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An Exploration into Panethnic Identity: A Bottom-Up Examination of Latin American Migration and Belonging in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the idea of a panethnic identity, and the specific Latin American migration experiences that contradict and reinforce it. While Cristina Mora's *Making Hispanics* argues the rise of a unified "Hispanic" identity is mainly due to the intersection of lobbyists and advocacy attempts to gain a wider base, this article challenges that top-down framework by exploring the nuanced experiences of migrants from Mexico, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Through a more bottom-up approach and analysis of migration routes, U.S. immigration policy, and sociopolitical treatment *within* the US, the research reveals both the unifying and fragmenting influences on Hispanic identity. Shared difficulties across countries like family separation and systemic exclusion strengthen panethnicity, yet unique situations due to distance, legal treatment, and racial identity fracture the notion of a cohesive Hispanic identity. I argue that panethnic identity functions less as a shared cultural reality than as a contingent political framework—one that fractures under differentiated legal treatment and social expulsion. Recognizing these fractures is essential for more accurate sociological analysis, equitable policy design, and meaningful representation.

Keywords: Panethnicity; Hispanic; Bureaucracy; Migration; Immigration; Policy

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, Latin American identity is often grouped as a single unified category, often in the Americo-centric perspective of southern hemisphere immigration. The term 'Hispanic' itself has a history in the context of this phenomenon. Cristina Mora in *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats & Media Constructed a New American,* (1) delves into the broad generalization present when the term *Hispanic* is invoked. Mora traces the increased use of the term to around 1960 and became widely accepted by 1990. In making this argument, Mora looks primarily at both advocacy groups and the federal government as they both grouped together people from Latin America for their own benefit during this time period. Although both groups acted independently at first, this devolved into a mutually beneficial partnership where both private actors and government agencies helped broaden and create this panethnic movement (1). While many Latin American immigration experiences cross national borders, lived experiences can vary drastically depending on region, distance and specific migration policy from the US (2-4). Alongside the fact that Hispanic is a relatively new term, the strength of a pan-ethnic identity is questionable,

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especially in the modern day as further immigration from Latin America complicates the Latin American diaspora in the US (2, 3). This begs the question of the strength of this panethnic national identity, and what helps solidify or contradict it.

Mora's extensive research creates a foundation for understanding the development of Hispanic identity; however, it does not fully account for the complexities undermining the panethnic categorization. Mora's top-down approach leads to an unsatisfying conclusion as to whether a pan ethnic identity exists because it only really demonstrates that people will embrace it when there is an explicit benefit. For example, Mora talks about the formation of a pan-ethnic identity through efforts taken by Civil Rights organizations, the Census Bureau, and media companies, all of which had a strong incentive to inflate the number of people they represented and thus, actively worked to group Latinos together to boost their numbers. For a thorough examination on such a complex diaspora, a more extensive examination is required, one that I aim to conduct in this article. Namely, a closer examination of Latin American groups in the US from: the story of their migration, US policy applied to them, their participation in electoral politics, and their lives within the US, as to provide a clearer view of the potential similarities and differences between the Latin American groups. This bottom-up approach provides a clearer picture on the extent to which a panethnic identity is accepted among Latin Americans in the US.

In this article, I delve into four separate regions with both their similarities and differences in migration pathways and treatments: México, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Cuba. I look at patterns across regions, unique circumstances within certain countries, and their experiences in the US.

While regional and migration experiences can serve to create a shared identity, does the close examination of Latin American migrants in this context demonstrate a common culture that *overcomes* potentially different regional and migration experiences, like Mora argues, or are national differences too strong to effectively write them off under a pan-ethnic identity? While the idea of a panethnic identity is not entirely refuted, this article poses the argument for the latter, arguing that Hispanic panethnicity is not a valid social identity naturally experienced by Latin American migrants, but rather a framework *strategically* shaped by similar cultures and experiences; different migration histories, unique cultural differences, and legal statuses within the United States, invalidate the idea of one true Hispanic identity.

DIVERGENT LEGAL PATHWAYS

The most consequential fractures in Hispanic panethnicity emerge from unequal U.S. immigration policy. Namely, the different legal statuses given to Latin Americans of different countries shapes their experiences in the US. These experiences create diverging political desires among Latin Americans that are more closely charted along national lines instead of fueling a pan-ethnic coalition (2, 4).

