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Stories of Identity, Race, and Transnational Experience in the Lives of Asian Latinos in the United States

Julia Shu

Abstract: *This article examines the lives of Asians and Asian Latinos who came to the United States after living in Latin America. It focuses on the questions of experience and identity for these individuals and their families, at an intersection of places and cultures. In particular, this essay attempts to compare the relative experiences of Asian Latinos as an ethnic minority in two different social situations: the Latin American country to which their family emigrated from Asia and the United States.*

Introduction

The field of Ethnic Studies is one of inherent change and evolution. After all, no matter the topic, the work of our scholars revolves around the lives of working, moving, growing human beings. Diaspora studies – the study of the spread and movement of a group of people through time and space – and its related topics of transnationalism and mixed race studies – are often neglected and overlooked, yet recent academic trends show that they are increasingly becoming prominent in university classrooms.¹

I first became interested in Asian diaspora studies while studying abroad in Mexico and Spain. In particular, Chinese immigration in Spain is a relatively new and undeveloped phenomenon, and provides an intriguing perspective on Asian immigration and the minority experience in a modern European nation – perhaps a topic for another paper. My experiences

in other countries prompted me to consider the comparative experiences of immigrants and minority community development around the world.

More specifically, this paper focuses on the communities of Asian immigrants within Latin America, and the move made by some of these individuals to the United States. My interest here is partly personal – when I graduated from high school, my father’s sister presented me with my grandmother’s amethyst ring. She told me it had been purchased on my family’s last day in Brazil, where they had lived in the process of moving from China, to Japan, to the United States. Surprised, I felt like I had uncovered a hidden part of my father’s and my family’s history. Indeed, for many people it is an unknown fact that immigration from Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Korea has created large communities in many Latin American countries, including Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Brazil. Increasingly, scholarship and research around this area seems to be a necessary pursuit not only for the sake of Ethnic Studies, but also for the sake of a country that bears so many misconceptions about Latin America and its inhabitants.

Additionally, I believe this topic is critical for rethinking the ways in which we² understand immigration, racial identity, and transnationalism. Those Asians and Asian Latinos who have relocated to the United States from Latin America carry a fantastically diverse background; not only have they and/or their families undergone unique experiences as immigrants both in Latin America and in the United States, but they embody a mixing of cultures and identities. Asian Latin American migration to the United States also raises some very interesting questions. How do their experiences in the United States relate to or compare with their experiences in Latin America? How do Asian Latinos here navigate around issues of conflicted identity or culture? Through these questions, we may better appreciate the diversity and growth that stems from a single family or person’s decision to leave their native country and create a new home in unknown lands.

Literature Review & Historical Background

As noted previously, the scholarship surrounding the Asian diaspora in Latin America remains fairly limited, and thus the scholarship concerning Asian Latinos in the United States is even more so. However, enough information exists to give a substantial and interesting base off of which we may pursue further inquiry. To root our research in knowledge of the past, Evelyn Hu-DeHart writes about the historical role of Chinese laborers and entrepreneurs in Mexico and Peru in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her article explains the various factors which drew Chinese workers to Mexico in the 1800s – notably, proximity to the United States and the opportunities for small businesses, such as shops or markets. In the northern states of Mexico, the presence of the Chinese constituted the “petit bourgeois” class. Resentment from native Mexicans grew, until an expulsion movement in the early half of the 20th century pushed many out, forcing them to find other homes and employment.³ Like many groups of immigrants, this early Asian population in Latin America faced discrimination and racism, perhaps a result of attitudes originating in the United States. In 1881, the Mexican consul in Tucson, territory of Arizona, warned the state of Sonora, “The Chinese are considered in this nation [the U.S.]... to be harmful and dangerous, because they take work away from the natives of the land, encourage prostitution of various kinds, and contrib-

ute nothing to local commerce or industry."⁴ In addition, the idea of unassimilability, which has long plagued Asian Americans north of the border, was present in Mexico as well. "The Chinese and the westerner are essentially different," one Mexican politician opined. "Thus we have to agree that any idea to assimilate the Chinese or to dominate them in a way that forces them to leave behind their way of being, is absurd."⁵ Therefore, from Hu-Dehart's work it is evident that in early Asian immigration to Latin America, the themes of racism and unassimilability were established as critical factors. It is necessary to keep these components in mind as we follow other groups of immigrants in Brazil and Panama through history.

