

IS LATINA/O IDENTITY A RACIAL IDENTITY?

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Is Latina/o identity a racial identity? Given the social basis of racializing categories and the dynamic nature of identities, there is no decontextual, final, or essential answer to this question. However, I would describe my concern in this paper as being in the realm of social ontology in the sense that I seek the truth about how Latina/o identity is configured as well as lived in the context of North America today. The question then can be formulated in the following way: What is the best, or most apt, account of Latina/o identity that makes the most sense of the current political and social realities within which we must negotiate our social environment? Although I am interested here in the politics of identity, that is, the political effects of various accounts of identity in and on popular consciousness, both among Latinas/os and among Anglos, my principal concern is at the level of experience, ideology, and meaning rather than the attendant political rights that may be associated with identity.

As will be seen, much of the debates over Latinas/os and race weave together strategic considerations (a concern with political effects) and metaphysical considerations (a concern with the most apt description). It is not clear to me that these concerns can, in fact, be disentangled. There are two reasons for this. One is that strategic proposals for the way a community should represent itself cannot work if there is no connection whatsoever to lived experience or to the common meanings that are prominent in the relevant discourses and practices. Thus, the strategic efficacy of political

proposals are dependent on correct assessments of metaphysical realities. But, second, the question of what is the most apt description of those metaphysical realities is not as clear-cut as some philosophers might suppose. And this is because the concepts of "race," "Latina/o," and even "identity" admit of different meanings and have complicated histories, such that it is not possible to simply say, "This is *the* meaning." Thus, we must make a judgment about meaning, a judgment that will be underdetermined by usage, history, science, or phenomenological description of experience. And in making these judgments, we must look to the future and not just the past. In other words, given that we are participating in the *construction* of meanings in making such judgments, we must take responsibility for our actions, which will require carefully considering their likely real-world effects.

The question of Latina/o identity's relationship to the conventional categories of race that have been historically dominant in the United States is a particularly vexing one. To put it straightforwardly, we simply don't fit. Racialized identities in the United States have long connoted homogeneity, easily visible identifying features, and biological heredity, but none of these characteristics apply to Latinas/os in the United States, nor even to any one national subset, such as Cuban Americans or Puerto Ricans. We are not homogeneous by "race," we are often not identifiable by visible features or even by names, and such issues as disease heredity that are often cited as the biologically relevant sign of race are inapplicable to such a heterogeneous group.

Moreover, the corresponding practices of racialization in the United States—such as racial border control, legal sanctions on cross-racial marriage, and the multitudinous demands for racial self-identification on nearly every application form from day care to college admissions—are also relatively unfamiliar south of the border. Angel R. Oquendo recounts that before he could even take the SAT in Puerto Rico he was asked to identify himself racially. "I was caught off guard," he says. "I had never thought of myself in terms of race."¹ Fortunately, the SAT included "Puerto Rican" among the choices of "race," and Oquendo was spared what he called a "profound existential dilemma." Even while many Latinas/os consider color a relevant factor for marriage, and antiblack racism persists in Latin America along with a condescension toward indigenous peoples, the institutional and ideological forms that racism has taken in Latin America are generally not analogous to those in the North. And these differences are why many of us find our identity as well as our social status changing as we step off the plane or cross the river: race suddenly becomes an all-important aspect of our identity, and sometimes our racial identity dramatically changes in ways over which it feels as if we have no control.

In the face of this transcontinental experiential dissonance, there are at least three general options possible as a way of characterizing the relationship between Latina/o identity and race. One option is to refuse a racialized designation and use the concept of "ethnicity" instead. This would avoid the problem of racial diversity within Latina/o communities and yet recognize the cultural links among Latinas/os in the North. The concept of ethnicity builds on cultural practices, customs, language, sometimes religion, and so on. One might also be motivated toward this option as a way of resisting the imposition of a pan-Latina/o ethnicity, in order to insist that the only meaningful identities for Latinas/os are Cuban American, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and so on.²

A second option would resist the ethnic paradigm on the grounds that, whatever the historical basis of Latina/o identity, living in the context of North America means that we have become a racialized population and need a self-understanding that will accurately assess our portrayal here. A third option, adopted by many neoconservatives, is to attempt to assimilate to the individualist ideology of the United States both in body and in mind, and reject the salience of group identities a priori.

None of these responses seems fully adequate, though some have more problems than others. It is hard to see how the diversity among Latinas/os could be fairly represented in any concept of race. And it is doubtful that many Latinas/os, especially those who are darker-skinned, will be able to succeed in presenting themselves as simply individuals: they will still be seen by many as instantiations of a group whose characteristics are considered both universally shared within the group and largely inferior, even if they do not see themselves this way. On the face of it, the first option—an account of Latina/o identity as an ethnic identity—seems to make the most sense, for a variety of reasons that I will explore in this paper. This option could recognize the salience of social identity, allow for more internal heterogeneity, and resist the racializing that so often mischaracterizes our own sense of self. However, I will ultimately argue that the "ethnic option" is not fully adequate to the contemporary social realities we face, and may inhibit the development of useful political strategies for our diverse communities. My argument in this paper primarily will take the form of a negative: that the ethnic option is not adequate. Developing a fully adequate alternative is beyond my scope or ambitions here, but the very failure of the ethnic option will establish some of the necessary criteria for such an alternative.

My argument will take the following steps. First, I will explain briefly the context of these debates over identity, which will go some way toward refuting the individualist option. Next, I will go over some of the relevant facts about our populations to provide the necessary cultural context. Then I will

zero in on the ethnicity argument, assess its advantages and disadvantages, and conclude by posing the outline of an alternative.

Why Care about Identity?

