

Consuming and Contesting Latinidad: Audience Research and Cultural Capital

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Volume 7, Issue 1 (May 2010)

Abstract

This paper investigates the articulation of Latinidad in U.S. popular culture by conducting an audience study of *Americanos*, a multimedia documentary project undertaken by Edward J. Olmos and his partners, Time Warner and the Smithsonian Institution. *Americanos* attempts to combat the negative stereotypes and marginalization that characterize Latina/o media representation by using positive and depoliticized imagery. This paper argues that the positive lens of *Americanos*, like other instances of the so-called “Latin pop explosion,” works within liberal multiculturalism to produce a transcultural and celebratory Latinidad without addressing structural power. Interviews with visitors to the *Americanos* photography exhibit in Los Angeles demonstrate the seduction of positive imagery, but Chicana/o college student responses also show how cultural capital can cultivate more critical and oppositional readings of difference.

Keywords: Latinos, audience, museum, decoding, preferred meaning, race, culture

Beginning in the late 1990s, two significant events in the history of Latina/o¹ media representation converged to facilitate a new framework for the meaning of Latinidad in U.S. institutional and popular culture. First, Latina/o leaders, media producers, artists, and performers claimed increased representational power, justified by the under-representation and negative portrayals of Latina/os in mainstream U.S. culture. Second, cultural institutions, media organizations and corporate advertisers recognized the need to incorporate Latina/os into their stories for many reasons: to satisfy critics; to increase revenue; and to define a Latina/o imaginary that fits with mainstream sensibilities or needs. The 2000 U.S. Census (2002) propelled these events forward with projections of future Latina/o population growth and the corresponding recognition of Latina/os as a viable demographic group among marketing firms (Martinez, 2004; Rodríguez, 1997) and as a powerful constituency among political strategists (Connaughton & Jarvis, 2004).

This confluence of events creates conditions for the articulation of a broad, pan-ethnic Latinidad in mainstream culture that frames the possibilities for a Latina/o unity in the coming years and decades. At this important juncture, community-based, subaltern, vernacular expressions of Latina/o solidarity mix with corporate-managed, official efforts to define a coherent Latina/o community. I maintain that the multimedia project, *Americanos* navigates these conditions by offering a broad, diverse, and positive Latinidad while supporting the hegemonic projects of multiculturalism and the meritocracy that informs ideologies of the American Dream. Edward J. Olmos, Time-Warner, and the Smithsonian Institution collaborated to produce *Americanos*, which first appeared in 1999 as a photography exhibit in the Smithsonian Institution, and as a photo book, music compilation, and documentary film produced by various Time-Warner subsidiaries. The exhibit traveled to museums around the U.S. through 2004, and sought to represent a positive but apolitical picture of everyday Latino life. Much has happened in the ten years since the project first emerged from ferment within the Smithsonian Institution regarding Latino representation. But *Americanos* serves as a key moment in the re-articulation and re-appropriation of Latinidad beyond negative stereotypes.

In this article, I present the outcomes of a study of audience responses to the *Americanos* exhibit during its visit to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County². The audience study was conducted in the spirit of cultural studies approaches to audience interpretation and the determination of meaning, emanating from Hall's (1980, 1993) encoding/decoding model. In this way, I hope the findings contribute to the critical acceptance of the encoding/decoding essay. By this I refer to the evolving debates about audience research sparked by Hall and the initial work inspired by his ideas, and the lines of argument that find enduring value in the encoding/decoding model but attempt to adapt and change its direction (Gurevitch & Scannell, 2003; Morley, 2006; Pillai, 1993). Hall (1994) has remarked that the original essay "suggests an approach; it opens up new questions. It maps the terrain. But it's a model which has to be worked with and developed and changed." (p. 255). While some have called for a departure and suggested different ways of studying and conceptualizing audiences critically, empirically, and qualitatively (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Barker, 2006), I aim to work within the encoding/decoding problematic. I also hope to contribute to the study of Latina/o media reception, which remains an important and understudied area of audience research. Lastly, this study contributes to the area of critical museum studies, investigating the different ways that audiences encounter increasingly interactive multimedia exhibitions.

I argue that the *Americanos* exhibit affirms the lived reality of Latina/o life in the U.S., outlines Latina/os contributions to U.S. culture, and presents Latina/os as a diverse group, defying the stereotype as the brown race. By investigating audience responses to the exhibit, I hope to paint a more detailed picture of how positive representations of U.S. minorities operate than

can be gathered from textual analysis, and to think purposefully about the denotative strategies employed by middlebrow, educational texts such as documentary photography and museum exhibition. *Americanos*, and other rehabilitative efforts like it, is a complex text that closes down meaning with several windows open into the encoding process on exhibit walls and in museum pamphlets: the motives of editors; reflections by contributors; introductions by curators. All of these paratextual elements attempt to close down the meaning of the exhibit and elicit a general interpretive framework from visitors. At the same time, through dramatic photojournalism, the exhibit works on an emotional level, where the images inspire hope in ways that the descriptive text cannot. Visitor responses show that this strategy works on some level, but interpretations can come from a highly negotiated position if readers arrive at the exhibit from a different political logic.

