

**Ramón A. Gutiérrez**

The Political Legacies of Columbus:  
Ethnic Identities in the United States



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## **The Political Legacies of Columbus: Ethnic Identities in the United States**

On December 27, 1991, the American Historical Association, having gathered together in Chicago for its annual meeting, organized two plenary sessions on the meaning and significance of the Columbian Quincentenary. Given how important history and popular memory were to any commemoration of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the Americas, the professional guardians of the past were eager to discuss how the events of 1492 would be remembered, framed, and written about in 1992. The two plenary sessions on the Columbian Quincentenary were the only formal program activities scheduled for the first evening of the three-day-long gathering, guaranteeing a large and undistracted audience. "Global Encounters, 1430-1750," was the first session staged. Chaired by Helen Nadar, an historian of early modern Spain at Indiana University, the panelists were three white males—Joseph Miller from the University of Virginia, A. J. R. Russell-Wood from Johns Hopkins University, and James Axtell from the College of William and Mary, each speaking respectively on the significance of global encounters in "Africa," "Central and South America," and "North America."

"Global Encounters" was immediately followed by the second plenary session. Here several "minority" members of the American Historical Association were invited to enunciate "Alternative Views of the Quincentenary." This panel, moderated by Professor Evelyn Hu-DeHart, a Chinese American historian of modern Latin America at the University of Colorado, Boulder, had presentations by Joseph E. Harris, an African American historian at Howard University, Rayna Green, the director of American Indian Programs at the National Museum of American History, and myself, a specialist on Latin American and Chicano history at the University of California, San Diego.

From the start, this session had a rather odd dynamic and response. A family emergency kept Rayna Green from attending, so no Native American view was officially expressed. At the end of the formal

presentations, when the floor was opened up for questions from the audience, one of the first was from a Native American graduate student who wondered why an American Indian perspective on the Quincentenary had not been articulated. Since Rayna Green's absence was due to last moment circumstances, a substitute had not been found at that late hour. This was all easy enough to explain. To remedy the problem the questioner was drafted to the podium and allowed to address the gathering. Nervously he gathered his thoughts and spoke about the alienation of human experience in modern industrial society. He urged his audience to return to a simpler life and to spiritual values rooted in an harmonious relationship with nature. Such values, he asserted, was what had allowed Native Americans to endure over the centuries, resisting domination and exploitation.

What was also missing from the session, or so the moderator repeatedly complained, was "the Asian American Perspective." They too had made crucial contributions to the history of the Americas, though how specifically an Asian American perspective would have framed the Columbian voyages was never really mentioned. Despite Professor Hu-DeHart's control of the microphone and podium, and several opportunities to inject whatever historical correctives may have been necessary to remedy the situation, none were uttered. What were heard were jeers from several in the audience who shouted back to the moderator that she was wrong. No group, be it minority or majority, had a single perspective on the Quincentenary. Rather, every community had multiple voices.

My own formal remarks about "Alternative Views of the Quincentenary" focused on this multiplicity of perspectives and responses, both statist and populist, regarding the historical legacy that the Columbian voyages had precipitated and the ways in which daily experience reflected the sediments of historical memory and embodied experience.

I began by noting that since I had first accepted the invitation to speak at the plenary panel my assignment has had a rather unusual evolution. When I was initially contacted by a representative of the American Historical Association's Program Committee to see if I was willing to speak at the session, I was asked to prepare a "Latino" perspective on the Columbian Quincentenary. A few weeks passed. Eventually a letter arrived in the mail officially confirming my participation. Here, my duty, as spelled out, was to give a "Chicano

perspective” on the meaning of 1492 on the eve of 1992. Several more weeks went by. The printed program for the meeting of the American Historical Association eventually reached my hands. Therein I was scheduled to offer an “Hispanic Perspective.”

For persons untrained in the political nuances of ethnic terminology in the United States, the shifting nature of my assignment may seem meaningless, simply the product of bureaucratic snuffs. Mindless errors born of miscommunication always occur. Perhaps the mix-up could be read as a symptom of the general fuzziness that had entered public parlance with the use of ethnic labels. But for those trained in the history of racial and ethnic taxonomies born of the Spanish conquest of America’s native peoples, the shifting nature of my assignment—the desire to hear a Latino, a Chicano, an Hispanic perspective—was the product of vying political interests that each had a stake in claiming as their own the terrain on which 1492 would be remembered. Different ethnic constituencies in the American Historical Association wanted to have their versions and their visions of the conquest of America given voice. Equally powerful forces within the Association wanted to mute those voices and to channel their dissident and oppositional utterances into marginal and subordinate spaces. The organization of two panels on the Quincentenary, one with only white male historians and another with the Association’s “others” certainly would seem to indicate this.

