

# Reading Latina/o Images: Interrogating *Americanos*

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*This essay explores the visual and discursive elements of Americanos, a published collection of photographic images of Latina/o life in the United States. While clearly a mass-market text intended for enjoyment and edification, Americanos also serves as a mass-mediated rhetoric through its location and its representation of Latina/o life and cultural practices. We argue that, in this role, Americanos serves the project of a critical rhetoric by articulating a vernacular rhetoric, and we explore how the verbal and visual fragments in Americanos invent a Latina/o community while reifying Latina/o differences. We conclude that Americanos implicitly critiques how Latina/o identities have been flattened and distorted by dominant discourses.*

A long-standing tension exists between the persistence of specific Latina/o identities and the pursuit of a pan-Latino identity. As a consequence, the articulation of a unified Latina/o cultural community has been elusive. Geographically situated Latina/o identities—each with their own sense of community and ethnicity—such as Chicanos in the southwest, Cuban-Americans in south Florida, and Boricuas in the northeast, complicate the pursuit of a singular Latino identity, community, ideology, or aesthetic. In terms of politics, these divisions have manifested themselves in party affiliations and political attitudes. In cultural forms (literature and performance) Latina/os have demonstrated their predisposition for attachment to the U.S. as well as a nostalgia for their cultural homes. In the visual arts, the variety of *Latinismos* has led to tensions resulting from the tendency to totalize Latino-ness through the prism of a particular Latino aesthetic. As Dávila (1999) observes, “in corroborating the Latinness of particular works or artists by relating them to particular Latin cultures

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or countries, curators and museum workers alike have tended to concurrently call attention to particularized forms of identification” (p. 184).

The articulation of a Latina/o community is thus a fiction, a discursive imagining of a community (Anderson, 1983) with parallels found in scholarly analyses of the generative power of discourse in north America (Charland, 1987; McGee, 1975) and Europe (Cabrera, 1992). In general, these analyses have tended to examine public discourses as either the written or the spoken word. In the present instance of Latina/os, Sommers (1991) takes note of the folklorist and multimedia expressions associated with collective action and “group-specific” expressions of identity (pp. 32–33). This opens up the possibility for the performative and the visual to be central articulators of the people and of community. Indeed, Latorre’s (1999) analysis of Yreina Cervantez’s Chicana and feminist murals suggests that the visual medium provides an opening because “it constructs new cultural forms reflecting a fluid community that constantly and continuously forms and redefines itself” (p. 107).

Latorre’s (1999) analysis can serve as a metaphor for the U.S. Latina/o population. A constantly shifting demographic, through both new generations of immigrants and U.S.-born Latina/os, Latina/os are emerging as a sociocultural force. Yet, like Cervantez’s murals, Latina/os remain dynamic and difficult to fix precisely because they are responsive to their shifting environment, their historical contextualization in the U.S. and their pursuit of opportunities there as well as their ties to their cultural homes.

This problem of representing the fluidity and diversity of Latina/os is central to Olmos, Ybarra, and Monterrey’s (1999) *Americanos: Latino Life in the United States/La Vida Latina en Los Estados Unidos*, a compendium of images produced by 30 photographers whose work is organized into seven major and four minor sections, each preceded by a short introduction provided by a noted writer or scholar. The result is a remarkably nuanced view of Latina/o personhood, community, and experience within the U.S. Olmos et al. deploy a transcultural framework, wherein transculturalism is manifested through bilingualism and material culture—the body, dramatic action, geographic and physical space, and discursive locations (Sandoval-Sanchez & Sternbach, 2001)—that endeavors to articulate a pan-Latina/o perspective. They present a visual and verbal record of Latino-ness, cataloguing and inventing Latina/os for the cultural edification of Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to explore how Latina/os are represented by *Americanos* as a complicated and variegated “community” to an audience that has greater or lesser understanding of the range of Latina/o possibilities and experiences. Following Olmos et al.’s transcultural lens, we seek to demonstrate how *Americanos* operates vernacularly to highlight the ways in which Latina/o social and personal identities are always in process, and to illustrate how, for hyphenated Americans, García-Canclini’s (1990) conceptualization of cultural hybrids is a reality while notions of cultural purity, safety, and precision are illusions. By examining the visuals of *Americanos*, and their accompanying verbal texts, we will demonstrate how

*Americanos* textually invents a Latina/o community. Our analysis will point to how *Americanos* articulates the presence of Latina/o differences while implicitly critiquing how Latina/o identities have been flattened and elided by dominant discourses.

### *Americanos and the Latina/o Visual Narrative*

*Americanos* resulted from the collaboration of actor/activist Edward James Olmos, Dr. Lea Ybarra, executive director of the Institute for Academic Advancement of Youth at John Hopkins University, and photojournalist Manuel Monterrey. Their goal was to have a social impact on those who identify as Latina/os as well as on those who would be interested in learning about what Latina/os are or could be. As Olmos et al. write in their dedication (1999, p. 5):

The *Americanos* photo documentary has left an indelible imprint on our minds and in our hearts. We hope our work will leave a legacy that expresses true commitment to community, a pride and love of family and culture, a remembrance of our past, a celebration of our present, and a hope for the future.

It would seem that *Americanos* was offered as a sincere documentary of Latina/o identity and experience. As such, one would presume that the editors believed they were affirming an actual reality in opposition to a presumed (negative) construction and discourse that has unfairly situated and characterized Latina/os.

Olmos is clear about his aspirations for the *Americanos* project (which includes a soundtrack, an HBO documentary, and a traveling photographic exhibit) and about the importance of visual images:

There really has been a drought of cultural awareness, as far as understanding Latin life in the United States.... I think the strength of the piece is that we show dignity.... Members of the society are looked at stereotypically because they don't have these images. That's one of the reasons we made this book in the first place. (quoted in Lipson, 1999, p. D6)

In an effort to reconfigure the value and recognition ascribed to Latina/os, *Americanos* follows in the spirit of Espiritu (2001) who argues that social change must take place on the level of mediated images as oppressed groups respond to ideological racism through constructions of their own images. In a mediated world, dueling images become the battleground for the articulation of identity.

