

## The Latino Wave Is Already Here



Gabriel Lerner

*Protest for Trayvon Martin, against Zimmerman's not guilty verdict, in the Plaza de los Mariachis, East Los Angeles, with the participation of around 200 people, almost all of them young Hispanics. July, 2013.*

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## **Dedication**

**Dedico estas páginas al inmigrante, el que pone toda su vida en un atado de ropa y arranca sus propias raíces como otras tantas espinas de su cuerpo para “vivir una cultura diferente”.**

**To the immigrant, who puts his life on a bundle of belongings, curtails his own roots like so many thorns in his body and embraces a new and different culture.**

**To Celia.**

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## **The Way We Are: Hispanic Identity**

### **Latinos: Who Are We And Why Are We Here?**

From above, at a distance, we are but just one group; a loose association. Latinos, Hispanics or Chicano. Mexican Americans or 'sudacas'. This is how they see us from far away.

But if one comes closer, we change from tiny dots in the sky into individuals, and differences between us can be noticed; differences of national origin, skin color, culture, religion, political beliefs and more.

As immigrants, after we arrive, we are forged into one unified concept; we suddenly understand each other and we all become "Latinos" or "Hispanos". We are united by language and cultural characteristics and a common history and, once here, a common destiny and the similar way people view us.

A person I met worked a teacher in an elementary rural school in Mexico before he came to the United States. In his pueblo, families didn't have enough to eat. Nevertheless, the parents brought their children to him to learn the basics. But at the end of seventh grade, they would wait for their children at the school gate, he said, and send them to North to work.

Many of us came believing that as soon as we saved some money we would go back home.

A woman and her husband from Monterrey owned a lot not far away from the university where she studied. They came to Los Angeles with the idea of saving some money in order to build a house on that lot so their children could live close to this school and graduate from there. The boy was 10; the girl only six years old.

But they spent the money they saved on their needs here.

Today their children have grown up and are engaged and are staying here.

If they ever go back it will be alone. When? Probably Never.

Two parents from Uruguay came to Los Angeles during the political conflict of the 1970's, politically and ideologically militant. Here they wrapped themselves in the silence of remembrance and caution. Many years later their kids know nothing about what happened there. If they knew, they would consider it a good screenplay.

Another one arrived from Israel because he was required to spend two out of every twelve months in the military reserves. He miraculously survived two wars until his wife made him swear they would seek a better life in 'America.' Doing whatever, but alive.

An ex co-worker was a private school administrator in Guatemala. When the school went under she lost her house, her car, money and her job. She came here.



'But why to the US?'

'Where else, then?'

People come for many reasons: the economy, politics, to have an adventure. To get away from their parents. Or from a dictatorship. Some—like the one who previously was my best friend—because of the return of democracy.

I came – one said – because they offered me a job with a diplomatic visa. The visa expired but he stayed.

- And I came because my land was taken from me.
- I came because of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.
- I came because I fall in love with a gringo.
- I came because I was a marielito in Cuba.
- I came because in Mexico I was assaulted and robbed four times in one year.
- I came, because I had no other choice; food was scarce.
- I came – all said – because what we had there wasn't enough.

I came because of this, for this, or to get away from that. To risk it all.

One hand forward, one hand behind, this is how we arrived.

For those who came without papers and in hiding and those who arrived openly, to immigrate to the USA wasn't a means but an end. In Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, on the other side of the border from Douglas, Arizona, I talked with a man who tried to cross ten times. Ten times he was arrested on the border and returned home. The first time he paid a coyote, a smuggler, to help him cross, with money he obtained from selling his cow in the pueblo. After that, he said, he already knew the path.

- I'll try one more time and if they stop me, I'll go back home.

Those who immigrate as adults collapse here, their sense of belonging erased; their identity confused. The images of life here are foreign to them. They don't recognize the smells. The food, the faces, the habits; everything is new and foreign. Twenty years later they are still strangers. They could be fluent in the new language but inside they still speak the old one. At times in secret. Or they lose one language without quite acquiring the new one.

To survive they must be born again. They have to decode inches, miles and degrees Fahrenheit. They make this town our own. They gather and accept a generic name: Latinos, Hispanos.

From the time they arrive they make the name theirs. It becomes part of them, what they read, their areas of interest, demands, lacks.



We are not a race. Membership to our group is totally voluntary. It is a makeshift identity.

We will never be again who we were.

The man who was Don Alejandro in Buenos Aires – known and respected by everyone – now washes dishes in midnight at a restaurant and is Don Nobody.

Those who really wanted to go back already have. But some of them are strangers in their own countries. They go back but never quite arrive.

The streets of their childhood are too narrow; the buildings, too old. They are not understood. They are not happy, nor here neither there. They exist in circles.

And so, at the end, moving in circles, they continue looking for home. And they are lost, forever.

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## Hispanics Invested In Everything American

The events unfolding this week and announced for the next one remind us once again that Latinos in the United States are an intrinsic part of the population, and as such, are as interested and invested as every other American in the state of our union. When unemployment and foreclosure numbers rise, Latinos suffer; when the economy's numbers improve they rejoice. And when civil rights cases jump to the front pages, they listen with rapt attention as the issue is always close to home.

The killing of young African-American [Trayvon Martin](#) by a neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, has ignited a wave of protests. The epicenter of the uproar is in Sanford, Florida, but indignation and protest over what happened to Martin has spread far and wide across the country, dominating local and national news conversations.

Although Zimmerman, [according to his own father Robert, is Latino](#), the protests are [not directed toward the Hispanic community](#), but, instead, against local police handling of the case. However, later in the week, as the debate turned national, additional uproar was ignited by Hispanic, Fox News commentator Geraldo Rivera who tweeted "[His hoodie killed Trayvon Martin as surely as George Zimmerman](#)." Akin to blaming a sexual assault victim for what she was wearing, one had to wonder if Rivera actually believes what he says.

Nevertheless, Latinos in Sanford, who comprise 20% of the local population, [are frequent victims of crime, abuse and discrimination there](#) as well as everywhere, and certainly have a stake in seeing violence diminish and law enforcement procedures made accountable.

Latinos have been also an important part of the healthcare debate. After two years of political bickering, the healthcare reform law dubbed "Obamacare" by its opponents, will have its day in court.

Beginning this Monday, the Supreme Court will hear arguments for and against the law in which the Latino community has high stakes. According to a fact-sheet distributed by the Leadership Conference, Latinos are [much more likely to be uninsured than any other group](#) and less likely to have employer-sponsored coverage. As the nation's largest minority with 50 million residents, the economic and social impact of a large number of uninsured Latinos is something everyone should be aware of and seek to mitigate.

And, remember the 2012 Presidential campaign? It actually seems to have receded to a secondary level of public attention lately. The Republican presidential debates – our almost daily dose of pompous statements and incendiary declarations — have ended. And the perception that Mitt Romney has won the nomination seems to be the new credo. But maybe to offset this lack of interest, Florida's former governor Jeb Bush resurfaced to promote Marco Rubio's unlikely quest for a spot on the Republican ticket as Vice President. As [we have discussed previously](#) there is little chance that Latino voters across the U.S. would consider Rubio — the Cuban-American Republican senator from Florida — to represent their interests and thus shift their support to the Republican ticket. Perhaps this is why Rubio has so far answered the calls by his longtime political mentor Jeb Bush by repeating that he is not a candidate.



Discussing Rubio as a potential candidate will hardly convince Latinos that the GOP is paying attention to them, when at the same time they — including Rubio, a Tea Party favorite — haven't stopped pandering to the extremes by advocating hard-line positions on issues like the economy, education, crime, and immigration.

But if Latinos are as interested as every other American in the first three of these issues, many of them are also profoundly and emotionally invested in the last one, immigration. This is why the news which may have most resonated this week for many Latinos could have been the decision by a federal appeals court in Dallas to uphold the ban on the patently discriminatory housing law in the city of Farmers Branch, Texas. The law had “[called on the city's building inspector to check the immigration status](#) of anyone wanting to rent an apartment.”

As [AOL Latino](#) reporter Yolanda Gonzalez noted in a Spanish-language article, Farmers Branch spent more than 4 million taxpayer dollars [trying to impose anti-immigrant laws](#) which have been rejected by the courts, one by one, over the last few years.

Does the court's decision signal a trend? Hard to say, as more ominous anti-immigrant laws that affect many more people — like [SB1070 in Arizona](#), AB56 in Alabama and others — have been enacted in several states in the last two years, and the legal challenges against them are still working their way through the judicial system.

Meanwhile, young activists intensified their efforts to push for Congress' approval of the [DREAM Act](#), legislation that if approved, would grant legal immigration status to many undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. when very young and who are now students or soldiers.

A small group of activists started a cross country march for the DREAM Act and are set to travel 3000 miles, from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco [and visiting 285 cities in support of this legislation](#). At the same time, hundreds of undocumented students traveled to Albany, New York, “to educate and show legislators the faces and voices of those who would [benefit from the passage of the New York DREAM Act](#),” a state version of the law.

And in Maricopa County, Arizona, Sheriff Joe Arpaio categorized the DREAM Act as “all politics,” protesting, in an interview for Channel 5 in Phoenix, against the decision by immigration officials not to deport local DREAM Act activists who had taken to the streets under the banner of “Undocumented and Unafraid” because not one of them [had any record of violent crime](#).

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## **We're Here And We're Not Leaving**

When Mexican-American journalist Ruben Salazar was struck and killed by a tear gas canister while covering the National Chicano Moratorium protest in 1970, controversy erupted concerning the Los Angeles Sheriff's office responsibility for the tragedy.

It took 40 years for the case to be properly investigated. Only a few months ago the Los Angeles County Office of Independent Review concluded that Salazar [was not intentionally targeted](#) by the deputies who killed him. During those decades Salazar's image rose to almost mythic proportions, as often happens to those who are perceived as martyrs.

Salazar was the first Latino to cover the Mexican-American community of Los Angeles for mainstream media and the first to break the unofficial embargo that blocked non-crime news from the Latino enclave of East Los Angeles, where I now live. As a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, and as News Director of TV station KMEX, he was fully bilingual and integrated into mainstream America while developing, honoring and maintaining his Hispanic culture. He reported on a community struggling for **respect and recognition**.

While many of the questions of 1970 remain unresolved and hotly debated, Hispanics in the United States have achieved a great deal of success, making inroads into every aspect of society. As the pace of their growth accelerates, catapulting them into the largest ethnic community in our country, their rate of integration increases. While still lacking sufficient resources, Hispanics register serious advances in educations and business. This year, 32.2 million Hispanics, or 63% of the entire Hispanic population, are online. And while this percentage still pales when compared to that of other groups, according to a [report](#) by IAB Hispanic Research Working Group, the rate of growth of online activity among Latinos expected between now and 2015 — 35% — is four times faster than that of non-Hispanic Whites.

Latinos are united by common language, history and culture, as well as separated by vast differences. We are not a homogeneous group. We come here from México, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Ecuador... even from Argentina, my native country. Our interests and needs differ from Los Angeles to New York, from Miami to Chicago. But we are here to stay.

We are differentiated by age: young Latinos who speak more English than their parents tend to use newer technologies and social media, have habits and desires that parallel those of non-Latino youth; older Latinos who speak only Spanish hold onto more beliefs and values from their home countries. We are of course differentiated as well by income and education. Many of us are in desperate need of critical information, guidance, community referrals on immigration regulations, jobs, health insurance and education. And across each of these divides the question of immigration is omnipresent. Many Latinos in this country have a close relative or friend who is an undocumented immigrant, and most Latinos can trace their roots to an immigrant forefather or mother.

*Aquí estamos y no nos vamos...*



And so, Hispanics are **the face of diversity**.

All of which makes the launch of Huffington Post LatinoVoices an even more exciting, intriguing, and promising proposition.

Mindful of our strengths and weaknesses, HuffPost LatinoVoices will have to adapt to that which unifies us and that which, as Latinos, tears us apart. In times of xenophobic attacks and distortions of the truth, steadfastly and diligently, we will be supportive of the Latino condition.

In the best tradition of The Huffington Post and AOL, we will strive to make HuffPost LatinoVoices into a source of service to our community **across the lifecycle**; into a voice that **redresses grievances**. We will strive to reflect the struggles, successes and failures of this community. And we will be a truthful and thorough showcase of this community for non-Latinos.

But the journey that starts today with the launch of HuffPost LatinoVoices is not entirely new. We stand on the shoulders of giants, our precursors and pioneers. We will respect the tradition initiated in 1808 by the first Spanish language newspaper in the country, [El Misisipi](#), continued in 1892 when José Martí founded *Patria* and with today's dailies, *La Opinión* of Los Angeles (1926) and *El Diario / La Prensa* in New York (1913).

Like them, but online.

Larger, faster and more inclusive.

HuffPost LatinoVoices, in English.

AOL Latino, in Spanish.

Recognizing, respecting and celebrating diversity. Like the work of Rubén Salazar. And, like him, bilingual, fully integrated and fully independent.

First [published in The Huffington Post](#), 08/10/2011



## What Is A Latino, Anyway? It Depends

Against all odds, even while continuing to fight for recognition, Latinos are finding a way to remain in the mainstream.

Maybe that's the power of numbers. Yes, the Hispanic population is the largest minority group in the country, [well over 50 million](#). Yes, between 2000 and 2010, "the Hispanic population grew by 43 percent, [or four times the nation's 9.7 percent growth rate](#)."

But, what does that mean? What defines Latinos? Are they a race? An ethnicity? A group united by language and customs?

What unifies Latinos? Or better yet — are they united?

For some, this is an homogeneous group, so united that if you make one of them a formal leader, the others will follow.

So if you choose a Latino candidate to run for office, the thinking goes, just the fact that they are Latino will, by itself, convince Latino voters to support them. Regardless of whether the Latino candidate is opposed to what most Latinos support—and vice versa.

Thus the idea that Marco Rubio, the junior Republican Senator from Florida, is in the running for GOP vice president seems like a recipe to win the Latino vote for many Republicans. Give Latinos a Hispanic name and they will get with the program.

Is it that easy? Maybe not.

But this week, Senator Rubio, who endorsed Mitt Romney much later than most in the GOP, also announced his own version of the Dream Act. This is a cleverly designed move to take advantage of the immense popularity the Dream Act has among Latino voters, [who are estimated to support it by 90%](#), according to a Fox News March poll. (The general population supports it by 66%), and Rubio can do this without breaking the "no amnesty" mantra held by the Tea Party and his Republican base.

So, instead of granting legal status and a path to citizenship to undocumented students and soldiers under certain circumstances, what does the new bill propose?

Who knows?

["I don't have any specifics to announce yet,"](#) said Rubio to the New York Times. "This stuff has to be done responsibly. We're working toward that and hopefully very soon."



Translation: it doesn't matter what the idea is, as long as it achieves a couple of headlines and highlights his attempt to appear vice-presidential – whatever that means. Oh, and also as long as it doesn't alienate Rubio's own Tea Party activists.

This also serves to offset Rubio's poor record as Senator; his only piece of legislation thus far has been the July 2011 Senate Resolution 236, designating September 2011 as "[National Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Month](#)."

One thing is for sure: Rubio won't get Hispanic approval for the Republican ticket with this lame act; right now, [Latinos prefer Obama over Romney by six-to-one](#). At most, he may embolden the Cuban American vote in Florida to vote Republican, which it has already been doing for decades anyway. [But among other Latinos, Rubio](#) is either a) unknown or b) unwelcome.

Latinos share a common destiny and some cultural traits. And they all seek a place at the American table. So, by next June, if the US Supreme Court strikes down the comprehensive legislation known as "Obamacare," or just the individual mandate, while pundits analyze which party will lose most from the decision, it will be a sad day for Latinos, [the group which, more than all others](#), benefits most [from three major tenets of "Obamacare](#), including the prospect of all having health insurance, the prohibition against denying coverage for those with pre-existing conditions, and the ability of young people to stay on their parents' insurance until they reach age 26."

Finally, this idea of a "race" to which allegedly Latinos belong, became this week the subject of an additional controversy, in the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin, when media outlets wishing to clarify why killer George Zimmerman was considered white in the context of the tragedy, dubbed him [a "white Hispanic."](#)

["Mr. Zimmerman, 28, a white Hispanic](#), told the police that he shot Trayvon in self-defense after an altercation," wrote The New York Times' Lizette Alvarez on March 22nd.