So what precisely was at stake during the Quincentenary for the various ethnic groups I was being asked to speak for? “Chicano,” “Latino,” and “Hispanic,” are all highly contested ethnic terms currently in use in the United States that mark a remote ancestry in Spain through the diaspora of its citizens into the Americas. Each of these ethnic labels has a different valence and mean very different things if uttered in Spanish, the politically subordinate language (if not the numerically superordinate tongue), or English, the official language of the nation-state. Complicating matters further, it matters too whether these labels are vocalized inside the United States of America or in lands politically and culturally tied to Spanish America.

Chicano, the most widely used of these labels of ethnic self identification, was a political identity that militant Mexican American students living in the United States chose in the late 1960s to symbolize their ethnic pride and their resistance to Anglo American culture. In the Mexican Spanish-language usage of the day, Chicano meant gutter sweeper and was used as a class marker to denote a low, vile, and rude

person. Choosing to identify with the downtrodden, with the despised and with those who were deemed marginal, Mexican American students called themselves Chicanos to affirm their lower class origins, as a sign of their solidarity with colonized peoples world-wide, and as a badge of their unity with Native Americans in opposition to the dominant Anglo American institutions of the United States. To this day individuals who celebrate a Mexican-Indian or mestizo (mixed blood) ancestry as Chicanos are largely male, at least of third generation immigrant origin, economically and linguistically assimilated to life in the United States, and politically radical. Who chooses to be a Chicano also largely depends on class and age. The poorer one is, the more one will identify as Chicano. The older one is, the more likely one rejects Chicano as an ethnic self-identifier, preferring instead such ethnic labels as "Mexican," "Mexican American," "Latin American," or "Spanish American."<sup>1</sup>

Latino, like Chicano, is a political identity of rather recent invention, though the tradition that it too invokes is of that ancient unity that Latin bequeathed to Europe's romance languages. The political dimensions of the word Latino were first given shape in Chicago, Illinois, in the early 1970s when Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Cubans, and other Latin American immigrants entered into coalition to fight job discrimination and a long history of educational neglect. Prompted by the protection afforded American citizens under the 1964 Civil Rights Act against discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, and availing themselves of government enforcement of affirmative action programs, Mexican American and Puerto Rican community organizations banded together to press legal claims for employment opportunities and educational sensitivity in the form of bilingual education.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the etymology and use of the word Chicano, see my essay "Ethnic and Class Boundaries in America's Hispanic Past," in Sucheng Chan, ed., *Intersections: Studies in Ethnicity, Gender, and Inequality* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1989), pp. 47-63.

<sup>2</sup> John Walton and Luis M. Salces, *The Political Organization of Chicago's Latino Communities* (Evanston, Ill.: Center for Urban Studies, Northwestern University, 1977); Louise Año Nuevo de Kerr, "Chicano Settlements in Chicago: A Brief History," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 2, 4 (Winter 1975), 22-32; Isidro Lucas, *Aquí Estamos: An Overview of Latino Communities in Greater Chicago* (Chicago, 1978).



La Coalición Latinoamericana de Empleos (literally, The Latin American Coalition for Jobs) was created from these Chicago-based community organizations in 1972. Jobs was their primary objective; their immediate targets were Illinois Bell Telephone Company and the Jewel Tea Company. The former had a work force of 44,000, which included less than 300 Latinos. Of the 6,000 full-time worker at the Jewel Tea Company, only 86 were Latinos and of its 13,000 part-time work force, only 151 were Latinos.<sup>3</sup>

The sources of inspiration that La Coalición Latinoamericana de Empleos employed to craft an identity for its members is spelled out in the foundational documents for the organization's 1973 "Latino Strategies for the 70's" conference.

