 95.

37. *Id.* at 34.

flowing into Brazil had not assimilated, had ‘anarchized labor,’ and were ‘bad’ for São Paulo.”<sup>38</sup> Planters as well as scholars, journalists, and politicians called for the government to open the door to Chinese immigrants who were deemed more docile and deferent to authority than the allegedly more individualistic Europeans.<sup>39</sup>

The racialized discourse about Chinese immigration that took place from the 1860s to 1890s was not limited to economic issues. Other members of the political and economic elite, viewing Brazil as a white nation, feared the specter of “superior” European stock being overwhelmed by the addition of racially inferior Chinese to the “debased” population of blacks, natives, and poor people of racially-mixed ancestry.<sup>40</sup>

Those who favored Chinese immigration also relied on racial discourse, positing biological links between Chinese and Native Americans. This strategy was then taken up and perfected by those who supported the larger wave of Japanese immigration into Brazil.<sup>41</sup> These posited links served to establish Asians as forebears of the indigenous population and therefore as an integral part of the local inter-mixing of Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans. According to Lesser, these types of arguments were raised on both sides of the pro and anti-Chinese immigration divide by odd alliances of planters, racists, and abolitionists:

The ‘anti’ group brought together fervent nationalist/racists who asserted that Chinese were biologically degenerate, abolitionists who believed that Chinese laborers would form a neoslave class, and a few large landowners who were convinced that only Africans were biologically suited for backbreaking plantation work. The other side included a combination of plantation owners who wanted to replace African slaves with a cheaper and more docile group, other planters who believed that Chinese workers were biologically suited for agricultural labor and would help make Brazil more competitive in the world market, and abolitionists convinced that Chinese contract labor would be a step forward on the path to full wage labor.<sup>42</sup>

The pro and anti-immigration groups did not delineate themselves as “conservative” and “progressive.” Rather, each side included those who saw themselves as defending racial and social “others” and those who wanted to protect their own financial and social interests. In 1890, the anti-immigration faction succeeded with “a ban on all Chinese entry, codified...as a prohibition on the entry of all Asians and Africans without congressional approval.”<sup>43</sup> A large wave of Chinese immigration was thus prevented in the nineteenth century.

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38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.* at 19.

41. *Id.* at 14-15.

42. *Id.* at 15.

43. *Id.* at 33.

The immigration debate preceding and surrounding this ban crucially set the tone for Brazil's response to other Asian groups, particularly the Japanese.<sup>44</sup> In the wake of the ban on Chinese immigrants, Brazilian planters turned to Japan to alleviate the labor shortage. In the first half of the twentieth century, almost 200,000 Japanese immigrants settled in Brazil with the financial help of the Japanese government.<sup>45</sup> The Japanese government, as well as private firms in Japan, paid for relocation costs and for the lands on which many of these immigrants worked.<sup>46</sup> Apparently, industrial and governmental elites in Japan and Brazil recognized mutually complementary needs. Brazilian officials claimed a labor shortage that might impede national economic growth; Japanese officials feared that their national overpopulation constituted a threat to industrialization and economic expansion. Again, elite Brazilian plantation owners, scholars, politicians, and journalists were divided between those who feared and those who welcomed a Japanese presence in Brazilian society.

Pro-Japanese rhetoric, which stereotyped the new immigrants as disciplined and hard working, "naturalized" their presence in Brazil by spuriously linking the Japanese to the indigenous population.<sup>47</sup> Both pro-immigration Brazilian elites and pro-emigration Japanese authorities employed such rhetoric.<sup>48</sup> Claims of biological and historical connection served to soften the perceived alienness of Japanese culture. At the same time, Brazilians who perceived and admired Japanese diligence could encourage other Brazilians to follow suit, stressing that such character was part of the Brazilian racial and cultural make-up. Meanwhile, the anti-Japanese rhetoric exhibited a peculiar combination of racist hubris and of anti-imperialist anxieties about immigrants who hailed from an industrializing power.<sup>49</sup>

The pendulum swung between fear and admiration, with its position on this spectrum influenced by events in Brazilian as well as global history. From 1908 to 1942, between the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants<sup>50</sup> and Brazil's entry into World War II, most Brazilians viewed the Japanese favorably, as loyal and diligent farmers who contributed to national economic growth.<sup>51</sup> This changed in the period between 1942 and 1945,

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44. *Id.* at 38 (According to Lesser, "The debates over Chinese labor were important to the ways in which ethnicity would intersect with questions of national identity. For the first time elites began to expand the panorama of what Brazil might become by considering the impact of migrants who were neither black nor white.").

45. *Id.* at 83.

46. *Id.* at 95-100.

47. *Id.* at 104.

48. *Id.* at 108.

49. *Id.* at 149. This schizophrenic approach, which Lesser describes as a "sense of superiority and inferiority, of desire and disgust," was originally found in the earliest narratives of nineteenth-century Brazilians traveling to Japan and was reflected in Brazilian society throughout the twentieth century. *Id.*

50. *Id.* at 85-86.