If I may be permitted a gross overgeneralization, European Americans are afraid of strongly felt ethnic and racial identities. Not all, to be sure. The Irish and Italian communities, as well as some other European-American nationalities, have organized cultural events on the basis of their identities at least since the 1960s, with the cooperation of police and city councils across the country. The genealogy of this movement among the Irish and the Italians has been precisely motivated by their discrimination and vilification in U.S. history, a vilification that has sometimes taken racialized forms.

But there is a different attitude among whites in general toward "white ethnic" celebrations of identity and toward those of others, that is, those of nonwhites. And this is, I suspect, because it is one thing to say to the dominant culture, "You have been unfairly prejudiced against me," as southern European ethnicities might say, and quite another to say, "You have stolen my lands and enslaved my people and through these means created the wealth of your country," as African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans might say. The latter message is harder to hear; it challenges the basic legitimizing narratives of this country's formation and global status, and it understandably elicits the worry, "What will be the full extent of their demands?" Of course, all of the cultural programs that celebrate African, indigenous, or Latina/o heritage do not make these explicit claims. But in a sense, the claims do not need to *be* explicit: any reference to slavery, indigenous peoples, or Chicano or Puerto Rican history implies challenges to the legitimizing narrative of the United States, and any expression of solidarity among such groups consciously or unconsciously elicits concern about the political and economic demands such groups may eventually make, even if they are not made now.

This is surely part of what is going on when European Americans express puzzlement about the importance attached to identity by non-European Americans, when young whites complain about African Americans sitting together in the cafeteria, or when both leftist and liberal political theorists, such as Todd Gitlin and Arthur Schlesinger, jump to the conclusion that a strong sense of group solidarity and its resultant "identity politics" among people of color in this country will fracture the body politic and disable our democracy.³

A prominent explanation given for these attachments to identity, attachments that are considered otherwise inexplicable, is that there is opportunism at work, among leaders if not among the rank and file, to secure

government handouts and claim special rights. However, the demand for cultural recognition does not entail a demand for special political rights. The assumption in so much of contemporary political philosophy that a politics of recognition—or identity-based political movements—leads automatically to demands for special rights is grounded, I suspect, in the mystification some feel in regard to the politics of cultural identity in the first place. Given this mystification and feeling of amorphous threat, assumptions of opportunism and strategic reasoning become plausible.

Assumptions about the opportunism behind identity politics seem to work on the basis of the following understanding of the recent historical past: in the 1960s, some groups began to clamor for the recognition of their identities, began to resist and critique the cultural assimilationism of liberal politics, and argued that state institutions should give these identities public recognition. Thus, on this scenario, first we had identity politics asserting the political importance of these identities, and then we had (coerced) state recognition of them. But denigrated identity designations, particularly racial ones, have *originated* with and been enforced by the state in U.S. history, not vice versa. Obviously, it is the U.S. state and U.S. courts that initially insisted on the overwhelming salience of some racial and ethnic identities, to the exclusion of rights to suffrage, education, property, marrying whomever one wanted, and so on. Denigrated groups are trying to reverse this process; they are not the initiators of it. It seems to me that they have two aims: (1) to valorize previously derided identities, and (2) to have their own hand at constructing the representations of identities.

The U.S. pan-Latina/o identity is perhaps the newest and most important identity that has emerged in the recent period. The concept of a pan-Latina/o identity is not new in Latin America: Simón Bolívar called for it nearly two hundred years ago as a strategy for anticolonialism, but also because it provided a name for the “new peoples” that had emerged from the conquest. And influential leaders such as José Martí and Che Guevara also promoted Latin American solidarity. It is important to note that populations “on the ground” have not often resonated with these grand visions, and that national political and economic leaders continue to obstruct regional accords and trade agreements that might enhance solidarity. But the point remains that the invocation of a pan-Latina/o identity does not actually originate in the North.

Only much more recently is it the case that some Latina/o political groups in the North have organized on a pan-Latina/o basis, although most Latina/o politics here has been organized along national lines, for example, as Puerto Ricans or Chicanos. But what is especially new, and what is being largely foisted on us from the outside, is the representation of a pan-Latina/o identity

in the dominant North American media, and it is this representation we want to have a hand in shaping. Marketing agencies have discovered/created a marketing niche for the "generic" Latina/o. And Latina/o-owned marketing agencies and advertising agencies are working on the construction of this identity as much as anyone, though of course in ways dominated by strategic interests or what Habermas calls purposive rationality. There are also more and more cultural representations of Latinas/os in the dominant media and in government productions such as the census. Thus, the concern that U.S. Latinas/os have with our identity is not spontaneous or originating entirely or even mostly from within our communities; neither is the ongoing representation of our identity something we can easily just ignore.⁴

What We Are Depends on Where We Are

Social identities, whether racial or ethnic, are dynamic. In Omi and Winant's study of what they call "racial formations" in the United States between the 1960s and the 1980s, they argued, "Racial categories and the meanings of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded."⁵ Moreover, these categories are constantly facing forms of resistance and contestation that transform both their impact and their effective meaning. Clearly this is the case with ethnic as well as racial identities. As social constructions imposed on variable experiential facts, they exist with no stable referent or essential, non-negotiable core. And because such identities are often also the site of conflict over political power and economic resources, they are especially volatile. Any analysis of Latina/o identity, then, must chart historical trends and contextual influences, which themselves will vary across different parts of the country.

Since the passage of the 1965 immigration law that ended the quotas on immigration from South and Central America and the Caribbean, millions of Latinas/os have entered the United States from various countries, causing a great diversification of the previously dominant Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban communities. Thus today, Dominicans are vying with Puerto Ricans in New York City to be the largest Latina/o population, and even Cubans no longer outnumber other Latinas/os in Miami. As the immigrant communities settle in, younger generations develop different identities than their parents, adapting to their cultural surroundings. Young people also tend to experience similar problems across the national divisions, such as Dominican and Puerto Rican, and this promotes a sense of common identity. So in one sense diversity has increased as new immigrations continue and new generations of younger Latinos depart from some aspects of their parents' cultural identity, such as being Spanish-dominant or being practicing Catholics, while in another sense diversity has decreased as

Latinas/os experience common forms of discrimination and chauvinism in the United States and an increasingly common cultural interpellation.