Olmos acknowledges a history of misrepresentation in various forms, most prominently television and film, which have provided the public with images of the Mexican vamp, the *bandido*, and the greaser (Keller, 1994). Of more recent vintage have been the discourses that conjure up images of Latina/os as invaders waiting to rob the US of its resources (Flores & Hasian, 1997). Olmos speaks in relation to a media culture that is “a chief disseminator of ‘official’ national affect” and “often attempts to contain Latina/o images as spectacles of spiciness or exoticism. Such mainstream depictions of Latino affect serve to reduce, simplify, and contain ethnic difference” (Muñoz, 2000, p. 69). In short, the trajectory of so many media stereotypes directed at Latina/os reflects “negative-value differences [that] form the basis

for making Others inferior, thus excluding them from the in-group” (Ramírez Berg, 1990, p. 288). *Americanos*, then, is offered as an antidote to the string of mediated and discursive distortions that have socially defined Latina/os for several generations. Olmos and his colleagues are not alone in their efforts. Recent film and television productions (such as *American Family*, *Resurrection Boulevard*, *Tortilla Soup*, *Luminaria*, and the *Spy Kids* films) have endeavored to offer richer Latina/o narratives. However, the *Americanos* project is singular because of its form and clear intent.

The *Americanos* project is complicated because, apart from the creators’ aspirations, the reality is that as a mass-marketed book, video, and soundtrack, it is open to consumption and interpretation by Latina/os and non-Latina/os. However, we believe that this only amplifies the import of *Americanos* as a visual rhetoric. It aims at both the Aristotelian goal of persuasion and the Burkeian presumption of rhetorical discourse as identification. In the first instance, *Americanos* functions as a vernacular rhetoric that retells the story of Latina/o peoples and counters the legacy of distorted impressions of Latina/o peoples and cultures. In the second, the text imagines a pan-Latina/o reality through the images and their composition within the text and invites readers (Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike) to recognize the connectedness among the variety of Latina/os.

While the legacy and experience of mediated Latina/o identity construction has been widely examined (Delgado, 1998b; Noriega, 2000; Rodriguez, 1997), the role of the visual (photography, figurative art, or iconography) in constructing specific Latina/o identities, let alone a pan-Latino identity, is still nascent within the domains of communication and media studies (LaWare, 1998). Other academic fields, however, have explored Latina/o visual images and suggested their relevance in the construction of community and political identities. For example, Eckmann (2000) observes that Chicano murals were an important adjunct to the Chicano movement of the 1960s as they articulated a desire for social change, represented positive role models, instilled ethnic pride, and raised cultural consciousness. Echoing the powerful and resonant murals of Siqueiros, Orozco, and Rivera, this form of “Chicano art fundamentally is a multi-layered art of protest: spiritual, social, economic, aesthetic and political” (Eckmann, 2000, p. 19) that can be a mediation point for multiple cultural or group identities. As Sanchez-Tranquilino’s (1995) analysis of Chicano and gang murals suggests, “identities at times conflate so as to appear as one under certain cultural circumstances” (p. 56).

This mediation function is granted greater importance by LaWare (1998) who recognizes the many forms reason takes and the importance of murals in “articulating” connections and possibilities “in ways that make them distinct from discursive arguments” (p. 144). LaWare contends that through visuals, communities can display the distinct properties of their cultures in ways that distinguish them from the dominant culture as well as celebrate significant events in a community’s (often oral) history. Rojas (1999) argues that such “murals make marginal urban spaces tolerable” (p. 135). LaWare notes that murals help to construct homelands in ways similar to Flores’s (1996) argument that the discursive spaces crafted by Chicana feminists in their writings constitute homelands. Because of the primacy

and agency given to communities through murals' celebration of cultural symbols, LaWare identifies them as a kind of epideictic rhetoric that celebrates rhetorics of difference.

As a visual medium, art has the ability to communicate because it can collect images and artifacts of cultural and ideological resonance and reposition them within a given frame to echo long-held sentiments while articulating new meanings. For example, various Chicana artists, including Alma Lopez, Ester Hernandez, and Yolanda Lopez, have reappropriated *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, a traditionally holy icon, in order to recover a gendered identity and express the dimensions of female and lesbian experiences. Yarbro-Bejarano's (1998) analysis of queer Chicana artist Laura Aguilar's work details how Aguilar's photos operate as a sustained critique of domination and freedom and disrupt essentializing practices within Chicana/o cultural traditions. Such examples demonstrate how the elements associated with cultural specificity, memory, and experience can be powerfully connected to a critical praxis. Left unresolved, however, is whether or not such efforts create the community that is presumed under an identifying rubric such as Latina/o.

Nevertheless, these examples demonstrate the power of the visual to serve as a vernacular discourse. Constructed from and within the experience of Latina/os, such images articulate the experiences, aspirations, and ideologies of given communities. Indeed, from the revolutionary and Marxian images of Mexican muralists of the early 20th century to the community-focused and social movement images of murals and posters from the last 30 years, the tradition of incorporating elements of Latina/o culture into a visual rhetoric is strong and understood. While we would not want to discount the power of the spoken or written word, scholars have persuasively argued that visual images function in a way that can affirm the experiences of Latina/os and contest and critique the social inequities they experience.