"Are we now going to refer to people as white Hispanics and black Hispanics? Given that my complexion is a shade lighter than brown, should I be referred to as a beige Hispanic? [Where does this end?](#)" wrote Ruben Navarrete.

But personally, I understand the concept: if there is such a thing as a white Latino, you are now reading an article written by one. I am so white, in fact, that my neighbors in the 99% Latino East Los Angeles area where I live used to answer me in English when I would speak Spanish, seeing me as a little more than a condescending *gringo*. And yet, even if I don't share the pigment of the skin of my neighbors or their religion, I am Latino. I was born in Latin America and Spanish is my first language.

And right now, the race, or ethnicity, to which George Zimmerman allegedly belongs is a hot potato. A loaded term. Nobody wants to claim his identity.

Radio personality and political leader Rush Limbaugh didn't want Zimmerman considered white, and



harangued Hispanic organizations and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) specifically, for allegedly not supporting him as a Latino.

“[Nobody in the Hispanic activist community is piping up here](#),” said Limbaugh, according to a transcript of his show.

To which [Lisa Navarrete](#), spokeswoman for La Raza answered: “The only time he [Rush Limbaugh] apparently cares about what happens to a Latino is [when they may have killed a young African-American man](#).”

First [published in The Huffington Post](#), 03/31/2012



## Latinos: 16% Of Population, 2% Of Homegrown Terrorists

The fact that Muhammad Yusuf, who was arrested yesterday and accused of conspiring to commit a terrorist act in New York, was born in the Dominican Republic and that his pre-conversion name is Jose Pimentel, wasn't ignored in the reports about the failed plot. On the contrary, it appeared mostly on the first paragraphs in the news.

Social media, of course, echoed this same ethnic categorization. On Twitter the hashtag #dominicanterrorist spread, one user writing: "#DominicanTerrorist would probably scream "HOY SE BEBE" before blowing up." *Hoy se bebe* in Spanish translates to "Today we drink."

Another user wrote: "He must have been deprived of good dominican food/parties to want become a terrorist and bomb NY #DominicanTerrorist lol."

And yet another: "#DominicanTerrorist is what happens when parents let their children hang around too many Puerto Ricans."

In our charged political landscape, the Hispanic identity of the subject will undoubtedly become important in the coming days.

Sure, Pimentel is not the first. Others include also [U.S. citizen Abdallah el-Muhajir, or "Ibrahim", née José Padilla](#), a Brooklyn native of Puerto Rican origin who was suspected of planning to explode a "dirty" (radioactive) bomb in New York in 2002 and convicted in 2007 of supporting terrorism abroad.

And, some other American citizens who crossed the lines and joined al-Qaeda or it's affiliates are White non-Latinos, like John Walker Lindh (Suleiman el-Faris), the American Taliban who was fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan, imprisoned, and tried in a civil court in the United States the next year.

But, how do different ethnicities, and Hispanics in particular, play in this field?

In the February 2010 report "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim American Communities", scholars from Duke and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill analyzing homegrown terrorism wrote that since 9/11, in the United States "139 Muslim-Americans committed acts of terrorism-related violence or were prosecuted for terrorism-related offenses that involve some element of violence..."

Of the 139 terrorists, 47 were born outside of the United States and are either legal residents (25) or citizens (22), while 63 were born here.

"Almost two-thirds of the individuals are U.S.-born (63) or naturalized citizens (22). Twenty-five are legal residents and only 10 were in the United States illegally," says the report.



And when divided by ethnicities, 32 of the offenders are Arab, 24 are African-American, 24 are South Asian, 20 are Somali, and 20 are Caucasian. Just over one-third (47) of the individuals are converts to Islam. Twenty four of the converts are African-American; 10 are Caucasian.

And 3 are Latino.

The report can be read [here](#).

So, that's it: until 18 months ago, just 3 of the 139, about 2% of the homegrown terrorists, were Latinos, while Latinos are about [16% of the population](#).

The three Latinos in the list are Padilla, Danyel Aljugaifi, and Bryant Neil Viñas. Danyel Aljugaifi, born Daniel Maldonado, born in East Chicago, pled guilty in 2007 to “receiving military training from foreign terrorist organization; conspiring to use explosive device outside US”, after receiving training in Somalia, according to the Duke report. And Bryant Neil Viñas, who was convicted in 2009 of giving “material support to al-Quaida”, was also U.S.-born. Viñas participated in a rocket attack in Afghanistan.

Pimentel, then, would have been the fourth Latino.

So, if there are “only” four Latinos involved in attacks against the country, why does the arrest of one of them create interest?

In her 2010 paper “Delinquent Citizenship, National Performances: Racialization, Surveillance, and the Politics of ‘Worthiness’ in Puerto Rican Chicago”, Ana Ramos-Zayas noted that in 2002, reporters calling her as a source were tying Jose Padilla’s being a Puerto Rican Latino with his decision to support terrorism, since he was “so angry at the United States” because he was “the son of a single mother, growing up in Chicago’s Logan Square and being influenced by the barrio’s nationalist activism and gang involvement”.

“Padilla’s involvement with the Taliban,” wrote Ramos-Zayas, “was almost explained away by his Puerto Ricanness...”

“More significantly, however, was the... view of Padilla’s involvement with the Taliban as a natural progression stemming from his ‘un-American’ citizenship”... while John Walker was portrayed “as an unexplainable aberration, an exception to the otherwise normative whiteness emphatically represented in images of his upper-middle-class professional suburban upbringing.”

In consequence, “citizenship rights are dispensed accordingly so that John Walker’s judicial and human rights take precedence over the rights of Jose Padilla, who... basically disappeared from public view.”

The article is part of the reader [“Latinos and citizenship: the dilemma of belonging”](#) edited by Suzanne Oboler, and it can be read [here](#).



Pimentel seems to have been only one hour short of detonating a bomb. This fact shows us how vulnerable the civilian population is and how important it is to be alert, in order to prevent terrorism, as well as to prevent its threat from poisoning the fabric of society.

But the fact that he is Latino solely serves to remind us that the rate of Hispanics among convicted terrorists is very low in our country.

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## 'We Are Running Out Of Time'

For many years, political debates have been—and still are—a great way for candidates to introduce themselves to American voters, whether watched by a live audience or broadcast on television and radio. Debates introduce the candidates to the public, and even help the candidates themselves to shape their original ideas to be more sophisticated and coherent so that they resonate with the electorate.

In recent years, these debates seem to have lost some of their educational value to bitter feuding, as well as continual switching of positions by participants catering to what they perceive as changing tastes of the voters. The debates seem to have become little more than a combination of catchy punch lines and repetitive talking points and sound bites repeated ad nauseum—and with rapidly diminishing substance.

In many ways we can blame the debate format, which has been continually changed and reshaped by debate organizers, media corporations and campaign managers to accommodate a growing field of debates and debaters. This ultimately renders the original and often repeated purpose of the debates into an impossibility.

In April 2005, I was a member of the panel that presented questions to the two finalists for mayor of Los Angeles: incumbent James Hahn, who had completed his first term, and challenger Antonio Villaraigosa. The debate was the first of its kind and magnitude to be broadcast on Spanish-language TV and was organized by KVEA-34 Univision and La Opinión. The questions were formulated in Spanish; an interpreter translated them to English for the candidates and then another translated candidates' answers back into Spanish. The process was as smooth as possible and thousands of Latino citizens who prefer Spanish felt respected and informed. It was the right thing to do.

Villaraigosa went on to win that election and was reelected in 2009. However, this Latino elected official, who commands an acceptable but fairly basic level of conversational Spanish, did not want to be seen wearing a headset, or have to stop the debate and lose precious seconds asking for clarification. He wasn't confident of his ability to understand completely. What was the man to do? He approached me seconds before the broadcast began and asked me to speak slowly...

Fast forward to the present; the Republican debates are a hit this season. Last week, Texas governor and Republican presidential candidate Rick Perry announced he was considering skipping some or all the remaining televised debates. Over the weekend, Perry relented, saying he will participate in four scheduled debates next month. "There are numerous – 15, 16, 17 – debates, and we're taking a look at each one and making the appropriate consideration," said a spokesman, Mark Miner, to [The Guardian](#).

It's true. The debates are numerous. Actually, [23 of them](#). There were four in September, two in October; three are planned for November and four for December. The next debate is due November 9th at Oakland University in Rochester, Minnesota.

The debates have become the focus of the Republican presidential campaign. Like a troupe, the group of



eight candidates (at last count) travels from town to town, pulls in and starts the show. This is what the debates have become today. One of the oldest and most respected expressions of American democracy has been turned into little more than a reality show, where the candidate with the loudest voice scores points among an increasingly strident crowd.

Why so many? Does the increased amount of debates provide the public with additional tools to make an informed decision? The debates have become wildly popular, attracting millions, and according to The New York Times, [“twice as many viewers as any of the early debates, Democratic or Republican, did four years ago.”](#)

Pressed by a hectic schedule, a shortage of time to present real positions, haunted by the presence of candidates that otherwise would have dropped out of the race long ago, these debates are turning into a shouting contest. Plans are introduced to the public without much preparation, it seems, and just for the sake of publicity (or entertainment).

And so, the only thing that outweighs the rhythmic chanting of “Nine Nine Nine” (a tax plan setup by the most implausible of candidates, Herman Cain) is Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann’s observation that if you put it upside down it turns into “Six Six Six”... the Devil!

But a lot of the triviality and shallowness of the most recent debates is a product of the format’s limitations. Candidates are provided with constantly changing schedules, and face new rules at each debate. Each candidate is given a minute or so to explain his or her philosophy, if he or she has one. If another candidate is mentioned, they have 30 seconds to respond. There may or may not be opening or closing statements. There may or may not be a right to ask each other a question, or be forbidden from talking directly to rivals. Sometimes just explaining the rules to the public takes five precious minutes. And when the number of participants is still eight, the chances to get an informed answer to an intelligent question dangerously diminishes.

The moderators have a nearly impossible task, trying to maintain at least the perception that all candidates have equal talking time, and that none of them is controlling the entire event. They must ensure questions are answered and maintain respect and decorum, an increasingly daunting challenge when a frequent punchline lately has been that “the media” is “dead set against the GOP” and thus conspiring to incite confrontation in order to make the participants look bad.

In the most recent GOP debate, [Texas governor Rick Perry](#) was cheered when he answered Anderson Cooper’s insistence on answering the question with, “You get to ask the questions, I get to answer like I want to.” Former House speaker Newt Gingrich also received applause for using his last line to attack Cooper for “maximizing bickering” among the participants.

We know it is a debate because the most frequently repeated phrase is “We are running out of time.” The pace is frenetic, the cameras swing wildly from one face to another, and very quickly, everything is over... Or are we bored enough and change to another reality show. A real one, not a staged performance.



Formats can differ. Last year, on September 29, I moderated a radio debate jointly with Patt Morrison for KPCC-FM between [California Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer and Republican challenger Carly Fiorina](#). There was much at stake. Fiorina ran a strong campaign and with the possibility of her winning there was the spectre of Democrats losing their majority in the Senate. This would be the last debate between the two before the election, and there was a great deal of interest and expectations.

But the candidates didn't have a time limit. That way, there was less need to interrupt one other, and they had more time to explain their position and avoid sound bites and the gaffes that inevitably come with them. At the same time, we prevented them from dominating the debate by frequently correcting them when they steered away from the question, and their common sense dictated that at some point the question was answered. We tried to maintain a balance without being intrusive nor rude. We tried not to interrupt them in the middle of a sentence, but sometimes we did, because we really wanted to know what they thought about the topics. Maybe it was easier because we broadcast from a tiny radio studio in Pasadena with no public present, and Senator Boxer participated from the NPR studios in Washington, DC.

In the end, what is better? Short and frequently-repeated cliches, quickly digested but easily forgotten? Or long speeches, hard to grasp but fertile material for future historians? A debate with a panel of journalists reading aloud their questions and rapidly fading into oblivion? A moderator who is himself a media star? Questions from the public? Do voters learn from televised or broadcast debates? Do debates help them to form opinions at all?

In the Illinois (Senate) [Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858](#), attended by hundreds in a live audience (but obviously not broadcast to millions), one of the candidates started with a 60-minute speech and was followed by the opposing candidate, who had 90 minutes, no less. The rival then had another 30 minutes. Lincoln lost to the incumbent, but was able to build upon the clarity of his discourse and published a book based on his speeches.

He went on to win the presidency two years later.  
How things have changed.

Published [in The Huffington Post](#) on 10/31/2011



## **Jailing Undocumented Immigrants Is Big Business**

At dawn on July 19, nearly 40 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) agents burst into the home of Carmen Bonilla, 44. The agents were searching for “Robert” an alleged drug dealer, but ended up terrifying Bonilla and her son Michael, 16, daughter Josefina, 23, daughter-in-law Leticia, 28, and two of her granddaughters.

According to Jessica Dominguez, the family’s lawyer, and Jorge Mario Cabrera, spokesperson of the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), the family was subjected to “different levels of physical and verbal abuse,” including screaming, “kicking, beating and aggression.” Their treatment was [documented last week](#) by HuffPost LatinoVoices’ Jorge Luis Macías.

What happened to the Bonillas has happened to thousands of immigrant families. Immigration authorities — both local police and federal ICE agents — have embarked on a program to seek out “criminal illegal aliens” and, whether they find them or not, have often rounded up entire families for deportation.

Even though the Bonilla family members do not have criminal records, they face removal proceedings before an immigration judge. The family was able to find legal representation and general public support, enabling their release from ICE custody, but undocumented immigrants who are less lucky are routinely sent to prisons and detention centers where ICE will process their paperwork and decide whether they may be released.

“If they have a criminal record, particularly a drug or security-related conviction, or a felony or violent crime, or crime of moral turpitude, they will likely have to remain in custody until their trial before the [immigration judge],” explained Aggie R. Hoffman, an immigration attorney.

The Department of Homeland Security pays between \$50 to \$200 per day per person to local, county and state prisons to house apprehended aliens. A few years ago, a series I wrote for [La Opinión](#) showed how prisons in general, and California’s prisons in particular, benefit from the largesse of the federal government and vie for a piece of this lucrative business. At that time, I visited a detention center in Lancaster, Calif., run by the Sheriff of Los Angeles, where immigrants rounded up in raids were housed until their deportation or legal proceedings. The process is supposed to take just a few days, but some of the detainees rushed to tell me that they had been kept there for more than two years.

“This happens frequently because the courts are so backlogged; not enough judges to hear the cases of those being held”, explained Hoffman.

But the incarceration trend is not limited to public prisons. Thanks to a concerted lobbying push from the corrections industry, growing numbers of undocumented immigrants could end up in private detention facilities.



Over the past three years, immigration politics has seen more restrictive legislation at the state level and the unprecedented enforcement of current laws by the Obama administration. Together, the laws and the stepped up enforcement have the potential to bring tens of thousands of individuals into for-profit jails.

The recent animated video “[Immigrants for Sale](#)” by the activist group Cuéntame illustrates some facts behind the connection between the ongoing crackdown on illegal immigration and the for-profit corrections industry.

The video follows the trail of money and political power behind this piece of the national immigration debate. Its creators say it’s an attempt to uncover what lies behind the positions and ideologies in a discussion in which statements and accusations made at maximum volume have long replaced the open exchange of ideas and opinions.

“Cuéntame means ‘tell me your story,’” said the group’s founder, producer/director Axel Woolfolk Caballero. He said the organization [works to make an impact](#) through short videos, docu-series, media campaigns and “interviews from the street or in our studio or sent to us by others.” Cuéntame is part of the [Brave New Foundation](#), which focuses on social justice media.

The video states that behind the words and laws, there is an alliance of businesses and politicians called the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC. Some of ALEC’s members are both the most ardent proponents of anti-immigration laws and representatives of the industries that will benefit directly from having more people behind bars. At least 12 companies involved in the corrections industry are members of the alliance.