In the 1960s, U.S. state agencies began to disseminate the ethnic label "Hispanic" as the proper term for identifying all people of Latin American and even Spanish descent.⁶ So today we have a population of thirty million or so "Hispanics" in the United States. The mass media, entertainment, and advertising industries have increasingly addressed this large population as if it were a coherent community.⁷ As Suzanne Oboler's study reveals, this generic identity category feels especially socially constructed to many of the people named by it, given that it is not how they self-identified previously.⁸ Oboler asks, somewhat rhetorically:

Are marketers merely taking advantage of an existing "group" as a potentially lucrative target population? Or are their advertising strategies in fact helping to "design" the group, "invent" its traditions, and hence "create" this homogeneous ethnic group?⁹

One might well be concerned that adapting to any such pan-Latina/o identity as constructed by dominant institutions—whether economic or political ones—represents a capitulation or is simply the inevitable effect of what Foucault might call governmentality.

However, much of the debate over this interpellation among those named by it does not so much critique the fact of its social construction or even the fact that its genesis lies in government and marketing agencies, but focuses instead on its political implications and its coherence with lived experience, for example, the way in which it disallows multiplicity or the way in which it erases national allegiance. In this way, the debate shifts to a more productive set of concerns, it seems to me. I witnessed an interesting exchange on some of these points at the "Hispanics: Cultural Locations" conference held at the University of San Francisco, in 1997. Ofelia Schutte, a leading Latina philosopher, presented a paper arguing that a pan-U.S. Latina/o identity may be a means to disaffiliate us from our nations of birth or ancestry, nations that have been invaded or otherwise harmed by the U.S. government. Thus, thinking of ourselves primarily as U.S. Latinas/os rather than, say, Panamanians or Salvadorans may work to dislodge or weaken feelings of loyalty to countries outside the U.S. borders. In the discussion period after her paper, one member of the audience argued strongly that as a half-Spanish, half-Puerto Rican woman who grew up among Chicanos in California, she had found the emergence of a pan-Latina/o identity a welcome relief. Although she recognized the dangers that Schutte was describing, identifying herself simply as Latina allowed her to avoid having to make complicated choices between the various

aspects of her identity, and it helpfully named her experience of connection with a multiplicity of Latina/o communities.¹⁰

Another political concern I have heard voiced against overhomogenizing Latina/o identities is that it could allow those members of the group who are themselves less disadvantaged to reap the benefits of affirmative action and other forms of economic redress that have mainly been created for (and often mainly fought for by) Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, that is, the more disadvantaged members. We are already seeing this happen because of the label "Hispanic." It is unclear how to effectively police this problem other than to rely on people's own moral conscience (which is not terribly effective). In some cases, targeted groups are designated with specificity as Mexican Americans or Puerto Ricans in order to avoid, for example, giving scholarships to Argentinians of recent European extraction. However, the problem here is that one cannot assume that no Argentinians in the United States have suffered discrimination, given their particular racialized identity, skin tone, the way their accent may be mediated by their class background, and so forth. Given the racial heterogeneity of every Latin American and Caribbean country, one cannot exclude an entire country from measures aimed at redressing discrimination without excluding many who are racially marked as inferior north of the border.

The resistance to a pan-Latina/o identity is most likely a losing battle, moreover, as both government and marketing agencies are increasingly winning hegemony in their public interpellations. Moreover, as both Arlene Davila and Daniel Mato have argued in separate studies, the marketing and advertising agencies are not simply forcing us to use labels that have no real purchase on our lives, but participating in a new subject construction that affects how Latinas/os think about and experience our identity and our interrelatedness to other Latinas/os with whom we may have felt little kinship before.¹¹ Mato points out that the television corporation Univisión, which is jointly owned by U.S. and Latin American companies, is exposing its viewers to a wide array of programming such that viewers are becoming familiar with a diversity of communities, in both the South and the North, and in this way "Univisión is participating in the social construction of an imagined community."¹² To say that an identity is socially constructed is to say not that it does not refer to anything in reality, but that what it refers to is a contingent product of social negotiations rather than a natural kind. And the exchange I described above at the "Hispanics: Cultural Locations" conference indicates that the pan-Latina/o identity does in fact correspond at least to some contemporary Latina/os' lived experience.

Latin America itself is probably the most diverse area in the world, producing extreme racial and ethnic diversity *within* Latina/o communities.

By U.S. categories, there are black, brown, white, Asian, and Native American Latinas/os. There are many Latinas/os from the Southern Cone whose families are of recent European origin, a large number of Latinas/os from the western coastal areas whose families came from Asia, and of course a large number of Latinas/os whose lineage is entirely indigenous to the Americas or entirely African. The majority of Latinas/os in North and South America are no doubt the product of a mix of two or more of these groups. And being mixed is true, as Jorge Gracia reminds us, even of the so-called Hispanics who are direct descendants of Spain and Portugal. And it is true as well of many or most of the people identified as black or *moreno*, as is the case in the United States. Latin Americans are thus generally categorized "racially" in the following way: white (which often involves a double deceit: a claim to pure Spanish descent, very rare, and a claim that pure Spanish descent is purely white or European, also very rare); black (meaning wholly or mostly of African descent, usually sub-Saharan); Indian (meaning being some or mostly of pre-Columbian or Amerindian descent); and mixed (which is sometimes divided into subcategories, *mestizo*, *mulatto*, *cholito*, and so on), with the mixed category always enjoying a majority. Asians are often entirely left off the list, even though their numbers in several countries are significant.