51. *Id.* at 118 ("Japanese immigrants had proposed since at least the early 1930s that their

during Brazil's involvement in World War II, when Brazilians began to feel threatened by the Japanese population (as well as by the Italian and German populations).<sup>52</sup> Getulio Vargas' authoritarian regime issued several laws in response to these perceived threats.<sup>53</sup> Under these laws, immigrant farming colonies were dispersed, and citizens were forced to move to different regions because of perceived risks of invasion and sabotage:

Now 30 percent of all colonial residents had to be Brazilian, and no more than 25 percent could be of any other one nationality. Decrees required that all schools be directed by native-born Brazilians, and that all instructions be in Portuguese and include 'Brazilian' topics. Non-Portuguese-language materials were prohibited, except by permission.<sup>54</sup>

Japanese language publications were forced to shut down.<sup>55</sup> This move cut off the immigrants from news about events in Japan, in the world, and even within Brazil. The situation led to a peculiar split within the Japanese Brazilian community following World War II, between those who believed Japan had won the war and those who accepted Japan's defeat.<sup>56</sup>

Since the end of the military regime in the 1980s, Brazilian society has become more pro-diversity. Nearly two million Brazilians now claim at least partial Japanese ancestry, constituting the largest ethnic Japanese population in any nation outside Japan.<sup>57</sup> Brazilian society in general has a positive attitude toward Japanese Brazilians, due in part to Japan's status as an economic power. The business media depicts Japanese Brazilians as an educated and sophisticated group to be emulated by others.<sup>58</sup>

Japanese Brazilians themselves, many of whom are third-generation native-born, now have a complicated relationship with the larger population. They are Brazilians with varying degrees of connection to their ancestral land. Some are bilingual, fluent in Japanese and Portuguese. Many intermarry with non-Japanese Brazilians.<sup>59</sup> Many hold on to a Japanese identity.

However, those who migrated to Japan at the end of the twentieth century seeking economic opportunity have discovered that the Japanese majority views them as Brazilians and as foreigners.<sup>60</sup> These Brazilians in

'natural' devotion to authority had simply shifted to Brazil upon arrival. Those in the anti-Japanese movement twisted the notion by proposing that ethnicity was immutably tied to nationality and that immigrants would always be loyal to Japan.").

52. *Id.* at 135.

53. *Id.* at 129-30.

54. *Id.* at 130.

55. *Id.* at 133.

56. *Id.* at 139.

57. Daniel T. Linger, *Do Japanese Brazilians Exist?*, in *SEARCHING FOR HOME ABROAD: JAPANESE BRAZILIANS AND TRANSNATIONALISM* 201, 202 (Jeffrey Lesser ed., 2003).

58. Lesser, *supra* note 35, at 172.

59. *Id.* at 170 (noting "a high level of interethnic marriage (almost 46 percent overall, and over 60 percent in some regions of the country)").

60. Takeyuki (Gaku) Tsuda, *Homeland-less Abroad: Transnational Liminality, Social Alienation,*

Japan see themselves as both Asian and Latin American, yet they are not completely at home in either sphere. Japanese Brazilians in Japan are foreigners, typecast just as their fellow Latin Americans are in the United States. They are seen as good for only manual and industrial labor. As Angelo Ishi points out, though most of these immigrants arrived in Japan seeking to make money and to return to Brazil rich, "Becoming upwardly mobile in Japanese society seems almost impossible. They lack language fluency, and Japanese companies seem reluctant to accept foreigners into skilled jobs: lawyers, doctors, or engineers in Brazil have little chance of working in their own profession in Japan."<sup>61</sup> The discrimination they have encountered in Japan has led many Japanese Brazilians, who once identified Japan as their ancestral homeland, to cluster among themselves and to identify themselves primarily with Brazil and Latin America. Immigrants who have successfully opened establishments in Japan have often chosen to sell Brazilian foods, clothes, and jewelry. Ishi observes that "in restaurants owned by Brazilians, nobody would disapprove of speaking loud or of kissing a friend—they are meeting people that share common social and cultural codes."<sup>62</sup> Thus, Japanese Brazilians feel free to engage in familiar Latin American cultural practices only within such environments, out of the view of the Japanese majority.

#### VII. THE DEPORTATION OF JAPANESE LATIN AMERICANS

Beyond Brazil, which contains the largest population of ethnic Japanese outside of Japan,<sup>63</sup> neighboring Peru also has a sizeable Japanese population, which numbered almost 20,000 by 1923.<sup>64</sup> Like the history of Japanese immigrants to Brazil, the narrative of Japanese Peruvians is marked by waves of acceptance and rejection. World War II marked a period of particular vulnerability and intense persecution for Japanese Peruvians, even more so than for Japanese Brazilians. While Europe and Asia were being liberated from German, Italian, and Japanese imperialism, Peru and other Latin American countries were acquiescing to the United States' imperialistic influence.