ALEC was created in 1978 and is headquartered in Washington, D.C. According to the group’s [mission statement](#), it is “a non-profit, private organization dedicated to principles of free markets, limited government, federalism (the proper balance of federal and state government), and individual liberty.” ALEC achieves these aims through a exchange of ideas between state politicians and business leaders, facilitating the legislative process around certain causes dear to the latter. Through one of ALEC’s eight committees, lawyers and business experts actually write laws that are later enacted almost verbatim.

Each year, ALEC produces approximately 1000 legislative proposals, 20 percent of which eventually become laws, according to the group. The Center for Media and Democracy’s PR Watch [reports](#): “98% of ALEC’s funding comes from corporations like Exxon Mobil, corporate ‘foundations’ like the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation, or trade associations like the pharmaceutical industry’s PhRMA.”

Cuéntame focuses on ALEC members’ use of political pressure to achieve more restrictive immigration laws, which require longer detentions and a larger number of detainees.

Some of ALEC’s model bills include the “[three Strikes](#)” law, changes in mandatory minimum sentences and “truth-in-sentencing,” which would further [eliminate the possibility of parole for many inmates](#).



Yet ALEC rejects the idea that it promotes increased construction of private prisons. In [a statement last October](#), the group said, “ALEC’s position on prison overcrowding ... is to reduce the non-violent prison population in order to save taxpayer costs.”

One of the best known legislative members of ALEC is State Senator Russell Pearce, a proponent of Arizona’s very restrictive immigration law, [SB 1070](#). According to [an investigation by NPR](#), Pearce took his version of the legislation to an ALEC meeting, where it was then revised and adapted by members of the corrections industry, obtaining their unqualified support.

SB 1070 has been imitated by similar laws — some even stricter and more encompassing — in at least five other states. These include [HB 56 in Alabama](#), [Utah’s Compact / HB 497](#), [Indiana’s SB 590](#), [Georgia’s HB 87](#) and [South Carolina’s S 20](#).

ALEC is now working on [a series of laws concerning prisons](#), including The Housing Out-of-State Prisoners in a Private Prison Act; The Prison Industries Act; The Inmate Labor Disclosure Act; A Resolution on Prison Expenditures; a Model State Bill Prohibiting Wireless Handsets in Prisons; the Targeted Contracting for Certain Correctional Facilities and Services Act; and the Prevention of Illegal Payments to Inmates Incentives Act, details of which are restricted to ALEC members only.

One of ALEC’s members is Corrections Corporation of America, the country’s largest for-profit prison company, founded in 1983. CCA designs, builds, manages and operates correctional facilities and detention centers on behalf of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the United States Marshal Service in nearly half of all states, according to the company’s [website](#).

According to Cuéntame, CCA houses about 60 percent of the almost 100,000 — up from 14,000 in 2006 — immigrant detainees at any given time.

In 2008, the *New Yorker* [published an expose](#) drawing attention businesses involved in the imprisonment of families with children in the T. Don Hutto Detention Center in Texas, a CCA facility.

CCA, together with other prison companies GEO Group and Management and Training Corporation, owns more than 200 private prisons with 150,000 beds and makes an annual profit of \$5 billion, Cuéntame found.

“Private prisons profit like a hotel,” the video states. “The more occupants they can throw in, the more money comes out.”

First published in [The Huffington Post](#) on 08/14/2011



## Talk Radio And Hispanic Los Angeles

Southern California is a fascinating place. On a stretch of Pacific Coast Highway there is a [Harley Davidson](#) shop with long-haired guys in leather coats. Across the street, a place where they read [Tarot](#) cards, next to a [Montessori](#) school which is next to a Lutheran church followed by a Chinese restaurant that changes hands every couple of months.

In each of these buildings, behind the simple or ornate facades, is the predominance of Latinos who provide services, working in the kitchens and bathrooms performing the most needed but lowest paid jobs.

Everywhere we see diversity right in front of us; in every neighborhood, city or suburb that makes up this urban monster called Los Angeles. However, this ‘diversity’ is just a euphemism for the undeniable: the growing presence of immigrants from Mexico and the rest of Latin America. They have a tight grip on southern California’s economic pulse, ranging from those filling entry-level positions, to well-known professors and artists, and up to the top level of local politics.

Immigration in southern California has created a unique landscape that is dynamic and upbeat, but is also vulnerable to economic upheavals. Hence the frightening numbers of unemployment recently revealed: 12.7% here, compared to 9.5% nationally.

We live in a melting pot of changes.

But there is something wrong in this picture. A contradiction.

The voices of Latinos and their points of view are absent from the debate currently raging mostly on local AM radio. If someone turns on their radio and listens to these talk shows, he or she would think this is some remote corner of the South, or a bastion of white supremacy; definitely a place with no, zero, Latino presence.

But this is Southern California, where Latinos comprise almost one-half of the population.

Political radio has been transformed into something that subverts values and agitates, that promotes seemingly unstoppable propaganda pushing in only one direction: that of the most radical wing of Conservative political thought in America.

Viacom/CBS’ [KFWB 980](#) was for many years –when owned by Westinghouse– a non-stop source of general news. On September 9<sup>th</sup>, it turned into “Talk News,” whatever that means, killing its news content and leaving only one station, partner [KNX 1070](#) for 12 million listeners.

The new content of Radio 980? Anti-immigrant tirades, strident anti-Latino gesticulation, loud discord, unlimited pretension, and Dr. Laura Schlessinger.



A couple of months prior to that move, management took care of laying off about 25 reporters and hosts.

[KFI 640 AM](#), the station with the largest audience in the West, with hundreds of affiliates, is the cozy home of [Rush Limbaugh](#), one of the most evident spokesmen for Conservatism, and the [John and Ken](#), broadcast in a new format of five hours per day, six days a week. The content is an ongoing manifesto against politicians, crime, taxes and mainly what they call “the Illegals.”

Different points of view are not represented equally. Air [Air America 1150AM](#), sort of a progressive response to these programs, has been unable to create a similar audience, neither awakening enthusiasm or spurring indignation. Why? because this station actually considers the facts and respects those with differing opinions. Imagine.

And [KPFK 90.7 FM](#), celebrating 50 years, a station with enormous potential and geographical reach, is struggling with a crippling crisis of often irrelevant content and [diminishing](#) audience.

So, flip the dial; station by station, hour by hour: Mike Savage; Ann Coulter, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Larry Elder, Don Imus, Laura Ingraham, Hugh Hewitt, Roger Hedgecock, Dennis Prager, Michael Smerconish are the better known, and with them a myriad of imitators and wannabe Conservative hosts. Their messages are similar, as is the format: they debate political issues with a strong ideological content, absent of opposition, without verifying their information or allowing those they attack to have an opportunity to respond.

What about Spanish radio?

Terrible. We have programs with insufferable confessions of promiscuity and crude sex. Know-it-all doctors and experts in human sexuality.. Incredible tales of perversion or stupid and boring forums. Scorn, gossip, segments more apt for the zoo animals where some of them obtained their nicknames. Just program after program of pre-recorded laughs, false clapping and cheering. Well-concealed infomercials for the victims of foreclosures by the same brokers who caused them. In the best case, sports and religion.

Even with this content directed to the lowest possible denominator, Spanish radio is losing audience. Unbelievable, but true. The September report by Arbitron shows that for the first time since they began measuring ratings, there is only one Spanish language station among the first 10: Univision’s [KLVE 107.5 \(K-Love\)](#). Univision also owns La Nueva 101.9 FM, Recuerdo 103.9-98.3 FM, 1020 Radio AM and the ever popular show “*Pióln Por La Mañana*“. Another Spanish station, [KLAX/97.9 FM](#) (La Raza), with regional Mexican music, slipped from 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> place.

So how come half of Southern California and a clear majority of its Latinos have a keen interest, for example, in immigration reform, public education, labor issues, etc., while the radio medium is forcefully against all that, and represents only a tiny political minority?

We have a long, long way to go.

*This blog, published [on October 20th, 2009, in HispanicLA.com, is still current.](#)*



## **Semana Latina: Who Are The Latino Leaders Of Tomorrow?**

As recent elections in heavily Latino-populated states like Texas, Florida and California indicate, there is no shortage of Latino candidates running for office at the city, county, parish and state levels. There are Hispanics who submit themselves to the will of the voters for school and water districts and tax boards; for judges and district attorneys, and all the way up the ladder including state legislature races.

Here in southern California, dozens of Hispanic candidates are flooding our mailboxes with colorful electoral literature just in time for the [June 5 primary and state election](#). While most of them are Democrats, a good number are also running as Republicans.

Some of the Californian candidates are well-known politicians, like Richard Alarcon, who is now a member of the Los Angeles city council and who previously served as state Assembly member (for three months), state senator, and prior to that, again, LA council member between 1993-98.

There is also Ian Calderon, the 26-year-old son of Assembly member Charles Calderon, who has to leave office due to term limit laws. His uncle is Ron Calderon, a state Senator. Another uncle, Tom, is trying to regain his seat in the state Assembly. An entire dynasty of Los Angeles County Latino Democrats.

On the other hand, some are fairly new to voters, despite often having a background as staff member for other elected officials. Just in California's 51st district – my own – there are four new Latino candidates, who all identify as progressive Democrats: [Jimmy Gomez, Arturo Chavez, Luis Lopez, and Oscar Gutierrez](#).

And not only here in California. In Texas, with two new “Hispanic” congressional districts created and four new seats in Congress following [an increase in the state's Latino population](#), Hispanic candidates are also vying for elected office. On July 31st, Ted Cruz, a tea party Republican who is also Latino will face Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst in a primary runoff for the Senate [seat being vacated by Kay Bailey Hutchison](#). And former state representative Domingo Garcia is on the runoff ballot with state Rep. Marc Veasey in the solidly Democratic North Texas 33rd District.

In Central Florida, new redistricting maps are allowing for more Hispanic candidates, that, some say, can change the solidly Republican and Caucasian legislature in Tallahassee, So instead of only “one Hispanic-and one black-leaning house seat in Orange County, the redistricting maps approved this spring have two of each. A [new Hispanic-majority Senate seat in Orange, Osceola and Polk](#) counties was created.”

More Hispanic candidates... Who knows, perhaps one day some of these candidates will become the next Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, or Antonio Villaraigosa, Mayor of Los Angeles, or Congressman Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill, or Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis, or the former secretary of HUD, Professor Henry Cisneros, or former Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales...?

Or, maybe, maybe, the next Cesar Chavez or Dolores Huerta.



Last September, [at a roundtable with Latino news outlets](#), President Obama told me that ” “within my lifetime we will have a [Latino candidate for President who is very competitive and may win](#)“.

Yeaaah. Really?

Un momentito, por favor. Wait a minute.

Let’s stop the self-indulging narrative. The truth is that few of these candidates and leaders are qualified to stand in line for the chance to be like their great predecessors.

This week, Dolores Huerta was honored by the President of the United States with the Medal of Freedom, one of the nation’s highest honors.

And a thought sent chills through my spine: where is the new, the next, Dolores Huerta? While she is receiving a medal for what she has done decades ago, and for the work her foundation does currently, where are the future recipients of the Medal of Freedom developing?

Maybe they are not running for office. Not yet.

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta (and Edward R. Roybal, Bert Corona, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez”, Reies Tijerina, etc.), were all products of the people’s struggle for civil rights. They fought for the working people in the fields and factories. This is how they were formed, and how they became known.

Where are the Latino leaders of the future?

Let me answer my own question with another question...

Do you know the legend of the Bluebird of Happiness?

My mother taught this to me and I have been telling it to my kids forever. The sons of a family leave their parents and go on a years-long journey crossing land and sea in search of the Bluebird that, they are certain, will bring Happiness forever. Decades later, as planned, all reunite at the home of their parents to confess to each other that their quest was in vain and none of them had found the magic Bluebird. They have all come to realize that the Bluebird is alive and well and living in a cage in their parents’ home.

The Bluebird is among us.

The Latino leaders of our future are with us, today, on our college campuses.

They are the DREAMers, the undocumented kids who fight for recognition and legal status.

They were brought from abroad by their parents as children. They don’t know any other country. Many of them barely speak, or write, Spanish. They could be deported any day, but they fight to become American



citizens. They excel in class and they fight for their kind. They are strong and courageous. They left the shadows and jumped into the limelight. They march, carrying flags and banners for freedom.

The civil rights struggle of today is fought by them, by the DREAMERS.

[Some](#) of [them](#), have found in the pages of the [Huffington Post Latino Voices a platform](#) from which to blog and to [announce their credo and beliefs](#).

They are our dear, dear, sons and daughters. And our future.

Hopefully, after the November elections, Congress will discover common sense and approve the DREAM Act.

Let them be free. And let them take responsibility to continue their struggle, but for the entire community. To represent us all.

Let us give way to the emerging generation of Latino leaders: the DREAMers.

*Originally published [in The Huffington Post](#), 06/02/2012*



## How Far Have Judeo-Latino Relations Progressed?

Years ago, I was invited to a debate in Los Angeles about relations between Jews and Latinos. At the time, I lashed out at some of the participants who were idealizing the relationship between the two groups. For many, I said, the only time they talk to a Latino is when they're asking someone to mow their backyards, watch over their children, or clean their dirty clothes.

More than a decade later, the situation has improved. There seems to be a new – or additional – level of communication and understanding between both communities, fueled by a series of common initiatives.

For me, as a Jewish Latino, it mattered.

A [recent survey by Latino Decisions](#) shows that “positive views in the Latino community about Jews on a wide range of issues tend to correlate with frequency of personal contacts, and levels of education, income and acculturation.”

The study examined “the extent to which Latinos subscribe to both positive and negative stereotypes about the Jewish community,” according to a statement by the American Jewish Committee’s Latino and Latin American Institute, the organization that commissioned it.

The institute was created in 2004 to develop mutual understanding between the communities, deter terrorism, and “[ensure that democracy and pluralism remain strong](#),” among other reasons.

“This comprehensive, insightful survey will inform and advance our ongoing efforts to engage Latino communities, form coalitions, and deepen understanding of American Jews and Israel,” said Dina Siegel Vann, director of AJC’s [Latino and Latin American Institute, in a statement](#).

In recent years, national and local Jewish organizations increased their efforts to reach out to Latinos.

In Los Angeles, a group of civil rights activist founded in 1992 the Latino-Jewish Roundtable, an initiative of the local Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Other efforts were led by Local Jewish federations at the time.

In many cases, the efforts were fueled by the sense that the present-day Latino struggle for recognition, respect and rights corresponds to that of the Jewish community decades ago — and that anti-Latino sentiment exacerbated by attacks on illegal immigration, is a type of xenophobia akin to the past waves of anti-semitism.

The major Jewish organizations in the U.S. repeatedly published statements of support for immigration reform and the DREAM Act.

Last Christmas day, the large Breed Street temple in East Los Angeles, built in 1915, reopened after many



years [as a community center to serve Latinos in the neighborhood](#), as a “center for art and culture exhibits and social activities.”

The synagogue was one of 30 built in an area –where I live– that decades ago was a hub for Jewish immigrants from the East. It is now almost entirely Latino.

The survey’s findings are not all positive for Jewish people, however.

Only 18 percent of Latinos consider themselves “highly familiar” with Jews and 31 percent are “not familiar at all”. And while Latinos from Puerto Rico (57 percent) and South America (53 percent) have a higher familiarity with Jews, among those who came from Mexico – the majority of the Latino community – 67 percent have had none or minimal contact.

“Most of the Mexican Jewish community is concentrated in Mexico City, but most Mexican immigrants to the U.S. come from other places in that country,” explained to me [Siegel Vann](#), a native of Mexico City, over the phone.

Latino opinions, concludes the study, “are hampered by limited contact and general unfamiliarity with Jews.”

Not the biggest surprise — the better the education level of Latinos and the higher their incomes, the more familiar they are with Jewish people.

“While 50 percent of those without a high-school education have zero familiarity with Jews, 38 percent of college graduates have the highest rate of familiarity.”

And more than other forms of relations, the one created in the workplace is the most common, encompassing “45 percent of all Latino-Jewish interaction”.

“Interpersonal connections are of the essence, particularly since Latino culture stresses trust and loyalty in the creation of substantive, long-term professional and political alliances,” said Siegel Vann.