Different countries vary these main racial designations, however. During a recent weekend festival for Latino Heritage Month in Syracuse, Latinas/os of different nationalities provided information about their countries for passersby, information that included statistics, culled from government sources, on what in every case was called the country's "ethnic makeup." Racial categories of identity were given *within* this larger rubric of ethnic makeup, suggesting an equation between ethnicity and race. For example, in the Dominican Republic the ethnic makeup is said to consist of 73 percent "mixed people," 16 percent "white," 11 percent "black." In Ecuador the categories are listed as "mestizo," "Indian," "Spanish," and "black." In Chile there is a single category called "European and mestizo," which makes up 95 percent of the population. In Cuba we get categories of "mulatto," which is 51 percent of the population, and we also get categories of "white," "black," and "Chinese." In Bolivia the breakdown is between "Quechua," "Aymara," "mestizo," and "white."

One is reminded of the encyclopedia invented by Borges, which divides dogs into such categories as "(a) belonging to the Emperor . . . (b) tame . . . (c) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush . . . and (d) having just broken the water pitcher."¹³ There is no internally consistent or coherent theory of ethnic or racial identity underlying the diversity of categorizations. Under the rubric of ethnicity are included a mix of cultural, national, and racial

groups, from Spanish to Quechua to white. The sole point that seems to be consistent throughout is that the category "black" is the only one that is invariably racialized, that is, presented as black or mulatto and never presented as "West Indian" or "African." Interestingly, the category "white" is also often racialized, though it is sometimes replaced with "European" or "Spanish." I would suggest that there is a strong relationship between these two facts. That is, it becomes important to use the category "white," and to self-identify as "white," when the category "black" is present, in order to establish one's clear demarcation, and out of concern that a category such as "mestizo" might be allowed to include black people. "White" is also used to distinguish oneself from "Indian," a category that bears racialized meanings in Latin America and negative associations similar to the associations with African Americans in the United States.

Blackness does, of course, signify differently in Latin America; thus it is not likely that a typical white American landing in Santo Domingo would look around and think only 11 percent of the population is black. However, it seems clear that the striking use of the category "black" for all people of African descent, rather than cultural and national markers, is an indication of antiblack racism. The people so designated are reduced to skin color as if this were their primary characteristic rather than some self-created marker such as nationality, language, or culture. One may have been born into a culture and language not of one's own choosing, but these are still more indicative of human agency than is any classification by phenotype. From this, one might argue that replacing "black" with another ethnicity category, such as "West Indian" or "African," might help equalize and dignify the identities.

The category "Indian," however, even though it might initially look to be more of an ethnicity than a race (since it is not merely the name of a color), has primarily a racial meaning, given that the term does not say anything about language, mode of life, religion, or specific origin. Also, in non-indigenous communities of discourse, the term often carries associations as negative as "black" does. Here one might argue that disaggregating the category "Indian" would be helpful. If the main meaning of "Indian" is a kind of racial meaning, then the use of "Quechua," "Aymara," and so on reduces the significance of the racialized connotations of the identity, subordinating those to the specificity of linguistic and cultural markers.

Despite all this variety and heterogeneity, when Latinas/os enter the United States, we are often homogenized into one overarching "Hispanic" identity. This generic Hispanicity is not, as Jorge Gracia reminds us, actually homogeneous. That is, in European-American eyes, "Hispanic" identity does not carry the same connotations in every part of the United States. Gracia explains:

In Miami it means Cuban; in New York City it means Puerto Rican; and in the southwest it means Mexican. So in California I am supposed to have as my native food tacos, in New York City, *arroz con gandules*, and in Miami, *arroz con frijoles negros*¹⁴

I, too, cannot even count the times it has been assumed that I must naturally like hot and spicy food, even though the typical food in Panamá is extremely mild.

Still, there is one feature at least that persists across this variety of "generic" Hispanic identities, and that is that our identity in the United States, whether or not it is homogenized, is quite often presented as a racial identity. In a recent report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, just to give one example, differences in average SAT scores were reported in the following way:

The average verbal scores by race were: white, 526; black, 434; Asian-American, 498; American Indian, 480; Mexican-American, 453; Puerto Rican, 452; and other Hispanic students, 461.¹⁵

So again, like Angel Oquendo, we find that "Puerto Rican" is a racial identity, and a different one at that from the "race" of Mexican Americans. Whereas in the categorizations I just analyzed from Latin America, racial categories are subsumed within an overall account of "ethnic makeup," in this example from the United States, ethnic categories are subsumed within an overall account of racial difference. But in both cases, race and ethnicity are all but equated.

The Ethnicity Paradigm

Latinas/os in the United States have responded to racialization in a variety of ways. One response, still ongoing, has been to deny vigorously any racial interpellation as other-than-white. Thus some Latinos have literally campaigned to be called white, apparently thinking that if they are going to have to be racialized, whiteness is the one they want. Anita Allen reported in 1994 that the largest petitioning group that had thus far requested changes to the year 2000 U.S. census was the Association of White Hispanics, who were agitating for that designation to be on the census form.¹⁶ In the self-interested scramble for social status, this group perceived correctly where the advantages lay.

