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Colao subjectivities: Portomex and Mexirican perspectives on language and identity
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Colao Subjectivities: PortoMex and MexiRican Perspectives on Language and Identity

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Abstract

This essay contributes to current theories of *latinidad* by using ethnographic research to reveal how ordinary people, in this case individuals who are of both Puerto Rican and Mexican ancestry, theorize *latinidad* from their lived experiences. This essay is also a reclaiming of Elena Padilla as a vanguard scholar of Puerto Rican Studies, Latino Studies, and urban community studies. Building from her work and drawing from the insight of a generation that is the product of interLatino encounters in Chicago, I seek to demonstrate the multiple and uneven ways individuals theorize, practice, experience, and take part in everyday constructions of *latinidad*. I argue that manifestations of *latinidad* begin with these daily negotiations of identity.

The tendency found among the recent [Puerto Rican] migrants [in Chicago] to move into the Mexican neighborhoods may result in... Puerto Ricans will tend to become Mexicanized. This condition will probably operate mainly with women who will marry into the Mexican group.

Elena Padilla (1947: 98).

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Yeah, all the time I’m asked, I say I’m Puerto Rican and Mexican but primarily, you know, when anybody hears me speak... or the way I act, it’s like, ehh, “Hey, you look Mexican but you act Puerto Rican, what are you?” I’m a PortoMex (Olivia).
Scholarship that debates the notion of *latinidad* (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 1998; Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997; Flores 1996; Padilla 1985) rarely contemplates the everyday existence of U.S. Latinos like Olivia.³ In the late 1940s, anthropologist Elena Padilla was a pioneer in theorizing *latinidad*; her research considered the significance of interLatino relationships and how prospective identities would unfold from them. While her conjecture that Puerto Ricans in Chicago would “tend to become Mexicanized” did not necessarily result in the manner foreseen by her, Padilla’s prediction prompted me to reconsider the relevance of interLatino dynamics and subjectivities in Chicago. Thus, with this essay I hope to contribute to current theories of *latinidad* using ethnographic research to show how ordinary people, in this case individuals who are of both Puerto Rican and Mexican ancestry, theorize *latinidad* from their lived experiences. This essay also reclaims of Elena Padilla as a vanguard scholar of Puerto Ricans Studies, Latino Studies, and urban community studies. Building from her work, and by way of Olivia’s Puerto Ricanized Mexicanness, I seek to demonstrate the multiple and uneven ways individuals theorize, practice, experience and take part in everyday constructions of *latinidad*.⁴

Traditionally, research in this area underscores organized efforts among Latinos of diverse national backgrounds to build coalitions. Most notable are studies that examine Latino struggles in the spheres of politics, labor, and citizenship rights (de la Garza et al. 1992; Padilla 1985; Oboler 1995; Flores and Benmayor 1997); the creation of Latina/o studies programs on college campuses (Aparicio 1999; Flores 1997; Cabán 1998); and musical and poetic exchanges between groups (Flores 1993; Pacini Hernández 2000). Absent, however, are analyses of how even within misunderstandings, disagreements, and conflicts, which are part and parcel of everyday group interaction, expressions of *latinidad* are articulated. These articulations, however, repeatedly go unnoticed because of the tendency to search for *latinidad* in consensus. Many times these tensions are the very reasons given as to why *latinidad* is not sustainable and therefore also questionable. Caveats regarding the use of concepts such as *latinidad* and “Latino” in scholarly research focus on the dangers of homogenizing historical experiences and obscuring critical distinctions between diverse populations that are supposedly captured by these terms (Aparicio 1999; Flores 1996; Oboler 1995; Padilla 1995).

While other works locate *latinidad* in social, cultural, and political movements, in this essay I probe the day-to-day encounters that lead to the possibilities of these organized movements. Taking into account the institutionalized unifying discourse of *latinidad*, I seek to uncover how *latinidad* is also, as Frances Aparicio (1999: 3) puts it, “an oppositional, yet contested and multiply inflected marker of identity” where authenticities are often competing (see Rúa and García 2001). This article is based on data gathered in Chicago through formal and informal interviews, participant observations, and subsequent follow-up conversations. I spoke and spent time with ten individuals, who ranged in age from their mid-twenties to late thirties. I also conducted archival research and consulted census data and local newspaper reports. The data for this project were collected during the fall of 1999 and comprise preliminary research for a larger study that will examine conceptualizations of *latinidad* in Chicago.

Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1991) methodological choice of writing “ethnographies of the particular” proved instructive in my efforts to unsettle the homogenizing and ahistorical potential constructions that *latinidad* and things “Latino” hold, and for which they are often critiqued.⁵ Further, drawing from the particularities of the lived experiences of my informants, I can textualize theoretical claims about how *latinidad* is produced in
tension. Thus research and interpretation at the microanalytical level provides a vehicle
to understand how individuals use the personal and community to engage in theoretical
debates about processes of social change and identity formation in their everyday lives.
Rather than asserting a one-way assimilation/acculturation from Puerto Rican to
Mexican, as put forth by Elena Padilla, I propose to theorize interLatino subjectivities.
I consider processes of transculturation as proposed by Aparicio and Chavez-
Silverman’s (1997) tropicalizations, the bidirectional, though not necessarily equal,
influence that cultures have upon each other. Herein the complexity of Puerto Rican
identity is examined in the dynamic context of interactions with Mexicans in Chicago.
I introduce the term colando-ing to think about how social and cultural practices, such
as language, family ties and friendships, are negotiated in articulations of latinidad.
This analysis of interLatino subjectivities is grounded on the insight of a generation that is
producing and is the product of Puerto Rican and Mexican encounters in Chicago.