Another scholar, Jeffrey Lesser, specializes on the ethnic and racial dynamics of Brazil. Lesser writes that "Brazilian interest in Chinese labor can be found as early as 1807," a proposition which makes Brazil perhaps one of the first Latin American countries to import Asian labor.⁶ As racism and anti-Chinese sentiment grew in Mexico, so too did it in Brazil in the 1800s, eventually diminishing the possibility of a significant Chinese population. However, the question of the Chinese brought into play the idea of a group neither white nor black, neither African nor European.⁷ The problem of defining race, always a socially and legally ambiguous ground, would deepen in complexity as time went on.

Lesser's more recent work focuses on the Nikkei in São Paulo, Brazil, the Japanese Brazilian descendants of immigrants, during the 1960s and 70s. Lesser investigates "ethnic militancy" as it is expressed by Nikkei activists, guerilla fighters, militants, and actors and actresses. He proposes that in an effort to assert their Brazilian identity, the Nikkei produced the opposite effect, emphasizing their minority status. The idea of unassimilability emerges again as Lesser describes in his words "a discontented diaspora," suggesting that many people in Brazil erroneously assume that Nikkei feel "Japanese" and thus have an emotional attachment to Japan as an irrefutable homeland. While Japanese Brazilians rarely see themselves as diasporic in this classic sense, the strong imprint from the majority has had an impact on their identity construction."⁸ The trap of being seen as a perpetual outsider creates many problems for Japanese Brazilians. One actress describes the identity conflict this creates: "Among the Brazilians I am Japanese and among 'descendants' [other Japanese Brazilians] I am considered Brazilian. I am discriminated against from both sides: from one when I want to get a part in a film, from the other because I am an actress."⁹ This discord in self-identification and the social pressures that are its source are vital factors for my study.

Not only do Asians in Latin America navigate around issues of racial exclusion and acceptance with other non-Asians, but divisions within the immigrant community itself exist as well. Lok Siu's article on the diasporic Chinese in Panama explores the rifts between recent and older groups of immigrants. This separation has evolved into more than a simple chronological or generational difference. As one Chinese Panamanian tells Siu, "These immigrants are a different kind of Chinese altogether," which "impl[ies] that it was not a matter of learning cultural behaviors and practices, but that the recent immigrants could never become like them, that their difference is much more profound, perhaps even unchangeable."¹⁰ Siu suggests that Chinese Panamanians seek to distance themselves from recent immigrants in an effort to disassociate themselves from the negative stereotypes of Chinese immigrants, namely, that they are "rude, ignorant, dirty, disrespectful, and dishonest."¹¹ This coping technique exists as an understandable response to the outside pressures of xenophobia and racism, yet poses challenging questions for immigrants seeking acceptance and a

sense of belonging.

Finally, an article from Kyeyoung Park addresses the Korean diaspora in Latin America and the United States. Park's work is unique in that it addresses the United States as both an influential component and an affected result in this transnational equation. Park observes that the impact of Korean Argentineans in the Korean American community brings together Latino and Korean groups in unnoticed, yet significant, ways. For example, Korean Argentineans may translate English, Spanish, and Korean in their multiethnic Southern California communities. In another example in New York, Korean Argentineans take up fruit and vegetable businesses which serve Latino populations.¹² Park concludes that the effect of having three different countries, cultures, and homes creates "rootlessness" in these immigrant communities:

Because they have three different backgrounds, their relationship to the world has irrevocably changed. The more rootless and cosmopolitan, the less rooted. This is because rootedness provides comfort and security, particularly during times of crisis. These Korean tri-migrants might have three positions - Korean, South American, and North American - to interpret their reality, but they are not anchored in any of these worlds.¹³

This theory of rootedness and rootlessness poses interesting questions for the future study of Asians and Asian Latinos in the United States and how they might view themselves and their role in society. Indeed, overall, the literature and scholarship reviewed herein seems to necessitate more research into the comparative experiences of re-migrants and the self-identification processes they undergo during the course of their multiple migrations.

Methodology

In order to learn more about the personal stories and struggles of Asian Latinos in the United States, I employed qualitative research methods and searched for interview subjects in and around the University of California, Berkeley campus community. Finding potential subjects proved slightly difficult, as there are no officially established social groups, clubs, or community groups for persons or families of backgrounds in both Asia and Latin America. For this reason, I kept the parameters of my search wide, not limiting factors such as age, place of birth, family circumstance, or countries of residence. Through the personal recommendations of classmates, professors, friends, and the subjects themselves, I was able to arrange interviews with four participants. Communication with these participants took place primarily through emails, occasionally over the phone, or in person. Only one interviewee was a previous acquaintance, while the rest I met for the first time during our interviews. One interview, for reasons of geographical distance, was held over a video and teleconferencing service by which we were able to both hear and see one another. Two were held on the Berkeley campus and another at a shopping mall convenient to both my interviewee and myself. All participants were of roughly the same age bracket, the youngest being 22 and the oldest 32, with three females and one male. For my own notes and reference, I recorded each interview with a handheld digital voice recorder. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 48 minutes, although I spent a longer time talking with one interviewee after the of-

ficial interview.