### **Vernacular Discourse and Discourses of Oppression**

The exploration of Latina/o vernacular discourses has circulated around the issues of cultural affirmation and the critique of domination or oppression (Calafell, 2001; Delgado, 1998a, 1998b; Flores, 1996; Flores & Hasian, 1997). However, these efforts have largely centered on verbal texts and eschewed the role of the visual in articulating feelings of marginalization and oppression. Implicitly, these Latina/o-focused discursive analyses draw inspiration from Ono and Sloop (1995), who argue for the privileging of critical discourses that emanate from historically oppressed communities. We also rely on Ono and Sloop's theoretical framework as we argue that a visual rhetoric, such as that found in *Americanos*, can also function as a critical rhetoric rooted in the vernacular expressions found in the cultural margins.

Calling for a sustained critique to prevent romanticizing vernacular rhetoric that has no inherent sense of liberation, Ono and Sloop (1995) caution: "Unless critical attention is given to vernacular discourse, no new concepts of how community relations are interwoven and how communities are contingent is possible" (p. 21). Rather than conceptualizing separate critiques of domination and freedom, they ask that we recognize the ways in which these projects are inseparable or identical.

Attention must be given to the circumstances that allow critical and generative verbal or visual discourses to emerge.

Ono and Sloop (1995) acknowledge that vernacular rhetoric is cultural production, visible through symbols, artifacts, and textual forms of materiality. They see vernacular discourse as critique because it makes visible power relations among subjects by exploring the textual fragments of a culture. As a result, vernacular discourses possess two characteristics: cultural syncretism and pastiche. Cultural syncretism refers to the ways that various cultural expressions are affirmed while they simultaneously protest against the dominant ideology. Culture and protest are interwoven elements of vernacular discourse, yet as Ono and Sloop maintain, “Vernacular discourse does not exist only as counter-hegemonic, but also as affirmative articulating a sense of community that does not function simply as oppositional to dominant ideologies” (p. 22). Indeed, communities may articulate their vernaculars to be affirming and generative of their communities, given relations within a dominant culture.

Pastiche is one strategy of connecting the fragments of culture for generative or critical purposes (see McGee, 1990). As “elements of popular culture torn out of context for the explicit purpose of constituting new effects” (Ono and Sloop, 1995, p. 23), pastiche “challenges mainstream discourse while at the same time affirming and creating the community and culture that produce vernacular discourse” (p. 24). Indeed, this is a turn that has been suggested in examinations of Latina/o community or identity production (Delgado, 1998a). It is through pastiche that vernacular discourse can simultaneously operate against something as counter-hegemonic rhetoric and for something, the articulation of a generative discourse. The project of vernacular discourse, however, is never completed and is therefore open to what Madison (1998) terms “the performance of possibilities”:

In a *performance of possibilities*, I see the “possible” as suggesting a movement culminating in creation and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of “merging text and world,” of critically transversing the margin *and* center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces. (p. 227, emphasis in original)

The production and circulation of *Americanos* cannot simply or easily be understood solely as a vernacular or constitutive of a counter-public. The text’s interaction with a mainstream publisher (Little, Brown) perhaps suggests the possibility of a large Latina/o audience and a broader, general audience. However, the marketing logic of the publishing industry does not inherently mute the vernacular critique, emerging from the cultural margins, that is found in the text. Indeed, scholars who have explored rap music have observed critiques of mainstream values and logics in mass-marketed rap and hip-hop culture artifacts (Boyd, 1997).

Here, we emphasize the ways in which the visual image in Latina/o cultures, functioning as advocacy, representation, and memory, plays an important role in the emergence of a transcultural Latina/o text. In one approach to conceptualizing visual arguments, Blair (1996, p. 38) defines visual images as “propositional arguments in

which the propositions and their argumentative function and roles are expressed visually,” noting that these arguments can stand on their own. Blair’s perspective on the visual, linked with Ono and Sloop’s (1995) projection of a vernacular rhetoric, suggests that *Americanos* can present a vernacular discourse, through verbal and visual fragments, that points to the existence of polyvalent Latina/os communities. Ono and Sloop (1995, p. 40) remind us that:

By recognizing that vernacular discourse is culturally syncretic, and may be generated from a pastiche of hegemonic culture, we begin to realize that vernacular discourse cannot be examined as bits and pieces of hegemonic culture itself but, instead, should be analyzed as a whole new hybrid, though its own conditions of emergence.

*Americanos*, like Ono and Sloop’s (1995) study of the newspaper the *Pacific American*, offers a narrative of “possible realities” (p. 26), including realities that affirm particular identities and senses of community, even when these are on the margins.

Similarly, vernacular discourse is also always in process, pursuing the aims of creating a community and interrogating the ongoing and also never finished expressions of power and asymmetrical relations between the dominant and the dominated. Following Boal (1985), who argues for the focus on process in theater as a space to work things out or as a space to rehearse revolution, we see *Americanos* as part of a larger process of articulating and rearticulating Latina/o identities in the making, energized by the creation of such products as *Americanos* but sustained or limited by the situatedness of Latina/o and non-Latina/o media consumers. The contingent experience of reception no doubt circulates around interest, experience, and world view but these elements may contribute to accepting *Americanos*’ invitation to contemplate the construction, articulation, and meaning of Latina/o identities. We are cognizant of how texts coming from minority communities can disappear in a capitalist system that markets these identities as fads and then sees them as disposable culture. The periodicals *Latingirl Magazine*, *Sí*, and *Moderna* are examples of this trend. Nevertheless, when they persist and circulate, such texts open spaces that encourage more fluid understandings of Latina/o identities in the making and offer visual counterarguments to other discourses regarding Latina/o identity.

### **Reading *Americanos***

*Americanos*’s images articulate Latina/o identities arising from multiple realities, including the quotidian realities for many Latina/os, the inflated presence of celebrities and political leaders, and sociocultural messages that reflect broader and more diffuse messages about identity, valuation, and worth. *Americanos*’s short narratives, combined with the wealth of images of Latina/o life and personhood, offer insights into Latina/o subject positions within the U.S. We maintain that *Americanos* addresses the perception that Latinas/os have been unable to unify politically and socially by visually rendering a transcultural discourse based on three argumentative *topoi*: “the third space,” crossing over, and *los sagrados* (the sacred).