One of the most significant contradictions arises from the differences in U.S. legal treatment, and while the tendency to group Latin American immigration together was mentioned previously, many clear preferential or targeted treatment does arise. Cuban migrants, for example, benefited from unique diplomatic conditions, while El Salvador is not included in these privileges (2). To this day, the U.S. government continues to refuse to recognize Salvadorans as victims of geopolitics, making them ineligible for most legal protections but creating categories that are neither citizen or resident but also not undocumented (2).

Meanwhile, Cubans, as Cold War exiles, often had faster access to legal residency and a special refugee status tied to Cuba being a communist nation, while Salvadorans cycled through TPS renewals, mass deportations, and harder access to permanent residency (2). TPS allowed many Salvadorans to legally live and work in the U.S. temporarily, however it did not provide a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship. While Salvadorans faced legal struggle, Cubans received substantial assistance, as they were fleeing a *communist* hostile state, especially during the Cold War (2). "Laws were bent if not broken to accommodate them," and the Cuban Refugee Program invested more than nine hundred million dollars for these migrants, not just for the refugees themselves but also to cushion the local economies with the financial burden of the newcomers (2). This investment in Cuban refugees has not been extended to any other refugee or migrant group from Latin America.

Mexican migrants were also targeted through employer sanctions, as the greatest fraction of the agricultural labor force, unparalleled and disproportionate to the labor force makeup from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the farther countries (3). US policy on Mexican migration has hardened making it nearly impossible for most Mexicans to migrate legally to the US despite having a history of doing so (3). Namely, the Bracero Program which ran from 1942-1965 created a legal pathway for

Mexican laborers to work cyclically in the US. The program's termination in 1965 did not include a plan to fulfill labor demands in the US Southwest fulfilled by Mexican laborers or a remedy to economic need that spurred Mexican migration in the first place (3). The next big immigration policy that impacted Mexican migration was the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. This act targeted illegal immigration by both restricting passage and allowing for an easier legalization process for working migrants. The goal was to decrease the number of undocumented people in the U.S, yet it failed to successfully curb illegal migration (5).

Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration, by Ana Raquel Minian covers the unequal treatment Mexican migrants felt. She argued that although "legalization encouraged Mexicans to move north permanently", the number of those without legal status only grew; in 1986, 3.2 million undocumented grew to 5 million in 1996, and 11 million in 2006 (3). A key factor to the shortfall of President Reagan's policy was the lack of understanding between legislators and immigration patterns. For one, the constant changes of policy dissuaded Mexicans from 'circular migration' or reentering and leaving the U.S. less desirable, so permanent residence was elected, contrasting with Cuban and Central American migrants who benefited from being able to reside permanently in the US with a legal status that authorized them to work in the U.S. (3). This uneven policy relationship has assisted in greater legal stability for Cubans and some Central Americans, because of the lack of legal authorizations to remain in the US, both Mexicans and Dominicans face greater challenges in seeking employment and being compensated fairly once employed (2, 6).

And while the societal expulsion, the sociopolitical leveraging, and the rise in border enforcement may seem typical of Latin American migration experiences throughout the southern hemisphere, it disproportionately advantaged certain respective Mexican laborers (4). In the 1980s "The administrations of Reagan and Bush insisted that those who fled the civil wars in Central America were not true refugees, but rather economically driven migrants." (2) This political framing allowed the U.S. government to deny protections to Central Americans while still facilitating economic migration from Mexico (2). Subsequently, in the 1980s, less than 5 percent of Central Americans were successful in their asylum petitions (2). Meanwhile, five years later, IRCA would grant millions of undocumented immigrants' legal status, primarily Mexicans, an immigration policy that favored Mexican migrants, but reinforced unequal treatment within Latin American countries (3).