Latinidad in Puerto Rican Chicago:

Especially in Chicago Mexicans hate Puerto Ricans and Puerto Ricans
hate Mexicans there’s always prejudice... there’s the tension....
[G]rowing up... in school or something... I’d be around a lot of
Mexicans and somebody would ask somebody else if they were Puerto
Rican and then that person would get insulted, “I’m not no Puerto
Rican,”...and then there I am being half-Puerto Rican wondering why
is that an insult.... (Raquel).

Oftentimes anecdotes related to intermingling between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans
in Chicago reaffirm the stereotype of “absolute antagonism” (Ang 2000) so aptly cap-
tured by the first part of Raquel’s statement. InterLatino engagements thus, are
reduced to the idea that “Mexicans hate Puerto Ricans and Puerto Ricans hate
Mexicans.” This would appear to be proof positive that the differences between these
Latino groups are too great for us to “just get along.” Yet it is the remainder of Raquel's
comment, and an element of interLatino convergences that seldom receives scholarly
attention, that is of interest to me. In her attempt to comprehend relations between
Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, Raquel complicates glib interpretations of interLatino
dynamics by incorporating her very existence: “...and then there I am being half-
Puerto Rican wondering why is that an insult....”

In her article “Chicana! Rican? No, Chicana-Riqueña! Refashioning the
Transnational Connection,” Chabram Dernersesian (1994) affirms her Chicana-
Riqueñaness and challenges Chicano studies to expand its knowledge base by incor-
porating comparative Latino research. She proposes ways to begin theorizing latinidad
through the recognition of interLatino subjects. This Chicana cultural theorist
explains how she came to learn about her Puerto Rican self through memories and
family stories told by her Chicana mother. She also describes her experiences growing
up Chicana, which did not exclude visits with her Puerto Rican family. Chabram
Dernersesian's essay further points to narratives of divorce as an important area of
exploration in studies concerning interLatino subjectivities. She argues that the merit
Chicano Studies both in and out of the academy lies in the field’s willingness to engage
in critical dialogues concerning the complexity of Chicana/o identities in contempo-
rary life. Her motion resonates with calls for Puerto Rican Studies and Latino Studies
to expand their scholarship in light of the dynamic transformations taking place in the
everyday environments of Latinos (Aparicio 1999).

The city of Chicago is an ideal site to explore _latinidad_ via interLatino relations because it is a space where Puerto Rican migrants and Mexican (im)migrants have had to strategically negotiate Latino identities both in the past and in contemporary times. The 2000 census indicates that Chicago has the third largest Latino population in the U.S. With numbers reaching over 750,000, a number constituting 26 percent of the City’s total population, “Latinos now represent one in every four Chicagoans.” Of the City’s Latino population, Mexicans (70.4 percent) and Puerto Ricans (15 percent) account for approximately 85 percent of all Latinos in Chicago (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). This makes Chicago home to the second-largest concentration of Mexicans and the second-largest settlement of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The Latino population of Chicago has also long been recognized as being one of the most diverse in the nation. For decades, Chicago’s population has resembled the national Latino population. More U.S. cities are now in concert with Chicago’s demographically diverse Latino populations as a result of the large migrations of the 1980s.

Thus, I highlight Chicago not just because I believe it provides a “particular” or “unique” model of Latino identity formation but because it is an example that has the potential to inform future studies about Latinos in the U.S., due to the long history of interaction between groups. The field of Latino Studies is geographically divided, and regions are popularly imagined as the scholarly domain of certain Latino national groups (i.e., Cubans in Miami, Chicanos/Mexicans in Los Angeles, and Puerto Ricans in New York). Consequently, many debates centered on _latinidad_ and the future of Latino Studies posit what will happen when East meets West, when the Chicano encounters the Nuyorican. Scholarly works are now beginning to recognize the changing demographics of Latino populations on the East and West Coasts, as evidenced by studies exploring the Mexican presence in the “New ‘Nueva’ York” (Flores 1996) and Puerto Ricans in California (Flores and Benmayor 1997), yet these interactions are still fairly new. Chicago has a historical trajectory from which to draw upon as to how diverse Latino groups eke out an existence, together, in a U.S. urban context.

In my view, _latinidad_ is a cultural expression that embraces blood and fictive kin, lovers, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and even strangers in an everyday form of community building. Individuals engaging in these community-building efforts come to know themselves by way of their interactions with members of diverse Latino ethnoracial groups. This view of _latinidad_ moves beyond the segmented approaches to Latino Studies and Ethnic Studies by exploring the malleable boundaries that shape interLatino relations in the U.S.