Another response, especially among groups of young people, has been to use the discourse of racialization as it exists in the United States to self-identify, but in positive rather than derogatory ways. Thus Chicanos in the August Twenty-Ninth Movement and in Mecha, as well as the primarily

Puertorriqueno Young Lords in the Northeast, at times adopted and adapted the concept of a brown racial identity, such as the "Brown Berets," as if Latinas/os in these communities shared a visible phenotype. One relevant causal factor for this among Puerto Ricans may be their long experiential history of U.S. colonization, which imposed racialization even before they ever entered the United States. Latinas/os from countries without this experience of intensive colonization are more surprised by being racially designated when they come here.¹⁷

But neither "white" nor "brown" works for a pan-Latina/o identity (or even for the specific nationalities they want to represent). What better unites Latinas/os both across and even within our specific national cultures is not race or phenotype but precisely those features associated with culture: language, religious traditions, cultural values, characteristics of comportment. Thus, another response to forced racialization that has existed for a long time among some Latina/o communities and which has enjoyed a recent resurgence is to deny that race applies in any way to Latinas/os and to argue for, and self-identify as, an ethnic group that encompasses different nationalities and races within it.¹⁸ The U.S. census has adopted this approach at times, in having no Latina/o identity listed under possible racial categories and including it only under the list of ethnic categories. Let us look at the main arguments in favor of this approach, both the political as well as the metaphysical arguments.

1. There is powerful sentiment among Latinas/os toward resisting the imposition of U.S. racializations and U.S. categories of identity. It is not as if the system of racial classification here has benefited anyone except the white majority. As Jorge Klor de Alva provocatively put it to Cornel West in a conversation in *Harper's*, "What advantage has it been, Cornel, for blacks to identify as blacks?"¹⁹ Oquendo argues against the use of such racial terms as "Black Hispanics" and "White Hispanics" on the grounds that these categories "project onto the Latino/a community a divisive racial dualism that, much as it may pervade U.S. society, is alien to that community."²⁰ Our identity is about culture and nationality, not race: for example, as Clara Rodriguez has shown, Puerto Ricans of all colors self-identify first as Puerto Rican.²¹

But in the United States, cultural, national, ethnic, religious and other forms of identification are constantly subordinated to race. So Afro-Cubans, English-speaking West Indians, and Afro-Brazilians are grouped as "black," in ways that often counter people's own felt sense of identity or primary group alliances. Race trumps culture, and culture is sometimes even seen as a simple outgrowth of race. Shouldn't this ridiculous biological essentialism be opposed and the use of race as an identity or as an all-important category of identity be diminished?

2. Within the United States itself, many African Americans have been opting out of racial categories ever since Jesse Jackson started pushing for the use of the term "African American" in the late 1980s. This was a self-conscious strategy to encourage analogies between African Americans and other hyphenated ethnic groups—to, in a sense, normalize African-American identity by no longer having it set apart from everyone else. Shouldn't Latinas/os unite with and support this trend?

3. The strategy of using ethnic terms rather than racial ones will have the effect of reducing racism or prejudice generally. This was clearly Jackson's thinking. A representation by ethnic terms rather than racial ones confers agency on a people; it invokes historical experience as well as cultural and linguistic practices, all of which are associations with human subjectivity, not objectivity. In contrast, race is often said to be something one has no control over, something one "can't help." This surely perpetuates the association between denigrated racial categories and victimhood, animal-driven natures, inherent inferiority and superiority, and so on. For whites, racial essentialism confers superiority whether or not they've done anything to deserve it; superior intelligence is just in their genes. These beliefs may be more unconscious than conscious, but given the historically sedimented and persistent layers of the ideology of race as an essential determinant, no matter what one intends by use of a word, its historical meanings will be brought into play when it is in use. Naomi Zack, Anthony Appiah, Klor de Alva, and many others today argue that any use of racial terms will be inevitably embedded with biological essentialism and historically persistent hierarchies of moral and cognitive competence.²² Luis Angel Toro calls on us to "abandon the outdated racial ideology embodied in [the Office of Management and Budget's Statistical] Directive no. 15 and replace it with questions designed to determine an individual's membership in a socially constructed, cultural subgroup."²³ The goal here, of course, is not only to change whites' assumptions about racialized groups, but also to help alter the self-image of people in those groups themselves toward a more affirming identity, an identity in which one can take justifiable pride.

Some also point to the relative success of Jamaican immigrants in the United States as an example here. Grosfoguel and Georas write, "The Jamaican's community's strategy was to emphasize ethnic over racial identity. The fact that Jamaicans were not subsumed under the categorization 'African American' avoided offsetting the positive impact of their skilled background. Thus Jamaicans were successfully incorporated into the host labor market in well-paid public and private service jobs . . . [and] are currently portrayed by the white establishment in New York as a model minority."²⁴

These are strong arguments. To summarize them, the political arguments are that (1) the use of ethnicity will reduce racism because it refers to self-created features rather than merely physiological ones, and (2) this will also resist the imposition of U.S. forms of identifying people, thus disabusing North Americans of their tendency to naturalize and universalize the predominant categories used here in the United States. The metaphysical arguments are that (3) ethnicity more accurately identifies what really holds groups together and how they self-identify, and (4) ethnicity is simply closer to the truth of Latina/o identity, given its racial heterogeneity. All of these arguments are, in my view, good ones. But the problem is that there are other considerations, and once they are put on the table, the picture unfortunately becomes more complicated.

Racial Realities

Let us look at the case of Cuban Americans. By all measures, they have fared very well in this country in terms of both economic success and political power. They have largely run both politics and the press in Miami for some time, and presidential candidates neglect Cuban issues at their peril. Of course, one cannot argue, as some do in the case of Jamaicans, that Cubans' strong ethnic identification is the main reason for their success; most important has been their ability to play an ideological (and at times military) role for the United States in the cold war. The enormous government assistance provided to the Cubans who fled the Cuban revolution was simply unprecedented in U.S. immigration history: they received language training, educational and business loans, job placement assistance, and housing allocations, and their professional degrees from Cuban institutions were legally recognized to an extent other Third World immigrants still envy. In 1965, when President Johnson began his Great Society programs, the amount of assistance they received from the government actually increased.²⁵

But one may legitimately wonder whether the Cubans' status as refugees from Communism was all that was at work here, or even the overriding factor. The Cubans who came in the 1960s were overwhelmingly white or light-skinned. They were generally from the top strata of Cuban society. It is an interesting question whether Haitians would ever have been treated the same way. The Cubans who left Cuba after 1980, known as the Marielitos, were from lower strata of Cuban society, and a large number were Afro-Cubans and mulattos.²⁶ These Cubans found a decidedly colder welcome. They were left penned in refugee camps for months on end, and those who were not sent back to Cuba were released into U.S. society with little or no assistance, joining the labor ranks at the level of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans.