The *Americanos* Exhibit

Americanos presents an articulation of Latinidad that comes from a Latina/o perspective and might be mobilized to make demands on the state, the media, and other powerful institutions (Valdivia, 2003). Large-format photographs make up the core of the exhibit, with short narratives and reflections appearing as epigraphs on the museum's brightly painted walls. The *Americanos* soundtrack, available for purchase at the museum store, plays in the background. In general, the photographs are hopeful, dramatic and journalistic. The curators divide the content into thematic sections: community, work, sports, family, spirituality, and the arts. *Americanos* invites feedback with comment cards, and holds lectures and films in conjunction with the exhibit. The producers and contributors were Latina/os, and the exhibit was part of the new Latino Initiatives that later led to the formation of the Smithsonian Latino Center. However, the exhibit arrives from middlebrow institutional sensibilities and corporate partnerships, contexts likely to promote a vision of Latina/o life that maintains the political, economic, and cultural status quo and serves hegemonic interests (Henderson, 1999; Rodríguez, 1999; Sandoval-Sanchez, 1999). *Americanos* contains elements of each of the three conceptions of Latina/o unity outlined by Juan Flores (1997): demographic, analytic, and imaginary. Flores remarks that these three categories are not mutually exclusive, but illustrate the different strategies and points of emphasis used in the difficult task of suturing various national and hybrid identity positions into a coherent pan-ethnic group. Flores' first two positions, demographic and analytic, are partially present in the exhibit, but not completely realized. A demographic conception identifies Latina/os as a coherent group or target market unified for "electoral or commercial utility" (p. 186). Such a unity often serves the interests of powerful corporations and institutions. While *Americanos* articulates a broad and diverse Latinidad, the exhibit creates coherence and unity through neoliberal multiculturalism. Celebratory multiculturalism functions as a dominant discourse in U.S. cultural and institutional expressions. This sort of benign notion of difference also flows easily into cooptation and commodification that Flores describes in his demographic notion of

Latinidad. *Americanos* also reflects Flores' analytic approach to Latina/o unity, which focuses on the various sub-populations that constitute a pan-ethnic Latinidad. The exhibit makes ample use of signifiers for racial, cultural, and nation-of-origin diversity.

Flores' third position, the Latina/o imaginary, is most strongly evident on the denotative levels of *Americanos*. Flores argues that this position represents a community's vision of itself based on shared memory and solidarity. The Latina/o imaginary is, for Flores, a "unity fashioned creatively on the basis of shared memory and desire, congruent histories and meshing utopias" (p. 188) that "fuses the clamor for civil rights with a claim to sovereignty on an international scale" (p. 189). From this perspective, the Latina/o imaginary is a transgressive and resistive articulation of community solidarity that is not merely reactive to hegemonic culture, but productive as a social force. Much of this productive activity is based on memory, as Flores comments, "memory fuels desire; the past as imagined from a Latino perspective awakens the anticipatory sense of what is, or might be, in store" (p. 189). One of the key forces behind *Americanos* is to counter the stereotypes that have, over time, created a very limited memory about Latina/os' place in U.S. culture. For example Lea Yberra comments, "We definitely did not want to show people shooting heroin or being down and out to the point where there is no dignity left.... There have been plenty of times we've been depicted like that" (quoted in Moreno, 1999, p. C8). Yberra's remark echoes other expressions of producer intentionality inside and outside the exhibit that elaborate on the purpose of the project. We can gather from producers' comments that *Americanos* purposely and overtly attempts to wipe away negative stereotypes and recover a forgotten Latinidad rooted in the positive contributions and universal humanity of Latina/os rather than the associations promoted widely through news, entertainment, and institutional discourses. These sentiments appear in the exhibit, painted on walls and in the exhibit brochure.

However, I argue that through the use of positive imagery, a reliance on neoliberal multiculturalism, the absence of Latina/o political activism, and through the signification of the American Dream myth, *Americanos* misses the opportunity to create a transgressive Latina/o imaginary in Flores' sense of the term. While the exhibit photographs and epigraphs do express properties of a vernacular rhetoric (Calafell & Delgado, 2004), the codes of *Americanos* also suggest meanings about Latina/os and the U.S. national imaginary that support dominant ideologies regarding race and class. The ideologies of multiculturalism and the American Dream are mobilized to channel the potentially divisive and oppositional politics of race and class difference into practices that affirm pluralism and meritocracy, and to encourage the hope and promise of America – a promise that is often unfulfilled. Multiculturalism, in the neoliberal sense, limits its own challenge to the hegemony of white supremacy by avoiding direct confrontation with structural inequality and racial injustice. In its limited scope, benign, celebratory multiculturalism ultimately supports the hegemonic racial

order by “including its subjects, incorporating its opposition” (Omi & Winant, 1996, p. 68). Similarly, the American Dream myth obscures class differences by promoting narratives of social ascendancy and arguing for a functioning meritocracy in the U.S. Latina/os are invited into capitalism and liberal pluralism, directing meanings about Latinidad away from oppositional politics and direct challenges to hegemonic racial, economic, and political order. The American Dream provides ideological legitimacy to the elite and invites subaltern groups to blame themselves for their own failure (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). When infused with the ideologies of neoliberal multiculturalism, the American Dream provides a map for social ascendancy for racial and ethnic minorities that often requires assimilation into Anglo society and cooptation of political agency.

Multiculturalism and the American Dream myth require a type of cultural forgetting – a purposeful erasure of contentious race and class politics for the sake of moving on together as a multicultural nation. Such amnesia is evident in the meanings about Latina/os coded in *Americanos*, which suggest a politics of representation without directly confronting deeper relations of power. The exhibit engages in a politics of representation by directly confronting negative stereotypes, but also supports the ideologies of multiculturalism and the American Dream by leaving out more critical articulations that would challenge the gloss of multiculturalism and meritocracy. I maintain that *Americanos* uses some of the features of radical multiculturalism to create a transcultural, diverse Latinidad that makes moves in the direction of Valdivia’s (2003) notion of radical hybridity, but this effort is mediated by associations with ideologies that support the status quo. Thus, the exhibit does two things simultaneously. First, it supports a wider, more diverse idea of what constitutes the Latina/o community and the overall nature of Latinidad. Second, the assumptions of producers and the sensibilities of the institutions and funding partnerships create limitations around the ability of the exhibit to critique current political and cultural norms, and thus, potentially transform the material possibilities for those inscribed within the Latina/o category. This second area renders *Americanos* as part of a regime of representation that is ripe with debates about multiculturalism and threats to funding for questionable exhibits (Hubbard & Hassian, 1998). The meanings that audiences take from the exhibit can indicate the success of this strategy.