Upon entering World War II, the United States instituted a domestic policy of interning ethnic Japanese in prison camps. This policy was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Hirabayashi v. United States*<sup>65</sup> and *Korematsu v.*

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and *Personal Malaise*, in *SEARCHING FOR HOME ABROAD: JAPANESE BRAZILIANS AND TRANSNATIONALISM* 121, 124-126 (Jeffrey Lesser ed., 2003).

61. Angelo Ishi, *Searching for Home, Wealth, Pride, and "Class": Japanese Brazilians in the "Land of the Yen,"* in *SEARCHING FOR HOME ABROAD: JAPANESE BRAZILIANS AND TRANSNATIONALISM* 75, 81 (Jeffrey Lesser ed., 2003).

62. *Id.* at 85.

63. Linger, *supra* note 57, at 202.

64. Ayako Hagihara & Grace Shimizu, *The Japanese Latin American Wartime and Redress Experience*, 28:2 *AMERASIA J.* 203, 205 (2002).

65. *Hirabayashi v. United States*, 320 U.S. 81 (1943).

*United States*<sup>66</sup> and soon permeated the government's foreign policy.<sup>67</sup> Many of these Japanese Latin Americans were deported, not to Japan, but to internment camps in the United States. Hagihara and Shimizu state that "[b]y 1945, 2,264 Japanese Latin Americans had been forcibly deported from their countries of origin."<sup>68</sup> Congress eventually established a reparation law that compensated Japanese Americans who had been interned during the war. The program began in 1988 and ended in early 1999,<sup>69</sup> after allowing ten years for such individuals to file claims. However, Japanese Latin Americans were mostly excluded from this program because most were not United States citizens or legal residents at the time of imprisonment.

In *Mochizuki v. United States*,<sup>70</sup> the court upheld the right of Japanese Latin Americans to receive financial redress for actions taken against them at the United States government's behest. In 1997, the government proposed to compensate the surviving Japanese Latin Americans victims \$5,000 as opposed to the \$20,000 given to Japanese Americans.<sup>71</sup> Considering that Japanese Latin Americans were uprooted from their home countries and transported across continents to be incarcerated, this figure is arguably insulting and unfair. Many Japanese Latin Americans were either unwilling to apply for such a nominal reparation or "never learned of it."<sup>72</sup>

More recently, California congressmen Xavier Becerra, a Democrat, and Dan Lungren, a Republican, have proposed H.R. 662, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Latin Americans of Japanese Descent Act to "review U.S. military and State Department directives requiring the relocation, detention and deportation of Japanese Latin Americans to Axis countries."<sup>73</sup> It is significant that a government entity recognizes the United States' role in exporting xenophobia during World War II and the harms committed against Japanese Latin Americans. Still, as a *Los Angeles Times* editorial argues, both "recognition and compensation" are needed.<sup>74</sup> Of course, for the American public to understand the history of Japanese Latin Americans abducted to the United States, it needs to appreciate that Latinos are a diverse group. Unfortunately, as noted above,

66. *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944).

67. Hagihara & Shimizu, *supra* note 64, at 207 ("Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Peruvian police began to round up Japanese Peruvians identified by the U.S. Department of State and John K. Emmerson, Third Secretary of the American Embassy in Peru, as threats to hemispheric security.").

68. *Id.* at 210.

69. *Redress for War Internees Ended*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 15, 1999, at A2.

70. 43 Fed. Cl. 97 (1999).

71. Eun-Kyung Kim, *Bill Gives Reparations to Japanese*, ASSOCIATED PRESS ONLINE, May 19, 1999.

72. Editorial, *The Forgotten Internees*, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 18, 2007, at M5.

73. Xavier Becerra & Dan Lungren, *Justice for Forgotten Internees*, WASH. POST, Feb. 19, 2007, at A19.

74. Kim, *supra* note 71, at M5.

the media overall seem unable or unwilling to foster a richer, more nuanced and popular perspective of Latinos and of Asians, and of concepts like race and ethnicity in general.

News coverage of the internment of Japanese Latin Americans focuses on the United States as an agent exercising hegemony in order to induce Latin American countries to deport their citizens and legal residents. However, Latin American countries that complied through deportation<sup>75</sup> should also be held morally and financially accountable for succumbing to the United States' pressure and for failing to protect the immigrant and native-born members of their own population. Fear of military and economic reprisal cannot excuse complicity. After all, the United States was caught in a war upon whose outcome its survival depended. The United States could ill-afford to risk resources, public reputation, and Latin American allies by invading or threatening a country that resisted its deportation requests. Therefore, we cannot discount the influence of Latin American xenophobia on the decisions of countries like Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

Against this backdrop of Latin American acquiescence to a xenophobic, hegemonic United States, Brazil stands as an exception despite its own xenophobic policies. Brazil may have refused to follow its neighbors not for lofty principle, but for fear of its immigrant population.<sup>76</sup> The Brazilian government believed the population of Japanese immigrants and native-born Japanese Brazilians "was too large and well-armed to intern without creating a rebellion, and that Japan might attack (and defeat) Brazil if Japanese citizens were rounded up."<sup>77</sup> Whether these fears indeed explain Brazil's motives, it is true that the Vargas regime's nationalist rhetoric would have appeared laughable had the government begun deporting Brazilians under United States orders.