While the contacts and level of familiarity is the lowest among recent immigrants from Latin American countries, the picture changes for the second and third generation: “38 percent of first-generation immigrants have no contact”, but the same is true for only 12 percent of the second generation and 10 percent of the third.

But, other than familiarity, contact and knowledge, what do Latinos *think* about Jews?

The survey focused on a belief that both communities share the same basic values, like commitment to “faith, family, and social change” and “a strong faith in God”. A solid majority of Latinos finds and appreciates these values among Jews. And “61 percent believe Jews make positive cultural contributions to the U.S, 17 percent disagree and 22 percent did not know.”



Personally, while working with the Latino community in a large Spanish language daily in Los Angeles for almost 15 years, I found mostly feelings of tolerance and appreciation toward Jews, but also bigotry and anti-Semitism in fringe, specific groups. One of them still has in its website a photo of mine with a yellow David Star, a badge forced on Jews by Nazi Germany, on a corner.

For us Latinos, the organized Jewish community has been an important ally in the quest for an immigration reform.

And for us Jews, the alliance with the Latino community and support of it's advancement keeps us in the right side of history.

But the survey doesn't shy from asking difficult questions that touch on stereotypes of Jews. Like the attachment of Jews to Israel that has been questioned, the same way as in the past Catholic Americans have been criticized for supposed allegiance to the Vatican or that present-day Muslim Americans have been linked to an imaginary conspiracy to impose Sharia law in this country.

And still, 53 percent of Latinos think that the Jews are "certainly" or "probably" more loyal to Israel than to the U.S., a number that increases to 61 percent in New York and to 55 percent in Los Angeles. On the perception of an exaggerated Jewish influence in the U.S., 39 percent said it is "probably true" or "certainly true" (55 percent in New York), while 42 percent said it is "probably untrue" or "certainly untrue." And 44 percent agreed that "the movie and television industries are pretty much run by Jews" while 31 percent said it was false and 25 percent didn't know. Finally, 48 percent believed that "Jews have too much power on Wall Street." (56 percent in New York)

The findings are inconclusive about the attitudes toward Jews. Some were negative; most were not. While 30 percent said that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus (41 percent said no), "64 percent of all Latinos agree Jews are honest, 18 percent disagree and 18 percent don't know," according to the study.

*Published [first in The Huffington Post](#), 04/21/2012*



## **Violence In Schools, Nothing Out Of The Ordinary For Latinos And Blacks**

Last week we were shocked by the tragic massacre at Chardon High School near Cleveland, Ohio. Three students were killed and two wounded when a 17-year-old student opened fire.

Each time a tragic incident involving schools, guns, children and victims reaches the front page, a chorus of soul-searching follows with an almost predictable immediacy:

What is happening to our children? Who is to blame? And why do we lead the world in school shootings?

The litany of these horrible acts is long and distressing: 13 dead in Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999; 32 at Virginia Tech in 2007; six at Northern Illinois University-DeKalb in 2008.

But there is a problem with the research, analysis and commentary on these school shootings: it only focuses on the terrible tragedies where one or more students suddenly begins killing others at random.

The cases of chronic violence, which occurs repeatedly and is ongoing, are never explored—and these comprise the vast majority, causing untold devastation and grief.

While massacres and tragic shootings by crazed individuals occur in schools of all economic levels, with varying racial makeups, chronic violence in school tends to be concentrated in lower income areas, where the majority of students are usually Latino or black.

The truth is there is more violence in our schools than we realize. Many more tragic incidents than what we read and what rivets us. And this has occurred for years.

Many schools look more like fortresses, with high fences, metal detectors and armed police on campus. For years the shootings and violence has gone underreported. This violence is common; a pervasive presence in many of our schools. And the solutions go far beyond what is discussed for more famous tragedies like Columbine, Virginia Tech or Chardon High. They involve investing more in public education at all levels, addressing chronic unemployment, eradicating domestic violence and facilitating community involvement.

I remember the day after the Virginia Tech massacre; dozens of schools in Southern California were closed, as authorities feared “copycat” actions. But violence and fear didn’t attack those schools on that day. They have inhabited them long ago.

In these schools there are children who insult, humiliate, attack, steal, hit, maim and kill; children who surreptitiously bring knives onto campus, as well as marijuana and crystal.

This violence and fear is an extension of what occurs in their own barrios.

Back to 2012, a quick look at the latest news helps us to put this latest event in perspective: one week ago, [a](#)



[bomb threat at Colleton County High School in South Carolina](#) “disrupted most of the school day Tuesday for students, teachers, staff, parents.”

On February 21, in Austin, Texas, McCallum High School was placed on lockdown and nearby Ridge Top Elementary was heavily scrutinized [amid reports that a shot may have been fired](#).

And just last week, [one person was killed and another wounded in a shooting](#) outside the Los Angeles High School.

All-school lockdowns are frequent in these institutions; in some, they occur almost monthly.

Violence may be related to gang identity. In South High School in Torrance, California, a school known for its academic excellence and very low crime, a student was warned not to wear a red shirt because it denoted allegiance to a gang known as the Bloods. That student was my son. The kid who warned him was wearing blue, the color of the rival Crips gang.

Violence could be related to inter-ethnic conflict. In Compton, Inglewood and South Central Los Angeles there have been confrontations between African-American and Latino students, now the majority in this area.

Yes, massacres like those that occurred at Virginia Tech, Columbine and now, Chardon, Ohio are more compelling. And it is easier to explain that the perpetrators are crazy, alienated individuals, social deviants, or, [like a report points out, anti-depressant users](#), than that, in reality, they mirror our society.

This statement, made by the FBI, is simple and true: “School shootings and other forms of school violence are not just a school’s problem or a law enforcement problem. [They involve schools, families, and the communities](#).”

So, although we must protect our children by making access to firearms by perpetrators almost impossible, the solution to the more generalized, random but daily violence in schools goes well beyond individuals. The answer must be universal, and must address serious societal problems.



## **Alex Sánchez: Confronting Prevention And Intervention Efforts**

When FBI agents knocked on Alex Sánchez's door in Bellflower on June 24, 2009 in order to arrest him—in front of his wife and children—and charge him with being a covert leader of the Mara Salvatrucha (a Salvadoran gang in Los Angeles)—it was like *deja vu* all over again.

This called to mind events that occurred following Sanchez's earlier arrest on January 2, 2000, when a CRASH anti-gang unit in the LAPD's Rampart Division against Homies Unidos, the organization which works to prevent gang involvement that Alex still leads, which the cops back then—and maybe now—believed was a ruse.

Sánchez was then handed to ICE (formerly the INS) who were ready to deport him back to El Salvador from where he immigrated in 1979 with his parents, at the age of 6.

A defense attorney claimed that Sánchez was about to provide an alibi to a member of Homies Unidos accused of murder, which, he alleged, the LAPD was determined not to happen.

As in 2009 and 2010, the arrest created a strong reaction from inside the community. Protest simply focused on the absurdity of the accusations.

Then as now, ex-state senator Tom Hayden was at the forefront defending Sánchez. "Sánchez is just the sort of person the community needs— a reformed gang member who turned his life around and has dedicated himself to leading a new generation of street-wise youth away from gang violence," he stated.

The Salvadoran Consulate declared that it would not accept Sánchez if he was deported.

The Rampart CRASH Unit was already implicated in an investigation of its methods, which became known as the Rampart Scandal and that led to the September, 2000 consent decree between the city of LA, the LAPD and the US Department of Justice.

Sánchez was already deported once in 1994, after two convictions in 1990 and 1992. Back in El Salvador he made the decision to turn his life around, and returned to Los Angeles in 1996, moving in with his mother.

Two years later, he created the Los Angeles chapter of a new Salvadoran-American organization, Homies Unidos.

Here he worked to develop programs for youth at risk, working to achieve truces between gangs, build bridges between African-Americans and Latinos, help ex-gang members remove their tattoos, and initiate job training programs.

But that was the past. This time, Sánchez, together with another 23 individuals, was implicated in a criminal



sting. He was accused of conspiring to kill a member of the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador in 2006, a federal charge, as well as being a “shot caller,” one who collects “taxes” for the mafia and coordinates drug operations.

This time, they thought, they had a better chance to stop Sánchez than a decade earlier.

Think again.

So far, the effort to connect Alex Sánchez with the public perception as a callous murderer and capo of a drug-dealing and criminal group has failed.

Sánchez’ arrest stunned people all over Los Angeles and beyond, with stories in the most important media outlets like *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

The journalist and gang-expert writer Celeste Freemon in her WitnessLA blog condensed many people’s doubts when she wrote:

“Everyone I know who knows this field—including some of those in and around law enforcement—is stunned. Alex is an excellent and great-hearted man who has made a big difference in many lives.”

The main effort to free Sánchez on bail came from his family and supporters of his work in the community. The name of their main website, [WEAREALEX.ORG](http://WEAREALEX.ORG) and the masks of Sánchez’s face worn during the protests were designed to convey the idea that this attack is not only against Alex Sanchez, one individual, but, in reality, is against these underserved communities who awaken, arise and struggle.

The day after Sánchez’s arrest, this community felt stunned, incredulous and beaten. The Homies Unidos website was down.

But this state of shock lasted for one day only. On June 28, 2009, the first community meeting was held in Los Angeles, demanding a “Fair Trial for Alex” which galvanized his supporters. In a video posted on the website “We Are Alex,” organizers, activists, family members and many others expressed their love for Alex as a person as well as support for his cause. In Spanish, in English, over and over, they repeated, “You have come from failure to success, and we are all Alex.” Popular pressure began to mount, which was a key element in obtaining bail for Sanchez and freedom.

Maybe the drive to keep Sánchez in jail and deny him bail backfired. The more outrageous the allegations against him were, the more difficult they were to believe. Especially since many remembered a similar attempt a decade prior.

As Roberto Lovato points out, while charges against the other 23 defendants were backed by hard evidence, charges against Sánchez were based on “a series of phone conversations” in which he allegedly participated and discussed the killing of the Mara Salvatrucha member in El Salvador.



The tape of the conversation, which was played in court, is not conclusive and is prone to interpretation.

Those who defend Sánchez believe the legal campaign against him has broad social and political ramifications, and threatens to de-legitimize the social justice approach to the problem of gangs. That perception is widespread. “If they demonize this population – with whom we work around here – then it’s a short hop to demonize the people who work with them,” said Father Greg Boyle, the founder of Homeboy Industries, one of the most successful gang intervention programs in Los Angeles, pointing to himself in an interview. “I think that’s what happened to Alex”.

This case could thus be a wake up call for those ex-gang members who now work in prevention and intervention and, to be effective use the gang’s language, appearance, and set of values (i.e. respect, family, homies). They are, like Sánchez, in many cases, ex-gang members, who now fear that they too will be mistakenly accused of maintaining ties with those still committing crimes.

So, the arrest became a daunting reality for many young Blacks and Latinos in the inner city who for years have struggled to escape the reach of gangs. If Alex Sánchez was still considered a gangbanger after all these years, after all he did, goes the narrative, how will they redeem themselves, be able to escape that environment? Will they be able to make the transition, be allowed to study, work and thrive?

The direct effect of seeing an ex-gang member who has made the transition, Sánchez said, is crucial. “Nobody can do it except somebody who’s been there. All the kids who looked up to me because of the bad things that I was doing; now they seek change and want to do good in the neighborhood”. This example, seeing someone make that all-important transition, is now in jeopardy.

Most of the coverage of the arrest tilted heavily in crediting chief Bratton, the FBI, the US Attorney, the grand jury and others for the charges in the indictment, assuming this was sufficient evidence. It failed to separate the severe accusations against the other defendants and the weaker ones against Sánchez, who is, by far, the most important target of the 3-year-investigation.

In short, this arrest, the accusations, the legal proceedings thus far and most of the coverage in the English-language media were all a lethal attack against helping youth change their ways and avoid further gang involvement, as well as prevention, justifying enforcement as the desired, and only, objective.

Maybe the reactions to Sánchez’s arrest prompted many in law enforcement to rally behind the allegations and insist in the danger Alex supposedly poses to peace.

This alignment was international. Douglas Omar García Funes, the Civil Police Commissioner of El Salvador and chief of its Transnational Anti-Gang Center, said to Jorge Morales, a reporter for *La Opinión*: “It doesn’t surprise me that he was arrested and that he was in both places, because there are many *pandilleros* and drug addicts who return to the gangs even though it seems that they extracted themselves from it and created prevention organizations”.



Expressions like this were everywhere. The question became whether Sánchez would be granted bail by Judge Real.

As for Judge Real: the severity of the allegations, his determination not to make decisions based on public pressure and the insistence by law enforcement officers from a wide array of agencies that Sánchez will flee to El Salvador, together with his understanding of the law, pushed him deny bail to Sánchez twice, even though common sense dictated otherwise: Sánchez has nowhere to go, for in El Salvador he would be executed by current gang members. This is why the United States granted him asylum in 2002.

In the end, the sustained effort by law enforcement and others against Sánchez didn't work.

On January 24th, after six months in prison, Sánchez was freed on a 2 million dollar bail. As he told [Cuentame in his only interview since then](#), he is “working on my strategy” to prepare for his trial, scheduled to start in October. “The next thing, you know, is to focus on my case. This is the start of me being able to develop a strategy along with my lawyer and everybody else who is going to be helping.”

The more determined prosecutors were in painting Sánchez as a devil, the more he looked like an angel to his supporters.

The reaction to Sánchez' arrest and being twice denied bail created what can be defined as the beginning of a social movement around him.

And support grows for the path which places Sánchez as a national leader for social justice.

*Published in [the Huffington Post Latino Voices, February 10, 2010](#)*



## **Our Voices, Ourselves: Political Participation**

### **Occupy Los Angeles: What Was The Role Of The City's Latinos?**

Los Angeles County, California, is home to [1.8 million Latinos](#). It is also home to Occupy L.A., the Southern California city's answer to Occupy Wall Street-inspired protests across the country and world.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Latinos comprise [47.7 percent](#) of Los Angeles County's population and [48.5 percent](#) of the residents of the city of Los Angeles.

Antonio Villaraigosa, who has been Los Angeles' mayor for the past six years, is Latino and a longtime activist for Latino causes. Even the Catholic Archbishop of Los Angeles and the country's highest-ranking Hispanic bishop, Jose Horacio Gomez, is Mexican-American. The California Legislature is generally supportive of Hispanic issues and recently approved the California DREAM Act — which was then signed by Governor Jerry Brown — that extends state assistance to undocumented students. This is taking place even while other states like [Arizona](#), [Alabama](#), [Indiana](#), [Georgia](#) and [South Carolina](#) have been passing severely restrictive anti-immigrant legislation.

Southern California has seen some of the [largest protests and acts of civil disobedience in the history of the United States](#), including the 2006 [marches for immigration reform](#) that brought more than 500,000 people to the streets of downtown L.A. on March 26. This event and other actions reveal a strong Latino presence and influence. In short, Southern California has seen a meteoric rise in Latino activism.

But for some Hispanic activists, their heavy involvement in public affairs did not seem to count as much in the wake of the Occupy L.A. and other “occupy” movements in the state.

After a month and a half of occupying the L.A. City Hall lawn, the encampment is no more. The Los Angeles Police Department removed the last protesters from the park Tuesday, enforcing an eviction order from the City Attorney.

With the Occupy L.A. encampment gone, the subject could be seen as moot. But any attempt to understand the Occupy movement — particularly in California — needs to clarify what is, or was, the role of Latinos.

Only it's not that easy. Even among Latino activists, as a series of interviews by The Huffington Post shows, there are differing opinions regarding Latino integration into the movement.

On one hand, the protesters took up crucial Latino issues, such as adopting some demands for immigration reform.

In Occupy L.A.'s [“Assembly-authored City response”](#) members included a [list of “grievances not addressed”](#), one of which calls for “Los Angeles to be declared a Sanctuary city for the undocumented, deportations to be discontinued and cooperation with immigration authorities be ended — including the turning in of



arrestees' names to immigration authorities.”

But not everyone agreed that Latinos have been welcomed. Erick Huerta, a DREAM Act student activist from East Los Angeles Community College, told The Huffington Post that he was confronted by an Occupier who told him, “I am unemployed because immigrants are taking jobs.”

