

Deconstructing the Myth of the Pan-Latino Experience

by Víctor Santana-Melgoza

After working and living in several parts of the country, I am more and more convinced that there needs to be a better way of deconstructing the myth of the pan-Latino experience. Issues of class, language, generational status and familial country of origin all play significant factors in the way Latinos experience their lives in the U.S. With that said, there is also something unique about sharing a common ancestry that has the ability to transcend these issues and open the possibility up to multiple realities within the same experience. Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie does a brilliant job of sharing her ideas on the dangers of a single story. During my time at the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP), I became keenly aware of multiple realities for those who identified as members of the Latino experience.

The Great Divide

The Río Grande (or Río Bravo, depending on what side of the river you stand on) has long served as the dividing line between the countries of the United States and México. Yet this small river, less than a mile wide, earns its “grand” title by the separation it has caused a group of people that share the same heritage and origin. The Latin cultures that exist on both sides of the El Paso/Cd. Juárez border region have developed a noticeably different flavor from one another. Deriving from the same tradition, the people from this region often view each other as strangers living in the same land.

At UTEP, the juxtaposition of the two cultures becomes alive and sometimes painfully evident

to all those involved. The university sits on one of the largest international borders in the world and boasts one of the largest minority/majority Latin student populations in the country. According to the *University 2008-2009 Fact Book*, published by the Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning, out of more than 20,000 students, 75 percent (15,368) are self-identified Hispanic, and an additional 8 percent (1,579) of students come from México. But with an overwhelming Latino majority, there is not always a consensus on what Latino exactly means to the students at UTEP. Issues of language, dress and distribution of wealth, along with the very real issue of immigration, have all contributed to a culture that separates the United States and México, even on campus.

According to Dr. Josiah Heyman, chair of the sociology and anthropology department at UTEP, there have always been tensions that exist along borders throughout the world. Heyman says the tension among students exists for socioeconomic reasons. Most U.S.-born Latino students stereotype Mexican students as wealthy. Because of social mores that exist on both sides of the border, students have to renegotiate perceptions when confronted with a person that may look the same but has different ideas of self-identity.

Heyman explains that in México, socioeconomic layers are clearly defined and dictate social customs. According to Heyman, because class is the social stratum in which people are segmented, the wealthy students that come to UTEP carry those customs into the U.S. Heyman adds that in México, people at the upper eche-



lons of society are almost required to display their wealth through dress and behavior.

This tradition comes into conflict when confronted by fellow Latinos who have adopted a more egalitarian point of view found in American culture. Sociologist Dr. Pablo Vila, a former faculty member at UTEP who currently teaches at Temple University, studied border cultural phenomena both in the Paso del Norte region and in South America. Vila claimed that

one way people describe themselves is by contrasting how they describe others. For example, part of the way Mexicans view themselves is by what they are not, specifically American. Adopting American culture and customs would be a betrayal of one's nationalistic identity, and the same can be said of U.S. Americans.

According to Heyman, when members of the same assumed culture come into contact, they meet reflecting their own national identity that includes customs and views of the world. Additionally, Mexican-Americans, especially those who are multigenerational, have inner turmoil when defining "Latino" culture. Vila argues they tend to hold on to a past utopian idea of Mexican culture and value the old-world customs of family and tradition, but regard the current life of México as backward and poor, falling into a discrepancy.

This feeling of discrepancy is the case for Christopher Sánchez, a UTEP alumnus who received his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. The fourth generation to be born in the United States, Sánchez says he feels ashamed of his Mexican ancestry and became annoyed growing up when people assumed aspects of his background that weren't true. Raised by parents who were both professionals, one of whom is White, Sánchez was raised in middle-class U.S. society and never spoke Spanish in the home. The regular question of "*¿Y por qué no (hablas Español)?*" from native Spanish speakers was a constant source of frustration. After arriving at UTEP, he felt a need to connect to his Mexican roots and made efforts to learn Spanish.

While Giselle Aguilar, another UTEP alumnus, who received her degree in civil engineering, would never refer to her home country of México as backward, she does recognize differences in Mexican and U.S. cultures. Aguilar says that Mexican culture is generally more conservative than that of the U.S. but finds Mexicans have more fun all around. "We're funny. We're the type of people that tell a lot of jokes. We're not as serious as Americans," said Aguilar. She also says race is not the primary focus in México as it can be in the U.S. "We don't worry about being politically correct or about offending people because of their race." Aguilar confirmed the socioeconomic divide is what separates people in México much more than skin color.

Lizeth Vásquez, a former MPA student at UTEP, knows what it's like on both sides of the border. Born in El Paso and raised in Cd. Juárez, she describes herself as an embodiment of the

border region and a true Mexican-American. "My mom came over just to have me. She wanted me to be born here in the U.S. to have citizen rights," Vásquez said. Although she recognizes the dividing lines between the rich and poor in México and the racial lines that divide Americans, she sees Mexican and U.S. Latino cultures as one and the same. When asked, she finds it hard to find distinctions between the two cultures on the border.

Steven Martínez, a UTEP alumnus who now works on campus, somewhat agrees but makes a clear distinction between the United States and México. Martínez said that Cd. Juárez is not an accurate representation of Mexican culture because of its proximity to the U.S. border. "Things are so different" down in the interior of México," he said. He recently vacationed in Chihuahua City and said the general feeling of Mexican culture is clearer the farther away from the border one goes.

The Language

Division between cultures has also translated into stereotypes and terminology used to separate the two sides of the border. U.S. Latinos use several pejoratives to describe Mexicans. In El Paso, "fronchi" (a shortened term from "Frontera Chihuahua") is used to describe any person from the border region of México. "Fresa" is another pejorative used to describe Mexican women. The classic "fresa" stereotype is one of wealth, provocative dress and a self-absorbed demeanor.

The culture south of the border is as equally guilty of perpetuating stereotypes that help further drive a wedge between the two cultures. Typically, U.S. Latinos are thought to belong to neither the U.S. nor México. The Spanish word "*pocho*" is used as a pejorative to describe Mexicans born and/or raised in the United States. Another term, "*mojado*," translates to wetback. Since a large majority of Mexican immigrants come from very low economic backgrounds, Mexicans use this term to make fun of the image of the new immigrant taking pride in gaining employment in America as a janitor or doing other custodial work. "*Malinchismo*" is another term used by Mexicans to describe U.S. Latinos that do not show pride for México. The word has historical roots. The Aztec lover of Hernán Cortés, La Malinche, was adopted as a term for all who betray their own race and roots to become something else.

On Campus

The theme of multiple realities continues when discussing one particular building on campus. The Liberal Arts Building (LAB) is dubbed "Little México" by some and "*La Bardita*" by others. The entrance to the LAB is known as a social landmark and a hotbed of tension between U.S. Latinos and Mexicans. While attempting to navigate through the crowd, U.S. Latino students have long complained about how they are treated by the Mexican students who hang out between classes. Vásquez said she received intimidating glares and a general sense of disregard from her peers on her way to class. "I speak Spanish fluently, but they assume I don't because I look American," said Vásquez. "They all smoke; they all have those walkie-talkie phones, and they all use the word "*guey*."

On the flip side, Mexican students say that most who hang out in front of the LAB are first-year students and don't accurately represent the entire population. Students also say the reason they hang out in that particular area is to build a network of friends. Coming from another country, Mexican students say they feel isolated from the social majority and feel the need to connect with the familiar. Another reason the students point out is class schedule. Most, if not all, students from México are required to take ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, which are all taught in the LAB.

The Economic Facts

One perception that persists is that all students from México come from affluent families. Heyman gives credence to this argument, stating that the average Mexican does not have a border-crossing card and that very few Mexicans are fortunate enough to receive a college education or the chance to earn their degree in a different country. Daniel Fuentes, a former economics student, admitted he is part of the privileged few able to receive an education in the United States. "We are part of the elite since less than 1 percent of the population goes to university," he said. Although Fuentes is grateful to be among the few in his country to receive the opportunity, he argues that not everyone, including himself, is part of the affluent class in México. He referred to a friend who was forced to bike to school from Cd. Juárez because neither he nor his family owned a car. Fuentes also explained he was only able to attend UTEP because of several financial breaks, one being PASE (Programa de Asistencia Estudiantil/Program of Student Aid).

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Through PASE, Fuentes was able to receive a scholarship, and he worked part time. His parents offered what financial assistance they could to cover the rest of his expenses.

PASE, approved in 1987 by the Texas Legislature, assists Mexican students by allowing them to pay in-state tuition if they prove financial need. Nick Zweig, former director of the Office of International Programs and current experiential experience coordinator, said that even with programs such as PASE, the number of Mexican students able to receive an American education is limited.

"Mexicans are not eligible for financial aid, and with the discrepancy of wages in México, it's actually harder for the average Mexican to receive a college education," Zweig said. To qualify for PASE, students must fit between two categories; they must show they would be able to pay for college, but not if they had to pay out-of-state tuition. Zweig explained that the roughly 1,500 Mexican students enrolled in PASE must still pay semester by semester — and have very limited working opportunities on and off campus.

A Complex Reality

With the barrage of opinions, stereotypes and misperceptions between these two factions, one may think that Mexicans and U.S.-born Latinos never interact in a positive way. The truth is quite different. Students on both sides of the border do befriend one another and have collaborated on common goals. Vásquez remembered the mass walkouts that overcame the city in 2006 during the immigration debate over House Bill H.R. 4437, when both Chicano activist student groups such as MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlán) and MexSA (Mexican Student Association) marched side by side in protest of the proposed bill.

Other students said they found benefits in making friends with students from across the border. Sánchez said he learned new aspects of El Paso's sister city from the friends he made in his engineering classes. He said that due to the volume of Mexican students enrolled in the engineering program, he could understand what it must feel like to be a minority. "In study groups, I'm often the only guy who doesn't speak Spanish," Sánchez said.

The river that divides the El Paso/Cd. Juárez border is more than a small stream cutting through a large metropolis; it is a visual barrier that has separated a people who share many common values, traditions, beliefs and pride in

their heritage. The two Latin cultures that have developed along the banks of the river reflect both the good and the bad of both countries. Heyman explains that stereotypes "take some realities and make them the entire truth," which they are not. He said that reality is more complex than one or two simple descriptions of a people. The tensions that have arisen between U.S. Latinos and Mexicans often develop out of a snapshot of the culture and neglect a holistic approach. Heyman explains, "To stereotype captures some realities but also misses something greater."

En Breve

A pesar de que la distancia que nos divide es muy corta y de tener las mismas raíces la separación entre mexicanos y mexico-americanos en esta comunidad es muy notoria. La Universidad de Texas en El Paso es uno de los sitios que día a día reúne a los estudiantes de Cd. Juárez y El Paso y es aquí mismo donde encontramos tan notoria separación. Términos como "fronchi, fresa, pocho y malinchista" se han creado a través de los años, para de alguna manera describir dichas diferencias.

Según el Dr. Josiah Heyman, director del departamento de sociología en UTEP, muchas de estas diferencias se derivan de razones socioeconómicas, ya que en México a diferencia de los Estados Unidos, las clases sociales están muy marcadas.

Christopher Sánchez, quien a pesar de formar parte de la cuarta generación de su familia que nace en Estados Unidos, sigue conservando rasgos físicos de sus ancestros mexicanos. A Chris le resulta frustrante cuando compañeros de clase le preguntan que por qué no habla español. Jamás ha hablado español en su casa y a pesar de que solía avergonzarse de sus raíces, el convivir con estudiantes mexicanos en UTEP le ha hecho entender más de su cultura.

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