RACIALIZATION AND UNIQUE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Christina Mora's subtitle: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American, aptly encapsulates the process of how Hispanics became a panethnic identity. Its process was gradual, born as a political strategy and quickly adopted by the people it inhabited to both of their benefits, respectively. During the period between 1960 and 1990, Mora highlights the paralleled movements that converged to develop this grouping: the federal agencies and census officials that consolidated Latin American populations to produce demographic blocs, and Mexican American advocacy groups and Spanish media who also consolidated these populations to build national networks and political influence (1). These efforts yielded results soon after. The 2012 election results had greatly reflected the purpose of this movement; a surge of 40 percent in the Hispanic population was announced by the US Census, and Hispanics voted at record highs, establishing this group as one of the most important demographics in America, at least in the context of their role in U.S. politics (1).

Yet the success of solidifying these groups as one demographic depends on the process of racialization– the reduction of heterogeneous experiences into a single category. While this grouping is optimal for some –advocacy groups gain more visibility and reach, government organizations become more efficient — it is not entirely realistic. One caveat is the divergent legal processes outlined before. Hispanic categorization simplified lived realities, which is exactly what racialization does—overrides difference– like when the US government mass deported Central Americans in the 1980s, by claiming most were illegal economic deportees who were not under regional protection, grouping those fleeing violence with job opportunists (2).

Beyond obscuring legal categorization, racialization minimizes culturally specific migration experiences. Distance, for example, creates divides in migration experiences. Mass migration from El Salvador occurred in the 1980s, (2) largely in part to their civil war and the prevalent violence that ensued. During this time, the US also heavily increased their militarization at the borders, including other non-US borders that El Salvadorians may confront on their journey (2, 4).

Militarization and stronger border enforcement is not unique to the Salvadoran migrant experience; yet the separation of families, the stories of parents traveling miles to never see or speak to their families again, and the formation of transnational families is distinct to the migrating experiences of countries far from their end home, less common for Dominican and Mexican refuge seekers.

Racialization also constrained different groups into identifying primarily under the Hispanic category, creating a false sense of identity. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, written about Santo Domingo And New York after 1950, Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof identifies Dominicans as another case in understanding the evolution of panethnicity. In the chapter "Hispanic, Whatever That's Supposed to Mean," the title derives from the growing sentiment of confusion and confrontation Dominicans felt surrounding their new citizenship and identity in the US. A Puerto Rican observed "Don't call a Dominican black… He is Hispanic, whatever that's supposed to mean" (4). In the late 60s and 70s, Dominicans, situated mainly in New York, began to focus on the new, larger society they inhabited in the U.S, and adapted to the category of 'Hispanic' largely in part to their divisions with both white and black racial groups. Hispanic offered an alternative, an "ethnicity rather than a race" (4) as name suggested, and on the censuses of both 1990s and 2000, nine out of ten Dominicans reported as either "white" or "some other race," "most frequently Dominican or Hispanic" (4) institutionalizing the panethnic identity. However, this was also a result of Dominicans, often being associated with their African American neighbors, wanting to distance themselves. Understanding Dominican neighborhood ethnic politics' (4) brings this context to light, suggesting that the deployment of 'Hispanic', was also a result of the need for "an alternative to blackness" and "Dominicans' reluctance to identify as black" (4). Some Dominicans absorbed the social identities pushed on to them, considering themselves black due to the racism they experienced or Hispanic due to the public's association of them and Puerto Ricans, regardless of the plethora of Latin American countries typically included but disregarded in local politics (4).

FRAGMENTATION OF PANETHNIC IDENTITY

The flaw of the grouping of separate cultures is obscurement of structural differences and is inherently unstable when resting on delicate social narratives. Significant differences reemerge over time, creating new difficulties and stress. This is made clear through the unequal treatment of Latin American refugees. In particular, Central Americans, who were framed as economic migrants by US officials, thereby denying them regional protections (2).

However, beyond simply legal fractures, there are social and cultural ones as well. Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof explains cultural differences, accents, and the status of being independent versus a US territory, led Dominicans to separate from fellow 'Hispanic' groups, specifically Puerto Rico (4). There were distinctions between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans themselves, down to the spice for their meat and rice, their linguistic practices, all which created cleavages in the idea of a 'Hispanic' community, even in Washington Heights (4). The label of 'Hispanic' itself carried tradeoffs, as one resident observed: "Being Hispanic might help you escape the social prejudice associated with being black, but in exchange it exposes you to the social prejudice associated with being Puerto Rican,"(4).