One of the first studies to grapple seriously with the utility and implications of claiming a “Latino” identity is sociologist Félix Padilla’s _Latino ethnic consciousness_ (1985). However, a lesser-known yet seminal work is anthropologist Elena Padilla’s University of Chicago master’s thesis _Puerto Rican immigrants in New York and Chicago: A study in comparative assimilation_ (1947). By choosing as her focus of analysis the recent arrival of Puerto Ricans to Chicago, the author differs from the traditional community studies format of analyzing racial and ethnic urban groups as only black and white. Her study of U.S. Puerto Ricans is not only comparative regionally, examining the settlement patterns and experiences of Puerto Ricans in two cities, Chicago and New York, but it also explores interLatino and inter-ethnoracial concurrences in Chicago. Padilla historicizes relationships between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, noting collaborative efforts while also acknowledging tensions between and among groups. She illustrates that
expressions of *latinidad* were taking place even though they may not have been labeled as such. Her thesis, I argue, provided an early model for the potential articulations between Puerto Rican Studies and Latino Studies. Had the contributions of her work been acknowledged, I wonder if we would still be debating the segmented and regionalist/nationalist tendencies that often delimit and debilitate the fields of Puerto Rican Studies, Chicano Studies, and Latino Studies.

Elena Padilla identifies two distinct migrations to Chicago by Puerto Ricans. Usually, members of this first migratory group were university students continuing with their education in the U.S., who later settled in Chicago with their non-Puerto Rican spouses. The second wave of migrants were contract laborers, recruited in Puerto Rico for domestic and foundry work by Castle, Barton, and Associates, a Chicago-based private employment agency, in 1946. Once in Chicago, employers determined the areas in which Puerto Rican workers lived by providing housing and other accommodations. Domestic workers were scattered throughout the city while foundry workers were housed in a Mexican neighborhood in North Chicago. Padilla notes that the Chicago YWCA provided social activities for Puerto Rican domestic workers while Puerto Rican foundry workers established friendships with their Mexican co-workers.

Padilla’s work documents various important social interactions that occurred between Mexican and Puerto Rican workers in the late 1940s. The Rancho Grande, a Mexican nightclub on the North side of Chicago, was a place where Puerto Rican foundry and domestic workers informally gathered “to chat, to eat Mexican food, and to dance, [sic] to Latin American music” (Padilla 1947: 86). It was mainly through events at the Rancho Grande that Puerto Ricans began to interact with the Mexican community. Another meeting place was a reconverted railroad car that served as a dining area where Puerto Rican cooks prepared Island dishes on Thursdays and Sundays for foundry workers. After dinner, workers would gather at the Happy Hour, a U.S. nightclub. By way of work at the foundry, social mixers at the Rancho Grande, the reconverted dining area, and the Happy Hour, relationships evolved between Puerto Rican recruited laborers and Mexican *braceros*.

When Puerto Rican foundry workers became dissatisfied with their employment conditions, many either returned to the Island or migrated to New York. The Mexican Civic Committee assisted several Puerto Ricans who decided to continue living in Chicago with housing relocation. Padilla recognized that while some Puerto Ricans developed a great appreciation for the Mexican community, they also took offense if identified as Mexican. Social relationships were described as conflictive, others cliquish, and still others resulting in amorous unions between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. According to Padilla, Puerto Rican men were more inclined to legally marry Puerto Rican women. Consensual relationships were more common among Mexican men and Puerto Rican women. If a Puerto Rican couple entered into a consensual agreement, that relationship was usually accepted by other Puerto Ricans as more stable and permanent, as opposed to a Mexican and Puerto Rican consensual union. Interestingly, much of the animosity described by Padilla between the two groups had to do with the perceived legal status and social acceptability of these inter-Latino romances (Padilla 1947: 88).

Felix Padilla’s study explores the emergence and development of a “Latino ethnic identity” and behavior in the institutional life of distinct “Spanish-speaking” populations in the U.S. While Felix Padilla cites the work of Elena Padilla, he ignores the everyday articulations of *latinidad* found in her ethnographic work. It is at the institutional
level that Padilla locates the forging of Latinismo, a situational, ethnic political identity that emanates at particular historical moments and is most prominent during times of social action. As a strategic identity, Latinismo is deployed when the benefits of group unity and pan-ethnic coalition building outweigh organizing along nationality-based affiliations. Felix Padilla’s conclusions are based on an examination of traditional organized political structures and his interpretations of the perceptions of select community leaders. He contends that the engagement of Latinismo as a political identity and behavior does not replace nationality-based identities. This observation is the strength and most enduring contribution of his work. Unfortunately, the conceiving of Latinismo as a behavior infers that this identity can simply be activated and deactivated at will. It also suggests that a Latino identity is separate from identifying as Puerto Rican, Mexican, or both. By conflating identity and behavior, Padilla’s Latinismo disconnects the very lived historical experiences of Latinos in Chicago from the process of negotiating a “Latino identity.” His stress on the participation of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans as distinct groups in the institutional life of Chicago, while critical, overlooks ordinary friendships and working relationships, such as those that existed among Mexican braceros and Puerto Rican recruited foundry and domestic laborers in the late 1940s. The evolution of these ordinary and historically informed community exchanges and dialogues among individuals and group members, I argue, made viable the forging of a “Latino identity” in the 1970s.

The individuals interviewed in my study used both the designator “Latino” and their nationalities to self-identify during their respective interviews. When asked in what instances and why they evoked either term, their responses varied; however, they made substantively similar connections in their comments. Raquel affirms a Latina identity around “white people,” but she voices being both Puerto Rican and Mexican among friends with which she identifies. For her the term “Latina” is used more with outsiders. Olivia responded, “If someone asks you ‘what are you’…to me, I’m Puerto Rican first, I’m a woman, I’m Latina….” My informants employ the term “Latina/o” as a classificatory marker that conveys the most general information about their ethnoracial, cultural, and gendered identities. In so doing, they are not necessarily conjuring up the term because a political moment calls for such temporary action. Although it is important to bear in mind, as Raquel declared, “identity… is very political,” claiming a Latino identity, while situational and relational, is not in contention with their Puerto Rican and Mexican identities. In considering these responses, it is critical to recognize that the individuals I interviewed are of the generation born under the designator Latino as an official categorizing tool. Furthermore, as upwardly mobile college graduates or as individuals that have attained some college education, they have also been exposed to Latino Studies scholarship and/or faculty (Oboler 1995; Flores-Gonzalez 1999; Ramos-Zayas Forthcoming).