Because I interviewed a wide range of subjects with very different experiences, it may be initially unclear what generalizations can be made from the data. After all, with two subjects from Brazil, one from Bolivia, and one from Panama, how can this information have wide application to the study of the Asian diaspora, immigrant experiences, or racial identification? But in the discussion of the findings, important convergences emerge: factors that influenced the lives of the interviewees, trends in the ways in which they see themselves, and specific examples of experiences which shape self-identification. These convergences, while they did not apply equally to all individuals, provide the key thematic points through which we may analyze the research and data.

Although I believe interviews served as a useful method for obtaining personal stories and information impossible to find in a chart or survey, it also had several limitations. The most obvious difficulty came in finding interviewees with which to speak. With a very specific population in mind and no easy social groups to follow for it, relying on word of mouth became the best option. As a result, two of my subjects themselves are currently and directly engaged in scholarship on the Asian diaspora in Latin America. A third subject, while not an Ethnic Studies academic, was nevertheless familiar with the topics I presented to her. This detail brings both positive and negative effects: for the most part, my subjects understood my questions and the meanings I meant to imply. For them, thinking about race, identity, and their own experiences was familiar ground, and they seemed genuinely interested in the interview. But because of this, not until my last interview was I forced to rephrase my questions into terminology and forms more recognizable to a person unfamiliar with Ethnic Studies work (for example, terms like "mixed race" or "racialization" or even "discrimination" often called for further explanation). The disadvantage of gathering data from a rather specialized intellectual world may lessen the applicability of these findings. Given a second project in the future, it would be an intriguing challenge to find more interviewees who are relatively unaware of Ethnic Studies or diaspora studies.

Data Analysis and Discussion

1. Comparative Experiences of Race

For each interviewee, life in Latin America brought up different memories and associations; surprisingly, these memories gave contradicting visions of social situations and racial awareness. One interviewee, Mimi,¹⁴ recounted growing up in Brazil in a Korean family and feeling content, unaware of racial divides or ethnic rifts. Her contact with other Korean Brazilians came in the form of a wide family network and many cousins of the same age. She also made many Brazilian friends as a child and says she "got used to being in a diverse environment." When Mimi moved to California at the age of ten, she instantly felt uncomfortable with racial divisions in school. "I immediately became aware that I was Asian, because school seemed very cliquy. ...I felt out of place, I didn't know who to be friends with." Mimi first identified with other Latino students, feeling unfamiliar with the Korean and Asian cultural background of her Korean American and Asian American peers.¹⁵

This experience of race sharply contrasts with that of another interviewee. Jessica was born in Taiwan, and moved to Brazil with her parents at the age of two. She recounts

a childhood spent in constant awareness of her difference and outsider status. Very few Asians attended her school, and this fact weighed heavily on her experience there. "When I was in second grade, the students were being very rowdy and the teacher said, 'Why can't you be like the little Japanese girl right there? Because she just stays quiet and doesn't do anything.' Then everyone turned around and stared at me." This incident clearly made an impact on her, as she described the horror of being pointed out in class, and the desire to simply blend in with the crowd. When she and her parents moved to the San Gabriel Valley, Jessica was eleven. "I was really surprised... there were so many Asian Americans!" With the enormous population of Asian Americans in the San Gabriel Valley, in Southern California, and later, at the universities Jessica attended, she felt that blending in by identifying as Chinese or Taiwanese was easy.¹⁶

Why such disparate reports of experiences? One possibility lies in the fact that Jessica was born in Taiwan, or it could be due to the difference between being Taiwanese and being Korean in Brazil. In any case, the difference between Mimi and Jessica's experiences demonstrates the wide range of possibilities for a young Asian person growing up in Latin America.