There are no doubt many factors at work in these disparate experiences of Cuban immigration, having to do, for example, with the geopolitical climate. But surely one of these important factors is race, or racialized identity. Perceived racial identity often *does* trump ethnic or cultural identity.

Look again at the passage about Jamaicans quoted earlier from Grosfoguel and Georas, with certain words emphasized: "The Jamaican community's strategy was to emphasize *ethnic* over *racial* identity. The fact that *Jamaicans* were not subsumed under the categorization 'African American' avoided offsetting the positive impact of their skilled background." Grosfoguel and Georas contrast the *ethnic* Jamaican identity with what they revealingly take to be a *racial* African American identity, even though the term "African American" was Jackson's attempt to replace race with ethnicity. This again suggests that the racialization of black Americans will overpower any ethnic or cultural marker. It may also be the case that the category "African" is overly inclusive, since under its umbrella huge cultural and linguistic differences would be subsumed, and thus it is incapable of signifying a unified ethnic identity. But that may be assuming more knowledge about Africa among white Americans or even among Latinas/os than one reasonably should. More likely is the fact that "African American" is still understood primarily as a racial designation, in a way that terms such as "German American" or "Irish American" never are. Thus it is questionable whether the strategy of using an ethnic term for a currently racialized group will have the effect of reducing racism if it continues to simply signify race.

And after all, the first meaning given for the word *ethnic* in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* is "heathen, pagan." The concept of ethnicity is closely associated with the concept of race, emerging at the same moment in global history, as this meaning indicates. The common usage of the category "white ethnic" indicates that unless otherwise identified, "ethnics" are assumed to be nonwhite and thus they are racialized. For many people in the United States, "ethnic" connotes not only nonwhite but also the typical negative associations of nonwhite racial identity. Meanings given for the word *heathen* in the same dictionary include "rude, illiterate, barbarous, and irreligious." In this list, it is striking that "irreligious" comes last.

Like "African American," the fact is that in the United States the category "Latina/o" often operates as a racialized category. Grosfoguel and Georas themselves argue that "no matter how 'blonde or blue-eyed' a person may be, and no matter how successfully he can 'pass' as white, the moment a person self-identifies as Puerto Rican, he enters the labyrinth of racial Otherness."²⁷ Virginia Dominguez even makes this case in regard not only to ethnicity but to cultural identity as well. She suggests that case studies from Canada to Brazil reveal that "people may speak culture but continue to think race.

Whether in the form of cultural pluralism or of the current idiom of multiculturalism, the concept of culture is used in ways that naturalize and essentialize difference."²⁸

My suspicion is that this works for some Latina/o identities, such as Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican, but not always for others, such as Chilean or Argentinian or perhaps South Americans in general, depending on their features. And as mentioned earlier, some of these groups—Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in particular—have a long history of seeing their identities interpellated through dominant U.S. schemas. In terms of the pan-Latina/o identity, this would mean that when Mexicans or Puerto Ricans are called “Latina/o,” the latter category will connote racial meanings, whereas Argentinians who are called “Latina/o” in the North may escape these connotations. Identity terms, as Omi and Winant argue, gain their meaning from their context. Just as Gracia said “Latino” means tacos in California and *arroz con gandules* in New York, it will mean race in California, Texas, New York, and Florida, and perhaps ethnicity only in a few locations. Thus, moving from race to ethnicity is not necessarily moving away from race.

Surely, an optimist might want to interject here, the persistence of racial connotations evoked by ethnic categories is not insurmountable. After all, the Irish *did* transform in wide popular consciousness from a race to an ethnicity, and Jews are making the same transition, at least in the United States. Is it truly the case that only light-skinned people can enjoy this transformation, and that darker-skinned people will *never* be able to?

In order to answer this question, we need to ask another one: What *are* the obstacles to deracializing people of color in general?²⁹ Is it really the mere fact of skin tone?

I would make two suggestions. First, race, unlike ethnicity, has historically worked through visible markers on the body that trump dress, speech, and cultural practices. In Mississippi, a Jamaican is generally still a black person, no matter how skilled. Race demarcates groups visually, which is why racist institutions have been so upset about nonvisible members of “races” and why they have taken such trouble in these cases to enforce racial identifications. What I am suggesting is that in popular consciousness—in the implicit perceptual practices we use in everyday life to discern how to relate to each other—ethnicity does not “replace” race. When ethnic identities are used instead of racial ones, the perceptual practices of visual demarcation by which we slot people into racial categories continue to operate because ethnic categories offer no substituting perceptual practice. In other words, the fact that race and ethnicity do not map onto the same kinds of identifying practices will make race harder to dislodge. This was not the case for the Irish or for at least some Jewish people, who could blend into the European

American melting pot without noticeable distinctiveness. For them, ethnicity could replace race, because their racial identity as Irish and Jewish did not operate exclusively or primarily through visible markers on the body so much as through contextual factors such as neighborhood and accent. So their identity could shift to white race plus Jewish or Irish ethnicity without troubling the dominant perceptual practices of racial identification. However, for those who are visibly identified by such dominant practices as non-white, as "raced," the shift to a primary ethnic identity would require eradicating these practices. It is unlikely that the use of new terms alone will have that effect. At best, for people of color, ethnic identities will operate alongside racial ones in everyday interactions. At worst, ethnic identities, perhaps like "African American," will operate simply as a racial identity.

