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Abstract

For the first time in American history, there is a numerically significant population in the United States that cannot be defined primarily in terms of race. I will show how almost half of Latinos, when given a chance to self-define racially, pick labels that have nothing to do with color. It is through an expanded awareness of creative and defiant Latino racial identities that non-Latinos in the U.S. can greater appreciate how racial classifications are fluid and not essential cultural categories.

I would like to deviate slightly from the topic of 'Why Spanish Matters' and instead focus on 'Why Latinos Matter,' or more succinctly, why Latino identity matters. For the first time in U.S. history, there is a numerically significant population in this country that cannot be defined primarily in terms of race. Latinos exhibit a great diversity of phenotypes and thus as a group are not candidates for racial identity, as the concept of race is understood by most North Americans. The only thing that all Latinos are presumed to have in common is their connection to the Spanish language. Race, on the other hand, does not figure as crucially into Latin American culture, in which racial mixture is not uncommon (Smedley 2007: *ix*, Barrios 2006: *x*). Moreover, the rise of Latinos to statistical prominence in the United States has the potential to seriously challenge Anglo valorization of the idea of racial purity (Alcoff 2006: 229). However, very much like the fate of the Spanish language in its interaction with English in the United States, Latino culture not only exerts influence on Anglo culture, but is also influenced and altered through its interaction with North American Anglos. As a reaction to the North American racial worldview, many Latinos, especially those born and raised in the United States, are now actually demanding racial identity for themselves with the hope to gain recognition in a country where

it has been said not to have a racial identity is not to have any identity at all (Mendieta 2000: 48). Many Latinos in the U.S. may feel marginalized for this very reason, that they are the new 'invisible' men and women whose lack of racial identity (instead of its stigmatized possession) causes them to be ignored by the dominant and ubiquitous racial discourse that is often reduced to a black-white binary (Barrios 2006: *xii*). Yet even though Latinos may feel pressure to adopt Anglo-created racial categories, results from a questionnaire I developed show that almost half of U.S. Latinos opt for a racial identity that does not conform to traditional notions of race in North America. My data comes from an anonymous online survey I created in order to explore attitudes towards the Spanish language in the U.S. and those who speak it. Originally using a snowball sampling technique and then widening my sample by distributing the survey through Facebook, email listhosts and news website message boards, I have, to date, collected responses from 585 individuals. The creative and defiant Latino racial identities observed among the respondents to my survey suggest that Latinos have the potential to create a greater appreciation for racial classifications as mere cultural creations as opposed to scientifically valid categories determined by biology. I will show how many Latinos, when given a chance to self-define racially, pick labels that have nothing to do with color. Thus it is possible that the most important and lasting legacy of Hispanics in the United States will not be the spread of the Spanish language as much as the transformation of the concept of race in North America.

Despite the ever increasing numbers of Hispanics in the U.S., numerous studies show they endure systemic material and spiritual hardships at the hands of the dominant Anglo culture. This conclusion was confirmed by research published by the Pew Hispanic Center in October of 2010 that reports that about six in ten Latinos say that discrimination against Hispanics is a major problem preventing them from succeeding in America (Lopez, Morin and Taylor 2010: i). The perceptions of group discrimination reported in the Pew Study are supported by statistical data that reveal great economic disparities between certain racial and ethnic groups in the United States. According to the National Institute for Latino Policy (NILP), in 2010 the poverty rate for Latinos was 25.4 percent, compared to 12.5 percent for whites and Asians (Falcón 2010: 2). While Hispanic citizens are only 16 percent of the total U.S. population, 12.4 million Latinos living in poverty make up 28.3 percent of the U.S. poor (Falcón 2010:

1–2). Hispanics also have the smallest median personal earnings for full-time, year-round workers and have the highest percentage of persons of any ethnic/racial group not to be covered by any health insurance. Finally, Hispanics in the United States have the smallest percentage of college graduates (12.9%) of any group and are the population with the highest percentage (9.3%) of high school dropouts (Pew Hispanic Center).

As these statistics reflect socio-economic inequalities between ethno-racial groups, the disparities highlighted here would seem to speak to the systemic nature of racism in the United States. Adopting the view of Smedley (2007), I see racism in the U.S. is a consequence of 'race as worldview . . . a cosmological ordering system structured out of the political, economic, and social realities of people who had emerged as expansionist, conquering, dominating nations on a worldwide quest for wealth and power' (26). In the contemporary United States, the racial worldview has effectively divided the U.S. racial landscape into discrete group categories such as blacks, whites, Asians, Native Americans and, as the statistics now suggest, Latinos. The racial worldview as we know it today relies on popular or 'commonsense' notions of physical group attributes, like shades of skin color, facial features and body type, as demarcating races (Smedley 2007: 14). Moreover, despite all of the taboos regarding overtly racist acts and speech in the United States, racializing beliefs completely permeate North American thinking. To be born and raised in the United States virtually guarantees that one possesses the racial worldview.