2. Social Misidentification

A common story for interviewees involved being misidentified by others as of the wrong Asian origin. When growing up in Brazil, most people assumed that Jessica was Japanese (as seen in the anecdote from grade school). Of Asian groups in Brazil, the Japanese community is the largest and one of the most prominent. "I always knew I was different... it's different in Brazil. So if you're Asian, if you look phenotypically Asian, they just, the mainstream community, they just assume you're Japanese. I've been called Japanese many times," she says. This fact did not seem to bother her, rather, it was an accepted fact of life in Brazil. "Everywhere I go, I'm misidentified," she says, adding that when visiting Taiwan, people often mistake her for Southeast Asian.¹⁷

For James, being Korean in Bolivia presented a similar problem. "In Bolivian thinking, all Asians are Chinese, because they have small eyes. That's the first stereotype. The second is – all Asian people have restaurants. When I walk out, they ask me 'Chino! Chino!' – like 'Chinese.' That's racist," he told me, half laughing. The fact that most Bolivians made assumptions about his invented Chinese heritage did not seem to bother James at first. He noted that sometimes "Chino" was more than a label – Bolivians would use it instead of using an Asian person's name, and that even a person's protestations over his identity could not convince a Bolivian that he was not Chinese. After a while, he said that it became annoying. "The pronunciation was annoying. It was not favorable," he explained.¹⁸ I interpreted this to mean that James had experienced the type of racial teasing that so often borders on offensive name calling. The story of misidentification is an interesting detail in the stories of those who carry complex and evolving identities already. To have most people around you believe a false statement about your heritage seems another destabilizing element in the process of constructing one's own racial identity.

3. Perpetual Race

A strong theme for all interviewees was a belief or underlying feeling of the perpetuality of otherness, specifically, the unchanging fact of being Asian. Alison, the daughter of Chinese parents, was born in Panama City and moved to San Francisco at the age of eleven with her sister to live with relatives. Her mother stayed behind in Panama to work, a decision that she says was difficult to adjust to, but worked out for her in the end. Given a paper survey, Alison reports that she would mark "Chinese" before any other option. If second choices were allowed, she would include her Panamanian identity, but only if the survey allowed for multiple races and ethnicities.¹⁹ Similarly, James states, "I'm Korean, that's number one, I cannot forget about it."²⁰ "If you're going to assume that I look Asian anyways, there's no point in trying to complicate things," Jessica pointed out, "Brazilian, you can be different shades of color...but when you're Asian...you can't really integrate as easily."²¹ This type of social thinking seems to be the legacy of centuries of Asians being cast as the unassimilable, the perpetual foreigner. Another explanation relates to the concept of diaspora. Jessica describes it as thus: "It goes back to the diaspora...regardless of where you go settle, you're Chinese...That's almost like an essentialist way of thinking...you can move to Africa, or anywhere, you'd still identify as Chinese instead of Brazilian, Guatemalan, or Nicaraguan."²² Whether the phenomenon of Asians somehow staying Asian no matter what is a result of age-old racism and xenophobia, the product of strong belief in biologically deterministic notions of race, or an unconscious sense of cultural and physical belonging (quite probably it is a combination of these factors and more), it remains true that for each interviewee, their Asian identity was predominant. However, that has not stopped the development and adoption of unique identities influenced by their lives in Latin America.

4. Language

One of the most critical steps in adopting a culture and learning to live in a new place is often learning to speak the native language. For my interviewees, language was not only a method of communicating in a new place, but a cultural signifier and a lasting imprint of their Latino cultural upbringing. For the three women who moved to California as children, the process of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and working with language tutors became an important factor in what groups of students they came to befriend first. Alison told me that her first strong group of friends in the United States came from her group in ESL classes. "I felt really close to them," she said, acknowledging the bonds of friendship that grew between young Spanish speakers in an English speaking world.²³ In contrast, Jessica, who was offered Mandarin or Spanish options in school, opted for Mandarin. Her identification with Asian Americans and other Asian immigrants was in part related to this choice.²⁴ Mimi recalled identifying initially with other Latino students through the commonality of language; she felt distant from Korean American students because of a perceived cultural gap.²⁵ Therefore, language appears to transcend the rules of perpetual race and unchangeable identity.

Language is both strongly inclusive and exclusive: you are either in, or you are not, depending on what you speak. James, who moved to Bolivia from Korea at the age of 16 with the goal of learning Spanish, saw language as the basis of experiencing cultural identity.

He continues to use Spanish here, just as Alison does.²⁶ Indeed, language may be the only way these multinationals maintain certain parts of their cultural past. In her interview with me, Alison realized that she makes a very conscious effort to use Spanish with other Spanish speakers. "When I see that someone speaks Spanish, I'm very inclined to speak Spanish with them. I make myself available...when they see we have something in common...we feel more comfortable," she points out. "But when I meet someone who is Asian, I use English... [and not Chinese] Maybe because we look similar, we don't need that."²⁷ Mimi also felt that she made a conscious effort in using Portuguese. Her effort comes from the assertion that she maintains her Brazilian identity, but must prove this fact to others, through language and other demonstrations of "insider" cultural knowledge.²⁸ Language then creates both a pathway for cultural acceptance and learning, but offers a way to preserve that cultural identity after a person migrates.

5. Self-Identification

For the interviewees in this project, self-identification is both a simple and complex idea. According to Alison, questions like "Where are you from?" are taken in a straight-forward manner – although her answer may change depending on the curiosity of the interlocutor, it causes no troubling dilemmas or soul-searching.²⁹ For Jessica, the answer has changed over time. During the years she wished to blend in with other Asians and Asian Americans, she would sometimes neglect to mention her Brazilian past. Now, it is a part of her identity she recognizes more publicly.³⁰ James, traveling from Korea to Bolivia to the United States on a journey of language learning, sees himself as Korean, "but some part, some little part is Latino....and a little bit American" – parts that grow the longer he resides in a country.³¹ Each interviewee recognized a lack of social space, academic discourse, and awareness surrounding Asian Latinos, but Mimi's response to this problem is the most active. "I am Korean Brazilian, but that's confusing to people," she laughs. (Each other interviewee laughs too upon describing the reaction they get when detailing their diverse past. Confusion, surprise, amazement, shock. As Jessica wryly pointed out, being of many cultures can be seen as trendy or cool). Mimi strives to bring awareness to others by asserting her Brazilian identity. A doctoral student in the Spanish and Portuguese Department, she must work to convince professors of her cultural authority. "The solution [is to] inform people, let them know I grew up in Brazil and here, and they need to acknowledge that." Her current academic work explores the lives of Koreans in Brazil and seeks to establish a terminology and academic theory that appreciates the dual identity of Korean Brazilians (a term so far used only by her).³² In answer to the research question regarding how Asians and Asian Latinos navigate the twisty paths of self-identification, I believe the answer can only be a myriad of individual stories that map the many influences and turns of each life. From these stories, we begin to see the ways in which these multinational citizens are carving out their own spaces, their own explanations, and their own ways to be at home.

Conclusion

It is quite likely that this research project creates more questions than it does provide answers. I am woefully aware of the number of topical intersections that remain unaddressed –

for example, an examination into the role of gender and gender norms in determining such things as self-identification. However, looking back to initial literature review conducted, this project introduces new and potentially helpful insights. For example, the use of language to maintain and prove cultural knowledge, the experiences of misidentification, and the ways in which each individual defines a distinct and changing racial identity. With current scholarship only beginning to touch on the connections between the United States, Latin America, and Asian immigrants, I hope that this project and others like it will further open the doors to seeing identity, human migration, culture, and race as components in an interconnected and evolving web.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. For example, see the description of the Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies Program at UC Berkeley, which "is now increasingly attentive to issues of transnationality and diaspora." "About," *Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies*, <http://www.aaads.berkeley.edu/about/> (accessed May 20, 2012).
2. Throughout this paper, the words "we" and "our" are used, with the intent of implying an audience of scholars and students of Ethnic Studies, Asian Diaspora Studies, as well as others interested in transnational identity studies coming from other fields or from personal interest.
3. Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Coolies, Shopkeeper, Pioneers: The Chinese of Mexico and Peru (1849-1930)," *Amerasia Journal* 15, no. 2 (1989): 9.
4. Evelyn Hu-DeHart. "Racism and Anti-Chinese Persecution in Sonora, Mexico 1876-1932," *Amerasia Journal* 9, no. 2 (1982): 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. Jeffrey Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 15.
7. *Ibid.*, 38.
8. Jeffrey Lesser, *A Discontented Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xxi.
9. *Ibid.*, 53.
10. Lok Siu, "Cultural Citizenship of Diasporic Chinese in Panama," *Amerasia Journal* 28, no. 2 (2002): 183.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Kyeyoung Park, "'I Am Floating in the Air,'" *positions: asia critique* 7, no. 3 (1999): 669.
13. *Ibid.*, 692.
14. All interviewee names have been altered to protect their privacy.
15. Mimi, in conversation with author, Nov. 6, 2011.
16. Jessica, in conversation with author, Oct. 31, 2011.
17. *Ibid.*
18. James, in conversation with author, Nov. 15, 2011.
19. Alison, in conversation with author, Nov. 9, 2011.
20. James, Nov. 15, 2011.

21. Jessica, Oct. 31, 2011.
22. Ibid.
23. Alison, Nov. 9, 2011.
24. Jessica, Oct. 31, 2011.
25. Mimi, Nov. 6, 2011.
26. James, Nov. 15, 2011.
27. Alison, Nov. 9, 2011.
28. Mimi, Nov. 6, 2011.
29. Alison, Nov. 9, 2011.
30. Jessica, Oct. 31, 2011.
31. James, Nov. 15, 2011.
32. Mimi, Nov. 6, 2011.