Audience Research in the Museum

Museums serve many roles. According to Bennett (1995), museums operate within two difficult contradictions: first, exhibits endeavor for broad representation of a nation, but the poetics of exhibition necessitate partiality; second, while museums address a whole citizenry of equals, they also differentiate visitors by cultural markers. Bennett remarks, “museum attendance varies directly with such variables as class, income, occupation, and most notable, education” (p. 104). How people read exhibits might be structured by any of these subject positions. Regardless, for museum curators, the success of an exhibit may lie in the

number of visitors attending and how long visitors linger in front of a painting or display (Munley, 1987). A cultural approach to media studies, however, asks how meaning is constructed by producers and audiences rather than posing questions about the effectiveness of communication and educational strategies. Common understandings of a texts' meaning are rooted in shared cultural assumptions, not in the clarity of meaning encoded by media producers (Lewis, 1991). At the same time, producers and curators attempt to limit ambiguity and promote their intentions about the meaning of a text. The preferred meaning of a text is not the same as producer intentionality. Producers are constrained by the conditions determined by corporate sponsorships, professional standards, and their institutional setting (Hall, 1993). The preferred meaning of a text lies at the intersection of shared ideological assumptions among producers and the audience.

Justin Lewis (1991) describes the preferred meaning as "the exercise of power within a set of shared cultural assumptions," and argues that to find the preferred meaning scholars cannot study the text alone, but must "study the message in terms of the shared assumptions it articulates and manipulates" (p. 64). Preferred meanings reveal moments of determination where audiences decode a text based on the same ideological terrain that producers use in the encoding process. Such moments also point to the place where meanings will differ if the ideological terrain is not shared. As Hall (1993) explains, "decodings are going to take place somewhere with the universe of encoding. The one is trying to enclose the other" (p. 261). Producers of *Americanos* are clear, in the exhibit text itself, about their desire to construct a positive and rehabilitative Latinidad and to displace racist regimes of representation with images of hope and diversity. Audience research can gauge visitor responses and suggest how the preferred meanings of the exhibit operate.

During January of 2001, I conducted interviews with 35 visitors to the *Americanos* exhibit lasting 15 to 30 minutes. Respondents gave their permission to be interviewed and their responses kept anonymous. Of these respondents, 8 identified themselves as white, 2 as African American, and 1 as Asian American. The remaining 24 respondents identified themselves as either part Latina/o, Latina/o, Hispanic, or Chicana/o. Participants included 25 women and 10 men. Interviews took place inside the museum with permission from museum staff. I identified myself as an independent researcher who was not affiliated with the museum or the exhibit. Interview questions move from the open to the specific, allowing respondents space to elaborate or move into other areas. Respondents completed a short survey after the interview that asked for general demographic information including ethnic identity and geographic location. The interviews were tape recorded.

Audience research in the cultural studies tradition examines social structures to shed light on a particular reader's response to a media text. In an self-evaluation of his study of the television news program *Nationwide*, David Morley (1992) proposes "a position from which we can see the person actively producing meanings from the restricted range of cultural resources to which his or her structural position has allowed access" (p. 136). While reader positions shape the perspectives and interpretive strategies of museum visitors, I approach visitor responses with an openness to the many subject positions that might be at work in the active interpretation of *Americanos*. Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (1996) argue that by approaching audiences as a unified bloc necessarily representing their race or class position, many audience research studies limit the recognition that readers might approach media texts from a variety of subject positions. They write, "rather than treating class position [or other structures] as an isolatable 'independent variable' predetermining cultural responses, it could best be seen as a factor (or vector) whose impact as a structuring principle for experience can only be conceptualized within the concrete historical context in which it is articulated" (p. 117). In order to allow readers the analytic space to construct their own understanding of *Americanos*, I analyze any social-structural dynamics as they arise from the interview situation.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) notion of cultural capital also serves as a useful concept for making connections between an audience member's background and his or her reading position. Cultural capital is held in individuals and objects, and may be an important way to understand how visitors experience museums. In many ways, the *Americanos* exhibit and the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History can be understood as part of the new museum movement (Message & Healy, 2004) aiming to create more experiential, vernacular exhibits and evoke emotional responses by visitors. Thus, visitors may represent more diversity than might have traditionally been conceptualized as the museum audience (Bennett 1995). Cultural capital creates hierarchical relationships in the culture through the combination of economic status and social position (Lewis, 1991). Based on level of formal education, life experience, or personal associations, some respondents have access to discourses that others do not. Museum visitors, in particular, may hold more specific middlebrow cultural competencies than people who do not visit museums. A 2004 survey of visitors to Smithsonian Institution museums found that the average age of visitors was 37 years, and adults reported high levels of education with 73 percent of those over 25 years old holding bachelor's, graduate, or advanced professional degrees. 74 percent of visitors described themselves as white and only 9 percent self-identified as Latina/o (Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, 2004). While similar data are not available for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, we might expect that visitors reflect the diversity of the Los Angeles community, although within the demographic trends identified in

the Smithsonian survey. I include at least one group interview with college students who identify as Chicana/os who are active in a Chicana/o student organization at a nearby university. Because of their membership in the organization, these Chicana/o students might have cultural capital that allows them to interpret the *Americanos* differently than other readers from similar class backgrounds or education levels.