Where, and how, do immigrant rights activists and Occupiers intersect?

### **‘Latinos are making decisions’**

As an undergraduate at California State University, Los Angeles, Esperanza Arrizon is an immigrant rights activist with [SURGE](#), an organization that promotes higher education for students regardless of immigration status.

Now an media worker with the grassroots organization Good Jobs LA, Arrizon said she used to visit the Occupy site up to three times a week and was active in the Occupy L.A. actions committee. In her [Good Jobs LA Blog](#), Arrizon describes an atmosphere of solidarity between Latinos and non-Latinos in the movement.

“Latinos are making decisions,” she said. “I can say this because I’ve gone to committee meetings and voted on things. Decisions are not made by an individual.”

But others raised the question of actual Latino participation. Was Occupy L.A. representative of the actual percentage of L.A.’s population that is Latino? If not, was it because the Occupy movement, as Martha White argued in the online publication [Time Moneyland](#), fails to engage people of color?

“While it’s impossible to precisely measure the racial makeup of the deliberately leaderless Occupy movement, most of the images and video clips that have garnered media attention do indeed seem to feature mostly Whites,” White wrote.

Said student-activist Huerta: “There are very little people of color voices. That’s a major issue.”

But others disagreed, saying that the issues of diversity and minority inclusion are being addressed.

In her blog [Multiamerican](#), KPCC’s Leslie Berestein Rojas acknowledges that “Since the beginning, Occupy protests in other cities have been accused of being too white, with little Black or Latino participation despite these groups having been hit hardest by the economic crisis that spurred the protests in the first place.”

“This hasn’t been the case so much in California, though, where Latinos have been involved in the protests since the start, among them immigrant rights activists and supporters.”

Veronica Federovsky, the West Coast Coordinator at the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and a Latina, concurs.



“From what I’ve seen, there are a lot of people of color,” she said. “But of the few times I’ve been there, besides meetings with specific committees, I went to actions, and those actions brought people out from different organizations and unions. So, it wasn’t just occupiers. There was more diversity at actual events.”

### **The Absent Working Class**

Zuriel Espinoza, a youth organizer with Good Jobs LA and the Development Committee chair for [DREAM Team LA](#), a support group for undocumented students, was approached during the first week of encampment to participate in the media committee. But, he said, “I want to be present 100% but might have other commitments that won’t let me/”

Espinoza recognized that “Occupy L.A. has been trying to outreach to Latinos and integrate them into the movement ... but you don’t see Latinos occupying because a lot of our communities are working class.”

This explanation — that Latinos are workers and as such don’t have the time to participate — was echoed in a forum organized in New York for [AOL Latino](#) by David Ramirez a month ago. There, Julio Cesar Malone, a veteran journalist and columnist for Spanish-language media in New York, said he thinks some Latinos who identify with the movement may not have the time or energy to actively take part.

“What time does a Latino have to go protest on Wall Street?” Malone asked. “Our people are working two jobs to survive. Many work 16 hours, and have to commute for four more — that’s 20 hours; they’re drained.”

That reasoning may lead to considering those who “can” participate in the protest, to be, somehow, “privileged.”

Espinoza explained: “At first, because they’re privileged enough to be at the Occupy site, it made me want to push away from the movement.”

“That’s what I went through at first, but then I saw that, hey, they’re not rejecting me, they are trying to be inclusive. It is my responsibility as a DREAMer, as an undocumented person, as a Latino, and a college-educated person, to try and jump on board and represent because I am the face of L.A., and I wanted to jump on.”

Some Latino activists may have been reluctant to join a movement where a main activity — camping — is foreign to other traditional forms of political action.

“There is Occupy ELAC,” Huerta said, referring to East L.A. Community College, a smaller encampment not far away from where the main one was, in front of City Hall. “But I haven’t been to it. I have better things to do than to occupy a space. It is a certain privilege to spend the night there and hold it down, but we all have lives.”



Huerta said the absence of people of color made him feel alienated.

“I felt the divide, especially in L.A., by the lack of ideology and lack of messaging,” she said. “That was the first time I was confronted with feelings of alienation.”

Arrizon said, “While OLA is fighting for the 99 percent as they say — the 99 percent isn’t involved. The occupation is a small number of people compared to the masses being affected. The majority doesn’t know about the occupy movement or see it from a distance and think they’re kooky.”

### **Participation Through Unions**

But while some debate how well-represented Hispanics may be in the movement, including by pro-immigrant organizations or activists, others noted that Latinos were present during the days of Occupy L.A. through the involvement of unions.

In the last decade, the percentage of Hispanics in labor unions swelled from 6 percent in 1987 to about 13.5 percent in 2007, according to the [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#).

And while membership in unions as a whole has shrunk, [SEIU](#), which has a heavy Hispanic component, is among the fastest-growing unions in the country.

“I think this is a huge shift in unions’ priorities in the last years,” National Day Laborer coordinator Federovsky said. “Before, it was jobs and worker’s rights and wages, but now I think immigration is a big issue for them too. They either are undocumented or have someone in their family who is. So, whole families are being affected by immigration policies in this country.”

The presence of union members and organizers at Occupy L.A. was significant, Arrizon said.

“There’s so much support for unions there,” she noted. “A lot of union people are there as well, as occupiers ... That’s what I notice with the OLA folks. The good organizers that genuinely want to move the occupation forward. A lot of them have been affiliated with unions or community organizations.”

Federovsky said that unions have been so involved in Occupy L.A. because, “their base is immigrants.”

“So, those are really big issues for them because they are workers who may run the risk of detention or deportation and are affected by [Secure Communities](#),” she said, referring to the federal collaboration on deportations between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and local authorities.

As many wait to see what shape Occupy L.A. and other evicted Occupy protests will now take, a key question remains: how aware are Latinos of the Occupy movement and its goals?

“Latinos have bank accounts, including undocumented immigrants, and I know a lot of immigrants who are



homeowners who have suffered — more people are getting it,” Espinoza said.

After all, as organizers of the [Migrant Day Action](#) that should have taken place Wednesday on Occupy L.A. grounds if it hadn't been shut down, said: “Immigrants are part of the 99 percent.”

*Published in [The Huffington Post on 12/01/2011](#)*



## The Iraq Conflict: The War That Changed Latinos

Last Saturday, quietly, without cheers, excuses nor lamentations, the Iraq War was over. Before dawn, the last convoy was crossing the international border to Kuwait, carrying a mixed load of soldiers and journalists.

During the previous weeks, troops were abandoning their bases, taking with them equipment, tanks and ordnance, and American flags. By the thousands, soldiers were coming back home.

Who is the soldier — our youth — that came back? How did they change?

I remember a political cartoon, now lost, in an American magazine at the end of the Vietnam war. Under the headline [“When Johnny Comes Marching Home,”](#) a soldier walked down an empty avenue. Nobody welcomed him. Instead of a gun, he carried a syringe. This was that war’s image.

And now? Will it be the unemployed young man?

Yes, because while unemployment at the national level is 9.2 percent, among veterans it is 11.4 percent, almost a quarter more, according to the [Department of Labor](#).

But for Latinos and blacks, the [percentage is much higher](#), reflecting their proportion among the nation’s poor: 14 percent for Hispanics and 14.7 percent for African Americans.

For this war initiated on March 20, 2003, the bloodiest since Vietnam, [wrote Nick Shifrin from Baghdad](#), “In the end, there was no decisive battle, no peace treaty.”

As the war ended, almost 9 years later, the United States of America is a different country: more divided, rancorous, recriminatory, suspicious, again, almost as much as at the end of Vietnam.

The [numbers are relentless](#).

Almost two million Americans participated in the conflict, together with the still evolving one in Afghanistan. Of them, 625,384 use the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare system for rehabilitation; 4,476 American “men and women in uniform” died, and 32,102 were wounded. At least 168,854 ex soldiers are treated by VA for problems of adaptation to the civilian environment, haunted by their traumatic experiences.

For Iraqis, [the numbers of the dead](#) are much higher, fluctuating between 112,000 and 600,000.

This is the balance of an unbalanced conflict.

What about Latinos?



Their relative participation in the armed forces [grew markedly during these years](#), jumping from 4 percent in 1983 to 9.5 percent in 2001, to [10 percent at the beginning](#) of the war, and, finally, [12 percent](#) when it ended, getting thus closer to the percentage of Latinos among the general population, which according to the [2010 US Census](#) is 16 percent.

Among elite groups like the Marines, the [percentage of Hispanics was even higher](#): 15 percent at the beginning of the war and 18 percent when it ended.

So, considering their [increase in participation during the war years](#), Hispanics neither reneged on their obligations nor turned into cannon fodder.

But they participated at all levels of the war, including among those who paid the price in blood.

The first American soldier killed in the operation was Jose Gutierrez, 22, who arrived here as an undocumented child from Guatemala, crossing Mexico hidden in a train. And among the first seven American war prisoners, [“one was a woman from Panama and another the son of Mexicans.”](#)

The total number of Hispanics killed in action until February 2009 was 450, according to United States Military Casualty Statistics, compiled by the [Congressional Research Service](#).

By the end of the war, unofficial counts placed the total number at 477.

That is a little less than 11 percent of the total of casualties, reflecting their participation in the conflict and, according to the same source, surpassing the number of African American soldiers killed, which stands at 9.6 percent.

Among Marines, the rate was even higher. Of [“969 Marines killed in Iraq, 39 were African Americans and 139 Hispanics.”](#) or 14 percent of the total.

All this confirms an early analysis by [Pew Hispanic in 2001](#), according to which:

“Latino enlisted personnel are underrepresented when compared to the size of the civilian labor force of the appropriate age. They are on par when compared to civilian labor force of the appropriate age that possess the necessary educational credentials. And, they are overrepresented when compared to the civilian labor force of the appropriate age that possess both the necessary educational credentials and immigration status.”

An important thing has changed since Vietnam: the abolition of compulsory recruitment. Without the draft, those who serve today are looking for the approval of their peers or to serve the country. They're also



seeking a better future, benefits for study, housing, medical care and loans, among other things.

For legal immigrants, those who have a “green card,” there was also the benefit of a shortened path to citizenship. At the beginning of the war, almost 5,000 immigrant soldiers [benefited from an executive order](#) that allowed those in active duty on September 11, 2001, to apply for naturalization. The number of Latinos among them is unknown.

Many Latinos also took part in the anti-war movement. They marched in demonstrations, with protest signs in one hand and American flags in the other. They attended mock funerals at the fake Arlington West cemetery in Santa Monica, California. They were active as parents opposed to military recruitment in public schools in poor neighborhoods. And they participated in the most terrible of protests: those by parents who lost their children and who clamored for the lost meaning in their lives. Along with national protagonists like Cindy Sheehan there were figures such as [Fernando Suarez del Solar](#).

But there also were many [Latinos that supported the war](#) as combatants, who raised the flag and defended their service.

Many Hispanics were decorated. [Five of the 21 recipients of the Navy Cross](#) were Latinos.

Others were promoted to higher ranks. Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez was chief of forces in Iraq for 18 months, starting during the difficult days after June 2003.

But in general, in the weeks leading to the war, [support by Latinos paled in comparison to other groups](#), as shown in a Pew Hispanic study.

In those days, the war drums beat loudly, with our government helping induce the fever for war and controlling the flow of information. Between 60 and 70 percent of the population supported military action, and even more after it started, but only 48 percent of Latinos — and among immigrants — just 46 percent.

As the war ended, the [proportion had changed completely](#): 75 percent of the public supported the withdrawal of troops. But a whopping 96 percent of veterans said that they were proud of their service.

Did the war influence the status of Hispanics in the country? The answer lies in the event that allowed it to be characterized as part of the anti-terrorist effort: the 9/11 attacks. On that fateful day, an immigration agreement between former presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox of Mexico vanquished. Increased border security and stricter immigration laws became part of the answer to the perceived threat. Deportations increased and swelled to record numbers under President Obama, who opposed the Iraq War and supported immigration reform. In the war years, many Latino soldiers learned that their government had initiated — and, in some cases, completed — deportation proceedings against their loved ones.

Latinos participated as much as any other group in the conflict. During the war, their numbers in the armed forces grew to around 12 percent. Their sacrifices were also proportional to others, including immigrants.



Thousands of legal immigrants received their citizenship because of their service to the nation.

Many more returned home without a job.

The war ended, as I wrote earlier, silently and without fanfare.

When President Obama announced in October that troops would leave Iraq by year's end, only 30 percent of the public heard him. The news generated [much less interest](#) than “several other major policy announcements about Iraq.”

Between 2007 — the year of the troop “surge” — and this year, Iraq coverage in the news [“reached a new low”](#) — a 96 percent drop.

One last image. A personal one, from another war, in another country, in a different time.



It was 1974. Israel had signed a cease fire accord with Egypt, ending the Yom Kippur War. We withdrew from Egyptian territory back to the Sinai peninsula. Our armored vehicle crossed an improvised bridge over the Suez Canal. The photo shows my younger version, my hair grayed by desert sands, my arms in the air, my helmet in hand.

I felt the same as American soldiers coming home now: joyful for having survived.

*Published in* [The Huffington Post, 12/19/2011](#)



## The Fata Morgana Of The Latino Republican Vote

Until this week, it seemed that Latinos were invisible in the Republican presidential campaign. Candidates spoke to an almost entirely white electorate, ignoring an important topic for Hispanics, that of immigration, which surfaced only marginally and with negative connotations.

In a telling moment during Monday's presidential debate, [Juan Williams asked Mitt Romney](#) if by taking the "hardest line of anyone on this stage on immigration reform....[are] you alienating Latino voters that Republicans will need to win the general election?"

Romney didn't flinch. He said something about Latinos being part of the whole population; that everybody wants a better country, that he loves legal immigration and we ought to "stop the flood of illegal immigration." (Yes, he used "flood" [even though since 2009 illegal border crossings have become only a trickle](#) and that for the first time in 60 years, "the net traffic has gone to zero and is probably a little bit negative.")

Romney was just repeating *clichés* for the benefit of the audience in South Carolina, the Fox TV viewers, and the pundits. But he certainly was not talking to actual Hispanic voters. In the debate, they were ignored by Romney and the other candidates.

Williams, booed and interrupted by the audience, didn't insist. No one really cared, because neither Iowa, with 5%, New Hampshire (3%), nor South Carolina (5%), have sizable Hispanic populations. But starting Tuesday, January 31, the date of the Florida primary, Hispanics, who comprise 22% of the population there—will be considered.

And this is why, [in Thursday's debate in South Carolina between the surviving "Final Four" candidates](#), the "Deport Them All" position held previously by Romney had morphed into a more centrist "...we're not going to round them all up and deport them", and "those individuals who have come here illegally should be able to register in this country, have a temporary period to arrange their affairs, and return home and get at the back of the — at the back of the line like everyone else."

Now, if you hear the sound of rapidly changing drafts, the addition of words in Spanish by the speechwriters, the shift away from deportation as a one-size-fits-all solution, it's because primaries in Florida and other states with considerable Latino populations are just around the corner.

And so, Newt Gingrich, a master in creating perceptions, [claims in an ad that Romney is "Anti-Immigrant."](#) and on Thursday debate repeated his offer for *abuelitos* and *abuelitas* who came illegally 25 years ago who "maybe they go to your church!" to be able to stay. (But..."they will not be citizens!")

The Romney camp has already broadcast [a video](#) for the Florida market in which – without addressing much of anything—one of Romney's sons speaks in Spanish and several Florida politicians who are both



Republican and Hispanic praise the former governor.

Just like the old days. In public they demand you speak English — but expect that having your son speak in Spanish, their vernacular, will get votes.

Despite the best efforts of Latino Republican activists, the party appears to have difficulty embracing the community. Even though almost one-fourth of Florida's population is Latino, attention is not really shifting toward anything other than advertising that panders. [In 2008, Obama obtained 67% of the Latino vote](#); and despite the support by so many Cuban voters who traditionally vote Republican, he even won Florida, thanks to Puerto Rican voters in central Florida who preferred him over John McCain.

Though [polls show a softened support](#) for Obama among Latinos due to higher Latino unemployment rates and record levels of deportations of undocumented immigrants, those who won't support him again will not vote Republican.