These transcultural strategies of inventing a Latina/o identity or community

function in ways similar to McGee's (1975) and Charland's (1987) conception of the people as rhetorical or discursive constructions. Within *Americanos* these three strategies of invention, or categories of constituting Latinismo, emerge as keys to understanding how the text functions as a critical discourse and, following McGee (1990), how the photographic and epigraphic fragments within it attempt to persuade readers that Latinas/os are imbricated within the sociocultural fabric of the U.S. It is our task to relocate *Americanos* as a textual fragment that functions vernacularly to speak of a positive difference from within (Latina/o communities) to a readership that may cling to narrow and unfortunate stereotypes of a presumed homogenous people or of a fragmented Latina/o community.

### *The Third Space: Identity and Identities*

The border, or borderlands, has become a widely dispersed and recognizable term (Gutiérrez-Jones, 1995; Saldivar, 1998). One need only look at popular films such as *Lone Star* or read the works of Arturo Islas, Sandra Cisneros, or María Helena Viramontes to understand the significance of that symbolic and material line that unites and differentiates the US. and Mexico, Anglo America and Latin America. Anzaldúa (1987) set in motion much of the intellectual concern with borders, figurative and actual, by defining a borderland as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary, that is in a constant state of transition" (p. 7). In this space the ability to manage the ambiguities of life, of social rules and roles, and of one's own identity, become manifest. Indeed, it is within the border that one finds García-Canclini's (1990) cultural hybrids making culture within and out of a transcultural space that connects north and south.

Borderlands thus fits within a conceptual field of other spaces that includes hybridity, *mestizaje*, and the Black Atlantic. Connecting scholars as diverse as Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Gayatri Spivak, Soja (1996), reflecting on the Black Atlantic, describes a "thirdspace" that is:

The exploration of new identities that build alternatives to a "double illusion" created, on the one side, by a cultural essentialism that promotes such polarizing exclusivities as black nationalism; and on the other, by an unlimited cultural relativism that dissolves black subjectivity in a universal melting pot or pluralist jumble of equals.  
(p. 141)

The parallels to the experience of Latina/os within Anglo America are stark. Latina/os endeavor to constitute a community and articulate, from within, a coherent identity measured against the Anglo mainstream. Yet, at the same moment, Latina/os remain aware of their particularities (and even antagonisms) as specifically situated Latina/os.

We argue that *Americanos* is a plea to Latina/os to re-interpret their own ambiguity from a celebratory, inventional, or constitutive perspective. Yet we also maintain that it is simultaneously a plea to non-Latina/os to read the text as an articulation of a strategic essentialism. This move echoes Ono and Sloop's (1995)

argument that vernacular discourses may operate from spaces of conditional essentialism, though we see *Americanos* also reflecting Asen's (2000) position that the "recognition of exclusion avoids essentialist understandings of difference and situates collectivities that emerge through recognition" (p. 427). The cross-border(s), transcultural realities of Latina/os in the U.S. remind us that coming to grips with the third space entails a move beyond essentialisms that remain static while the forces of globalization and of shifting cultural borders redefine the face (and place) of Latinas/os in the U.S. As Sandoval-Sanchez and Sternbach (2001) argue, identities are constantly in process and, within a transcultural or transborder frame, are constructed, deconstructed and, quite possibly, reconstructed. The impact of the third space is a simultaneous process of blending and reblending, an intoxicating cocktail of cultural syncretism and pastiche.

By featuring the blended and disparate racial, ethnic, and cultural dimensions of Latina/os in the US, *Americanos* participates in the articulation and representation of a third space. *Americanos* challenges essentialist discourses of race, nationhood, and citizenship by offering an alternative vision that celebrates Latina/os as Americans and redefines what American means: "It's the most unifying single word in the hemisphere. But for some reason the United States has coined it as their word" (Olmos, 1999, p. 9). Olmos rhetorically asks, "Why *Americanos*?" (emphasis in the original), and answers:

Too often society sees us not as Americans but as strangers to this land. We have worked hard to help build this country and we continue to do so every day. The face of America should include us. Second, as Latinos we often think of Americans as the others in this country, not us. We, and especially our children, need to see that we are an integral and equal part of the US society. Third, we wanted a title that would be easily understood in both English and Spanish. And finally, we wanted to illustrate that much like a quilt woven intricately with many beautiful fibers, Latinos are a proud and diverse people interwoven with indigenous, Spanish/European, African, and Asian roots. We are citizens not only of the United States of America, but also of all the Americas and the Latin American countries around the world. (p. 9)

*Americanos* thus reifies the third space through images that serve to remind us that "pictures then are important not because they represent reality but create it" (Deluca & Demo, 2000, p. 244). For example, a cursory review of the text will demonstrate the power of globalization and the erosion of cultural borders by reminding us that these are images of Latina/os. Thus we see an image of an Asian Latina from Argentina (p. 73), Yoo-mi Lee, whose inclusion may startle some but who also serves as a reminder that the new world and the land of immigrants are referents not confined to the lower 48 (in addition to Hawaii and Alaska). This photograph provides a reflection of the layered history of migration and cultural accommodation. The accompanying text echoes this history by admonishing the reader to "realize that all humanity is linked in experience by displacement and creativity" (Curry Rodriguez, 1999, p. 72).