Interpreting *Americanos*

At the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, audience readings of *Americanos* closely matched producers' stated intentions: the exhibit articulates a positive, diverse Latinidad that contributes to the social fabric of the U.S. national imaginary. Respondents acknowledged the positive framework through expressions of pride and hope upon visiting the Natural History Museum. One museum visitor remarked that, on the whole, *Americanos* "was a pretty, um, what's the word, positive, positive images, not negative." Another Latina visitor stated, "it's nice to have this in a museum where there's tons of people that come and come look." Many respondents found the positive images inspiring and affirmative of the Latina/o contribution to the U.S. A Chicana/o student summed up both the purpose and the intended audience of *Americanos* when she tersely remarked that the overall message is: "Look, we're like you. Can we be accepted by you?" *Americanos*' producers admit that their first audience in mind consisted of non-Latina/os, and this Chicana/o student's reading confirms the introductory tone of the exhibit. Another Chicana/o student discussed the title:

I think like any title, if they were going to choose a culturally identifying title, they would get different reactions. Just about any title they could've chose: Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, Americano. Because the thing is, it's covering totally diverse people - different countries that they come from, different social classes, different states. That no one, you're never going to get everyone to agree on the term. I guess, in a way, it is saying that we're here, we're part of this country.

These responses by Chicana/o students speak to a key feature of the overall preferred meaning of the exhibit, which affirms the positive contributions of Latina/os and articulates a Latinidad that exists firmly within the borders of U.S. culture. The all-encompassing term "Americanos" sets an inclusive tone and frames the photographs in a generous and open definition of what it means to be a Latina/o and what it means to be an American. The responses of museum visitors and the Chicana/o students reveal how the exhibit text evokes shared cultural assumptions articulated by producers in the encoding process and reinforced in press interviews. General audience agreement about the nature and purpose of the exhibit demonstrates the success of producers in their attempt to close down ambiguity through denotative and connotative codes. Audience responses speak to the power of documentary

photography and the denotative tone of museum exhibition in limit polysemy and clarifying the meaning of the text. In the pages that follow, I discuss three themes in audience responses: the positive lens of *Americanos*, diversity and multiculturalism, and the promotion of the American Dream. Audience responses, whether expressing praise or frustration with *Americanos*, reveal the preferred meaning of the exhibit and how *Americanos*' producers' work touches with the shared assumptions of these members of the audience.

"It Gives Me a Lot of Pride;" Americanos' Affirmative Vision

Americanos stands in contrast to a regime of negative imagery that defines Latina/os as outsiders in their own nation. The exhibit challenges negative stereotypes and provides visitors with a relief from the pervasive discourses of marginalization and otherness that circulate in the culture (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Navarette & Kamasaki, 1994; Ramírez-Berg, 2002; Subveri-Velez, 2004). At the same time, *Americanos* works alongside the celebratory regime of representation in general market media that depoliticizes Latinidad to fit Latina/os within the sensibilities and preferences of mainstream commercial and political culture and came to characterize millennial discourses about Latina/os (Aparicio, 2003; Beltrán, 2002; Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004). Many of the museum visitors and Chicana/o students in the study embraced this positive framing of Latinidad. In many instances, respondents commented on the affirmative imagery, where their interpretations matched seamlessly with the codes of positive multiculturalism mobilized by producers. Preferred readings pointed to the positive, diverse, and humanist Latinidad articulated by exhibit producers. One visitor remarked,

One thing that I'm left with is just the richness of the contributions to American life. It went through all different aspects: sports, art, culture.

This statement points to the breadth of *Americanos*, which articulates Latinidad as active in diverse parts of U.S. culture, including family, work, and art. These areas extend Latina/o contributions far beyond the limited range of possibilities that are found in stereotypical media portrayals. *Americanos*' success, according to several readers, lies in how the exhibit represents participation in everyday life and the beneficial contributions to society. Two young Latina/o visitors discussed the feeling of pride that came from their encounter with the positive, diverse imagery of the exhibit:

RESPONDENT 1³: I saw a lot of people celebrating

RESPONDENT 2: It just makes you appreciate your culture. Makes you, like it gives me a lot of pride. It just gives you a lot of pride for your culture. I know it does for me.

RESPONDENT 1: It's nice to see familiar faces, because sometimes they only do the highlights with the famous people and it's nice to see that there's perfectly unknown people in the culture – that represent the culture.

These responses demonstrate how readers understand the text as celebratory, and the exhibit's positive depictions of everyday life and everyday people evoke expressions of pride and satisfaction about their cultural location as Latina/os. This exchange indicates the successful determination of meaning in the encoding process, as positive reactions from visitors solidify the meaning of *Americanos* as an affirmative and realistic articulation of Latinidad.

Many positive audience reactions came from images that depict day laborers, farm workers, and fruit sellers. These images connote the dignity of work and the triumph of the human spirit and represent Latina/o contributions to the U.S. that are often overlooked. Stylized images of unskilled labor evoke beauty found in suffering and sacrifice. Several respondents commented that the Marisol series –made up of several photos of a young immigrant girl - revealed the hardships of migrant farm labor and the isolation that many migrant children must endure. For some, the Marisol series suggested the wide lens of *Americanos* that included images of suffering:

That was a really good photo. I bet a lot of people don't really think about what it is, what kind of life is for a farm worker. And that photo essay, you got a good look at the struggles that they go through that a lot of people don't realize.

I was happy to see that because at least someone who was taking the picture was aware ya know. It's sad. A lot of people think our generation is different. We don't have through all that stuff that our parents had to go through. Family members or friends—you really get to appreciate the way you live, how you live here, what you have because what they have there was like, what they had to go through to get here. My dad crossed the border 14 times and they even knew his name.

