American Latinos and the Making of the United States: An Introduction
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The relatively unknown story of Latinos in America is at the heart of this National Park Service Theme Study, American Latinos and the Making of the United States. Over a year in development, the idea was launched at a forum held in La Paz, California on June 16, 2011. Shortly after, the National Park System Advisory Board constituted the American Latino Scholars Expert Panel. At the invitation of the Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, the group of ten academics agreed to dedicate themselves to crafting a historic document; one that would help the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service tell the layered story of American Latinos as an integral part of the history, culture, and politics of the United States. The group’s charge was also to recommend possible Latino historic sites for recognition and to suggest ways to incorporate Latino history into the presentations and interpretations at already-existing national sites.

To start, the panel made several key decisions that significantly shaped the study’s direction and breadth. The first was to emphasize the period from the mid-19th century to the present. The panel chose this path both because the National Park Service is already rich in pre-1800 Latino historic sites and because much of the contemporary Latino experience is directly rooted in the last two centuries. In addition, at a time when Latinos make up 18% of the population of the U.S and its territories, the panel felt there was a greater need to identify more recent landmarks, figures, and stories. These would not only better exemplify modern Latino history but also enable a greater understanding of how and why the U.S. has become more thoroughly “Latinized” politically and culturally during this period.

The second decision, perhaps even a controversial one, was to use the term Latino instead of Hispanic in the study’s title, and to include the Spanish settlement and colonization of the Americas as an important part of what we refer to as Latino history. In doing so, the panel did not aim either to homogenize the many identities of the groups that today are called Latino or to dismiss the fact that there has never been a single descriptive category for all as the persistence of Chicano, Boricua, Cuban, Nuevo-mexicano, and Hispanic amply underscore. Rather, the panel chose Latino for two main reasons. By alluding to Latin America (or latinoamérica in Spanish), the term punctuates the experience of peoples living in the Americas rather than Europe. In addition, unlike Hispanic, which relates to “Hispania” or the Hispanic peninsula, Latino in its current meaning is a category that officially emerged in the U.S. during the 20th century in response to the dramatic increase of Latin American-descended people in its national territory.

At another level, the term calls attention to the fact that Latino communities have significantly diversified over time and begun to settle beyond their traditional enclaves, producing new pan-Latino realities. The fastest growing Mexican communities today, for instance, are in the south and southeastern U.S., areas where few Latinos settled before. While most Cuban Americans still live in Florida and remain the majority of Latinos in Miami, Puerto Ricans are by far the largest number in Central Florida and nearly half of Miami’s Latinos are non-Cubans. Conversely, New York, long a Puerto Rican stronghold, is projected to be a Mexican majority Latino city by 2040. And there are now more Salvadorans living in the U.S. than Cubans or Dominicans, for decades the third and fourth largest Latino group respectively.

In other words, within the context of this theme study, “Latino” is less a marker of a sin-
gle cultural or ethnic identity than a concept. This concept refers to a long historical process through which those perceived as Hispanic and/or Latino were thought of as a different kind of people—politically, culturally, and racially—than the truly “American.” The conjointing of the terms Latino and history thus facilitates a more complex telling of the American story. It also enables us to view Latinos comparatively and to investigate the ways that Latino history is also American history in the broader hemispheric sense. Ultimately, Latino history is American history with an accent—on the experiences and geographies extensively shaped by the Spanish Empire in the Americas and by the rise of the U.S. as a global power beginning in the 19th century.

With the goal of fleshing out this story further, the theme study includes seventeen essays that aim to powerfully capture the Latino experience. Authored by leading experts in various fields, the scholars gathered here are political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary critics, legal scholars, and historians by training. Yet, all share in a commitment to interdisciplinary methodologies and transnational perspectives that take into account the ways that class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status, among forms of difference, produce Latino history.