Although this is a fact about the visible features of the body, it is not an immutable fact: the meanings of the visible are of course subject to change. However, the phenomenology of perception is such that change will be neither quick nor easy, and that word usage will be nowhere near sufficient to make this change.³⁰ The transformation of perceptual habits will require a more active and a more practical intervention.

The second obstacle to the deracialization of (at least most) people of color has nothing to do with perception or bodily features. This obstacle refers back to a claim I made at the beginning, that assertions of group solidarity among African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinas/os in the United States provoke resistance among many whites because they invoke the history of colonialism, slavery, and genocide. Thus, their acceptance as full players within U.S. society comes at much greater cost than the acceptance of previously vilified groups such as the Irish and Jews—groups that suffered terrible discrimination and violence including genocide but whose history is not a thorn in the side of "pilgrim's progress," "manifest destiny," "leader of the free world," and other such mythic narratives that legitimize U.S. world dominance and provide white Americans with a strong sense of pride. The Irish and Jews were (are) colonized peoples in Europe, and there they are reminders of colonization and genocide. But they do not play this role in the legitimizing narratives of the U.S. state. Thus, the line between European ethnicities and people of color is not merely or perhaps even primarily about skin tone but about history and power and the narratives by which currently existing power arrangements are justified.

So what are we to do? If the move from race to ethnicity is not as easy as some have thought, what is a more realistic strategy, one that will also resist being fatalistic about racialization? How can we avoid both fatalism and naïveté? Are we to accept, then, that Latina/o identity is a racial identity, despite all the facts I have reviewed about our heterogeneity and different

methods of self-identification, and all the pernicious effects of racialized identity? In conclusion, I can only sketch the outlines of an answer.

Although racial ideology and practices of racialization seem to always carry within them some commitment to biological essentialism, perhaps the *meaning* of race is transformable. If race is going to be with us for some time to come, it might still be the case that race itself will alter in meaning, even before the perceptual practices of racialization can be done away with. It seems to me that this change in meaning is exactly what Paul Gilroy is attempting to chart, as well as to promote, in *The Black Atlantic*, as well as what some other African-American theorists are doing, such as Robert Gooding-Williams, bell hooks, Lewis Gordon, and Patricia Williams.³¹ You will notice in their works an intentional use of the term *black* rather than *African American*; I think this is meant as a way to “be real” about the social reality we live in, and also as a way to suggest a linked fate between all black people across nationalities, at least in the diaspora. But in their works, blackness has been decidedly de-essentialized and given a meaning that consists of historical experience, collective memory, and forms of cultural expression. For Gilroy, there is a “blackness” that transcends and survives the differences of U.K., Caribbean, and U.S. nationalities, a blackness that can be seen in culture and narrative focus. Blackness is social location, shared history, and a shared perception about the world. For Gooding-Williams, black identity requires a certain self-consciousness about creating the meaning of blackness. It requires, in other words, not only that one is treated as a black person, or that one is “objectively” black, but that one is “subjectively” black as well, and thus that one exercises some agency in regard to their identity. His argument is not simply that this is how we should begin to use the term *black*, but it is how the term is actually used in common parlance, as in “Is Clarence Thomas really black?”

Whether such an approach can be used for Latinas/os, I am not sure. There is probably even greater diversity among Latinas/os in relation to history, social location, and forms of cultural expression than there is among black people across the diaspora. And the question of where black Latinas/os “fit” is still unresolved, even when we make racial identity a matter of self-creation. This is a serious weakness in Gilroy’s broad conceptualization of a “black Atlantic”: Brazil, as large a country as it is, is nowhere to be found.

But I believe that we can take an important lesson from this body of work because it suggests that, even while we must remember the persistent power of racialization and the inability of ethnicity to easily take its place, the meanings of race are subject to some movement. Only a semantic essentialist could argue that race can mean nothing but biological essentialism; in reality, this is not the way meaning works. Let me be clear about my position

here: I don't believe, à la some postmodernists, that signifiers are slippery items whose meanings and associations can be easily transformed. Like Michelle Moody-Adams, I would argue that some *can* be (as in "black is beautiful") and some *cannot* be (as in "spic").³² Meaning works through iterability, that is, the invocation of prior meanings. When those prior meanings are centuries old and globally spread, they are going to be hard to dislodge. On the other hand, words do not simply pick out things that exist prior to their being picked out, and thus reference is mutable.

So the first point I am making is this: despite our hopes that the influx of Latinas/os on the North American continent, in all of our beautiful diversity, would transform and annihilate the binaries and purist racial ideologies prevalent in the United States, this is not likely, at least not very soon. Existing systems of meaning will absorb and transform our own self-identifying terms in ways that may not be immediately obvious but which we need to become aware of. However, although we may be stuck with racial categories for longer than some of us would wish, it may be easier to help "race" slowly evolve than to try to do away with it as a first step.

Latinas/os in the United States have without a doubt been racialized. And I would argue that the history, and even the contemporary socioeconomic situation, of Latinas/os in the United States simply cannot be understood using ethnicity categories alone; we have been shut out of the melting pot because we have been seen as racial and not merely cultural "others."

However, this has not been true to the same degree for all of us. It has been true of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans most of all, much less so of some others. So what are we to do in the face of this diversity of historical experience and social location? Is race perhaps a way to understand some Latina/o identities but not all? For a pan-Latina/o moniker, shouldn't we refer to ethnicity?