The most they can do is to abstain from voting.

At some point, Republicans should change their rhetoric, if they want to repeat even the meager 31% they received in 2008. And they will have the opportunity to address Latinos when the states with high levels of Hispanics have their turn to vote in the primaries.

To win over Latino hearts, many Republicans repeat a mantra: Latinos are natural-born Republicans. They agree with the GOP on religion, hard work, family values, small business, low taxes, the war on crime and opposition to gay rights. It remains to see how the surviving four candidates in the race will consider [these basic metrics](#).

**Florida** is the epicenter of Republican Hispanics; 22% of the state's population is Hispanic. But in 2008, Barack Obama won in large part due to the support of 57% of Latinos. In 2004, George W. Bush received 56% of the Latino vote.

**Nevada** has a caucus on Feb. 4. Latinos, who represent almost one-half of the new population growth since 2000, comprise 26% of the state's population. Obama won there with the help of 78% of all Hispanics, while Bush took the state with just 40%.

**Colorado** also has a caucus on Feb. 7. Latinos are 20% of the population, and in 2008 helped Obama take the state with 61% of the Hispanic vote, less than the 68% that supported Kerry four years earlier. But while in 2004 the Hispanic vote was 8% of the total, in 2008 it jumped to a record 14%, allowing for Obama's victory by 7.5 points.

**Arizona's** primary is February 28. The state shares a reputation with Alabama as a hub of Republican anti-immigration laws and sentiment since Governor Jan Brewer's signing of SB 1070 into law in 2010. SB56 in Alabama, enacted the following year, is even harsher. But while in Alabama Latinos are only 4% of



the total population of 4.8 million, in Arizona they comprise 30% of 6.4 million total. It's difficult to imagine heavy Hispanic support for any Republican candidate in either state.

**Texas**, with a primary on April 3, has a population that is 38% Hispanic. In 2008, 63% of them voted Democratic, while 73% of whites preferred McCain. In 2004, ex-Texas Governor George W Bush received half of the Hispanic vote.

**New Jersey** has 1.5 million Latinos, 18% of the total, and votes on June 5. In 2008 Hispanics favored Obama by 79%, much more than the 56% received in 2004 by Kerry.

**California**, which also votes June 5th, has 14.5 million Latinos, 38% of the total. In 2008 74% of them voted for Obama, more than the 63% who favored Kerry.

**New Mexico** has the largest rate of Latinos – 48% – in the population and also votes June 5. More Hispanics voted for Democratic in 2008 – 69% – than in 2004 – 56%. That and the increase of Latino voters from 32% to 41% of the total gave the victory to Obama.

And so, as they prepare for primaries in states with sizable Hispanic populations, Republican candidates continue to explore ways to reach Latinos. Ultimately, however, the price to obtain the Latino vote, which undoubtedly would include at least some softening of positions on illegal immigration, may be too steep, and could potentially trigger a backlash among Conservative voters. And even then, it may not be enough.

*First [published in The Huffington Post](#), 01/20/2012*



## Latinos Bid Loud 'Adios' To A Depressing Year

2011 is almost gone. For Latinos in the United States, it was primarily a year to forget.

Life hasn't been good, and Hispanics have suffered the same fate as the much of the general population: persistent unemployment, political uncertainty and a deep sense of dejection. But as a group, their fate was worse: according to the Department of Labor, last month, when [the national unemployment rate was 8.3 percent, for Latinos it reached 11.4 percent.](#)

Among veterans returning from Iraq [unemployment reached 11.4 percent in general and 14 percent for Hispanics \(and blacks\).](#)

In 2011, for the most part, Latino political influence in national affairs is almost non-existent. Neither Latino community representatives nor supporters could stop the onslaught of negative news. This year, just as in the two that came before, the Obama administration tried not to alienate independent and white voters by avoiding immigration reform as if it were leprosy. Obama's election-year promise to offer a path to citizenship for many undocumented immigrants during his first year in office vanished in clouds of both stark reality and mere excuses.

At the same time, Washington [deported undocumented immigrants in record numbers.](#) Thus, in 2009 there were 389,834, 392,862 in 2010, and 396,606 by November 2011. This year, the number is expected to surpass 400,000 for the first time in history.

Could it be that there is so much anti-immigrant furor in the country that the president simply cannot resist the pressure? The latest public opinion polls point to the contrary. According to a Fox News survey from November, [63 percent of the population favors increasing the number of legal immigrants, 66 percent view positively the path to citizenship as a solution to the issue, and only 19 percent favored deportation.](#) In a July Time poll, 62 percent of respondents opposed a constitutional amendment that would bar children of immigrants from becoming citizens. In other polls, [about 90 percent of the population considers immigration a very serious or serious problem.](#) On all other immigration issues, the public is almost equally divided. In a September interview for The Huffington Post at the White House, I [asked the president about his record deportation numbers.](#) "The statistics are actually a little deceptive because what we've been doing is, with the stronger border enforcement we've been apprehending folks at the borders and sending them back," he said. "That is counted as a deportation, even though they may have only been held for a day or 48 hours, sent back — that's counted as a deportation."

However, the practice the president referred to, known as ["expedited removal"](#) is not new and dates to 1996.

In reality, the White House may have a difficult time explaining how it can be both a champion for the promise of reform as well as architect of the most repressive practices against immigrants in recent decades.

As a corollary, as Ray Sanchez wrote in The Huffington Post, ["the deportation of undocumented immigrants](#)



[has left an estimated 5,100 children languishing in U.S. foster homes](#) – a troubling figure that could triple in the coming years.”

This increase in deportations together with the failure of immigration reform (which he continues to support verbally) have caused Obama’s popularity among Hispanics to slide further this year. While [shortly after taking office he enjoyed 85 percent support, in June that dropped to 62 percent and today it’s down to 56 percent](#).

In order [to get at least the 65 percent of the Latino vote he received in 2008 \(against only 43 percent of the vote among whites\)](#), which is absolutely necessary for his re-election, the White House has lately sought to improve relations, granting interviews to Latino media and organizing meetings with Latino leaders. But these efforts, for now, seem cosmetic acts of kindness and goodwill unrelated to policy.

The Administration says its hands are tied by the obstinate Republican opposition in Congress to any immigration reform.

True, but from here, he does not appear to struggle mightily to untie those hands.

In 2011, even more than the preceding two years, policy has been shaped by the fact that 2012 is an election year. The Republicans, in their disciplined way, have prevented any evidence of a division between their extreme right wing and the so-called moderates by continually unifying to confront the president. The political, economic and social developments in 2011 were a reflection of this unifying effort, and the issue of immigration and the Latino community is part of this.

That explains why in 2011 and 2010, the attention that Latinos were unable to obtain at the federal level, they received from state governments in Republican hands.

In fact, the Republican attitude on Latinos is the reverse of that of Obama. For the president and Democrats, it is a divisive issue. Touch it and risk losing crucial independent votes. For the GOP, on the contrary, hostility towards undocumented immigrants is a unifying factor.

Therefore, neither Democrats nor Republicans fought the xenophobic and nativist political environment that continued to expand, as reflected in the many presidential debates. The anti-immigrant agenda made a triumphant return to the scene of mainstream politics.

In 2011, several states sought to enact their own immigration reform, even though legally the matter is exclusively federal. [By September, there were anti-immigrant laws enacted in Arizona, Alabama, Indiana, Georgia, South Carolina and Utah](#), and others at various stages of the legislative process.

Arizona’s SB 1070, considered a model for the rest, again attracted opposition from Hispanic activists and institutions this year. But the most severe and controversial legislation has been Alabama’s AB56. Basically, all of these laws authorize the state police to detain individuals suspected of being undocumented immigrants, and to deny certain rights and funds for education, employment, housing and public health, to the point of requiring school principals to provide lists of “illegal” children. These laws have been



challenged in court and provisions have been declared unconstitutional.

Reflecting on this anti-immigrant frenzy, one might think that illegal crossings on the border with Mexico remains high. But in reality the [numbers have fallen to the lowest levels since the Nixon presidency](#). A Dec. 11 report by the [U.S. Customs and Border Protection \(CBP\)](#) states that “U.S. Border Patrol apprehensions—a key indicator of illegal immigration—decreased to 340,252 in FY 2011, down 53 percent since FY 2008? – and here is the big difference – “one fifth of what they were at their peak in FY 2000.” Far fewer Latino immigrants are crossing the border these days; those who come pay much higher sums to get here and rarely find work upon arrival.

This year ends the way it began, only that the country is closer to a national election. The campaign promises to remain divisive, and during the primary election cycle, Republican candidates will undoubtedly compete to be the one to deport more undocumented immigrants when he or she becomes president. Only now they have a higher threshold: President Barack Obama.

*Published in [The Huffington Post, 12/27/2011](#)*



## **About The Culture**

### **Latino Festivals Spread And Thrive**

It can happen everywhere, even in those cities and towns without a massive Hispanic presence.

But in each of them, as the Latino population grows, the festivals attract the whole community. Those who immigrated recently and those who were born here; and even a sizable amount of non-Latinos come. The festivals ranging from an event that lasts a few hours for a few thousands of visitors, to a tradition that extends for a full week, engulfs millions and represents a culture that can be traced to events that occurred decades ago.

All of them are an expression of this community, a source of pride, a place to go with the whole family and to enjoy the things it left behind. And it is not only the food, though it may be the most important. There is traditional music, dances, games.

In downtown Columbus, the [Festival Latino](#) exists since 2000; this year it is celebrated on August 13-14 in Genoa Park. “Kids activities, music, dance, food, fashion, art, culture, and more!” And it thrives, even though only 4.5% of the 711,000 residents are Latinos.

But then, the National [Puerto Rico](#) Parade in New York – formerly known as the Desfile Puertorriqueno, attracts as much as two million spectators who gather to watch the 80,000 participants walking on Fifth Avenue, from 44th Street to 86th Street. This year it was held on June 12th and offered music, food, dance as well as celebrities, local politicians and world class beauties. The event is celebrated since 1958.

Fiesta Broadway in [Los Angeles](#), probably the largest Latino event in the country , celebrates Cinco de Mayo, commemorating Mexico’s victory in the Battle of Puebla over a French army in 1862. Similar festivities are being [held in other cities](#), as San Jose, San Francisco, San Antonio, Sacramento, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Denver and El Paso . Between 500,000 and 1 million people participate, on an area of 24 blocks in downtown, along Broadway from Olympic to the area of City Hall. In between stages performing popular music, there is “food, fun and games for the whole family”.

For lovers of conga and Cuban food and culture, the Festival de la [Calle Ocho](#) in Little Havana, Miami is a dream come true. Even better, it developed into “a virtual Pan-American showcase” featuring what the organizers call “the world’s largest street party,” with a multitude of musical stages and renowned performers of Caribbean music. What started in 1978 is now a gigantic event celebrated every March.

The list goes on and on: Boston celebrates it in early June at the North Common Park; Vermont has it by mid September on Burlington Park, with a week of music and food, and since 1994, and Provo, Utah, celebrates the Latin American Festival since 2004 with the active participation of the Mexican consulate in [Salt Lake City](#). Actually, it seems that every major city in the country is rushing to organize it’s own one: good for the soul, good for commerce, good for the stomach and good for the country...

*First posted in [The Huffington Post on 08/04/2011](#)*



## From Yiddish to Spanglish: my Life As An Immigrant

Speaking of Spanglish, Yiddish had a major presence in my childhood. It was the hybrid language spoken by Jews in Eastern Europe during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. It emerged long ago, perhaps 1000 years ago or even longer.

Yiddish was the first foreign language I learned, well before English or Hebrew, beginning in 1957 when I was 4 years old and was sent to the Yitzhak Leibush Peretz School on Boulogne Sur-Mer Street in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I returned to Buenos Aires in 2000 after almost 30 years and found the school closed and barricaded. Cement block barriers had been placed to prevent a car bomb attack, and a young policeman told me there were no visitors there anymore. Although the school is a distant memory, I have retained some words, gestures, traditions and memories of the school's principal, a kindly elderly woman who waited at the door and kissed each of the school's 300 students when we left every day. Later, I learned that she survived for decades the end of the school, enduring loneliness and poverty, and died in 2001, a year after my visit.

When a Hebrew word from the Bible is translated into Yiddish, pronunciation changes dramatically. Instead of the Hebrew *mazal-tove*, it's *mazeltov*; *mishpoche* for the Hebrew word for family, *mish-pa-cha*, *shabbes* for *shab-bat*. Somehow the same Yiddish words sound different in Buenos Aires and Los Angeles. In Argentina, they sound like *lunfardo porteño* – Buenos Aires slang. Here, like New England English.

Yiddish has evolved over the years into an important literary language with well known writers including two Nobel prizewinning authors, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Shmuel Joseph Agnon. Many are familiar with the legendary Yiddish storyteller, Sholem Aleichem, and many, many poets such as Itzhak Katzenelson, murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, Itzik Manger, and Peretz Markish, assassinated by Stalin in 1952.

Here in America many Yiddish words have been incorporated into modern vernacular: *chutzpah*, meaning audacity or impertinence; *bagel*, meaning, well, bagel; *kvetch*, which in Yiddish actually means "compressed," but which we use as "complain." Argentine Spanish, on the other hand, has not acquired significant Yiddishisms. Argentine slang always preferred Italian words. Still, a Jew can be called a "Rusito" (little Russian) or a "*Moishe*." (Moses)

Yiddish poetry is exquisite, musical, full of guttural sounds, of rich, melodic language and of emotional context. Speaking Yiddish or even reading it in public is associated with contortions of one's entire body, dramatic grimaces and wild gesticulating. Its expression is compact and intense. *Tzures* means the troubles we encounter daily, a *shlemazel* is an unlucky guy; *schlemiel* is a simpleton, a bungler. *Shayne maydele* was my sister Viviana when she was a beautiful young girl (prior to becoming gravely ill as a young adult). While *gurnisht* means "nothing," *gurnisht mit gurnisht*, literally meaning "nothing with nothing," is another way to summarize the sad sum total of one's lifetime efforts.

Yiddish is not connected to any soil, Motherland, country or state, and was almost annihilated by the Nazi Holocaust. The establishment of the state of Israel and the declaration of Hebrew as national language was



another blow to the language, and Jewish advancement and integration into various local societies was yet one more. For all intents and purposes, Yiddish is now a dead language, found only among the very religious Orthodox Jews for whom Hebrew is a sacred tongue only to be used for prayer. But for my grandparents and even my mother, 70 years ago, it was the language used for everyday conversation.

My grandfather Alejandro Kohan, the first journalist in the family, the *groiser khokhem* (wise man—but not wise guy, which is *uber khokhem*) worked for the daily Die Presse in Buenos Aires. He was the *zeyde* and his wife was the *bubbe*, but also the *baleboste*, a single but very descriptive word meaning a “traditional Jewish woman, devoted to maintaining a well-run home.” His mother, who died at 100 years old, was Bubbie Bassie (Batia in Hebrew). My grandmother Lerner was Riva, for Rivka in Hebrew and Rebecca everywhere else. All of them and my own mother Ilana (Elena) were and will be forever my *Yiddishe Mommas*, which, as everybody knows, means much, much more than a Jewish mother. (We will need to ask Sigmund Freud, who had one, for the real meaning)

Will Spanglish develop into something like Yiddish or is it merely transitional speech which “changes in such a way to approximate the model of local language in a pace that resembles the cultural advance of the speaker” as Argentine writer Ricardo Feierstein says? Will Spanglish separate itself from English and Spanish so eventually one can SPEAK Spanglish?

Will we see a Spanglish school? (Ilan Stavans has a course devoted to Spanglish) Rules? A Spanglish Academy?

Scholars recognize six different Yiddish dialects, but when we think of it, we usually refer to Ukrainian or Polish Yiddish. In the same way there is a Newyorican Spanglish, the border Spanglish, and more.

Today’s Spanglish is generated by speaking English (or Spanish for some) and combining words from the other language.

Is there a normative Spanglish literature, other than, again, Stavans’ translation of Don Quixote? And, will Los Angeles understand a book in Spanglish from the Bronx?