### VIII. THE CHINESE OF NORTHERN MEXICO

While responsibility for the mass deportations of Japanese and other Latin Americans rested in part on the United States, the same cannot be said about the attacks on the Chinese population of Northern Mexico after the Revolution of 1909 to 1914.

According to Gerardo Rénique, the author of "Race, Region, and Nation: Sonora's Anti-Chinese Racism and Mexico's Postrevolutionary Nationalism, 1920s–1930s," Chinese immigrants settled in Sonora—a Northern state that borders the United States—seeking mining and railway

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75. Hagihara & Shimizu, *supra* note 64, at 208 ("During early 1942, approximately 1,000 Japanese, 300 Germans, and 30 Italians were deported from Peru to the United States, along with about 850 Germans, Japanese, and Italians picked up from Ecuador, Colombia, and Bolivia, and an additional 184 men from Panama and Costa Rica.").

76. Lesser, *supra* note 35, at 134–135.

77. *Id.* at 134–35.



construction opportunities at the turn of the century.<sup>78</sup> Eventually, when the Chinese became known as merchants in this state,<sup>79</sup> a mixture of economic and racist anxieties manifested in public expressions of anti-Chinese prejudice. Newspapers and popular revolutionary songs decried the presence of local Chinese men, depicting them as a threat to Mexican national interests and to Mexican women in particular.<sup>80</sup> Organizations such as the Commercial Association of Businessmen in Magdalena under the leadership of José María Arana agitated for the expulsion of Chinese merchants.<sup>81</sup> These organizations and their supporters in the media, academia, and government eventually succeeded in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. According to Gerardo Rénique, “between 1927 and 1940 the Chinese population—racially defined—was reduced at the national level from 24,218 to 4,856. In the northwestern frontier states the Chinese population was virtually wiped out.”<sup>82</sup> This campaign was successful: it all but eliminated the Chinese presence in Northern Mexico without drawing negative international attention. To this day, only a few scattered ethnic Chinese individuals remain in the region. Thus, perhaps ironically, the same nation that celebrates its hybrid European and indigenous character allowed extreme xenophobia to overrun its culture and its politics.

Rénique sees Mexico’s expulsion of the Chinese as a triumph of the myth of Mexican whiteness over the myth of Mexican *mestizaje*: “Through the optic of anti-Chinese racism, the *blanco-criollo* racial type of Sonora (and the *norteño* states more generally) reinforced northern predominance over regions identified by the theories of *mestizaje* with the indigenous and mestizo types.”<sup>83</sup> However, this view of the origins of anti-Chinese prejudice overlooks the exclusionary implications of *mestisaje*. As Debbie Lee points out, words like *mestizo* and *mulatto* provide “no hint of the Asiatic mixture represented in these terms.”<sup>84</sup> These terms limit the celebrated miscegenation of Latin American nations to those of European and Native American, or European and African combinations. At their most generous, these terms acknowledge a European, Native American, and African mixture—but leave no room for an Asian element.

It is emblematic of the exclusionary undertone in traditional celebrations of Latin American hybridity that José Vasconcelos, one of its most forceful proponents, was also one of the most influential anti-Chinese

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78. Gerardo Rénique, *Race, Region, and Nation: Sonora’s Anti-Chinese Racism and Mexico’s Post-Revolutionary Nationalism, 1920-1930s*, in *RACE & NATION IN MODERN LATIN AMERICA* 211 (Nancy P. Applebaum et al., eds., 2003).

79. *Id.* at 217, 230.

80. *Id.* at 212, 223.

81. *Id.* at 219-20.

82. *Id.* at 230.