Colao identities and subjectivities: Puerto Ricanized Mexicanness and Mexicanized Puerto Ricanness

In everyday conversations people describe identity through fixity and rootedness. This fixing of identity allows individuals and groups to pinpoint certain attributes in their self-definations that are necessary to claim uniqueness or to make distinctions between themselves and others. Cultural identities, Stuart Hall (1990: 226) writes, “are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification and suture, which are made within the discourse of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning.” Bearing this in mind, I contemplate the social and cultural practices that produce identity (Lowe 1996). One must be aware of Hall’s (1990: 222) recommendation that we
think of identity as a production always in the making, improvising, inventing, borrowing, and “always constituted within, not outside, representation.” Hall (1990: 222) further suggests that “practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation.” Using an everyday Puerto Rican metaphor, colao, I explore processes of identity formation by enunciating the lived experiences of U.S. Latinos.

Colar: (vt) Pasar un líquido por un colador o por otro líquido filtrante; Blanquear con lejía la ropa lavada; Vaciar; Mentir, defraudar o pasar algo con occultación; Pasar o hacer pasar algo por un lugar muy justo; Pasar por verdadero un engaño; Beber vino; meterse subrepticiamente y sin permiso en un sitio, adelantarse en una cola o turno, etc.; Equivocarse; Enamorarse, prendarse. (Grijalbo 1989)

Colar: (vt.) To pour a liquid through a strainer or through a filtering liquid. To whiten clothes with bleach. To empty. To lie, defraud or to covertly pass something. To pass on or pass something through a tight place. To pass on as true something that is false. To drink wine. To enter a place surreptitiously and without permission; to cut in a line or to move up your turn in a line, etc. To make a mistake. To fall in love.

The multiple connotations of the word colar raises issues about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and sex in terms of the fixity and nonfixity of identity and positioning. For the purposes of this paper I focus on the meaning of colar as people negotiate their ethnic identities. Hereinafter, the word is transformed to colando-ing, doubly marking this concept as an action, with Spanish (colando) and English (-ing) intersecting into Spanglish (colando-ing) alluding to identity formation as a process in the making. This concept acknowledges the agency of individuals in claiming transculturalized spaces such as PortoMex and MexiRicans, while recognizing the multiple tensions located in asserting such an identity for the individual—as well as those impacted by their claim. It attempts to capture how essentializing practices are contested and negotiated, consciously and unconsciously, through ambiguous social practices that can include speech patterns, engagement in “passing” strategies, as well as drawing from transculturized repertoires. This interlingual signifier allows me to enunciate the lived experiences of those who shared their histories with me. The uneasiness and discomfort that may arise by colando-ing's characteristics of interlinguiality, flexibility, and stress fittingly capture the contested nature of identity formation that I seek to explore.

Colando-ing can take place in many forms and fashions. In terms of café, the colando-ing process can be conceptualized within social spheres as that which gets watered down, served and presented to people, while the borras (coffee grounds) remain packed in the middle of the colador (filter), and are usually not seen, tasted, or experienced by others. Each time café is colao (filtered) and served, its taste, aroma, and feel can differ, varying in degrees from cargao (heavy) to aguao (more watered down). Social spaces can also be colao or penetrated through (i) reproductive relationships and/or intermarriage; (2) the assistance of those already a part of certain circles, such as allowing an individual to cut in a line or inviting him/her into an established group; (3) “passing” by concealing one’s ethnic and/or racial background; or (4) through the tenacity of individuals who demand the recognition of their multiplicity in these “naturalized” spaces. Inserting oneself in particular social spaces and claiming multiplicity, however, does not mean that individuals are always comfortable with that claim. In many ways,
colando-ing is about being included while simultaneously being excluded. While it is important to dialogue about latinidad as a place where a “we” is articulated, the tensions and discomforts also need to be part of the conversation.

My informants’ daily life experiences demonstrate the colando-ing process. Throughout their respective interviews they explained the diverse ways in which both Mexican and Puerto Rican cultures represent them and came to be represented and embodied in social practice.

Raquel and Rosario, who are sisters, located and relocated to different neighborhoods throughout their upbringing, weaving in and out of predominantly Puerto Rican and Mexican neighborhoods and areas. They moved from Humboldt Park to Hermosa—an area directly north of Humboldt Park and west of Logan Square—to the state of Texas, and then returned to Chicago’s Brighton Park neighborhood, a predominantly Mexican community on the South Side of the city. Their parents (Puerto Rican father and Mexican mother) met at their maternal uncle’s house, in the Humboldt Park area, where their father was doing electrical work. Raquel remembered the subtle ways in which her home life was both Mexican and Puerto Rican. Her colao family lifestyle became apparent when her social location shifted and she entered new environments where she was informed of “appropriate” sociocultural practices. For instance, she never identified the foods she ate at home as either Puerto Rican or Mexican until she visited other homes and realized her mother prepared dishes that were a combination of Mexican and Puerto Rican cuisines. She gave the example of a dinner consisting of Mexican rice, pollo guisao (stewed chicken), and habichuelas guisas (stewed beans) or Mexican beans, Mexican rice, and fried bananas (maduros) on the side.