These perceptions hardened into stereotypes, further weakening a shared identity. Dominicans characterized Puerto Ricans as 'irresponsible', 'drug users', 'less serious', Puerto Ricans tossed in their own distinctions in press and the public, representing Dominicans as 'darker', 'foreign' 'criminal' (4). These tensions extended into local politics, as leaders, both Puerto Rican and Dominican, wedged a divide in stronger Hispano coalition building (4).

While different groups and government organizations may construct an appearance of unity, Hispanics' functionality and validity *depends* on a shared identity that these fractures undermine. These structural fractures in panethnicity risk obscuring unequal policy outcomes, and hide inequalities, rather than producing a new nationality or shared heritage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY AND SOCIAL COHESION

As Mora points out, the two spheres most responsible for creating this identity are also the ones most impacted by it (1). The government relies on this panethnic identity to collect census data that distinguish this population from other groups, while social advocacy organizations rely on the same categorization to "develop the nation's first panethnic Hispanic political advocacy groups." (1). Thus, although the category functions as an organizational and administrative tool, it lacks social coherence, and fragmentation in panethnicity must be understood to appropriately remedy the migration issues. A report from The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has proven there are extreme disparities in asylum rulings (2).

The fragility of panethnicity is not simply important to uncover for its own sake; it has implications for the groups that benefit from it. By pushing together separate migration stories into a single racialized identity, U.S. institutions risk crafting policies that are uneven. Why this racialization actually impacts politics is it simply enables policies to appear valid or widespread, when in reality they unjustly leave out certain Latin American populations. In other words, countries that are disproportionately represented within the Latin American diaspora will advocate for policies that more clearly benefit their group while claiming that it is to the benefit of all Latin Americans in the US (1).

García demonstrates that U.S. administrations repeatedly framed Central Americans fleeing civil wars as "economic migrants," despite "overwhelming evidence of political violence" in El Salvador and Guatemala (2). Again, this choice had grave policy implications: by insisting that Central Americans were "not true refugees," officials justified mass deportations and asylum denial, albeit legally (2). Cuban migrants, on the other hand, benefited from the Cold War policies that led to more legal accommodation. As Ackerman notes, for Cubans, "laws were bent if not broken to accommodate" their entry and citizenship in the U.S. (6). The result is a policy regime in which migrants experience radically different legal outcomes—refugee protection, temporary status, or deportability—based on collective policy (2).

The implications extend beyond law and into society. Ricourt delves into the Dominican migration with *yolas*, which were "controlled by predatory criminals" and marked by extreme mortality risk (7). This mode of migration produces a migration experience that differs from land-border crossings or state-assisted refugee resettlement. Treating southern migration pathways as uniform obscures important distinctions among migrant experiences, marginalizing the specific challenges faced by particular groups. As García notes, refugee policy in North America often "reflected national interests more than humanitarian commitments" (2). This mass categorization is dangerous across fields, including the health industry, where Latin Americans are often grouped together simply for a shared language, despite many differences throughout specific populations (8).

CONCLUSION

This article shows how Hispanic panethnicity in the United States is shaped by politics and contingencies, a framework that weakens under closer scrutiny or a bottom-up approach. It challenges the understanding of this identity when seen through a hierarchical lens, from the top down, as this lacks the nuance of such a multivariable, *organic* collection of ethnicities. While many Latin American migrants share experiences of exclusion, treacherous border conditions and racialization, these commonalities fracture when held next to divergent legal pathways, and politics, as my research shows.

Recognizing these fractures has significant implications, both for policy and research. For policy makers, the short-term benefit from a monolithic "Hispanic" identity may manifest into a stronger voting bloc, but risks obscuring unequal treatment by treating such distinct origins and ethnicities as a homogenous group. Such blind categorization could lead to unequal asylum outcomes, uneven access to legalization, even socioeconomic consequences. A blanketed perspective risks obscuring the distinct needs of specific populations. Thus, policies may appear inclusive and not be.

For scholars, and policymakers alike, this issue highlights the importance of including a bottom-up approach or at least widening the scope of analysis. The question is no longer what the category "Hispanic" encompasses, but what it masks and excludes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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