83. *Id.*

84. Debbie Lee, *Regino Pedroso and El Ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu: Poemas Chinos*, 28:2 *AMERASIA J.* 93, 105 (2002).

racists in Mexico. Scholar, philosopher, and education minister in the early twentieth century, Vasconcelos authored *The Cosmic Race/La raza cósmica*, a book that celebrates the mixing of African, European, and Native American races in Latin America. It defends this mixing against the philosophy of white supremacy and racial purity that dominated European and United States thinking on race and which also found advocates in white elite circles of Latin America. Vasconcelos divides the Western Hemisphere between "Anglo-Saxons" in the United States and Canada, who he believes wish to cleanse "the earth of Indians, Mongolians or Blacks, for the greater glory and fortune of the Whites" and Latins, who "insist on not taking the ethnic factor too much into account for their sexual relations."<sup>85</sup> However, Vasconcelos proves in many ways to be a product of his time. While departing from European and United States thinking on race in his belief that racial confluence can produce a stronger individual and a better culture, he still sees each element in the mix in stereotypical ways. For Vasconcelos, the racially mixed Latin American

resembles the old Mayan *cenote* of green waters, lying deep and still, in the middle of the forest, for so many centuries since, that not even its legend remains any more. This infinite quietude is stirred with the drop put in our blood by the Black, eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust. There also appears the Mongol, with the mystery of his slanted eyes that see everything according to a strange angle, and discover I know not what folds and newer dimensions. The clear mind of the White, that resembles his skin and his dreams, also intervenes. Judaic striae hidden within the Castilian blood since the days of the cruel expulsion now reveal themselves, along with Arabian melancholy, as a reminder of the sickly Muslim sensuality. Who has not a little of all this, or does not wish to have all? There is the Hindu, who also will come, who has already arrived by way of the spirit, and although he is the last one to arrive he seems the closest relative.<sup>86</sup>

This reads like a catalogue of the racial stereotypes that prevailed in the early twentieth century and still persist today.

Vasconcelos, in describing the racial ingredients of hybridity, places them in a hierarchy. He excuses anti-Chinese prejudice in Mexico and sophisticatedly distinguishes it from racial prejudice in the United States. Though claiming that Latins are less prejudiced than the United States' "Anglo-Saxons," he concedes that "it may happen sometimes and, in fact, it has already happened, that economic competition may force us to close our doors, as is done by the Anglo-Saxons, to an unrestrained influx of Asians. But, in doing so, we obey reasons of economic order."<sup>87</sup> Vasconcelos expresses a convenient naïveté about racism not evident

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85. José Vasconcelos, *THE COSMIC RACE/LA RAZA CÓSMICA* 19 (Didier T. Jaén trans., John Hopkins UP, 1997) (1925).

86. *Id.* at 21-22.

87. *Id.* at 19.

elsewhere in his work. He reduces racial prejudice in the United States to an innate, biological repulsion felt by Northern European whites against racial others, ignoring the fact that, as a historical matter, racist rhetoric has consistently been linked to economic issues. Furthermore, he continues to contradict himself by admitting to biological factors in Mexico's anti-Chinese sentiments while insisting that biologically driven racism is distinct to the United States:

We recognize that it is not fair that people like the Chinese, who, under the saintly guidance of Confucian morality multiply like mice, should come to degrade the human condition precisely at the moment when we begin to understand that intelligence serves to refrain and regulate the lower zoological instincts, which are contrary to a truly religious conception of life. If we reject the Chinese, it is because man, as he progresses, multiplies less, and feels the horror of numbers, for the same reason he has begun to value quality. In the United States, Asians are rejected because of the same fear of physical overflow, characteristic of superior stocks; but also because Americans simply do not like Asians, even despise them, and would be incapable of intermarriage with them.<sup>88</sup>

This is a "high-brow" intellectual justification for the expulsion policy proposed by the Commercial Association of Businessmen in Magdalena. The implications of these statements are twofold. First, Mexicans should turn away Chinese immigrants because their greater numbers could overwhelm the nation's resources. Second, since "Latins" are prone to miscegenate and the Chinese are addicted to reproduction, in Vasconcelos's view, upon contact, Chinese elements would overwhelm the Mexican racial mix. Thus, Vasconcelos's glorification of miscegenation strikes a difficult balance between a humane embrace of diversity and a racist fear of "undesirable" ethnic elements.

#### IX. CENTRAL AMERICAN CHINESE DIASPORA AND NATIONALISM

While the Chinese population in Mexico dwindled, Chinese communities thrived in Central American countries, adding to the "cosmic" racial mix in Latin America. As demonstrated in a study by Lok Siu, the Chinese community asserts its presence and maintains its link with China through annual conventions of the Federation of Chinese Associations of Panama and Central America.<sup>89</sup>

During these conventions, a Miss Chinese Central America beauty contest is held<sup>90</sup> in which young contestants demonstrate their hybrid cultural identity: "while the national dance category allows contestants to present their cultural competency in Central American folk culture, the

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88. *Id.* at 19-20.

89. Lok Siu, *Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: Chineseness and Belonging in Central America and Panama*, 19 SOC. TEXT 7-8, 28 (2001).

90. *Id.* at 20.

self-introduction category focuses on the contestants' ability to perform Chineseness."<sup>91</sup> Each contestant is judged, in part, on her ability to perform the folkloric dances of her home Central American country and for her ability to speak Chinese dialects.