*Americanos* extends the range of Latina/o identities and the third space by explaining that Latina/os are the "every(wo)man" because they are a universal

people. This has implications in that it forges a unique identity grounded in the absence of any singular racial characteristic other than the chameleon character of Latina/os. Isasi-Díaz (1999) poignantly observes: “How blessed the *mestizaje* and *mulatez* that run through our veins and are stamped on our skin. Diversity and differences: our blessings and our challenges” (p. 100). The more powerful rhetorical elements, however, are the photographs, which reinforce the polyglot reality of Latina/o America. We see images that remind us that Latina/os can be Cuban (pp. 101, 117), Mexican (pp. 98–99), Panamanian (pp. 108–109), Puerto Rican (p. 110), or even “American” (pp. 114, 116), a task accomplished through the strategic inclusion of flags within the images. Yet *Americanos* also reminds us that Latina/o identities are multiracial and multiethnic, as in the photo of Alberto and Marcela Prystupa holding their blonde children, whose surname recalls the waves of immigration from the old world to the new world (p. 85). Known as *güeros* in Mexican American communities, such children reflect what *mestizaje* can look like, while challenging the narrow view of what Latina/os should look like.

Of greater significance may be the subjects of the images who, like Yoo-mi Lee, reflect the range of racial diversity that one expects to find among the *mestizos*, hybrids, and border people who populate the third space. Indeed, what *Americanos* tells us is that the presence of a universal Latina/o based on any singular characteristic, or even on a set of binaries, is elusive. Rather, *Americanos* posits a community that is built on a series of “ands.” Latina/os are shown to be the range of common, and tragically overdetermined, phenotypic categories of race—brown, white, yellow, black, and red. The prevalence of *mestizaje* and hybridity makes anything other than strategic essentialism an unproductive approach. Olmos is direct in his vision that *Americanos* reflects the current limitations of essentialist views of Latina/os and his desire to reflect pan-Latinismo in a more encompassing manner: “African, Asian, indigenous, *mezclado*—that’s a mixture. That’s what I am today, a hybrid, multi-cultural person” (quoted in Lipson, 1999, p. D8).

Latina/os, however, pass through the third space with more than racial or ethnic concerns. Indeed, over the past two decades the idea of citizenship, of belonging, may be more resonant for Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike. *Americanos* takes this on in subtle and overt forms, suggesting the virtue of Latina/o cultural distinctiveness but not at the expense of articulating Latina/o presence with the U.S. As Hayes-Bautista (1999) writes:

We would not say Latinos have a double identity, rather that they have a complete identity that is at the same time Latino/Latina and American. What distinguishes the Latino from the Anglo-Saxon is that he is not first Anglo-Saxon, but American. According to this point of view, being American implies being Latino, speaking Spanish, and conserving the family. Latinos in the United States do not turn their backs on Mexico or Latin America. They do not suffer from assimilation nor from cultural amnesia. The preservation of a strong Latino identity, however, should not give rise to Anglo fears that there exists a disloyal group within the population. (p. 40)

Here *Americanos* again turns to cultural syncretism and pastiche to critique dominant views of Latina/os and to make the case that Latina/os are integral to

American culture, politics, and economics. The images selected thus serve as visual enthymemes (Finnegan, 2001) to persuade the reader that although Latina/os may be different, may be diverse, they are connected by their willingness to come to the US and to shoulder their share of the burden. Thus, while we do see a picture of the now-demonized illegal alien (pp. 60–61) in the almost trite imagery of crossing the Rio Grande, it is juxtaposed against images of border agents, including a Latina. This latter image conjures memories of *la Malinche*, who shoulders the responsibility for creating *mestizaje* and for contributing to the death of her people in the face of Spanish conquest (Del Castillo, 1997). That the border agent is named Glicet Gallegos Garvey merely serves to reinforce the duality of her bridging/gatekeeping role, as both Latina and American.

The positioning of these photographs suggests that Latina/os are both insiders and outsiders, though *Americanos* strives to reinforce the view that Latina/os are insiders. Thus, we see images of President Bill Clinton and his Latina/o White House staff (p. 38), Latino congressional leaders (p. 55), and various images of Latina/o professionals (pp. 34–37, 39, 54) engaged in educational, medical, or scientific activities that undoubtedly benefit Americans. The images implicitly critique the common stereotype of the Latina/o as an unskilled laborer (although there are images of these sorts of real contributions to the US economy) by opening the possibility that Latina/os contribute in a myriad of ways.

There are other strategies that suggest the contributions of Latina/os. The image of Bernadine Mendoza putting the finishing touches on an American flag suggests the incorporation of Latina/os (p. 41). That Ms. Mendoza should also be wearing a GAP t-shirt merely reinforces the notion that she has been economically incorporated. In a far different way, the image of Afro-Latino cowboy (p. 56) Juan Hrobowski suggests that the inclusion of Latina/os is so profound that race and ethnicity have even diversified that most protected area of American whiteness, the myth and reality of the cowboy. These images of Latina/o incorporation echo Ono and Sloop's (1995) analysis of the *Pacific Citizen*, which posited an image of Japanese Americans that was safe and "good" in the eyes of mainstream readers. In the same way, *Americanos* positions Latina/os as true and loyal Americans who are doing their part to elevate and contribute to the country. This example again illustrates the complex nature of vernacular discourse as a space of identities in process.

Circulating through the third space are Latina/os whose presence proves that communities can be (and are) made of multiple identities that cannot be solely defined by race or, increasingly, by nationality. *Americanos* complicates easy impressions of Latina/os by enlarging a reality of subjectivity and human activity in the context of coming into the space of America. In *Americanos*, Latina/os demonstrate cultural and social life associated with hyphenated, hybridized, and *mestizaje* realities.

### *Crossover Dreams*

The image of moving from, moving to, or moving through is commonly encapsulated in the notion of crossing over. Itself a multilayered term reflecting national

dislocation, language change, and social mobility, crossing over often involves narratives of loss, liminality, even rejection, as in the case of Richard Rodriguez's *The Hunger for Memory* (1982) or in Arce and Ichaso's *Crossover Dreams* (1985). In constructing threads of crossing over, *Americanos* categorically organizes images that reflect Latina/os' identities and pursuit of place within the US.