Raquel also become aware of words in her Spanish vocabulary that she never questioned until she spoke with people who did not understand some of her word choices. She nonetheless acknowledge that if one culture were to override the other it would be the Mexican. Raquel attributes this to her mother’s presence in the family since she was on hand more than her father. She shared a story about how her family in Puerto Rico made fun of her Spanish because it was different from theirs—it sounded Mexican. Raquel and Rosario’s mother raised her children with the custom of addressing adults with “mande” or “mande usted” (“yes” or “yes sir/madam”). Her Puerto Rican cousins had never heard the phrase so they would often mimic Raquel and her siblings saying the word mande in a “Mexican accent.” Recalling a similar memory, Rosario remarked, “Our Spanish was a little different because we spoke like a Mexican person... instead of having the accent of a Puerto Rican person.” Generally then, Mexican family members never really made fun of them because they sounded more Mexican when they spoke in Spanish. Rosario noted, however, that there were times in Mexico when relatives wanted them to perform their colao identities by asking them to “speak Puerto Rican.” In view of these experiences, both Rosario and Raquel are more aware of language differences deriving from two sets of Spanish vocabularies—Puerto Rican Spanish and Mexican Spanish—depending on their interlocutor.

Roberto’s Puerto Rican father and Detroit-born Mexican mother grew up around the Western and Harrison area, known as the Near West Side. They attended Precious Blood Grammar School, and according to Roberto, there were many Mexicans and Puerto Ricans living in that neighborhood when his parents were growing up. Consequently, a few amorous relationships developed. When we spoke about his upbringing Roberto casually remarked that his Mexican mother sounds Puerto Rican when she speaks Spanish. When I asked him to elaborate how does his mother sound Puerto Rican when she speaks Spanish, he quickly responded, “It’s just, my
mom talking... I never really thought about it that way. But she sounds, now that I think, she does sound more Puerto Rican than Mexican.” The majority of his English dominant mother’s conversations in Spanish are with her Spanish dominant Puerto Rican mother-in-law. Still, not really being able to convey his sentiment, Roberto reflected for a minute and then laughed aloud when the word “deso” came to mind. “Deso, she says deso all the time,” he stated. In her ethnographic work on bilingualism in a Puerto Rican community, Zentella (1997: 97) identifies the word “deso” (“what-sit/whatchamacallit”) as a catch-all term used by Puerto Ricans as a filler in a sentence. The language accommodation skills and bidialectism of Raquel and Rosario, and Roberto’s mother supports Lippi-Green’s (1997: 63) argument that, “we use variation in language to construct ourselves as social beings, to signal who we are, and who we are not and cannot be.” Sociolinguistic cues are indicators of with whom we are speaking. The cues “are directly linked to homeland, the race and ethnicity, [and] the social self” of our interlocutor (Lippi-Green 1997: 72). Most studies on language accommodation and bidialectism focus on shifts from English to Spanish and Spanish to English, yet my informants’ shifts in language enunciate their interLatino identities, moving between Mexican Spanish and Puerto Rican Spanish and demonstrating multiple ways of being bilingual.

The impact of US culture on the life experiences of U.S. Latinos cannot be ignored as an influential factor in their identity formation. Yet, oftentimes US Latinos express apologetic utterances in the process of negotiating bilingual and bicultural identities. When asked how many languages she spoke, Olivia stated, “Three. English, Spanish, and Spanglish.” Expressing her sentiments about Spanglish, she commented, “I consider it a language that, I mean, we don’t know any better. That’s not... that sounds horrible. Not that we don’t know any better, but that’s just an important part of who we’ve become. You know, that’s how our language has evolved...” The quote illustrates the tensions located in the colando-ing process. While Olivia claims Spanglish as a language, her language, she still wavers about its legitimacy. Roberto described his past visits to Puerto Rico as “difficult” due to the language barrier. For the most part, he listened and understood the events around him, but he still exempted himself from many conversations. Having to ask his father to translate meanings and situations made him feel “intimidated” and “disconnected” because he “didn’t know what the hell was going on.” Roberto admitted that in relation to his identity, Spanish is “a real big piece that’s missing.” Roberto’s parents did not raise him speaking Spanish, but like the rest of the respondents, he identified himself as a speaker of both Spanish and English.

Zentella (1997) takes note of the diversity in language within U.S. Puerto Rican communities and describes how U.S. Puerto Rican identities are being reconceptualized in relation to language. Spanish as a spoken language is de-emphasized as an indispensable element of U.S. Puerto Rican identity formation. In my case, because I assume that my Spanish language ability will always be questioned, I often identify and communicate my puertorriqueñidad through my choice of music and dance — salsa. Similarly, all of my informants connected salsa with their puertorriqueñidad, with Roberto identifying salsa as a way in which he has reclaimed the Spanish language:

The only... person I did understand and would listen to was my grandmother. Everyone else was, like, it could’ve been French or German, you know, for all I know (pause) as a kid. And as I got older, what really got me understanding it [Spanish] was when I got into salsa, which was around 7th grade, 6th grade. I started listening to salsa and stuff
and then I got more interested and wanted to know what they were saying... I was mimicking the words, singing along. I didn't know what the hell I was saying, so I'd ask my father what was goin' on.