My argument has been that given the way in which our ethnicity has been racialized, this is a doubtful solution. Moreover, we are in almost all cases racially different from Anglos, in the commonly used sense of race. That is—even for Spaniards, as Jorge Gracia is arguing—we are not "purely European," claims of white Hispanicity notwithstanding. In the very name of antiracism and solidarity with other racialized people of color, shouldn't we acknowledge this, and not go the route of those who would seek to better their social status by differentiating themselves from the vilified racial others? Perhaps we can help lift the meaning of race out of its status as an insult by uniting with the efforts of those such as Gilroy and Gooding-Williams, who seek to give it a cultural meaning.

Of course, it does not make sense to say simply that Latinas/os constitute a "race," either by the common-sense meaning or by more nuanced refer-

ences to historical narrative and cultural production. I (still) believe that if the concept of "mestizo" enters into U.S. culture, it can have some good effects against the presumption of purity as having an intrinsic value. Still, the concept of mestizo when applied to Latinas/os in general, as if all Latinas/os or the essence of being Latina/o is to be mestizo, has the effect of subordinating all Latinas/os, both North and South, whose descendants are entirely African, Indian, or Asian. Mestizos then become the cornerstone of the culture, with others pushed off to the side. This is clearly intolerable.

A concept that might be helpful here has been coined by David Theo Goldberg: *ethnorace*. Unlike race, *ethnorace* does not imply a common descent, which is precisely what tends to embroil race in notions of biological determinism and natural and heritable characteristics. *Ethnorace* might have the advantage of bringing into play the elements of both human agency and subjectivity involved in ethnicity—that is, an identity that is the product of self-creation—at the same time that it acknowledges the uncontrolled racializing aspects associated with the visible body. And the term would remind us that there are at least two concepts, rather than one, that are vitally necessary to the understanding of Latina/o identity in the United States: ethnicity and race. Using only ethnicity belies the reality of most Latinas/os' everyday experiences, as well as obscures our own awareness about how ethnic identifications often do the work of race while seeming to be theoretically correct and politically advanced. Race dogs our steps; let us not run from it lest we cause it to increase its determination.

Notes

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1. See Angel R. Oquendo, "Re-imagining the Latino/a Race," Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., in *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 61.
2. I do not mean to imply here that the recent marketing construction of a pan-Latina/o U.S. identity is the first or only time such an identity has been imagined. I will discuss this further on.
3. See Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992). Also see Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).
4. See Daniel Mato, "Problems in the Making of Representations of All-Encompassing U.S. Latina/o—'Latin' American Transitional Identities," in *The Latino*

- Review of Books* 3, 1-2 (1997): 2-7; Arlene Davila, "Advertising and Latino Cultural Fictions," in Arlene Davila and Agustín Lao-Montes, *Manibo Montaje: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming); Juan Flores and George Yudice, "Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation," *Social Text* 24 (1990): 57-84.
5. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 60.
 6. Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xiii.
 7. Mato, "Problems in the Making of Representations," 2.
 8. Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*; see esp. ch. 1.
 9. *Ibid.*, 13.
 10. As a Panamanian American who vividly remembers the 1989 U.S. invasion but who has lived most of my life in the United States, growing up especially around Cubans, I found both arguments persuasive.
 11. See Davila, "Advertising and Latino Cultural Fictions"; Mato, "Problems in the Making of Representations."
 12. Mato, "Problems in the Making of Representations," 2.
 13. Cited in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), xv.
 14. Jorge Gracia, personal communication, December 1998.
 15. "Disparities Grow in SAT Scores of Ethnic and Racial Groups," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 11, 1998, A42. Emphasis added.
 16. Anita Allen, "Recent Racial Constructions in the U.S. Census," paper presented at the "Race: Its Meaning and Significance" conference, Rutgers University, November 1994.
 17. Ramón Grosfoguel and Chloé S. Georas, "The Racialization of Latino Caribbean Migrants in the New York Metropolitan Area," *CENTRO Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 8, 1-2 (1996): 199.
 18. See, for example, Jorge Klor de Alva's arguments (against Cornel West) on this point in "Our Next Race Question: The Uneasiness between Blacks and Latinos," *Harper's*, April 1996, 55-63.
 19. Klor de Alva, "Our Next Race Question," 56.
 20. Oquendo, "Re-imaging the Latino/a Race," 60.
 21. Clara E. Rodríguez, *Puerto Ricans Born in the U.S.A.* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
 22. Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).
 23. Luis Angel Toro, "Race, Identity, and 'Box Checking': The Hispanic Classification in OMB Directive No. 15," in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *The Latino/a Condition* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 58. Emphasis in original.
 24. Grosfoguel and Georas, "The Racialization of Latino Caribbean Migrants," 197.
 25. *Ibid.*, 198.
 26. *Ibid.*, 199.

27. Ibid, 195.
28. Virginia Domínguez, "Editor's Foreword: The Dialectics of Race and Culture," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 1, 4 (1998): 297-300.
29. I am very aware of the paradoxical way this question is raised (since in a project of deracialization one shouldn't refer to people by their color), and of other paradoxes with the categories I've used at times in this paper (e.g. the use of the category "black" when I have argued that it is oppressive). It is impossible to avoid all such paradoxes while maintaining clarity about which groups one is trying to pick out. All I can hope to have done is to problematize all such categories, and increase our self-reflectiveness about them.
30. I make these arguments in more depth in my paper "The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," *Radical Philosophy* 95 (May/June 1999): 15-26.
31. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Robert Gooding-Williams, "Race, Multiculturalism, and Justice," *Constellations* 5, 1 (1998): 18-41; Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997); Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995).
32. Michele Moody-Adams, "Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative," *Women's Review of Books* 15, 1 (October 1997): 13-14. And I would suggest that even John Leguizamo's brilliant comic use of terms like "Spic-o-rama" plays off the negative connotations of the term rather than transforming it into a positive term.