As with any mass media product, *Americanos* measures crossing over through images of celebrity success and fame, though mainstream culture's treatment of Latina/os has been problematically stereotypical (Calafell, 2001; Delgado & Calafell, 2004; Noriega, 2000). Though *Americanos*' images of cultural production and celebrity remind us of Latina/o hybridity and *mestizaje*, their appeal is based on the subject matter. Paralleling the ways in which some black celebrities have transcended race in the eyes of Anglo Americans, Latina/o celebrities are shown to have overcome their status as "others" or outsiders. Unlike earlier stereotyped images of Latina/o celebrity, *Americanos* presents a racialized mix of celebrities, each of whom has attained success throughout the Americas and beyond. These are stars that are known to Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike.

The Latin cultural explosion that began in the 1990s has created a heightened awareness of Latina/o creative artists and their crossing over has signaled a Latinization or tropicalization of U.S. popular culture (Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997; Habell-Pallán & Romero, 2002). While Latina/os remain exotic, they are paradoxically more common. Thus, Latina/o culture is now positioned as a "safe" space of exoticness. For example, Desmond (1997) argues that Latin dance gives "whites" permission to enter "other," "exotic," or "foreign" sexualities in acceptable contexts (p. 48). Indeed, if not dance or the music that provides its rhythm, then it is the musician or singer who represents that acceptable exoticness. *Americanos* exploits the celebrity exotic through images of Carlos Santana, Celia Cruz, Marc Anthony, Néstor Torres, Tito Puente, and Gloria and Emilio Estefan. All of these are images of the artist in performance with the exceptions of Celia Cruz (shown with her husband Pedro Knight) and the Estefans, where the images are portraits of spouses in a joyful pose or loving embrace.

These images celebrate celebrity. Perhaps the measure of crossover success is that these images strike one as being first about celebrity and then being about Latina/os. What positions the reader/viewer within the frame of Latina/os is that these images are woven with other images of children, unknown artists, and community members engaged in musical or dance performance. The images reflect what Juan Flores (1999) writes in the accompanying text: "There may never be a single 'Latino music,' but by now it's clear that no mix is missing, all styles can harmonize, Latino beats can reverberate from different drummers. Latinos, too, sing *América!*" (p. 158; emphasis in the original).

The images associated with crossing over are predicated on surprising the reader/viewer and, at the same time, reflecting the obvious. Thus, figures largely known only to Latina/o audiences (such as Carlos Ponce) are included alongside those celebrities whose fame transcends and whose images depict a transcendent and thus polyglot US community. The most obvious exemplar of the latter is the image of

Sammy Sosa, shown acknowledging the fans after breaking Roger Maris's home run record (p. 128). Behind him, in celebration of his phenomenal feat, are faces that reflect a range of ethnicities and races. *Americanos* is perhaps suggesting that by crossing over Sammy Sosa brought us together. Or perhaps it is that the future of America is one where the easy categories of American, black, and Latina/o are elided by the realities of a multiethnic personhood.

The images of crossover success do not fit neatly into any one section of the book. Thus, we treat them more generally as an important *topos* of Latina/o diversity and integration. If the purpose of a vernacular discourse is to affirm community, then the images of celebrity, as well as those of quotidian or esoteric artists or artistic activity, suggest a range of cultural and social contributions that reposition Latina/os at the center of contemporary popular culture. The images of celebrities relate a narrative of Latina/o success and a form of cultural citizenship attained through mass acceptance.

While the celebrity images articulate one tale of crossover success, there is the subtler tale of Latina/os who live outside of the glare of celebrity. Here *Americanos* provides a stunning black and white image of Carlos Aguas, steely and proud, holding an American flag shortly after participating in a citizenship ceremony (p. 71). While fame may lead to general acceptance of Latina/o celebrities, the image of Aguas suggests the struggle and the feelings of loss and accomplishment that are coextensive with crossing over (the border) and achieving success (citizenship) in the U.S. If Aguas's image represents the common path of becoming American, then the two-page image (pp. 68–69) of César Chávez standing in the forefront of a United Farm Workers' march in Delano, California represents an energized and joyful Latino citizen exercising his rights of incorporation. Becoming an *Americano* is thus often a quiet struggle that can culminate in public accomplishment.

These images of the everyday Latina/o provide the pointed edge of a critique of domination and repression. While it is interesting that these tales can only be suggested by the absence of related images, *Americanos* does include a poetic rendering of how the experience of othering is felt by Latina/os:

We do not speak,  
our songs caught in our throats,  
misery in spirit,  
Sadness inside fences.  
Ay, I want to cry screaming! (Ak'abal, 1999, p. 62)

Martinez's (2001) example of success or citizenship without acceptance echoes the feelings of Ak'abal:

A Chicano lawyer friend coming home from a professional conference in suit, tie and briefcase found himself on a bus near San Diego that was suddenly stopped by the Border Patrol. An agent came on board and made a beeline through the all-white rows of passengers direct to my friend. "Your papers." The agent didn't believe Jose was coming from a US conference and took him off the bus to await proof. Jose was lucky; too many Chicanos and Mexicans end up killed. (p. 113)

Crossing over is thus a part of life in the third space. When we constitute Latina/o identities and communities, the considerations about maintaining connections to the past while reaching for a new and different future come into conflict. Latina/os are constructed here as contributing to the U.S. in myriad ways. However, *Americanos* remains faithful to its goal of celebrating Latina/os as they are and as they live and to its obligation to raise questions about how Latina/os have been incorporated as equals in America. Thus, we can see and read in *Americanos* how vernacular modes of cultural production are a means of affirming and retaining Latina/o communities and, in a sense, overcoming the obstacles to Latina/o otherness. Perhaps through popular culture production Latina/os will find acceptance as “good citizens” but, as we shall see in the next section, many Latina/os define goodness and community in more universal terms.