The first comment comes from a Chicana student who appreciates the Marisol series for including some of the harsher realities faced by many Latina/os that a non-Latina/o audience might not fully understand. The second comment comes from a second-generation Latina visitor who links the photograph with her own family experience, which locates the suffering of Marisol with her parents' generation, whose sacrifices have provided her with the opportunity to succeed in the U.S. Both comments praise the series for widening the scope of Latinidad,

although this series is among only a small group of photographs in the exhibit that overtly suggest poverty.

Work functions as a central framework where Latina/o contributions to the U.S. are brought into sharp focus, and many of the respondents comment on how they appreciate the dignity and beauty found in images of difficult work. Despite problems they had with the exhibit, Chicana/o students agreed that the images of unskilled labor truthfully represented the persistence and hard work that defines the Latina/o spirit, as evidenced in this exchange:

RESPONDENT 3: The only thing that I would say of the images that is reflective of our culture that is portrayed, is that you do see a smile and you do see that hope. That our people are so strong and they have so much strength and they go through so much shit, ya know? And that's the only thing that I see in any of the pictures that positively reflects our people because, ya know the person selling flowers—he's out there every morning, even though he only makes \$3.00 a day. He'll be out there, ya know that strength and continuing the hard work and the struggle.

RESPONDENT 4: It's like the whole Latino spirit. Regardless of what comes up, we still like have that high spirit because that's something that's already engrained I guess in all of our cultures in that kind of shows that we're the Latinos regardless of what's happening in our lives or what's happened in the past or is still happening, we're still out there, feeling ok. I'm going to continue.

These Chicana/o students made a subtle negotiation of the meaning by alluding to racism and economic subjugation, but affirmed the preferred meaning of *Americanos* that honors the beauty and positive contributions of Latina/o labor. The images of the stoic or happy worker, rendered with dramatic and colorful backdrops, engender associations between Latina/o labor and the self-reliance that is part of the ideology of the American Dream. Smiling farm workers and textile workers also signify happiness and satisfaction with their position in a capitalist society. The students' comments about hope and perseverance in the face of significant obstacles confirm the positive associations promoted in exhibit codes and demonstrate how *Americanos* is in touch with the assumptions about Latina/o life held by these Chicana/o students. Several other museum visitors commented on the positive connotations assigned to images of unskilled labor. One Latina museum visitor remarked,

And so it showed working people. Factory workers. It didn't show like I don't know people at the unemployment office. You know what I mean? Which is good. It showed positive—it didn't have like pictures of, I was waiting for—I was looking for

students like ditching school, smoking. Do you know what I mean? It didn't have those pictures, which is good, I think.

This response praises the exhibit for its presentation of work and its deliberate avoidance of representing government aid programs such as unemployment insurance. Instead, *Americanos* presents images of work with dignity and appeals to the up-from-your-bootstraps narratives that characterized conservative attacks on social welfare policies in the 1990s. Positive representations of manual labor slip easily into dangerous stereotypes of the happy worker who accepts subordination.

Diversity and Multiculturalism

Other elements of the preferred meaning confirmed by audience responses are diversity and human universalism that serve as the lynchpins of Latina/o coherence in *Americanos*. Olmos and his colleagues challenge stereotypes by presenting a racially, economically, and culturally diverse Latinidad. This diversity helps to articulate a transcultural and hybrid Latina/o imaginary that, in turn, links Latina/os with a multicultural America. Several readers confirm the diversity of Latina/os as a key element in the exhibit:

I get to see that there's not only Mexican Americans, but that there's Cubans, there's Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, so interracial, I guess.

It's diverse. I look at the faces of people and I like the woman who was Korean Argentinean. Ya know just to look at someone – to physically look at someone's face and realize that they could be from Asian or some sort. So I wish people realized there was diversity. Just because you look a certain way, doesn't mean anything. Because if you look at me, I don't look Mexican American. And they should – I don't know – we should just see people as they are human and enjoy who they are.

The racial signifiers and Latin American national markers serve as codes for the diversity of both Latinidad and a multicultural U.S. national imaginary. The second comment, however, is more complicated than the first. Here, the respondent reads the physical features in *Americanos* imagery as racial signifiers. Producers isolate the physical features of certain photographic subjects to signify their racial difference and to suggest the diversity of Latinidad, which proves to be a successful strategy given the response, "just to look at someone – to physically look at someone's face." The respondent points to the Asian racial signifiers found in a photographic subject's facial features as evidence for the slippery nature of racial essentialism. In other words, the reading suggests that if the woman in the photograph is both Asian and Latina, then the hybridity and transcultural nature of Latinidad proves the non-necessary nature of racial categorization. The respondent appeals to our

universal humanity as a way out of the trappings of race. If Latina/os are like everybody else, then our differences matter little and should not be mobilized as reasons for exclusion from the national imaginary. Because the exhibit employs racial diversity without addressing the relations of power that characterize the problematic of race, this comment moves close to color-blind multiculturalism – one that celebrates difference without bringing the structural power of racial signification into the negotiation of meaning.

Chicana/o students also interpreted the diversity of *Americanos* on the cultural level. For these students, who spoke about the social justice project of Chicana/o politics, signifiers of cultural difference within Latinidad provoked feelings of excitement. Two respondents remarked about the differences in class, religion, and race:

You also see like different cultures. I thought it was very representative of different cultures as well as different economic statuses. You see like people from very rural villages, um, to ya know, you see this little girl in a uniform playing chess. To me that represented a higher economic status. I thought it was cool how they used pictures and not a lot of words and it can mean whatever you want it to mean.

I just think that in a lot of pictures, unless they have a flag that says “I’m Puerto Rican or Mexican,” you can’t really tell where these people are from. It’s saying we are the same people. And that we are and we should like – I mean it was cool, like – these little girls that were like Jewish and Latina ya know. I was like, “Wow, that’s cool.” Or like, there’s also the boys who are half-Chinese and half-Latino – those are all part of ya know like who we are. And I find it really interesting that they brought those images out. To see the diversity that we have, but yet we’re all like one people.

Like other respondents, these students welcomed a broad version of Latina/o life that includes signifiers of different economic, religious, and racial positions. Responses also point to the notion that Latina/o unity lies in heterogeneity. The exhibit uses difference to articulate a unity that is bound by a series of “ands.” These audience responses confirm the possibility that a diverse, transcultural Latinidad can be constructed and understood as a unified, coherent site of identity and community agency.

At the same time, diversity and multiculturalism are more complicated representational strategies than they sometimes appear. Shohat and Stam (1994) discuss how despite the critical potential of multicultural discourses, the manifestations from the center-left often create new sets of problems. Some of the ideologies of this liberal multiculturalism, which celebrate apolitical difference without confronting structures of power, appear in responses from museum visitors, several of whom speak about the “melting pot” within Latinidad and in

the U.S. When I asked what the exhibit says about America, several respondents reference the tolerance and welcoming nature of the U.S.:

I would think the melting pot of America. What people bring to America - their culture, their tradition, that sort of thing.

It does I think show the melting pot culture. We have a very diverse culture. We have newcomers and people who have been here for generations.

I think it does say that it's possible to have your culture here. There's a lot of tolerance in America that I think it's fine to have your culture.

In these comments, respondents paint a picture of a tolerant and welcoming America that incorporates Latina/os into its "melting pot" of difference. Unlike traditional notions of the assimilationist melting pot of decades past, these responses do not indicate that Latina/os need to give up their culture to be included in the national imaginary. Instead, the national imaginary itself becomes a place of inclusion and diversity. Here, liberal multiculturalism leaves the status quo intact by celebrating difference without confronting the problems of the "melting pot" and the trappings of "tolerance." These responses indicate that *Americanos* proposes a reconstruction not only of the Latina/o imaginary, but also of a multicultural America where Latina/os and other racial and ethnic groups can find places to belong with other citizens who embrace difference. Again, the lack of critical political representation and an avoidance of relations of power in the exhibit make this transformation of America possible. As respondents confirm, *Americanos* seeks to build up a diverse and welcoming national imaginary where a bright and cheery Latinidad will be welcomed by mainstream culture with open arms.

Most visitors find the diversity, universalism, and multiculturalism at work in *Americanos* familiar, but not all respondents agree that the exhibit tells the truth about the cultural and institutional politics of difference in the U.S. One Chicana/o student characterized some of the oppositional readings that occurred regularly in our discussion in the student center. She described how the cultural capital of Chicana/o identification contradicts the multiculturalism at work in the exhibit:

Something that in [our organization] we discuss a lot is having a Chicano state of mind. That's one thing like growing up here in the United States, like feeling not totally like American, or not feeling like "Oh I can be part of that power." And I felt like I lived in 2 worlds. Like there's one side of you and another side of you and you're never comfortable in either one. There's always a struggle. And I think it doesn't

represent that and it doesn't represent people crossing the border, ya know?
Drowning in the rivers that they have to cross or being killed. You know it doesn't show that side, that of the police brutality. It just shows the good side. Keep working, it's selling flowers, that's beautiful, but it just shows the other side, more glamorized I think to what the American ideals are – like hard work and striving for that house.

Informed by the proclaimed subject position and political agency of Chicana/o identity, this respondent found the diversity in *Americanos* lacking a confrontation with relations of power. For many Latina/os, the transcultural nature of Latinidad leads not to the whimsical pastiche of postmodern notions of hybridity, but instead becomes a trap of identity that is neither here nor there. In talking about the photos depicting immigration, this reader remarked that she lived in “two worlds,” not fully accepted in the U.S. culture but not a Latin American. This comment directly challenges one of the key features of the preferred meaning in *Americanos*: that the lived reality of Latina/os defies stereotypes because of its internally diverse nature. In other words, the text encourages the respondent to consider how Latinidad is a diverse and mixed category, but the response re-articulates a form of radical hybridity that acknowledges how living in two or more cultural spaces might also mean not truly belonging in either. The student understands the positive difference articulated in the exhibit, but rejects *Americanos*' naiveté in efforts to define difference without addressing relations of power.

Challenging the American Dream

The American Dream constitutes an important part of the discourse of *Americanos*. The ideology of meritocracy and social ascendancy operates on the connotative level through association: images of unskilled labor are sutured with depictions of Latina/o professionals and celebrities to form one narrative supporting the myth of the American Dream. For example, the epigraphic narrative of Congressman Xavier Becerra sutures these images together into an argument for the availability of the American Dream for willing Latina/os:

María Teresa and Manuel married in Mexico and moved to California. Manuel helped build our nation from the ground up, laying pipe and concrete. While raising four children, María Teresa worked and attended night school to learn English.... They were able to buy their first home. Now in retirement, Manuel and María Teresa own many homes. They are an American success story and they are my parents.

While many photographs feature everyday Latina/os, a disproportionate representation of doctors, lawyers, and celebrities in these images solidifies the notion that professional success results from blind merit and hard work. Still, many museum visitors complained that there was too much poverty in the exhibit and not enough professionals:

You see a lot of things that go on in reality, especially like a lot of Hispanics and stuff, hard work and a lot of things that they have going on. But at a certain point I guess it shows a lot of the poverty. It doesn't show the good side, where some people are actually rich and wealthy. All you see is poor people living. Ya know? Like crap in a way.