Interestingly, through music, Roberto's *colao* subjectivity is also vocalized and reverberated. During a visit to Chicago, Roberto invited me to a downtown nightclub where the band he was playing with was performing. As evening turned into morning, the band played their last *merengue* of the night and musicians were introduced to the dancing crowd by name and nationality for their solos. When the saxophone section was highlighted, Roberto was presented to the audience: “y de México y Puerto Rico” [and from Mexico and Puerto Rico]. In this public setting he identifies and is identified as both.

Through the course of these interviews, observations and analysis of the data, I came to see that my informants redefine, for themselves, what it means to be Puerto Rican and Mexican in Chicago by linking identity formation not only to family and language, but also to their neighborhoods, their educational experiences, and their circle of friends and acquaintances:

I grew up... with my mother's side of the family who was Puerto Rican and we lived in Humboldt which was Puerto Rican and I went to a predominantly Puerto Rican high school... A good number of my friends are Puerto Rican... So that's why usually when I identify I say, and it's usually in that order Puerto Rican and Mexican cause I grew up more, I identify with both, but I grew up with... the Puerto Rican culture (Miguel).

For Miguel, the sequence was of particular significant when he stated why he identifies as "Puerto Rican and Mexican." He was adamant in his response to my inquiry on whether he changes how he identifies depending on where he is: “I always claim both and I always claim them in that order. And if... it’s a circle of *mexicanos*, you know what I’m sayin’ and depending on... the nationalism, ...they might say why don't you identify as Mexican and I'll tell them exactly that: ‘You know what, because I grew up around my mom's side of the family.’” Miguel bases his identity on who he grew up with and where he grew up: Humboldt Park, which has become synonymous with Puerto Rican identity. Humboldt Park, along with the adjacent areas of West Town and Logan Square (located on the Near Northwest Side) is commonly referred to as “the Puerto Rican community” in Chicago, even though my informants’ lived experiences indicate that historically Mexicans have lived side by side with Puerto Ricans in this area (see Martinez 1989). More recently, with the establishment of *Paseo Boricua*, Humboldt Park’s association as a social, cultural, and political space where Puerto Ricanness is expressed and performed has been strengthened.

Upon revealing more details about his life, I learned that besides residing mainly in and around Humboldt Park, Miguel also lived in the state of California for a few years during his early adolescence. Living in California he had the opportunity to visit with paternal relatives in Tijuana. In 1997 he returned to California to spend time with his father and they drove from Los Angeles to Jalisco, his father’s hometown. While Miguel has traveled to Mexico repeatedly, I was surprised to discover that he had never been to Puerto Rico. He even mentioned that his mother has asked him when is he going to finally visit *la isla*. While he does have intentions of going to Puerto Rico, he stated that the opportunity has not presented itself yet. Miguel’s leading comments
about acknowledging his colao identity—purposefully recognizing the Puerto Rican first—could lead one to presume that he had little or no contact with his Mexican side. However, later details about life show that Miguel presented an agua representation of his Mexican identity, one that while present might be overlooked or dismissed because it is enunciated from a cargao Puerto Rican position, a position historically informed by his ordinary day-to-day existence.

When were just getting’ down to it and talkin’, I’m Puerto Rican... I mean that’s where I grew up, what I also know. I didn’t really start recognizing my Mexican side until... the middle of high school. Other than, before that, all through grade school and everything, I just saw myself as Puerto Rican. Although I never denied, I said, “Yeah, I’m Puerto Rican and Mexican,” but my reality is one as a Puerto Rican (Roberto).

I don’t deny [being Puerto Rican and Mexican], but since I wasn’t raised with him [her father] and in the culture, I don’t know. I mean, I studied the history and that’s as good as it gets for me as far as identifying with being Mexican (Olivia).

I was... born and raised in the Puerto Rican community and eating Puerto Rican foods, speaking Puerto Rican Spanish and... then Humboldt Park, that’s being Puerto Rican to me.

During the course of his interview, Roberto shared that he has cousins and a few friends that are also of Puerto Rican and Mexican parentage. As stated earlier, members of this interLatino generation are the products of neighborhoods where many Puerto Ricans and Mexicans inhabited the same residential and social spaces. Notwithstanding this reality, the majority of Roberto’s friends are Puerto Rican, and almost all of them tend to perceive him as “just Puerto Rican.” As his quote illustrates, even though in public and private spaces Roberto is colando-ing himself as both Puerto Rican and Mexican, his process of identity formation is cargao towards Puerto Ricanness, resulting in a Puerto Ricanized Mexicanness.