This takes us to a central question for the study of racism in the United States. How is it continually reproduced and at the same time publicly reviled and denied? How do North Americans who subscribe to the racial worldview express racist ideas in a society that is on the record as being vehemently anti-racist? They use what anthropologist Jane Hill calls COVERT RACIST DISCOURSE (2008: 41). According to Hill (2008), covert racist discourse works through indexicality, presupposition and entailment (41). She says that the 'presuppositions or entailments invited by covert racist discourse include very negative stereotypes that might be sharply censured if they were made explicit. But since they are not overtly uttered, they are invisible to referentialist ideology with its focus on the meaning of words' (Hill 2008: 41). For instance, the term 'Mexican' is frequently used by Anglos to refer to all dark-complexioned Latinos. Since the word can obviously be used neutrally to describe

individuals from the nation of Mexico, the racist usage is often not identified as such. Not only are Mexicans the prototypical Latinos in the eyes of many Anglo Americans, but the word 'Mexican' conveys, more so than the other terms, a mental image of 'brownness' and other physical characteristics (such as a large body type) that the U.S. racial worldview considers relevant to the creation of racial categories. Notably, the trend of conflating brown hispanidad with race is not exclusive to Anglos. There is ample evidence to suggest that many Latinos have internalized this notion as well, such as discourse that affectionately embraces 'Brown Pride.' Philosopher Eduardo Mendieta (2000) claims that Latinos DO adapt to Anglo-imposed racial categories and that '[we Latinos] learn to think through them as we become part of the society and culture of the U.S. political structure. We learn to think of ourselves through these imposed categories' (47). In the collected interviews of Barrios (2006), it is clear that many of the Latinos interviewed have accepted the racial thinking of the North American mainstream and see themselves as part of a discrete biological subgroup, as the following quote from a member of the band Aztlan Underground suggests: 'When they conquered the Aztecs, our ancestors were raped, and so we became mestizos—but we are more indigena than white. Science proves it, plus you can see it with your own eyes. Brown skin came from here' (Barrios 2006: 174).

In spite of such claims to racial identity, the institution that officially determines racial categories in the United States insists that all Latinos still be referred to as members of an ethnic group and not a race. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the largest office within the Executive Office of the President of the United States, establishes concepts of race and ethnicity for the purposes of classifying federal data. The OMB (1997) has established that 'Latino' and 'Hispanic' refer to 'persons who trace their origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish cultures' (8). Of the five minimum categories that the OMB recommends for data on race and ethnicity for federal statistics, program administrative reporting, and civil rights compliance reporting, only 'Hispanic or Latino' is not considered a racial category but rather is considered a designation of ethnicity. This would be unproblematic if not for the fact that, according to Mendieta (2000), 'the history of the interpretation and self-understanding of the United States, whether it be cultural, political, or legal, has had to contend with the centrality of race' (49). Since there is no 'Latino' race category, Latinos essentially have three

options when filling out forms like the Census: 1) they can either choose to accept one of the racial categories available, 2) they can mark multiple categories (such as 'white' and 'Native American or Alaska Native'), or 3) they can create their own racial identity, by choosing 'Some other race' and writing in a response of their own.

This third choice was the one made by nearly half of the Latino respondents who took the anonymous online survey that informs my research. On my survey, I reproduced the race and Latino ethnicity questions found on the 2010 Census form. Of 471 total survey takers, 163 listed Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin. Of these individuals, 75 (46%) reported 'some other race' and wrote-in a racial designation that was not in the original Census categories, suggesting the inadequacies of these categories for many Latinos. Furthermore, these results suggest that, unlike many Anglos, who conceive of racial categories as rigid dividers, Latinos in the United States tend to approach racial identity more creatively and less narrow-mindedly. The most popular write-in race of Latinos surveyed was 'Hispanic' (12.3%). The next two were 'Mexican' and 'Latino/a,' which were both reported by 8.6% of Latinos. All in all, twenty different races were listed by Latino respondents. Among the 'other' races listed by Latino respondents were the following: 'Afro mestizo/a,' 'Chicano/a,' 'Human,' 'Hispanic,' 'Latin American,' 'Latinoamericano/a,' 'Mestizo/a,' 'Mexican American' "Mexican Ecuadorian," "Mixed," 'Mixteco,' 'Multiracial,' 'Peruvian,' 'Portuguese,' 'Puerto Rican,' 'Spaniard,' 'Trigueño' and 'White Hispanic.' One Latino respondent replied with the following: 'Considered "white" in the Census, but I refuse to list myself as such.'

Not only do these data challenge North American 'commonsense' beliefs about racial classification, but they also affirm the validity of allowing individuals to determine their own race and not allowing culturally-imposed racial categories to define them. These findings also shed light on Census data from 2000, when more than fifteen million U.S. citizens reported 'some other race' (Grieco and Cassidy 2001: 3). What would be the 'commonsense' response to those individuals? Are they wrong about their own racial identity because they wrote in something that was not amongst the 'official' races? 46% of my Latino respondents show in their responses to Census–type racilization that racial identity should be left up to the discretion of the individual and that choosing a race is a creative act. As Alcoff (2006:245) contends, 'although we [Latinos] may be stuck with

racial categories for longer than some of us would wish, it may be easier to help "race" slowly evolve by engaging with it in new ways rather than trying to evade it.' In reality, this is exactly what my survey results suggest Latinos are already doing in their responses to the race question. And thus even though people from historically Spanish-speaking populations are the victims of a multiplicity of prejudices and racisms in the United States, it is the growing presence of racially defiant and racially creative Latinos in this country that could prove fundamental to the erosion of the cultural validity of the concept of race.

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