There are a lot of Latinos that are going up like offices, going into politics. They could've shown stuff like that also. Not out in the fields or in a marketplace.

[The exhibit needs] more success stories, like showing more Latinos like in offices like good positions...not in the fields.

Museum visitors ask for even more images of economic and professional success that would support the American Dream narrative and satisfy audiences who crave positive role models. In these readings, images of poverty and farm labor support negative stereotypes about Latina/os. By calling for even more depictions of professionals who are "going up" in *Americanos*, these respondents reveal support for the American Dream myth that renders the poor and destitute as having only themselves to blame (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Importantly, this discourse deflects attention from the forces of race and class that structure Latina/o life in the U.S.

Chicana/o students read the American Dream as central and overt in the construction of preferred meaning and directly challenged the myth of meritocracy in many of their comments. The students' responses, which held a deeper critique of power relations than the other museum visitors, came in the context of group interviews. Chicana/o identity once again serves as an important reservoir for oppositional readings, as these students reject the assimilationist implications of the American Dream and express skepticism about unobstructed paths toward social ascendancy in the U.S. The students explicitly discuss the workings of American Dream ideologies and offer reasons as to why this preferred meaning must be resisted:

I think *Americanos*, like I said before, it seems like it's more um, ya know, the American Dream kind of thing. It's more about assimilation. Chicano is more about being who you are, with my indigenous background and not the American Dream. When you say the American Dream it means having a house, money, the perfect living. That's not the reality of what it is.

I did see some things, like the woman ya know, sewing the flag and all these other things and it was like, um some it just like portrayed like what many Americans say.

Ya know the American Dream. And for a lot of Latinos that is, ya know, their whole reasons why they want to come here. The opportunity for the American Dream, but in reality, like [another respondent] was saying, it's not like that. Even if you struggle, you go to school and you know you're in this top position, you're still going to face, um, racism. You're still going to face oppression and you're still a person in the community, ya know what I mean? So it's like I don't think that us as a people, as a whole can really reach that American Dream if the people, if the United States government is um putting all these barriers on us, ya know what I mean?

Drawing on Chicana/o politics, these oppositional readings reject the capitalist and assimilationist tenets of the American Dream and argue for a consideration of cultural and institutional racism as reasons why the myth of meritocracy remains a myth for many Latina/os. Although the students come at the text from a politically-informed perspective, their rejection of this part of the text also acknowledges how the American Dream functions within shared cultural assumptions. But for these respondents, race and class form a persistent and formidable barrier to the promise of social ascendancy and meritocracy that many other readers take for granted.

One particular photograph provoked a direct challenge of the purpose of the exhibit by the Chicana/o students. The image of Bernadette Mendoza, a seamstress wearing a GAP T-shirt and sewing an American flag, is featured in exhibit brochures and in the very front of the *Americanos* book. The image ties many of the different strands of the exhibit together: denotatively, the Latina woman is sewing the flag, but connotatively, the image speaks for the profound and very direct Latina/o contributions to U.S. culture. Her name brand T-shirt signifies her cultural belonging through commodity-belonging and corporate branding. By featuring the photograph in prominent locations, the image stands as an emblem for the overall message of the exhibit. The Chicana/o students invert the meaning of the image in this exchange:

RESPONDENT 3: There's a picture of a woman sewing a flag and she's wearing a GAP sweatshirt and she's sewing an American flag. It kind of made me just look at her as a normal American, but the truth is maybe she is and maybe she has a really good job and she has good health benefits and she gets paid well, but the majority of women that look just like her, that are probably selling similar objects, are sewing the sweatshirt that she's wearing, work in *maquiladoras*, or sweatshops. And I just thought that was a poor representation. I could see if it was the person was the other way around –most women have good jobs and they like to sew American flags, ya know? Then the picture is fine, but to me it's a really controversial picture because it depicts. Like she has a sewing machine there. Anyone that's been to downtown L.A. knows

that sewing machines don't mean freedom, they don't mean the American Dream, they don't mean stars and stripes. Most of the sweatshops in downtown L.A. have bars on the windows - you can't go in. The picture is just a real misrepresentation of a lot of things. (M2)

RESPONDENT 4: I totally see your point and I agree with you. When I saw it I immediately thought that the photographer purposely did those two images as ironic. And I purposely was like, "Wow that's an artistic, he's expressing himself, in a way that this is like fucked up." Like how is it that this woman...ya know I was like she's being oppressed the flag and what it symbolizes—liberty and freedom. She's being oppressed by that—by that same country. And to me it was more artistic, that the photographer almost did that on purpose. But then that also seems like maybe he or she didn't. And I think that's what this whole exhibit is just open to interpretation at a lot of points.

The image takes on new meaning in these oppositional readings: the GAP T-shirt and the sewing machine become signifiers of the oppression of women workers. One student's comment that the producers must intend an ironic reading of the photograph points to the absurdity of the image from his perspective. Certainly, this student infers, this image provides such a singular contradiction of economic, gender, and race relations that it must be there to make an ironic point. But nothing in the encoding process implies such a strategy; considering the comments from producers and given the featured presentation of the photograph, the intended meaning suggests that the flag represents belonging, whereas the Chicana/o student takes the flag to represent oppression and inequality. The disjuncture between the preferred meaning that the image articulates and the oppositional reading of the Chicana/o students demonstrates the failure, in this instance, of the encoding process to completely determine the meaning of Latinidad. Chicana/o students identify the American Dream as part of the preferred meaning of *Americanos* and proceed to reject its central tenets. The fact that other readers did not overtly name the American Dream only reinforces its status as common sense in our culture.

Jhally and Lewis (1992) find that *The Cosby Show*, another text bound up in the politics of positive representation, supports the myth of the American Dream in a similar way to *Americanos*. In their study, audience responses indicated a disconnection between the structures of race and class in U.S. society, leaving respondents to blame class inequality on individuals. When interpreting a text that celebrates the family life of upper-income African Americans, audiences neglected to include class-consciousness in their responses. This leads many of the white respondents in their study down the path of "enlightened racism," an innovative form of racism in the era of multiculturalism where, in this case, *The Cosby Show*

“proved that black people can succeed; yet in doing so they also prove the inferiority of black people in general (who have, in comparison with whites, failed)” (p. 95). In this study, after one of the Chicana/o students argued that the exhibit promotes the idea that Latina/so have been accepted in mainstream society, another student raises the issue of enlightened racism:

That makes me think of other people that haven't lived the Latino experience, when they see this exhibit, they're going to think “Oh, so all this Latinos always complaining about this about discrimination, about prejudice, about racism, look at this.” It keeps them with the same mentality that Latinos already have all the opportunities in this country so what are they asking for?

The positive lens of *Americanos*, combined with the absence of critical politics and a purposeful lack of confrontations with relations of power beyond the exhibit's stated goal of contesting negative stereotypes and its embrace of multiculturalism, raises concerns for this reader about the possibility of transgressive Latina/o politics. In an effort to reverse negative stereotypes, the producers of *Americanos* inadvertently promote a new form of racism based in the politics of positive representation and neoliberal multiculturalism. The oppositional readings present a direct challenge to the coding of race and class in the celebratory exhibit, and calls on media producers and cultural exhibitors to consider the double bind involved with the positive representation of racial and ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

At the time of the data collection for this study, Latinidad sat at a cultural precipice. With a long history of negative and demeaning depictions in mainstream U.S. media, the 2000 Census called attention to a growing Latina/o population, and marketers, media producers, and museums took notice. *Americanos* was part of a discourse that charted a new, affirmative, and celebratory notion of who Latina/os were, could be, and how they fit into the national imaginary. This article suggests some of the complexities of positive representation that might not come under consideration in the encoding process of producers who endeavor to combat racist regimes of representation for marginalized groups. While Olmos and his colleagues do not express explicit support for the American Dream or neoliberal multiculturalism in press interviews and within the exhibit text, their reliance on happy images of persevering workers, their exclusion of poverty and relations of power economic power, and their unapologetic positive lens supports dominant ideologies of race and class in the U.S. By embracing the politics of neoliberal multiculturalism, *Americanos* presents diversity without providing critical tools to unpackage racial ideologies and class relations. This refreshing and affirmative approach holds special saliency for Latina/os who are subject to savvy marketing and political messages proclaiming them the new and emerging power in U.S. culture.

Audience research shows that many of museum visitors and Chicana/o students recognize the positive framework of Latinidad and appreciate the diversity of Latina/o life depicted in exhibit photographs. Chicana/o students engage the text much more critically than the visitors interviewed at the museum. Their oppositional readings suggest that the cultural capital of Chicana/o political identity stands as a determining force in the interpretation of texts that celebrate Latinidad. Dissonance results from the embodied cultural capital cultivated over time by Chicano identity confronting the objectified cultural capital of the exhibit, which conveys the multiculturalism, pride, and the representational aspirations of the museum and exhibit creators (Bourdieu, 1986). The Chicano students' direct resistance to the apolitical and multiculturalist nature of the text challenges the purpose and scope of this exhibit and similar texts that articulate Latinidad in general market media and mainstream popular culture. The oppositional readings of the Chicana/o students in the audience study also point to how a politically-informed perspective can be cultivated in organizational and community settings and serve as cultural capital that influences message reception. Additionally, many of the responses by visitors and Chicana/o students expressed feelings as well as interpretations. This makes sense, as textual features of the exhibit worked on an emotional level, and in Los Angeles, which spent the 1990s as a center of the culture wars around race and class, the politics of identity and representation operate on a deep emotional level.

These findings can encourage the work of educators and scholars in their efforts to build liberating and critical perspectives through teaching and research. At a time when mainstream, consumerist culture attempts to define the nature of Latinidad, such perspectives can disrupt the manipulative strategies of dominant media corporations, political operatives, and marketing demographers. The interpretive activity of the Chicana/o students in this study also suggests that oppositional and critical reading strategies can illuminate the subtle politics of neoliberal multiculturalism and challenge the assumptions about difference promoted in many cultural institutions. At the same time, the relatively uncritical responses from many museum visitors shows that educators, advocates, and scholars have a long road ahead of them in the project to create emancipatory knowledge and to enrich Latinidad as a site of both solidarity and critical politics.

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¹ The term “Latina/o” is widely used in the emergent cultural studies research on the topic. “Latino” refers to those drawing a common ancestry to Latin America, and has salience in the entire hemisphere, but most notably in the United States. The “a/o” is sometimes used for gender inclusivity, and I employ it here. Scholars sometimes used the term “Hispanic,” which is considered more institutional and perhaps conservative by many Latina/os. “Chicana/o” is a political identity claimed first by Mexican-Americans during the Chicano civil rights movement in the Southwest U.S. during 1970s, and generally refers to those living in the United States who have Mexican ancestry. Although as some of the respondents later remark, it is considered a political “state of mind.” The term “Americanos” is proposed by the creators of *Americanos* to put forth an inclusive and diverse term representing Latina/os.

² The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County featured the *Americanos* exhibit between December 2000 to February 2001. *Americanos* toured exhibition spaces throughout the United States between 1999 and 2004.

³ During exchanges between respondents in the same interview, I have identified each of them with a number. All other responses are listed from separate interviews.