### *Los Sagrados: Practicing the Sacred as a Space of Critique*

As Latina/os in America we have continued our everyday practices and the special celebrations that mark the values and beliefs we share. Our *quinceañeras*, our *bodas*, our *pastorelas*, our *fiestas patrias*, our foods, our music, and our art are all part of the cultural contributions we have made to the vibrant life of the U.S. The scholar Renato Rosaldo describes these contributions as a “cultural citizenship through which we have claimed our identities, our space, and our rights. ... we have transformed the cultural landscape of North America” (Mesa-Bains, 1999, p. 107).

In many circumstances, religious practices and rituals are a means of understanding the culture and “the lived experiences and expressions of community” (Pulido, 2000, p. 77). Culture is “a network of stories that hang together in order to create a cosmos of meaning for the members of a society” (Abalos, 1998, p. 72); for many Latina/os the sacred, and its attendant rituals and modes of performance, is a significant component of that network. *Americanos* posits *los sagrados* (the sacred) as a way to see how rituals serve as a means to resist assimilation while simultaneously complicating the meaning and impact of religious practices both inside and outside of the culture.

De Certeau (1984) writes: “stories carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places” (p. 118). The photographs collected in *los sagrados* demonstrate the ways in which Latina/os create a familiar and “safe” space within the U.S. through stories (historical and cultural narratives) and religious symbols, thus affirming Latina/os while simultaneously critiquing themselves and mainstream culture. A common narrative guiding *los sagrados* is pilgrimage, rooted in *mestizo* experiences and, largely, Christian narratives. In crafting a space, “we carry memories on a pilgrimage: memories of our ancestral lands and people. Memory is the soul of a people. Without it we are just individuals living and working in a common space” (Elizondo, 1999, p. 20). Through this metaphor of pilgrimage, space begins to be transformed and identities take shape. *Americanos* provides images of the movement north and in *los sagrados* the symbols and rituals that were brought to sustain Latina/os.

The stories of the sacred are interwoven with other elements of Latina/os culture(s) to demonstrate the complexity and contradictions of Latina/o life. For example, the story of Malinche (*la chingada*) and Cortes (*el chingon*) carry both religious and sociocultural implications. Stavans explains: “*Chingar* signifies the ambiguous excess of macho sexuality. The active form means to rape, subdue, control, dominate. *Chingar* is what a macho does to women” (1996, p. 431). In *Americanos* this dimension of machismo is challenged through a retelling of a childhood experience where a grandson asks his grandfather what macho means (Heredia, 1999, p. 97). The grandfather explains that a macho is a man who is kind and gentle. The grandson then asks about men who mistreat people. The grandfather responds: “They’re just not that strong yet” (Heredia, 1999, p. 97). Next to and above the narrative are black and white photographs featuring men playing with their children in the park (pp. 96–97). A father and son in Yuma, Arizona celebrate the son’s baptism as the beaming father gently pushes him in a swing. Another beaming father, dressed in khaki pants, a white hat, and a starched white shirt (elements often associated with the *veterano* gang member), swings his young daughter as another male looks on. These and other photographs reconfigure Latino masculinity from the corrosive opposite to femininity into an affirmative identity associated with community building and preservation. *Americanos* thus shows that the macho need not be seen as an oppressor; through reappropriation of the work not simply in words, but through photographs, the definition and larger societal constructs are complicated.

In a similar fashion, the roles of women are complicated beyond popular images of the vamp, self-sacrificing *señorita*, or *mamacita*. A poem titled “*Mujer*,” accompanied by a full-page color photograph of dancer Christina Segura at the Mexican Mutual Club in Lorain, Ohio (p. 147), extols the strengths and virtues of Latinas, but residues of colonial and postcolonial narratives frame the photograph. Segura stands draped in a royal blue robe and a gold dress. Blue necklaces drape her chest. A headdress of glittered purple and blue rests on her head. Red, white, and blue feathers protrude from the edges. All of this invokes the image of an Aztec princess. Her golden brown face, slightly arched upward, is caressed by the sunlight. Her lips pressed together are adorned with red lipstick; her bright brown eyes look toward a place the viewer of the photograph cannot see. Segura’s eyelashes curl with black mascara and her eyelids show signs of eye shadow. Her long straight black hair rests on her back, away from her face. Beyond the immediate image of Segura herself, there is another image. It is a blurred painting on a wall of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. *La Virgen* wears a dull dark blue robe. The dress under the robe is as red as Segura’s lips, and the Virgin’s golden hands are pressed together in prayer. Her eyes are closed.

The photograph has endless layers of intertextual meaning, referencing a historical figure, a religious figure, and two specific historical movements. The dress, mannerisms, and physical appearance of the woman, as well as the placement of the image of the Virgin, visually present the situation of Chicana feminists whose struggles and voices have been well documented (Ruiz, 1998). Chicana feminist

movements became places for women who had been active participants in *El Movimiento* of the 1960s and 1970s to voice their frustrations with the *machista* attitudes that prevailed in the movement and culture at large. This attitude centered universalized or essentialized male, heterosexual, and indigenous experiences, negating female experiences in favor of perceived political unity or strategic essentialism. In defining Chicana experiences, several images are sources of empowerment. Reclaiming the virgin/whore dichotomy, which has dictated many of the ways in which women in Chicana and Mexican cultures are viewed, Chicana feminists transformed the images of *La Virgen* and Malinche into strong images of female identification. It is the play on historical references that is the most striking in the photograph.

Both points of feminist identification have a strong presence in the photograph, and within the photograph they mesh to create a symbolic unification. Segura herself, her body, is the embodiment of *mestiza* culture; she is both European and Indian. Her dress complements this identification. Her blue robe mirrors that of the Virgin, the woman who became a point of identification for the Spanish and the indigenous Mexican people, yet Segura's headdress and adornments remind the viewer of another time—a preconquest past. Perhaps she is referencing the past of an Aztec noble woman forced into slavery, a woman who saw the “betrayal” of her people as her only means of survival. Segura, the modern *mestiza* bridge, is visually juxtaposed with the first *mestiza* who attempted to heal the pains of colonialism. She acts as a shadow to Segura. Furthermore, her participation in a ceremony honoring Mexican American heritage, and the placement of the photograph in a book about Latina/o life in the U.S., marks the complexity of postcolonial situations, the continual struggle to define and reaffirm oneself in spite of being perceived as fragmented. The photograph manifests the dilemma of many Chicanas in the U.S. today: How does one define oneself when one is situated in a potentially oppressive past? This narrative attempts to create a place for Latinas beyond the virgin/whore dichotomy dictated by the archetypes of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* and Malinche through embodiment and ritual. Ritual plays upon performance and performativity to enact spaces of critique.

*Los sagrados* extends to a range of cultural practices overlain onto religious beliefs that influence and sustain Latina/o communities. A young girl exits a church, fan in hand, during her *quinceañera*, a Mexican quasi-religious celebration of a young woman's 15th birthday, practiced by many Chicanas/os (p. 105). A bride dances with a young boy as dollars drape her dress during the dollar dance (p. 106). Macario Ramirez lights candles on the altar he has created to honor Jesus, his father, and his ancestors (p. 25). A roadside cross, decorated with flowers, marks the spot at which someone lost her life (p. 24). Wearing black sombreros and Chicago Bulls jackets, two young men and a woman kneel at a church altar to *la Virgen de Guadalupe* (p. 22). A child is baptized with water as a joyful mother watches (pp. 26–27). Two young boys proudly display their prayer missals from their First Holy Communion ceremony (p. 27). *Cholos* and *vatos* are infused with Catholicism, first in a photograph of a car dashboard adorned with statues of saints, a rosary, medals, and a

crucifix (p. 21) and second in an image of a *vato*, his back covered with the image of the Virgin shown to the observer (p. 111).

The images of *los sagrados* demonstrate how deeply the religious sentiment, iconography, and rituals have become imbricated within Latina/o communities. Indeed, could the argument being made by *Americanos* be that through religious iconography and practice Latina/os are united? Or, as the powerful image of the father offering up an image of Jesus (pp. 16–17) suggests, have *los sagrados* turned to religion, particularly Catholicism, for sustenance as they travel through the third space in search of identity and place? The images of religious incorporation suggest that religion, particularly Christianity, offers comfort, community, and identity. *Americanos* presents images of people in the process of remaking themselves, who carry with them the icons of faith and spirit of *aguante* (the ability to endure) as they strive to transcend the third space and cross over to become American. Indeed, religious beliefs and icons serve to sustain faith, both in secular and spiritual senses. Images of *la virgen* (p. 22) and *ofrendas* (p. 25) remind (or cue) the reader of the symbolic sources of strength and memory that guide many Latina/os, particularly within Mexican communities. While these rituals, icons, and symbols do not provide a stinging critique of heteronormativity, machismo, or sexism, they do provide a resource for perseverance and an antidote to the sense of loss that coming north to the U.S. can engender.

### Ending at the Beginning

*Americanos* has provided us with an opportunity to explore the ways in which visual images provide arguments and counterarguments to ideologies or public memories concerning Latina/os in the US. *Americanos* complicates stereotypes of Latina/os by arguing for a pan-Latina/o identity that has its meaning in the U.S., rooted in the narratives of crossing borders and (re)defining the self as a subject. As such, *Americanos* is a vernacular visual discourse, collecting and connecting images to suggest to Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike who we are and why we belong. While *Americanos* does not completely resolve the issue of ethnic differences within Latina/o communities in the U.S., it does suggest the ways in which Latina/os are connected. As Carlos Fuentes (1999) writes in the introduction: “recognize yourselves in he or she who are not like you” (p. 12). It is clear that Latina/os are not all alike but, as the images reveal, there is much to recognize and many points of connection.

*Americanos* does not suggest that Latina/os can unify politically across interethnic lines based on experiences and expectations. Indeed, *Americanos* surprises by not being overtly or even strongly political. Instead, the text builds unity through suggestion, encouragement, and critique. These strategies suggest an affirming vernacular, in effect “speaking” in Latina/o. In that voice, *Americanos* is creatively syncretic and transcultural and its tone invites the reader/viewer in to explore the narratives, to engage identities, and to interrogate assumptions. Perhaps the key to

*Americanos* is that it informs the reader about Latina/os by destabilizing long-held mass media and cultural representations of Latina/os.

Ono and Sloop (1992; 1995) ask that as critics we privilege the text; through our study of *Americanos* we accept the text on its terms. *Americanos* attempts the difficult task of visually and discursively constituting a united Latina/o front, relying on three performative strategies of identity that cross interethnic lines. Although we take this to be a step in a positive direction, we find the identity argument advanced in the text (we are Latina/os who are diverse and American, we are different, but we are still like you) somewhat problematic because it does not, and perhaps cannot, resolve interethnic difference and it assumes the homogeneity of the non-Latina/o reader. Thus, while there is much to recommend the strategic use of images in the text, the creators of *Americanos* have not solved the challenges of deploying strategic essentialism.

Nevertheless, our analysis of *Americanos* has endeavored to suggest how Latina/o identities and communities are always in a process of making and unmaking. *Americanos* serves as both an introduction to and a representation of that process. For scholars who wish to interrogate further the Latina/o experience and visual discourses, we have endeavored to map out a heuristic approach to understanding Latina/o vernacular self-representations. However, as we note above, this is not an ending but a beginning. The elements of *Americanos* examined here do suggest how a Latina/o community may be invented from cultural fragments. What should follow are explorations of the challenges and barriers to realizing a coherent Latina/o community and the social, political, and cultural implications that would follow such a realization.

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