Structurally, the volume is divided into four major sections: Making the Nation explores how Latinos came to live in what became the U.S. and how their presence, thought, and media informed the new nation from its founding to the present; Making a Life delves into Latino religious experience, creativity, and contributions to popular culture and social institutions; Making a Living considers the impact of Latinos on rural and urban business, labor, commerce, the military, science, and medicine; and Making a Democracy delineates individual Latino and collective action in expanding democratic rights through legal battles and political organizing.

The study opens with historian Stephen Pitti’s “The American Latino Heritage,” a sweeping overview of the Latino journey as personified in five historical figures: the exiled Cuban priest Félix Varela, the Mexican American author María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, the Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, the Guatemalan civil rights organizer Luisa Moreno, and the Mexican American politician Edward Roybal. These pivotal protagonists creatively confront the major issues of their time—Manifest Destiny, the after effects of war, racial discrimination, and the struggles of workers for human dignity and civic participation. In doing so, they demonstrate how Latinos have had a significant impact in the U.S.’s collective past, advanced the democratic political process, and participated in sculpting the ever-changing definition of American culture.

Following Pitti’s chapter is the study’s first section, Making the Nation. In its initial essay, “The Latino Crucible: Its Origins in 19th Century Wars, Revolutions, and Empire,” historian Ramón Gutiérrez tackles the frequently asked question of “how did the U.S. become (so) Latino” by focusing our attention on the core process that first brought Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans into the United States’ fold: American nation-building. Moving south, west, and across the Caribbean Sea, Gutiérrez literally maps out the course and impact of U.S. continental expansion through the Louisiana Purchase (1803), the annexation of Texas (1845), the incorporation of half of Mexico’s territory through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), the acquisition of Puerto Rico and involvement in Cuban affairs after the Spanish-American War (1898). As Gutiérrez suggests, the end result was not only newly drawn continental and oceanic borders but also a different cultural, political, and demographic reality.
for the extended nation within which Latinos had now become a sizeable group.

While U.S. nation building set the foundations for modern Latino communities, these grew significantly through subsequent waves of migration and immigration. Yet, this considerable movement of people was, again, principally triggered not by individual will but by U.S. national policy. Historian David Gutiérrez thus continues the story in his chapter, “A Historical Overview of Latino Immigration and the Demographic Transformation of the United States,” proposing that the greatest “pull” factor in expanding Latino settlement to the U.S. in the mid-20th century was American economic strategy. Through policies like the Bracero Program, which sought to attract authorized Mexican labor to work in U.S. agriculture and factories; and Operation Bootstrap, a comprehensive plan to relocate Puerto Rican labor to the Midwest and Northeast, the U.S. government actively recruited Latino workers throughout the 1940s. Although originally designed to meet one-time labor shortages over a short period, American employers became dependent on Latino labor and continued to pursue authorized and unauthorized workers even after the policies ended. In turn, the new arrivals became an additional magnet for future immigration as they permanently settled in the U.S., prompting others to follow.

Significantly, the political and economic incorporation of Latinos brought not only new subjects or laborers to the U.S. With Latinos came different intellectual traditions and fully engaged minds with the burning questions of the day, remaking the nation in a different way. As literary historian Nicolás Kanellos argues in “Envisioning and Re-visioning the Nation: Latino Intellectual Traditions,” Latino intellectual history runs deeper than that of Anglophone Americans as Spanish settlers introduced the first written European language and founded the earliest schools on the continent. It is also essential to understand political action in the U.S. and the Americas more generally. Living amidst the constitutional promise and racial limits of American democracy, Latinos vigorously debated the merits of independence or federated nationhood for the former Spanish territories, the desirability of U.S. citizenship, and the meaning of equality in the U.S. and Latin America. In addition, these ideas at times took deep root and influenced major social and political movements evident in the independence of Texas, Mexico, and Cuba.

Complementing Kanellos’ account is historian Felix F. Gutiérrez’s chronicle of how this new thought “moved” through the growth of Latino print, broadcast, and digital media. In his essay, “More than 200 Years of Latino Media in the United States,” Gutiérrez observes that to the extent that mainstream media marginalized or denigrated people of Hispanic descent as foreigners or lesser Americans, Latinos developed alternate media forms that served as a “corrective” to this stereotypical treatment and as a crucial advocacy tool in challenging anti-Latino discrimination. Even further, Gutiérrez underscores that whereas ethnic communication is often seen as a passing phase in the life of immigrants, Latino media is even more important today as mainstream outlets continue to ignore and stereotype Latinos while the population grows exponentially.

Cultural traditions and practices, the focus of much Latino media, is similarly at the center of the study’s second part, Making a Life. This section includes chapters that further examine the ways in which Latinos have created (and recreated) their public and private lives, customs, and expression in the U.S. often under adverse conditions. Opening the section is religious scholar Timothy Matovina’s “Endurance and Transformations: Horizons of Latino Faith,” which deftly succeeds in both contextualizing common beliefs about Latinos and religion as well as challenging many of them. Matovina
begins by noting that Spanish-speaking Catholics have lived in North America for twice as long as the nation has existed and that Catholicism has often played a major role as a source of communal and cultural affirmation in the face of hostility from the majority culture. Yet, Matovina quickly dispels the stereotype that all Latinos are traditional Catholics by highlighting three significant trends in 20th century Latino religiosity in America: the significant and growing number of Latino Protestants, particularly Evangelicals; the persistent presence of faith-based social justice movements such as PADRES (Padres Asociados por los Derechos Religiosos, Educativos, y Sociales, or Priests Associated for Religious, Educational, and Social Rights); and the increase in the percentage of Latinos who claim either no religious attachment or multiple affiliations, including curanderismo and santería.

Similar to religion and other spiritual practices, Latino artistic production has diversified over time and served as a generative site for narratives of community and self. In “A Panorama of Latino Arts,” art historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, invites the reader on a thrilling journey through two hundred years of Latino creative expression and the performing arts. From indigenous arts to the earth sculptures of Ana Mendieta, from the Texan corridos to Nuyorican salsa, from the proto-feminist novels of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton to the spoken word of Pedro Pietri and the experimental theater of María Irene Fornés, Ybarra Frausto illustrates the many ways that Latino art has been a source of individual and collective “resistance and affirmation.” Encompassing a wide range of aesthetics and politics, Latino artistic production has simultaneously imagined an enduring sense of community and linked the traditions of the past with the challenges of the present. Increasingly, it also offers an alternative vision for what is—and can count as—art in America.

Focused on highly popular art forms, the next two chapters tread on very familiar territory—sports and food—but give us startling insight on the commonplace. Beginning with the quintessential American rodeo, which in Spanish means, “to circle” and was invented by Hispanic vaqueros (or cowboys), historian José M. Alamillo considers the long-standing participation of Latinos in America’s games. His chapter, “Beyond the Latino Sports Hero: The Role of Sports in Creating Communities, Networks, and Identities,” probes into Latino involvement in nearly every competitive sport, including boxing, baseball, football, basketball, golf, and tennis; and underscores multiple venues, from sandlots to the Olympics. Significantly, Alamillo does more than document the extraordinary achievements of Latino star athletes. With equal force, he explores the community networks that produce them and the rarely known struggles that competitors face on and off the track when encountering race and gender discrimination barriers. In this way, Alamillo demonstrates how the sports arena is equally capable of imagining cohesive communities and displaying its fractures.

Going behind the scene is also imperative when inquiring about how and what America eats. The media claims that salsa outsells ketchup and Mexican cuisine is one of the top three choices of ethnic food in the U.S., alongside Chinese and Italian. But the story of Latinos and food is significantly richer. As historian Jeffrey M. Pilcher argues in “Coming Home to Salsa: Latino Roots of American Food,” Latinos are pioneers of American agriculture, planting citrus and nut orchards in Florida and throughout the Southwest, founding cattle ranches in Texas, and building wineries in California. Moreover, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Latinos played significant roles in cultivating the land and inventing new ways of eating traditional foods. Despite the fact that Latinos are often negatively represented through food metaphors in which Latinas are “hot tamales”
and their cooking a source of “Moctezuma’s re-venge,” generations of Latinos insist on the worth of themselves and their food, by continuing to pass down recipes, open restaurants, and share their cuisine with others.