I don’t know the answers. My work as writer and editor — for my *parnusse*, to make a living; to have *gelt*, which means money — leads me to reject the mixture of languages. I speak with my sons in three languages: Hebrew with Ariel, the eldest, Spanish with Uri, English with Mark. All of them mean a lot of *nachas*, or blessings and pride from the kids (*kinderlach*), not to be confused with Nachas in Mexican slang

Back to the subject...

Spanglish develops where people live. Spanglish brings new words from one side of the border to the other. When immigrants return to their pueblos they bring seeds of many new and assimilated words, which germinate, grow, cross-pollinate and become part of the fabric of the old language and culture.



## About The Culture

From Yiddish to Spanglish: my Life As An Immigrant

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Let us recognize Spanglish, examine and play with it. This is required in order to love it.

Like here, in this text, I love Yiddish.

*Published* [in HispanicLA, April 19th, 2010.](#)



## **Cinco De Mayo Should Become A Day For Celebrating Immigration**

It was Cinco de Mayo. People of Mexican descent all across the United States were supposed to celebrate the 1862 Mexican victory over a large, invading French army in Puebla, Mexico. This was, as Roberto Lovato described it, the [“victory of the badly-equipped, but inspired Mexican guerrilla army that fought and defeated the far better-equipped forces of Napoleon III’s decaying French Empire.”](#)

Additionally, Mexicans-Americans were supposed to commemorate, on this 150th anniversary, that this was also a victory for the Union Army in the American Civil War, as UCLA Professor [David Hayes-Bautista described to HuffPost Voces’ Victoria Infante](#).

“Latinos here supported [President Abraham] Lincoln. They supported freedom, and democracy. The French invaded Mexico to remove democracy, and to impose over Mexico a treaty with the Confederation,” Hayes-Bautista explained.

Cinco de Mayo festivities — which originated with Mexicans and Mexican Americans in California — simultaneously celebrate legitimate Mexican patriotism as well as solidarity with progressive thought, such as was embodied by the anti-slavery North in the 1860’s.

But they don’t. This year, like the previous twenty, we celebrated instead, ‘Drinko de Mayo’.

On Thursday, President Obama rightly acknowledged the Latino contribution to the country in his annual Cinco de Mayo event, [infused with election year fervor](#).

...but a resort in Las Vegas sent invitations to “Drink, Dance, and Party for Cinco de Mayo 2012? with Corona beers and Don Julio tequila shots.

An airline advertised “Cinco de Mayo specials” with discounted trips to “Cancun, Cabo, and more when you book by May 8.”

The traditional Fiesta Broadway, touted as “the largest Cinco de Mayo celebration in the world,” was sponsored by Seagram and advertised that half a million people would attend the festival in downtown Los Angeles. Perhaps fortunately for the residents of the area, La Opinion newspaper [estimated the crowd at approximately 15,000](#).

In expectations of the revelry In Southern California, the California Highway Patrol deployed [“saturation patrols onto freeways and in unincorporated county jurisdictions.”](#)

In New Orleans, the “Jazz and Heritage Festival served up margaritas and other Latin fare... [as it recognized Cinco de Mayo with a lineup peppered with acts such as Mexican singer Paulina Rubio.](#)”



And elsewhere, reported the Associated Press, there were plans for parties including in Houston, where [“ballet folklorico dancers will stomp...”](#) to traditional Mexican music in a city park. New York City will close parts of Spanish Harlem and Queens for street fairs... Albuquerque honors the day with a Mariachi concert and free cab rides”... and “even West Des Moines, Iowa, has an all-day festival with Mexican food, artwork and live music.”

So, instead of proudly remembering their victorious contribution to this democratic country, Mexicans – both immigrants and longtime residents — were joined by many, many others, and they drank.

Because in the last few decades, as HuffPost reporter Carlos Harrison wrote, Cinco de Mayo has been [“co-opted by alcohol companies.”](#)

“It has been transformed by corporate America. It has become, really, a holiday that big business has used to enter the Latino consumer market. And so they’re making millions off this holiday without really honoring the tradition and the history behind the actual holiday,” said Professor José Alamillo of California State University-Channel Island to Harrison.

Celebrations, festivities and holidays have an interesting way of undergoing historic metamorphoses. Cinco de Mayo is not the only one to be so distorted.

In the same way, and coinciding by just a few days, May Day (May 1) has been transformed in a somewhat similar manner.

A national holiday in close to 100 countries, May Day was long rejected as International Worker’s Day and replaced, first with Americanization Day in 1921 and then with Loyalty Day in 1958, dedicated [to the promotion of patriotism.](#)

But May Day is as American as apple pie. It began in Chicago, in 1884, through a series of demonstrations aimed at securing the eight-hour work day we now take for granted, before spreading onwards to the rest of the world.

Since then, however, its meaning has since been distorted in many places.

Instead of free people marching out by choice, masses have been bused to squares, provided with banners and ordered to shout slogans supporting specific regimes. In some countries the people were completely ignored and replaced by stone-faced armed soldiers, tanks and ballistic missiles parading in unison.

But beginning in 2006, Latino immigrant rights activists embraced the original spirit of May Day as a time to act for the betterment of the community. Millions of them took the streets in huge numbers demanding immigration reform and protesting HR 4437 or the Sensenbrenner Law, an act of Congress that would have enacted a forceful “solution” to undocumented immigration. The Sensenbrenner Law died on the Senate floor, [unable to repeat its sweeping victory in the House.](#)



This practice of immigrant rights groups marching and demonstrating on May 1st has continued. In 2010, they marched in opposition to SB 1070, the Arizona anti-immigration law now before the Supreme Court, which seeks to allow for segregation and racial profiling in the name of the fight against undocumented immigration. (Here's [my coverage of that event – in Spanish](#))

But times have changed. This year, while pro-immigrant rallies once again set the tone of May Day in Los Angeles, Jorge Macías reported for HuffPost Voces (in Spanish) [that there were only 5,000 participants](#).

The Associated Press reported that the low turnout at this year's May Day protests showed [how weak the pro-immigration movement has become](#).

On Cinco de Mayo, the number of individuals who went to plazas and barrios lured by promises of beer, tequila and colorful mariachis was probably much larger.

That being said, Cinco de Mayo could become meaningful again, as a day for Immigrant Rights, a day for American Latinos to march and be proud of their heritage and accomplishments. We should bridge the day's national prominence with the spirit of May Day, and turn a commercial fiesta of drinking, into a party celebrating both the heart and the mind, highlighting recognition and reconciliation, or as a May Day banner said, “Esperanza, respeto y reforma” – Hope, respect and [immigration] reform.

Like in 1862, when Mexicans stood up valiantly for the cause of liberty in Mexico and in the United States.

*First published in [The Huffington Post](#) on 05/06/2012*



## **Samantha And Guillermo Moreno, Gay Siblings, Tell Of Coming Out To Their Traditional Latino Family**

It is natural for parents to daydream about their children's future and to worry about the things which may cause misery or harm to them. In many Hispanic families — [which tend to be socially conservative](#) — a child being gay is often seen in a negative light, because of the family members' own beliefs or due to fears of how others will treat their loved ones.

These were not easy questions for Olga Valenzuela Moreno, who came from Culiacan in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico, to live in Phoenix, Arizona many years ago. Both, her daughter and son, came out as gay 11 years ago, as they describe in a new documentary video produced by the civil rights advocacy group [Cuéntame](#).

“Dad asked me to go outside, and he goes, ‘what’s wrong with your mom’, and I’m like, ‘I don’t know.’ ‘What’s wrong with your mom?’ He was smoking a cigarette, and I said, ‘Well, ok, I’m gay.’ He happened to be inhaling at the time and he inhaled extremely deeply, like he was going to maybe ingest the whole cigarette,” said Samantha Moreno, 33, in the video.

She was the first to come out, but was followed soon after by her brother, Guillermo Moreno, age 29. “I told my mom and she jerked her head and my dad came walking, crying, and told her, you know, we have another child that is, you know, gay,” said Guillermo — who at the time was studying to become a priest (he is now a graphic designer and entrepreneur).

Cuéntame, part of the non-profit Brave New Foundation, is “a production and documentary campaign organization for Latinos, by Latinos,” according to Axel Caballero, the Mexican-born founding director of the group, in an interview with The Huffington Post.

“The video is part of a larger series called ‘An Honest Conversation,’ and tells stories that come from the voices heard in the community,” said Caballero. “It is a sober, honest, direct approach about LGBT Latino youth and their friends, families, and the community at large. We cover stories from bullying to abuse and from struggle to triumph. Our work aims to break taboos within the Latino community.”

How did the Morenos become involved in the project? “When we started the series we asked for stories in social media, Facebook and Youtube and started receiving comments. Guillermo contacted me and said he had a unique story; saying “it’s not only myself, but also my sister. We’re both gay,” said Caballero.

The Morenos are a tight-knit, fervently Catholic Latino family, full of traditional customs and rituals. Having two kids coming out as gay was not easy. “It hurts, it still hurts,” said Olga Moreno, the mother. “Just because you have one does not make the second one any easier. You go through the same thing again,” she explained in the video.

The brief documentary shows the three hugging, playing, smiling, eating and crying together.



But someone is missing: the father. “I’m gonna be with my girlfriend for 12 years in August,” said Samantha with tears in her eyes, “It’s gonna be 12 years in August since my dad even said a word to her. Does that hurt? Yes.”

The Huffington Post interviewed Guillermo Moreno on Thursday, asking him about their father. “My father doesn’t want to talk about it,” he said. “He cares about us; he is happy as long as we are happy. He never disrespected us,” he added, nor did their older brother, Manuel, 35.

On the video, the three speak candidly about traditional Hispanic roles and culture, how the family practiced their religion and how, ultimately, all of this is related to their coming out. “My parents tried to make sure that I was the queen of the church. I had my quinceañera with a big dress, and I did feel like a princess,” stated Samantha, showing photos of her 15th birthday celebration, a traditional Latino ritual in which families mark the transition of their daughter into womanhood. A ceremony is held in a church, and the daughter wears makeup and a formal ball gown to celebrate this rite of passage, usually with a full court of friends to accompany her.

“Another thing, is that our culture is ruled by God,” said Mrs. Moreno, adding, “I have a cousin, she took Samantha to the church,” and Samantha finishes her mother’s words as they say the same thing at the same time, smiling and mimicking the aunt’s thoughts of exorcising the young Samantha. “Just the thought that you are going to take the gayness out of me just because you pray for me; well, it was just a little bit too weird,” Samantha added.

In the end, the three agreed that the two children coming out actually strengthened the family union. They speak honestly and openly, noting that, even if their father didn’t wish to appear in the video, he still speaks to them, and he loves and accepts them. Because, in the end, they said, “this is all we have, the family.”

Over the phone, Guillermo seemed to want to stress this point, saying “You can see in the video that we are a close family, very loving, and what you see is not acting. It’s the real deal. [When we came out] we couldn’t expect them to jump for joy, but for the most part they took it very positively. There was never any objection or rude comments.”

*Published in [The Huffington Post](#) on 04/05/2012*



## 'Mosquita y Mari' Is About Us: Aurora Guerrero



We met at the corner of Pacific and Gage, in the heart of Huntington Park. It was still morning and the whole area was filled with beckoning storefronts and extravagant cafés, but best of all was the crowd parading up and down the boulevard; young mothers pushing little ones in strollers, couples in seemingly happy reunions, salesmen and office workers taking a break, and La Raza. Because this is a Latino Barrio.

And this is where director Aurora Guerrero is going to shoot her first feature film, “Mosquita y Mari.” “When people think about Latinos they often imagine East Los Angeles, Boyle Heights. They imagine a world of gangsters and cholos. Of stereotypes,” says Guerrero, who was born in San Francisco after her parents emigrated from Mexico. They met in the Mission barrio, where she initially wanted to film the movie. That’s where her roots are, and her script is personal. It happened to her.

“Mosquita y Mari.” is the story of two 15-years-old high school students, Yolanda Ontiveros and Mari Rodriguez, who forge a relationship sparked by sexual attraction and develop a friendship which reflects important and still-pressing issues: single mothers who need the help of their eldest daughters to get by; undocumented immigrants who must accept living in the shadows due to their legal status; high school students who want to break through despite social and economic impediments and fulfill the golden dream of going to college.



And also Homophobia: the ignorance, the difficulty encountered when parents and children try to communicate about such a taboo subject. "I want to talk about sexuality. I am attracted to the power of the [actual] violence within silence, a mixture so common in the reaction of parents...because in my house, we didn't talk", says Guerrero, who stares with the open, direct and sincere gaze of the dreamer.

And her parents' dreams got lost. "Life turned into work... which was not always humane." For 18 years, the Mexican restaurant they owned in Berkeley united the family. This is where each of the 3 siblings worked since the age of 8. "They were always thinking of us," she stated. "That's why they didn't go back to Guadalajara."

The way Guerrero speaks is a mirror of her generation: the cordial Spanish learned in the fields flowing into in the common Spanglish of today and into standard English.

"Here I like the big cities; in Mexico I like the rural areas." Aurora Guerrero is a symbol of so many Hispanics born here to immigrant parents, and "Mosquita y Mari" will reflect this, for Los Angeles and for the whole world to see. And she hopes her film will open the debate about Homophobia among Latinos.

The concept is being expressed in the story with the innocence and tenderness of everyday behavior. With the intimacy of suggestion; nothing explicit. With the gentleness and softness of a quinceañera, "Mosquita y Mari" is not about coming out, but about coming of age," she says. "Not homosexuality, but adolescence."

However, according to a study published by GLSEN, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network published last September with the participation of 7,200 LGBT students between 13 and 21 years, eight of every 10 of them were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation, four were physically attacked, and six felt threatened in school. That's another important reason to pay attention to this movie.

The project is supported by the Huntington Park chapter of CBE, Communities for a Better Environment. Once completed, the movie will be shown at a series of events designed to promote dialogue in the community.

In short, it is an idea that exceeds the personal story told by a new Chicana filmmaker. And it may come to the rest of the world very soon. "We want to start shooting by the end of June, for 20 days, here, in Huntington Park."

But there is a problem.

"Our dream budget was about a quarter of a million dollars." Through the Latino Public Broadcasting, the Sundance Institute, and a Ford Foundation fellowship, they received start-up funding which was a fraction of the total needed. The rest has to come through contributions from the community. Like its internet site states, fans of independent films "will have a unique opportunity to bring this film to life during the 30-day



campaign that started on April 26th and ends at the end of May.”

The clock is ticking. There is not much time, and the need is urgent.

If everything goes well, the movie will be ready for the next Sundance Festival, says Guerrero with hopefulness.

“I want young people to learn from this movie, because I didn’t have it when I was a girl... they didn’t tell me that a woman can direct a movie,” stated Guerrero, who is also an adjunct professor of Art Appreciation and Psychology at San Jose’s National Hispanic University. Guerrero won an award from HBO and the New York International Latino Film Festival (NYILFF) for her short films. She created “Pura Lengua” (2005) and “Viernes Girl” (2005) and participated in the production of “Real Women Have Curves” (2002) and La Mission (2009).

The new Latino film in the United States had several good starts. A few years ago, titles such as “Real Women...” broke through the wide markets and showed — together with family scenes, labor problems and the presence of gangs — a cheerful combination of grace and comedy. Some of them, like “Stand and Deliver” (1988) or “Walkout” (2006, for TV), were about historical episodes of overcoming and rebellion. Others, like “American Me” (1992), focused on the problems of youth in poor neighborhoods, where the abundance of drugs and the anguish of the immigrant experience added to impoverishment and convergence of youth criminals, crime and an alleged honor code and loyalty within these.

”Mosquita y Mari” is a project that takes an extra step forward, attempting to show the reality inside the Latino community that is not shown everyday. Not an absolute reality, but one that is sensitive, intimate. The story takes place in Huntington Park, the veteran city with an absolute Latino majority to the southeast of Los Angeles. There is where Yolanda and Mari met.

Yolanda, the only daughter of immigrant workers, wants to continue her studies and become a professional. Mari has to work so that her mother and two sisters can survive.

In school, Mari’s sense of justice leads her to rescue Yolanda from an incident in which Las Cuatas, twin sisters and childhood friends of hers for whom everything is fiestas, boys and texting, are implicated. Their friendship evolves after this, and takes us to a new place with a surprise ending.

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## Jorge Gutierrez, Undocumented Queer Activist Works To Bring LGBT And Pro-Immigration Groups Together



Julio Salgado

Jorge Gutiérrez, 27, was addressing a hall packed with almost 200 young people in Memphis, Tennessee.

Like him, they were brought to the United States as children. Like him, they grew up as Americans. Although they were bilingual, English was their first language.

Their parents came illegally, so they too, are undocumented.

Then, he told them that he is not only undocumented, but also gay. He asked the pro-immigrant organizations represented there to be inclusive. If there were others who, like him, were undocumented and LGBT, he asked them to stand up and come down to the front.

One by one, more than 20 activists stood up and approached. Some of them were revealing their sexual identity for the first time. Some were well known activists in the DREAMers movement.

Gutiérrez, currently lives in Santa Ana, California. At the age of 10, he arrived illegally from El Cora, Nayarit, Mexico, with his mother, two brothers and two sisters. In 2008 he graduated from Cal State University – Fullerton with a BA in English.



He is undocumented and queer, one of many.

“Some of the most recognized leaders of the DREAMer movement, who never talked about it, are now out of the closet, and are calling on others to do the same,” he told The Huffington Post in a series of phone calls.

Increasingly, scores of undocumented students are joining the ranks of the DREAM Act movement, in support of a federal law — the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM) — which would grant legal status to many of them under certain strict conditions. They do this openly — “undocumented and unafraid,” they say.

[Opponents label the DREAM Act as “amnesty”](#) and argue that granting legal status to 2 million “illegals” would reward undocumented immigration to the detriment of those who came here legally.

But for Jorge and others who are also gay, the experience of working in an organization fighting for the DREAM Act and which openly challenges current laws may have opened the path to express themselves. For many, this has been a liberating experience because they see it as one struggle: Undocumented and Unafraid; Queer and Unashamed.

Over the last few years, the fight for the DREAM Act has created a new type of legal rights’ activist: primarily undocumented Latino students who are resolute in revealing their immigrant status. In some cases, these activists are openly gay and have taken upon an added mission alongside their DREAM Act advocacy.

“In a year, we want to organize a meeting between the main LGBT organizations and the main pro-immigrant organizations” so they can work as allies, said Gutiérrez.

He is one of the founders of [DeColores Queer Orange County](#), a group created in 2009 that “focuses on narrowing the gap of needs of Latino/a Queer individuals.”

“They are no longer afraid,” they state.

Jorge also seems unafraid, and even combative, in a new video released today by the civil rights organization [Cuéntame, or “Tell Me”](#) in Spanish, part of the non-profit Brave New Foundation.

“Cuéntame is a production and documentary campaign organization for Latinos, by Latinos,” says Axel Caballero, the Mexican-born founding director of the group, in an interview with The Huffington Post.

The video, says Caballero, is part of a series that “as a whole breaks a taboo within the Latino community, as it is often the case that things like that go unspoken, hidden.”



As for Jorge Gutierrez, these days he is busy working on the [board of directors of United We Dream](#), a network which identifies itself as “the nation’s largest immigrant youth-led organization,” as well as on collaborative [projects with the UCLA Labor Center](#).

Recently, said Gutierrez, “in United We Dream we pushed for the Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project” or QUIP. A United We Dream statement Gutiérrez sent to The Huffington Post states: “The Dream Movement has begun to intentionally acknowledge and praise the contribution of Queer undocumented immigrant youth to the movement.”

“Faggot, illegal, dyke, wetback, pervert and alien,” are some of the insults directed at both “the LGBTQ and the immigrant communities,” states the document. The project aims to “engage Queer Undocumented immigrant youth in intentional dialogue with allies in the LGBTQ and Immigrant Rights Movements.

While the quest for immigration reform is an issue which has generated confrontation between the Latino community and external groups, the individual path which persons traverse in recognizing their own sexuality is an inward one, and confrontation around it can occur within a family.

Jorge describes repeatedly struggling to be accepted with dignity since he was six years old and still living in Mexico, stating how he was rejected by his own father. “I knew I was different from my brothers, but I didn’t know how to explain it; but for my father, everything was clear. Society told him that people like me go to Hell. He was very repressive: don’t walk like this, don’t play like this, don’t speak like this... and then severed all relations with me, like I didn’t exist. He used to take my brothers to the country, or the city, without me. I felt ashamed and bad, and even considered suicide.”

“I am alive thanks to my mom.”

A constant presence in Jorge’s life is his mother.

“I was around 15 years old and she was driving me somewhere. Suddenly she stopped and asked me if I liked girls. I was afraid I was going to lose her love like I lost my dad’s and I almost lied to her. But I told her the truth because I remembered just then that she always told me to be myself.” His mother, Amelia Cortez, who works cleaning houses, is now an important ally and talked to The Huffington Post.

“I already knew, but I wanted to be sure. It was a critical moment,” stated Mrs. Cortez in a phone interview in Spanish. “I wanted to protect him, even though I am not a schooled person; I knew that there is a lot of hatred against them, like they are not normal, although they are. Like his father felt.”

And she added: “Men in our culture are such *machistas*.”

“It was like in a telenovela”, said Jorge, remembering his coming out to his mother. “She told me to leave the car and followed me. We hugged. She recognized that she may not understand everything, but she will always, always love me. From that moment I became able to explore my identity as a gay man.”



Jorge's father lives somewhere in California with his daughters. He is not in touch with his son. But Jorge continues his activism: for rights; recognition and dignity. And he continues to dream. "I want to pursue a Master's degree or a doctorate to study the LGBT Latino youth community, so as a professional I'll be able to contribute." Shooting the video for Cuentame was part of this path.

"With this video and this series," said Axel Caballero, "we want to create an honest conversation on a nationwide basis, one that can engage families at the dinner table in real, although often uncomfortable, discussions about Latino youth."

"Because if not us, then who?"

*Illustration by [Julio Salgado](#)*

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## Psaltery, Serpentine, A Long Way From Home

For Hispanic Heritage Month, I offer some poems by Cecilia Martinez-Gil.

This event, which coincides with Independence Day of seven Latin American countries, seeks to answer the question of what are Latinos in the United States? It forces us to reflect on the meaning of our identity, slicing it into words, using remembrances of a supposedly better past, combining objects of collective desire, declarations of alleged unity, unfulfilled hopes and unreal dreams.

What better way, then, to show the transformation of a young poet born in South American Uruguay, from an *cosmonaut* of the Spanish vocabulary to a *conquistadora* of English poetry?

Her collection **'Psaltery and Serpentine'**, a Best Books Award finalist of USA Book News published in 2010 by Gival Press, is a volume of erotic poems. Some of them were originally written in Spanish and later translated, but most originated in English, with a heavy dose of the Spanish world's cultural images and metaphors.

In a café in East Los Angeles she reads to me in the thickest of accent (both hers and mine):

*"My  
mother tongue is not my language  
for my native voice  
is the poetic texture of my being."*

(from "lexis of emotions", page 51)

And this she writes to me this week: "I am a mutant of two languages: English and Spanish. I write as I speak, and on my pages there are mutations; blueprints of either Spanish or English".

I ask: in the quest to understand a woman, how better can one get to know her than through her poetry?

And Cecilia writes:

*"For the poem just notices this dust on the shelves  
dancing in the air  
and it seizes its Devenir\*  
beyond this minute"*

(from "sunrays and dust", 53)

(\*) State of becoming, destiny, future, G.L.

Full disclosure: Although I met Cecilia Martinez-Gil in college – Santa Monica College, late bloomers'



college, grown-ups' college, her essence was hidden to me then behind intensely-colored eyes, the darkest hair, the unstoppable stream of her thought, her body slim and fit, red and ochre.

Then I heard her in a [Circo de Poesía](#) presentation, the incredible troupe Federico Ludueña was then developing in Los Angeles. There was poetry, I thought, and there was an intense woman behind it, but the thought vanished amidst the cacophony and veils of other people's poems and gesticulations, among costumes and diluted drinks.

I lost track of Cecilia for many years. When we met again, Psaltery and Serpentine already stood between us. Separating and uniting. I read it and then I knew Cecilia.

Cecilia Martinez-Gil herself breathes through "Serpentine..." She just discovers with the most amazing ease, the most difficult words: those used to explain her body. *Palabras que tocan*, words that touch under the sign of simplicity.

*"He was mouth watering  
I wanted to be poured into him"  
("Mulberry Fingers", page 9)  
Or, even more:  
"Today,  
I will you to come  
To visit me even if you are a ghost"*

("a new obsession to keep me craving", 83)

These images of desire and magic germinate and sprout from behind her eyes, while her hands dance in front of you, full of elasticity. I read with her in the café:

*"I, a porcelain vase crashing into pieces,  
cruelly landing on the ground"*

("Unfair Treaty", page 65)

Then I realized that the poems are not hyperbole but just a bent description of yesterday's actual life events. The dreamlike tears of mist surrounding the verses were like clothes that kept falling off. And then the magic stopped.

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This is mainly a story about how accurate is the statement that language is our identity. Does language matter at all, then? Do poets have to shed their cultural clothes, their "*palabras*", and then put on new clothes, a new language?



Can we as immigrants ever change?

Cecilia, are you an immigrant?

“No”, she writes to me, “because I am wearing Uruguay and in fact, I am responding your questions drinking mate with yerba from Uruguay on a Santa Monica morning with a greyish overcast that resembles autumn in Montevideo. Yes, I am wearing Uruguay, *lo llevo puesto*, Uruguay is inside me actually, Uruguay is my insight.”

You read her poetry, and you note the appearances of Spanish in the English words, and how Uruguay, and the whole of South America, are straining to emerge from this melting pot while Cecilia keeps playing.

She plays the different layers of meaning that some Spanish language phrases cryptically contain, as if they were Aramaic verses in Hebrew verses in this volume reminiscent of the Song of Songs. The title “en la escala de sol” (77) could mean either multiple ways to write music or climbing towards the Sun. In “Era de Tango” (13), the title could mean both “He was of tango” and “A time of tango”.

“Era, the past tense of To be, translatable as it was, becomes era as in time period, age of tango,” she writes. “And the return to Spanish (which is still a work in progress), shows a title, mutating only in one word, affecting its temporality.”

In the same poem Martinez-Gil mentions an “abandoned bandoneón”, which is a typical instrument of the music of the Rio de la Plata.

Both “tango” and “bandoneon” could have been introduced here as intruders. Devoid of context, their appearances could be construed as her abandonment of Spanish and dismissal of Uruguay as her home.

But just a few verses later, Cecilia proves she took the entire house with her in order to recreate this in the New World:

*“As we tango on the immaculate tile  
you in black tuxedo and sleek hair,  
me a Scarlet from a farther south.”*

The bandoneon, the tango, replaces any other sound and follows this new Scarlett O’Hara “from a farther south”.

Then, in “in the wolf’s mouth”, she describes what for me is a lonely train station in the Pampas:

*“Hermit trains transporting full luggage  
of ballads and milongas of the fields  
played by lonely guitarists*



*whose only audience is a dimming sun.”*

“Psaltery and Serpentine was initiated 22 years ago, in Montevideo, Uruguay with about ten poems, which included the homonym Salterio y Serpentina, originally written in Spanish by a young writer, a girl who was becoming a young woman,” she says.

“I was empowered by a career in journalism that landed me in a job at one of the most popular newspapers at the time, Diario La Republica, and publication in many other newspapers and magazines. I liked books, music, theatre and the visual arts, so I wrote reviews, comments and critiques of every performance that I was able to attend. The artistic scene of Montevideo and the relationships of the artists with their fans were central to inspire many of the poems that today constitute Psaltery and Serpentine.”

Then she arrived here.

“In 1991 I left Uruguay for the U.S. and Europe and my box of poems as a portfolio of poetic artifacts traveled with me, safeguarded as my own passport. Soon, Salterio y Serpentina started to speak other languages, ventured in describing imagery with new words, mostly in English. In 2003, for a chapbook of original poems. I had a curious case of writer’s block: I was writing all the time, nothing but academic essays, and my mind worked already too much like a critic of literature, performing a close reading of any poem I wanted to write anew. Thus, I resorted to Salterio y Serpentina, translated one or two poems and comparing the two versions in both languages, I started to create a new poem in my new language of choice.”

“Psaltery and Serpentine” is then a book about rebirth, as much as it is about the challenges of taking your home with you on the long journey al Norte.

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## Books, Schmooks In Boyle Heights

Along Corrientes Avenue in Buenos Aires dozens of bookstores used to offer us knowledge through the printed word. There, I would leaf through controversial volumes of protest and philosophical thought or booklets of poems or famous novels. But many years ago they disappeared from my hometown — and so did I.

I used to feel so proud to be part of the human race — its creative genius and the beauties of the soul that it had produced — when I visited bookstores.

I felt that again as I passed through the glass door of [Libros Schmibros](#) in Boyle Heights two weeks ago.

The bookstore is new, small and humble. It opened on a Monday in July, the same day the Ben Franklin Public Library, just two blocks away, reduced its hours to five days a week because of budget cuts.

I did wonder about the bookstore's name.

“Of all the people in the world, you're the last one who should need to ask that,” said David Kipen, the owner of the place.

He's right. ‘Schmibros’ is a humorous, almost self-deprecating, Yiddish interjection. It's familiar in the dialect my grandparents spoke, a linguistic touch that unites many Jews the world over.

Kipen is a writer and translator who spent seven years as the literary critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He opened Libros Schmibros upon his return to his native Los Angeles after a stint as literature director at the National Endowment for the Arts.

Kipen moved to a building on corner of the Boyle Heights district on the Eastside, a decidedly Spanish-speaking dominion, after he found a storefront that had been empty for years. There's a small community theater and a Bohemian café and a popular taco stand down the block.

Libros Schmibros added seven thousand volumes to the block's offerings, most of them books that Kipen accumulated during his journalistic career. Shelves and racks of varying origins followed. A few desks; a couple of old sofas and chairs soon arrived.

When I arrived for a recent visit, two kids were leafing through books. Jonathan, a student at nearby Roosevelt High School, is interested in photography. David showed him an extraordinary volume and the two of them read, so fascinated that their eyes are as wide as plates.

Kipen wants to work with neighborhood schools and community colleges, offering the volumes required by curriculum. He wants to advertise in their school newspapers to draw kids will come and dive into the



endless knowledge and enjoyment of the printed word.

Libros Schmibros is open from 12 noon to 7 p.m. (sometimes 8 p.m.) on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturday. The books are loaned, but can also be purchased at prices starting at \$1.

[Libros Schmibros](#) was located on 1st Street, and moved to 1711 Mariachi Plaza De Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90033. Come and read — and if you have books to donate share them for culture's sake.

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*Translated by Patricia Ramos for [LABeez.org](#), published [on 11/11/2010](#)*

Gabriel Lerner serves since 2011 as Editorial Director of The Huffington Post Voces, which is the Spanish-language vertical of the site and the successor of AOL Latino. Prior to that he was News Editor at La Opinion, the largest Spanish language daily in the US, where he has also served in various editorial capacities for 13 years, including State and National Editor and Assistant Metro Editor. His column Gente de Los Angeles appeared there every Monday. He has served as guest commentator on Univision Channel 34 and CNN en Español. In January 2009 Lerner launched a bilingual web blog, HispanicLA.com, which has rapidly become one of the most successful blogs focusing on the Latino community in Southern California and is currently inactive. Lerner was a fellow at the USC Annenberg School of Communications border justice program in 2005 and has served as instructor at UCLA Extension journalism program. Born in Argentina, Lerner lived for 27 years in Israel where he served as Editor-in-Chief of the weekly Tiempo in Tel Aviv and later as CEO of Alfil Publishing.

Lerner has authored two Spanish novels, two books of poetry and a collection of short stories, for which he won the Arturo Capdevila Literary Award. He attended Tel Aviv University and graduated magna cum laude from California State University, Los Angeles majoring in History. He has three sons: Ariel lives in London and is a musician and sound engineer, Uri is currently doing an MA in PolSci in the American University, and Mark is graduating this year as software engineer from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in California. Minutario.com is his personal site.

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