Olivia notes that she has more Puerto Rican friends than Mexican ones and, like Miguel, acknowledges that where she lives impacts with whom she has relationships. She remembered having denied being Mexican as a child because Mexican girls in Humboldt Park were teased, called tortillas, a term which signified their Mexicanness and marked them as Other. Olivia’s mother often interceded, reminding her daughter that denial was not right. Similar to Chabram Dernersesian’s Chicana mother, Olivia’s Puerto Rican mother always tried to instill in her daughter pride for her Mexican heritage. Had she lived in Pilsen, Olivia asserted, she would have had more Mexican friends. The areas of Pilsen and Little Village, on the Chicago’s South Side, are considered the heart of “the Mexican community.” Upon leaving Humboldt Park to attend the University of Illinois, where Mexican students are the largest group in the Latino population, Olivia se coló and came to develop friendships with Mexicans. She also came to know more about her Mexican self. Before her university experience, Olivia resented her Mexicanness because of her strained relationship with her father. During and after her university experience being Mexican transcended her father. Yet and still, her Mexicanness, similar to Roberto’s, is informed primarily by her Puerto Rican identity.
In her youth, Raquel and her family lived near her father's side of the family, resulting in more frequent interactions with Puerto Ricans. As she became older, her mother's family had a greater presence and Mexicanness was predominant in her life. Although in her formative years the Mexican side of the family primarily influenced Raquel's identity, her Puerto Rican father still remained present, even after her parents divorced:

Whether or not, ...like I said, my mother's Mexican, ...influenced me, or had a bigger, I dunno, part in my identity, I think that both of them still made me who I am and, ...not only that but I think that I am very lucky to have been able to share'm both (Raquel).

For Raquel, there have been times when she has identified as only Puerto Rican or only Mexican, aquando ("watering down") elements of her Puerto Ricanness or Mexicanness because it was easier than explaining her interLatino self. She elaborated that in predominantly Mexicans settings, if she is with new acquaintances or people she will probably never see again, instead of explaining her colao subjectivity by asserting "my father's Puerto Rican and my mother's Mexican," she identifies as Mexican. Moreover, based on previous experience, when she is in a Mexican ambience her Puerto Rican identity is usually erased. The inverse erasure takes place in Puerto Rican circles. These experiences depict the ways in which Raquel is included while simultaneously excluded from certain circles.

Returning to part of Olivia's introductory quote, "Hey, you look Mexican but you act Puerto Rican," she feels the saliency of her colao subjectivity rather than the erase. Olivia has been doubly racialized by others based on her physical appearance—"You look Mexican"—and her comportment—"You act Puerto Rican." The major disadvantage Olivia proclaimed in being both Puerto Rican and Mexican is the jesting comments at her expense. She states, "I'll have Mexicans telling me... shame on me that I don't know, that I could've... gone to Mexico already. That I chose, you know, I had chosen not to. That's not really the case.... And all the time I go to Puerto Rico, its like mojá. I'm the mojá, I'm the prieta,... cause my family is light skinned." Olivia believes that because she "looks Mexican," Mexicans might be more sympathetic towards her. She claims her Mexicanness even though she does not think that she can really relate to being Mexican. The most difficult part is having to justify these sentiments. Olivia's racialization as a Mexican by her Puerto Rican family is also packed within a discourse of citizenship and "illegality" (Ramos-Zayas Forthcoming). By referring to her as the mojá and the prieta, Olivia is defamiliarized as Puerto Rican through connections made between Mexicanness and being undocumented in the U.S. This is accompanied by Olivia's "blackness" coming from outside of the Island since her Puerto Rican family is considered "light skinned."

Olivia's mother (Puerto Rican) and her father (Mexican) came to know each other during a Latin American Task Force organizing initiative that sought to recruit Latino electricians in Pilsen. Such personal relationships and the products of those relationships have significant potential for politically organizing Latinos. In the mid-1980s the Latino Institute of Chicago issued the report Al filo/The cutting edge: The empowerment of the latino electorate (1986), which pointed to the study of "Mixed Latinos" and political processes as "innovative and particularly worthy of discussion in further detail" (7). The report very briefly contemplates the significance of the growing number of "Mixed Latinos" in regard to the political empowerment of Latinos in the City. While political as well as social and cultural arenas are worthwhile sites for the study of
*latinidad*, they overshadow the daily interactions between Latinos of diverse national backgrounds, which serve as the building blocks for political, social, and cultural movements.

Despite the fact that Olivia’s parents met through an organized initiative for Latinos, her mixed cultural existence goes beyond that formal encounter. The parents of my informants all met in various settings within the city of Chicago, affirming everyday interactions between these two groups. Interactions that deserve scholarly attention include the request found in the June 1957 editorial of *La Vida Latina*, “the only Spanish and English magazine in the Midwest,” in which the editorial asked readers to actively welcome new Puerto Rican migrants and Mexican (im)migrants to Chicago. Some of the suggestions put forth in the editorial were to smile and say “*Halo,*” inform newcomers where they could go to church and find jobs, and invite them to join social clubs. Most important, it was said, newcomers should be made to feel that they are part of a community (Martinez 1989: 151). Manifestations of *latinidad*, both official and unofficial, I argue, begin with these ordinary exchanges between Latinos of diverse ethnoracial backgrounds.

Highlighting the lived experiences of Olivia, Rosario, Miguel, Roberto, and Raquel affords a means to destabilize homogenizing tendencies oftentimes located in constructions of *latinidad* and serves as an approach to understand how individuals engage in reflecting on processes of social change and identity formation in their everyday lives. Building upon the work of Elena Padilla with the concept of *colao*, I have illustrated the ways people negotiate nationalist tensions within interLatino spaces. In exploring the lives of individuals who are the product of two cultural and national identities, it would be assumed that they identify as half-and-half (50/50), as many do. Nevertheless, in everyday life these identities are never played out evenly. Instead, they are constituted within representation whereby identity formation embodies how one perceives oneself as well as how one is seen by others. For example, as I conducted my ethnographic interviews, I caught myself, more than once, referring to my informants as “just Puerto Rican” or framing my questions in ways that privileged their Puerto Rican identity. Moreover, life changes within informants’ immediate families impacted relationships with other family members, the areas in which they have lived, and the ways in which they self-identify. Roberto’s parents, for instance, are the only couple still together; all other marriages/relationships ended in divorce or separation. As a result of these life experiences, many of the individuals I interviewed provide testimonials as to the diverse, uneasy, but rewarding ways in which they have grown up bilingual and bicultural. The interviews show that identities are historically informed—by personal and family histories as well as texts—even as they transform the nature and content of what is traditionally deemed as Puerto Rican, Mexican, and even Latino.
NOTES

1 In this essay I use the concept of subjectivities in two ways: (1) to recognize my informants as actors and agents in constructing their identities and this narrative; (2) to refer to how individuals articulate themselves (the self) through language.