As the relationship between food, community, and economic survival suggests, Making a Life is often intertwined with Making a Living, a central focus of the study’s third section. The essays gathered here highlight the indispensable role of Latinos in fostering and sustaining American economic life—as entrepreneurs, professionals, and members of the armed forces. The section starts with the simply, if perfectly, titled essay “Latino Workers” by historian Zaragoza Vargas, which describes the enormous participation of Latino laborers in picking produce, laying railroad tracks, working steel mills, manning factories, and meat-packing. Equally important, Vargas underscores that Latino workers have done more for America than work. They have also had a significant role in labor movements for better wages and working conditions that have benefitted all Americans. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the legacy of Latino workers in building the U.S. and safeguarding fundamental labor rights is, on balance, priceless.

Simultaneously, the mainstream media’s nearly exclusive emphasis on Latinos as labor may at times overlook their impact in the creation of small businesses and the growth of large-scale industries. Historian Geraldo L. Cadava’s essay, “Entrepreneurs from the Beginning: Latino Business and Commerce since the 16th Century” offers an eye-opening account of the depth and extent of Latinos’ economic practices from Spanish colonization to the present. After investigating missions, presidios, and pueblos as profitable endeavors, Cadava continues by describing how Latino ranchers and cigar factory owners once ranked among the wealthiest of Americans until the mid-19th century. He further notes how fortunes begin to shift in the aftermath of the Mexican-American and Spanish-American Wars, as many lost land, capital, and social status. To subsist, many Latinos largely dedicated themselves to small scale and localized economic activity, investing in such businesses as bars, restaurants, and record stores. A mix of the old and the new, the current juncture anticipates a novel reality: while Latino businesses remain undercapitalized and still not generally as profitable as those owned by other racial groups, according to the U.S. Census Bureau by the beginning of the 21st century Latinos owned 1.6 million businesses, and their rate of ownership was growing faster than that of any other ethnic or racial group in the U.S. In contrast to earlier periods, an increasing number of these businesses are serving markets beyond the U.S. Latino community and some, like the iconic Goya Foods and Bacardi companies, have annual sales of well over one billion dollars.

The broad scope of Latino initiative is also evident in social historian John McKiernan-González’s unprecedented essay, “American Science, American Medicine, and American Latinos.” Here, he uncovers the rarely told story of Latino involvement in health care services, medicine, scientific research, and public health. Although Latinos have at times been the objects of scientific experiments involving birth control, faced unsanitary living conditions, and often been barred or discouraged from entering the healing professions, they have had a substantial impact in these fields. From discovering the role of mosquitoes in the propagation of yellow fever and starting grape boycotts to protest the use of pesticides to ensuring that all children regardless of resident status are treated in emergency rooms, Latinos have paved the way for new medical treatments and scientific research and have been relentless participants in the redefinition and democratization of American science and medicine.
The practices of medicine, agriculture, small business, and large-scale commercial activity are all a part of the Latino experience to make a living and to live with dignity. However, the picture would be incomplete without the complex tale of Latinos in military service. Even when their civil rights have not been observed or they have been barred from voting for the Commander in Chief as in the case of U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico, hundreds of thousands of Latinos and Latinas have served in the U.S. military out of a deep commitment to their country and its promise. Yet, as historian Lorena Oropeza observes in “Fighting on Two Fronts: Latinos in the Military,” Latinos have also seen their service as a way to gain access to otherwise elusive educational opportunities and to seek recognition as full U.S. citizens. Not surprisingly, on and off the battlefield, Latino veterans have been at the forefront of founding civil rights and advocacy organizations such as the American GI Forum in 1949 and leading legal battles against discrimination on all fronts.

Inevitably present in every chapter, the overt and transformative struggles for equality and democracy form the core of the chapters in the study’s closing section, Making a Democracy. Beginning with political scientist’s Louis DeSipio’s “Demanding Equal Political Voice—And Accepting Nothing Less: The Quest for Latino Political Inclusion,” this section provides an account of collective efforts to challenge the exclusion of Latinos based on race and ethnicity from the nation’s electoral processes and political institutions particularly in the 20th century, when the Latino population in the U.S. significantly increased and began to be perceived as a decisive voting bloc. Importantly, while these struggles have succeeded in electing more Latinos to political office, they have also been part of ensuring that all people living in the U.S. have access to the political process. As DeSipio observes, without them, rights that many take for granted, such as a citizen’s ability to vote in their native language, might not be as protected as they are today.

In a similar vein, legal scholar Margaret E. Montoya’s “Latinos and the Law” includes personal stories and historical analysis to examine how Latinos have been shaped and have sought to shape law in the U.S. Montoya compellingly demonstrates that Latino challenges to the legal system in the aftermath of the Mexican-American and Spanish-American Wars have greatly contributed to an idea that is now widely accepted in the U.S.: that cultural difference should not entail discriminatory treatment under the law. Through cases involving Spanish language ballots, literacy tests as prerequisites to voting, and equal educational opportunities for non-English speaking children, Latino communities have had a major impact in expanding democracy and its embrace of those outside of the majority racial or cultural group.

Arguing the case further is education scholar Victoria María MacDonald’s “Demanding their Rights: The Latino Struggle for Educational Access and Equity,” in which she considers the grassroots and legal battles for educational opportunity that have resulted in wider access to education regardless of territory or country of origin; language, skin color, or percentage of Native ancestry. Among the landmark litigation that MacDonald highlights are a series of school desegregation cases from the 1930s through the 1940s that culminated in the class action suit Méndez v. Westminster School District, which involved the segregation of Mexican American children by race in California’s public schools. Although not widely known, the success of Méndez—the judge ruled that that the segregation of Mexican and Mexican American students into separate “Mexican schools” was unconstitutional—paved the way for the groundbreaking Brown v. Topeka Board of Education in 1954 that ended legal school segregation in the U.S.
Providing a coda to Ramón A. Gutiérrez’s grounding essay, historian Lillian Guerra’s closing chapter is a forceful reflection on the “new Latinos,” those who arrived in the U.S. after the 1950s. In “Late-20th Century Immigration and U.S. Foreign Policy: Forging Latino Identity in the Minefields of Political Memory,” Guerra offers a sobering view of how the United States’ anti-communist foreign policy during the Cold War era helped to substantially increase Latino immigration by both facilitating the legal entry of Cuban exiles and supporting authoritarian regimes in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Noting the sheer size of this immigration to the U.S.—over two million people—Guerra then moves to analyze the unique challenges faced by many, particularly those fleeing American-backed state terror and political violence. Not only did these immigrants arrive undocumented and had to prove that theirs was not an “economic” migration to become legal citizens, they also found few opportunities to articulate the complexity of their experience. The unspeakable, the fact that their presence in the U.S. was a direct result of American support of undemocratic regimes in the region, continues to haunt policy and lives, reminding us that without these voices, the full story of the U.S. remains painfully untold. In this regard, although much has changed since the late 19th century, this major wave of migration underscores how war, revolution, and empire continue to shape Latino experience in the U.S. well into the 21st century.

All told, the American Latino Theme Study presents a diverse and intricate Latino past that can serve as a resource for telling a more nuanced American story, enabling us to better understand and inform our present. Yet, regardless of whether one is a professional historian or has never thought much about history, we can all add to this study in multiple ways by becoming more involved in the identification, preservation, and interpretation of historically significant sites and figures as well as the creation of new historic markers, trails, districts, and national landmarks. What was started in La Paz is now in everyone’s hands. The future of our past is completely up to us.

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