These conventions thus exemplify Chinese Central American transnational identity,<sup>92</sup> which encompasses local, national, regional, and diasporic affiliations as well as links to China as an ancestral home. As Siu asserts, "the overlapping and multiple identifications of diasporic Chinese challenge existing formulations of cultural citizenship that remain focused on the singular relationship between an immigrant group and their nation of residence."<sup>93</sup> This may be true, but the overlapping identities of Chinese Central Americans has as much to do with the peculiar characteristic of Latin American, especially Central American, national identity as it does with the Chinese diaspora.

In his study of the unique characteristic of Latin American nationalism, Benedict Anderson identifies a "well-known doubleness in early Spanish-American nationalism, [with] its alternating grand stretch and particular localism."<sup>94</sup> He attributes this characteristic to the role of print-capitalism, particularly newspapers, in shaping national identities.<sup>95</sup> However, factors beside the popular media have a role to play in constituting this identity. The "doubleness" in nationalism, a love for the nation as part of a larger unit known as Latin America, is also in part a product of past colonial interventions by Europe and the United States. Latin Americans do not self-identify as a race, but Latin American ideals of nationality do acknowledge cultural kinship with neighboring nations. In this context, the regional bonding of Central American Chinese is not unique since other ethnic groups in Latin America, such as Spaniards, Easter Europeans, Irish, and Japanese, among many, bond through cross-border organizations. Chinese Central American conventions fit within the Latin American ideal of regional solidarity. Siu may be correct in asserting that Chinese regional unity is grounded in an imagined ancestral culture and a shared experience of occupying "a politically vulnerable position in this region, where they often become scapegoats in xenophobic, populist, and nationalist movements."<sup>96</sup> However, the sense of regional interconnection of the Chinese Central American community is also nested within a broader sense of Latin American unity.

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91. *Id.*

92. *Id.* at 13-14.

93. *Id.* at 14.

94. Benedict Anderson, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM*, 62 (Verso 1997) (1983).

95. *Id.*

96. Siu, *supra* note 89, at 17.

## X. ASIAN LATINOS

The above historical synopsis foregrounds the Latin American origins of Asian Latinos, a group who I posit as an asset to the United States in an interconnected and globalized world. Along with my colleague Dr. Karlyn Koh, I received a CUNY Diversity Grant in 2005 to examine forms of cultural identification among Asian Latinos. As part of our research, we conducted voluntary interviews with individuals who identified themselves as Asian Latinos. According to the Office of Institutional Research at our school, fifty-six “foreign-born students (from Spanish-Speaking countries)” self-identified as Asian in the Fall 2004 semester, and eighteen in the Spring 2005 semester.<sup>97</sup> The individuals we interviewed described an identity shift similar to that experienced by Japanese Brazilians who returned to Japan: their Asian ancestry was salient when they lived in Latin America, but their Latin American identity became primary after arrival in the United States.

One young man we interviewed was a 22-year-old Venezuelan student of Chinese ancestry, born to a Chinese Colombian mother and a Chinese Venezuelan father.<sup>98</sup> His family owns a restaurant chain in Venezuela, and he described his lifestyle there as upper middle class.<sup>99</sup> The student’s nuclear family lived in South America while he resided in New York City with his uncle, who had come to study.<sup>100</sup> He worked in the Chinatown section of New York where many Asian Latinos are employed, making it possible for United States Chinese merchants to attract customers from the Latino community by claiming “se habla Español.”<sup>101</sup> Most of his friends in the United States are Latinos.<sup>102</sup> His closest friends in school were Brazilian and Peruvian, of Chinese and Japanese ancestry.<sup>103</sup> The student felt more comfortable in Latino settings than in Asian (North) American surroundings;<sup>104</sup> he explained that this is because he associates Latin America with greater acceptance of racial differences.<sup>105</sup> He believed racial categories are too rigid in the United States and that North Americans expected him to conform to Asian American stereotypes.<sup>106</sup> In Venezuela, by contrast, race was “not a big deal” and there is “a lot of intermingling.”<sup>107</sup>

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97. Office of Institutional Research Handout, LaGuardia Community College 1 (2005).

98. Interview with Chinese-Venezuelan, Student, LaGuardia Community College, in New York, N.Y. (Apr. 2005).

99. *Id.*

100. *Id.*

101. *Id.*

102. *Id.*

103. *Id.*

104. *Id.*

105. *Id.*

106. *Id.*

107. *Id.*

Another interviewee was a Korean-born female who had spent her formative years in Argentina and who spoke eloquently of the fluid identity produced by her migratory experiences.<sup>108</sup> She recalled her experience in Argentina: "As soon as I entered in elementary school, I realized that my biggest problem was the language. My first day of class was like being in another world where aliens lived. This kind of feeling continued for three months."<sup>109</sup> As a youth, she quickly adjusted to life in Argentina by adopting a "bicultural" identity: "My Spanish skills improved dramatically since I had made a lot of Argentinean friends. Although I lived as a Korean at home, my outside life was so different. I was behaving as an Argentinean. I lived this way for ten years in this lovely country."<sup>110</sup> On arrival in the United States, she was pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to live here as a Spanish speaker.<sup>111</sup> She conveyed a deepening of appreciation of her Argentinean past: "I now realize that my life in Argentina has become the most important experience and the biggest weapon while living in the United States."<sup>112</sup> She and her family used Spanish as their principal language in the United States, socializing mostly with Latinos.<sup>113</sup>