2 All names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.

3 A broad definition of the term “Latino” encompasses peoples living in the U.S. who are descendants of Spanish-speaking nations in the Americas. In this essay the designator Latinas/os is used specifically to describe people who identify and/or are identified as Puerto Rican, Mexican, and as both Puerto Rican and Mexican. See Oboler (1995) for a more in-depth discussion of the term Latino.

4 I use the terms Puerto Ricanized Mexicanness and Mexicanized Puerto Ricanness in reference to the ways in which Mexican identities are informed and can come to be understood by engagements with Puerto Rican culture as well as how Puerto Rican identities are impacted and understood in relation to Mexican culture.

5 Abu-Lughod’s essay rethinks the value of the concept of culture and the barrier between self and other on which the concept depends. She suggests that “writing ethnographies of the particular” is one way to undermine the process of othering because it would demonstrate the ordinariness of those classified as other.

6 Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman use tropicalizations to explore tranculturations between dominant and subordinate cultures in the same colonial context. I use their theoretical concept to examine two groups that are considered part of the subordinate sector in relation to a “dominant culture” in the US.

7 Working with Hall’s notion that identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being,’” Ang examines theoretical debates concerning cultural identity, seen either as dynamic and future oriented or as inert and historically cemented. Simply put, he seeks to address “both the necessity and ‘impossibility’ of identities” (2). Ang employs the phrase “absolute antagonism” to explore the extreme manner relationships are supposedly played out between those who seek Australia to be perceived as multicultural and cosmopolitan versus those who struggle to uphold an “old-fashioned” traditional (white) Australian national identity.

8 I am aware that in Chicago there are more than these two groups that lay claim to latinidad. Yet, I am focusing my analysis on these two groups for now. As part of a larger project, I aim to examine the impact of Cubans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Dominicans on the latinidad constructed by Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in Chicago. Puerto Ricans are identified as migrants since they are U.S. citizens by declaration of the Jones Act in 1917. Therefore they do not need documentation to travel or permanently move from Puerto Rico to the U.S. In the case of Mexicans I use the classification (im)migrant to acknowledge that Mexicans are considered both immigrants and migrants for a few reasons: (i) it recognizes the diversity of citizenship status among Mexicans and descendants of Mexicans/Mexico in the U.S.; (2) it highlights the internal migration that takes place among Mexican immigrants in the U.S. I do not use the terms Mexican American or Chicano because none of my informants used either of these terms in self-identifying.

9 Washburn, Hispanics increase city’s population: Chicago has 1st gain in decades, Chicago Tribune, March 15, 2001.

10 These types of discussions were most recently observed at a symposium on Latino Studies and Popular Cultures at the University of Michigan. There were a few moments during the question-and-answer period of the presentations when comments were made about how to bridge Chicano Studies and Puerto Rican Studies and how to make connections between lived experiences—“What happens when these two meet?” “How do we put
them in dialogue with one another?" Ironically, while the symposium was located in the Midwest, none of the comments turned to the example of the Midwest as a possible locus of these encounters and dialogues.

11 In her effort to rehistoricize the discipline of anthropology, Torres (1999) reviews and critically assesses the work and contributions of Elena Padilla to the field.

12 Similar models of race, ethnicity, and national identity have been explored in the Caribbean by a host of scholars. They have used metaphors that range from café con leche to callaloo (Wright 1990; Price and Price 1997; Torres 1998)

13 Gerald Suttles’ (1968) work on race, ethnicity, and territoriality briefly mentioned the presence of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in this area of the Near West Side.

14 Making a similar observation about the presence of Mexicans in Humboldt Park, Gina Pérez (2000: 205) writes: “Despite a long history of residential integration, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans tend to be spatially identified with the South (Pilsen and La Villita) and North (Humboldt Park) sides of Chicago.”

Presently, of the 48 percent of Humboldt Park’s residents identified as Latino, about 50 percent are Mexican (2000 Census). In 1990, Mexicans made up about 38 percent of Humboldt Park’s Latino residents (43 percent) (1990 Census), and the 1980 census indicates that of the 41 percent of “Spanish-speaking” residents in Humboldt Park 31 percent were identified as Mexican (1980 Census). Interestingly, currently Mexicans constitute .3 percent of Puerto Rico’s Latino population (98.8 percent).

15 Paseo Boricua is a residential, commercial, political, and cultural strip along Division Street, between Western and California, designated by the presence of two gargantuan steel Puerto Rican flags marking its entrance and exit. For a more detailed discussion about Paseo Boricua as a cultural, political, and economic space see Ramos-Zayas (Forthcoming) and Flores-Gonzalez (2001).

REFERENCES:


