Editorial

Revisting Latino identity

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On 23 September 2013, the Dominican Republic's (DR) Constitutional Court decreed that a 2004 law annulling birthright citizenship in that country would be extended retroactively to anyone born to non-citizens since 1929. This draconian ruling may impact more than 200,000 people, mainly Haitians, who will be effectively rendered stateless. Rightly so, this appalling decision has generated an outraged response from observers in the United States and abroad.¹

Here, I call your attention to how some of their countrymen responded to Dominican-American Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez' contributions to this debate when they dared to publically condemn the denationalization of the DR's Haitian-descended citizens. Various government apologists and defenders of this hateful decision quickly denounced them as inauthentic Dominicans who had no right to comment on this matter. As is unfortunately all too common, Latinos (both native and ancestral) of all nationalities who go against dictates of homeland elites are striped of their transnational identity, deemed inauthentic and pronounced unqualified to address controversial issues in the homeland. Such a move allows the pundits to deflect attention from contentious matters. Ironically, despite the claim that we exist in a post-identity era, in this case, both the deflection of the issue at hand, the racist denationalization of Haitians and the repudiation of Latino writers' right to speak on matters of national importance serve to remind us of the persistence of debates of belonging and identity in our culture and in our field.

As I considered the essays in the current issue of *Latino Studies*, I was struck by the degree to which, while not necessarily focused exclusively on it, all of the essays, in one way or another, take up questions of the complexity of identity as it plays out in Latino lives.

For example, in his reading of the work of Ernesto Quiñónez and other Latino authors, E. Domínguez Barajas finds that ethnic identity is still crucially important; he argues that the influence of ethnicity on the lives and life chances of Latinos continues to be a driving motif in Latino fiction. Understanding how ethnicity operates to constrain opportunities very much occupies Latino writing projects and calls into question narratives of individualistic bootstrap progress and fantasies of justice and equality for all. As Barajas asserts, blind acceptance of

1 See in particular the guest commentary by Silvio Salliant Torres on the National Institute for Latino Policy Website at myemail.constantcontact.com/NiLP-Guest-Commentary-Denationalizing-Dominicans-of-Haitian-Ancestry.html?soid=1101040629095&caid=u5E6yQBjdpU.

such false myths minimizes the continual existence of ethnic subordination as realized through both structural discrimination and micro aggressions. Similarly, through her reading of Helena Viramontes' stunning novel *Their Dogs Came with Them*, and specifically Turtle, the novel's genderqueer, racialized main character, Jackie Cuevas highlights Viramontes' challenging of heteronormative conventions of assimilation. Cuevas demonstrates that Viramontes "propels Latin@s into a queer time and place" that leads us to revisit sanitized narratives of Chican@ history as well as singular and narrow notions of Latino identity and paths to progress.

Questions of identity figure prominently in the essays by Christopher Rivera and Julián Jefferies. In recent decades, within the context of our unremitting obsession with immigration and economic and national security, Latinos have consistently been narrativized as a threat. Rivera and Jefferies unpack variations of this familiar trope prominent in mainstream media. Rivera introduces the idea of the "Brown Threat" whereby Latinos and Middle Eastern Muslims are conflated and read as terrorists and foreign subjects in the American imagination. As he states, "Whether because of fears of economic security or national security, the brown body has been marked in Western culture as the newest public enemy number one." In his contribution, Jefferies demonstrates that despite the Supreme Court's *Plyler v. Doe* decision that held that states cannot deny immigrant children a public school education, laws and policies continue to construct young immigrants as "illegal" subjects in the state of Massachusetts (and across the United States) by discouraging children from pursuing an education and drawing them into the low-wage labor force.

Mirelsie Velasquez documents how Puerto Ricans in Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s created space for themselves in print media. Through the Young Lords' publications, the conservative newspaper *El Puertorriqueño* and the scholarly journal *The Rican*, visible Puerto Rican identities were forged and propagated. The different ideologies and political postures evident across these venues typify the richness and diversity found in all Latino communities. In their own way, the Young Lords' Publications, *El Puertorriqueño* and *The Rican* each gave readers an opportunity to experience the range of identities inhabited by Puerto Rican Chicago residents: activists, students, scholars, as well as business people, poets, prisoners, mothers and fathers. Although these print media were primarily Puerto Rican spaces, they also, to various degrees, articulated linkages between the struggles of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos such as Chicanos.

Finally, pointedly challenging those who think that Latinos in the United States have no right to speak about their native or ancestral homelands, Mermann-Jozwiak, demonstrates how Latino authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Francisco Goldman, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Luis Sánchez and Helena María Viramontes, carve out a "Latinist" space in their works and claim a transnational identity, specifically by calling attention to histories of migration and the creation of transnational sites across the United States. In response to politicians, critics or

marketers who struggle to define Latinidad in simplistic ways for their own purposes, the articles in this issue invite us to resist monolithic renderings of Latino identity and begin to unravel its multiple and complex manifestations.

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