This young woman's experience fits within the identity formation patterns of Korean Latin Americans in the United States as described by Kyeyoung Park, who traces the immigration history of this group. According to Park, in the 1960s, many Korean immigrants began to arrive in countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay seeking to establish farming communities as the Japanese had done in Peru and Brazil.<sup>114</sup> Over the following decades, though, the trend shifted as Korean immigrants began seeking work in the garment industry in urban areas.<sup>115</sup> From there, many moved on to Southern California. Today, nearly 7% of the Korean community in Southern California consists of "secondary migrants from South American countries[]." <sup>116</sup> The shift in self-identification that Park finds in the Korean Latinos of California is similar to the one that Ishi describes in the Japanese Brazilians of Japan.

In Latin America, many of these Korean immigrants "were overwhelmed by public displays of romance and new sexual images"<sup>117</sup> propagated by the Latin American media. Such displays and images, which

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108. Interview with Argentinean-Korean, Student, LaGuardia Community College, in New York, N.Y. (Apr., 2005).

109. *Id.*

110. *Id.*

111. *Id.*

112. *Id.*

113. *Id.*

114. Kyeyoung Park, *10,000 "Señora Lees": The Changing Gender Ideology of Korean Latina-American Women in Diaspora*, 28:2 AMERASIA J. 164 (2002).

115. *Id.* at 166.

116. *Id.* at 163.

117. *Id.* at 166.

promote a voluptuous ideal of beauty and often play on ideals of miscegenation, disconcerted immigrants who identified with a more reticent, homogeneous culture. But when some of these immigrants moved to the United States during the South American economic downturns of the 1980s and 1990s, often bringing Latin American-born children with them, they found they had adopted some of these Latin American cultural markers.<sup>118</sup>

Park finds interesting differences between Koreans who immigrate directly to the United States and Koreans who have come after living in Latin America.<sup>119</sup> He believes the latter are more intent on preserving their language and their family-oriented cultures.<sup>120</sup> Also, Korean Latin Americans claim to have occupied “a more privileged social space in South American countries than in North America in terms of the racial and class hierarchy”;<sup>121</sup> they express a sense of having left behind a more racially open and accepting society. Judging from the past history of discrimination faced by many Asian Latin Americans, this sense of having come from a more racially open and accepting society may have as much to do with a longing for the Latin America they come to regard as home as it does with the traditional Latin American approach to race. Korean Latin Americans also claim that in places like Brazil, “Korean women gained much in the public domain of work, primarily in the garment industry, and were exposed to more liberal attitude toward gender roles and sexuality.”<sup>122</sup> Again, such claims may reflect a romanticizing tendency; whether Brazilian society is more egalitarian than Korean society is debatable. Regardless of the merits of these claims—that Latin Americans are less racist than North Americans and less sexist than Koreans—the claims bespeak a positive perception of the Latin American society left behind.

If Korean Latinos, such as those described above, begin to self-identify more strongly as Latino, their shift in self-perception is likely fueled by racial attitudes they encounter in the United States. With a tradition of the “one-drop” rule that classifies non-whites as black, and a current practice of racializing the national origins of immigrants who do not fit into a white-black binary, United States society wrestles with Asian Latinos whose layered identity is all at once Asian, Latin American, and North American. Half a million Asian Latinos in the United States<sup>123</sup> thus exist at the crosshairs of conflicting stereotypes. On the one hand, mainstream society tends to associate them with “yellow peril” and “model minority” stereotypes. Meanwhile, other minorities, including non-Asian

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118. *Id.* at 168-74.

119. *Id.*

120. *Id.* at 169.

121. *Id.* at 170.

122. *Id.* at 169.

123. United States Census Bureau, *supra* note 1.

Latinos, who are not aware of the complex cultural makeup and diversity of their own community, may view Asian Latinos with distrust and resentment as part of the overachieving minority the United States media lauds at the expense of blacks and (non-Asian) Latinos. Moreover, Asian Latinos face the suspicion of other Asian Americans. For example, Park observes, North American Koreans tend “to treat those from South America with a bit of contempt, reflecting a view that South American countries are backward.”<sup>124</sup>

Park further notes that “only now, as more Korean immigrants open businesses in Latino neighborhoods [in southern California], are Korean Latinos envied for their good command of Spanish and cultural knowledge of Latinos.”<sup>125</sup> In fact, the same cultural bond—that which links Korean Latinos and the broader Latino community in these neighborhood establishments—manifests also in the arena of global trade, as “an increasing number of transnational Korean corporations tend to recruit these Korean-Latino-Americans.”<sup>126</sup> Behind occasional concerned news reports of increasing Chinese and Japanese economic and military influence in Latin America—the United States’ traditional sphere of influence—lays the human work done by Asian Latinos and Asian Latin Americans, who move easily between the not-so-separate cultural spheres of East Asia and Latin America.

## XI. CONCLUSION

The existence of Asian Latinos upsets simplistic racial conceptions of the two most swiftly growing groups in the United States—with important implications for social and institutional policies as well as for popular sensibilities. If a young Korean Latina, for example, marks “Asian” as her racial identity when applying to college, an admissions committee governed by a “model minority”-influenced policy may treat her as a self-motivated student who needs no special support. If the same student marks “Latina,” she may thereby become an eligible beneficiary of affirmative action policies. The same individual can be judged in a myriad of ways by the society at large, depending on the identity category he or she identifies and is identified with.

The case of Asian Latinos complicates views about race and ethnicity, and thus it challenges policies that are premised on stereotypical assumptions. What assumptions would admission officials make if the same hypothetical Korean Latina marked more than one race category on her college application? It is also interesting to consider how the United States media might portray Asian Latinos if this group becomes more

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124. Park, *supra* note 114, at 170.

125. *Id.*

126. *Id.*



publicly visible. Would the media link them to Asian “model minority” stereotypes, or associate them with Latinos “taking away American jobs”? The raising of such questions disrupts myths that pervade United States culture: these questions highlight a concrete link, in Asian Latinos, between groups envisioned as distinct and contrasting.

Further implications follow from the ability of Asian Latinos to move between—and to some extent unite—Asian, Latin American, and North American cultural settings. By doing so, Asian Latinos undermine dire predictions by immigration restrictionists of racial balkanization in the United States. Such predictions, which have sometimes triggered public alarm, rest on slippery definitions of “race” and “nation” and yet static conceptions of individual cultural identity. Restrictionists tend to conflate the concepts of “race” and “nation” or substitute one for the other to serve their purposes. Likewise, the popular media presents the United States as a diverse nation, while presenting the ethnically complex Latin American and Asian nations as homogenous races. When news reports consistently link undocumented immigration with Mexicans, they reinforce the notion of Mexico as a race. Hence, Mexicans come to be perceived as members of one race, regardless of whether they have a traditional Anglo-Saxon Protestant last name, like former Mexican President Vicente Fox, or whether they are of Chinese ancestry. Meanwhile, the same news reports privilege the voices of white Americans in representing the United States’ position on undocumented immigrants.

While the modern academy accepts as a truism that identity categories are arbitrary social constructs, such constructs are deployed in the world to incite violence in places like the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and to mobilize political sentiment against immigration in places like the United States. Immigration restrictionists, treating human identity as settled even while playing fast and loose with “race” and nation,” tend to foreground concerns about immigrants’ failures to assimilate. Implicit in such concerns are views about whether Asians and Latinos can become “Americans.” Thus Buchanan—in reporting that Mexican immigrants jeered at the United States soccer team in Los Angeles and that Chinese Americans attribute Wen Ho Lee’s indictment to racism—does not distinguish between the attitudes of first generation immigrants and those of their second-generation offspring.<sup>127</sup> Restrictionist views reflect a belief, against historical and contemporary evidence, that cultural identity remains static not only for an individual but across generations.

The history of Asians in Latin America and the presence of Asian Latinos in the United States are evidence that group constructs are artificial, and that a fluid conception of identity is necessary to understand today’s globalized world. The culture-bridging presence of Asian Latino

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127. Buchanan, *supra* note 7.

communities challenges the view that immigrant groups in the United States are alienated from each other and from mainstream society. The American media glorifies multinational corporations that spread to various locations across the globe for economic reasons, but views with suspicion individuals who are driven by similar motives to move into our country. This suspicion may result in part from our expectation that individuals, unlike corporate entities, carry with them enduring cultural allegiances.

Still, it is arguable that our immigration policy should accept the universal right of individuals to move freely in search of economic, social, and personal opportunities. As evidenced by the shifting identities of Japanese Brazilians in Japan and Asian Latinos in the United States, cultural allegiances are not fixed phenotypes like eye color. They shift with changes in time and place. In a world where mass-migrations are common, home often seems to be the last place left behind. Yet, the stories of Asian Latinos also illustrate the continuing processes by which immigration experience transforms personal identities and immigrants themselves transform their new homelands. The notion of a predominantly white United States should fade like grainy film of the now romanticized arrival of white Catholics and Jews to Ellis Island at the start of the past century. Our country's diversity will not be its downfall: as Asian Latinos demonstrate, it is possible to retain multiple, layered identities and loyalties, without betraying any of them.