[The goal of the Coalition is] to unite ourselves together for better communication, accomplishments and development in political and economic affairs. There should be no barrier on account of our color, language, standard of living. We have to stop thinking we are Mexican and Puerto Ricans. We have to think of ourselves as Latinos with the belief to feel close together and cooperate with each other; as we suffer together the same needs for lack of representation of Latinos in this country [...] The central purpose of the Strategies for the 70's [conference] is to promote Latino unity. We Latinos have a common language, culture, similar origins and a common purpose; we must come together, for Latino development is both political and economic.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of the Coalition's statements was their definition of Latino:

On the eve of the birth of a truly pluralistic society, the Latin American is stirred by the riches of his own diversity. His is not only Latino —though the Latino lies at the core of his

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<sup>3</sup> Félix M. Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 84-100.

<sup>4</sup> La Coalición Latinoamericana de Empleos, "Latino Strategies for the 70's —Report," (Unpublished report, February 16, 1973), pp. 3-4.

being. He is not only American— though Americanhood touches every particle of his life. He is Latin American. This means the intermingling of two histories, many nations, two cultures, two languages, converging, colliding, blending, embracing, depending on one's location within the human geography evolved by one and one-half centuries of restless interaction.

In works reminiscent of New Testament eschatology, the Latin American is speaking for himself as a new man—a new man for which there is no historical parallel, at least not in the experience of the United States. He speaks of his ethnic family as LA RAZA, a new family of man, the first-fruits of a new humanity, where the colors of the Latin American skin, from the darkest to the fairest, will itself be the visible sign of a new age of fraternity. This is the birth of La Nueva Raza. The new breed for a new hope in the Barrio.<sup>5</sup>

The genesis and development of this definition of Latino identity in the United States was clearly rooted in the writings of José Vasconcelos, the Mexican philosopher and educator. In his 1921 book, *La Raza Cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana*, Vasconcelos argued that an aesthetic eugenics had transpired in Mexico through the blending of Europeans, Indians, Africans and Asians into a "Cosmic Race," a race that would result in social harmony, sympathy and beauty. The political model for this physical and racial unity was the dream of the nineteenth century Latin American independence leader, Simón Bolívar, who imagined a hemispheric political union of states and a common identity among its citizens as *Latinoamericanos*, or Latin Americans.<sup>6</sup> This dream of unity among *Latinoamericanos*, when transplanted to Chicago in 1972, united immigrants from Latin America's various nations and regions as Latinos. What is noticeably absent in these statements of the Coalition is any explicit recognition of indigenous ancestry. The Latino was created from "American" and "Latin American" mixing over

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> José Vasconcelos, "La Raza Cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana," in *Obras Completas* (Mexico: Libreros Mexicanos Unidos, 1958), II, pp. 91-125. For a biography and analysis of Vasconcelos' writings, see John H. Haddox, *Vasconcelos of Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), pp. 52-69.

“one and one-half centuries,” long after the Spanish conquest. The moment of foundational unity among Latin Americans was 1823, at the end of Spanish America’s Wars for Independence.

Of all the ethnic labels that were bantered about on the eve of the quincentennial year, Hispanic provoked the most hostility and ambivalence; a response not found when the term is uttered in Spanish as *Hispano*. *Hispano* is an identity that has long been recognized by the descendants of New Mexico’s original Spanish colony established in 1598. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Spanish-origin residents of New Mexico linked themselves culturally with the Iberian Peninsula and with the ancient Roman province of Hispania by calling themselves *Hispanos*. In the nineteenth century this identity took global political dimensions. For after Spain lost its last remnants of empire in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines at the end of the 1898 Spanish-American War, she embarked on a cultural campaign of imperialist nostalgia for the empire it had lost through the development of a movement that became known as *Hispanidad*. Sponsoring Spanish culture days and festivals, publishing editions of the heroic Spanish chronicles of exploration and conquest, and establishing Spanish culture centers, among other things, Spain thereby hoped to reignite a love for the mother country among her former subjects as *Hispanoamericanos* and *Hispanos*.<sup>7</sup>

*Hispanic*, when uttered in English, is an ethnic label and identity few readily embrace. More often than not, it evokes ambivalence in many and in some even disgust. If speaking strictly of cultural genealogy, *Hispanic* describes a large number of North and South American residents who in the remote past emigrated from Spain to the Americas and consequently speak Spanish. Residents of the United States who fit these criteria resent being called *Hispanics*. For much like Christopher Columbus and his compatriots in 1492 obliterated the complex Native American ethnic topography and leveled all of its

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<sup>7</sup> Ramón A. Gutiérrez, “Nationalism and Literary Production: The Hispanic and Chicano Experiences,” in Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Genaro Padilla, eds., *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1993), pp. 241-50. The history of *Hispanidad* can be found in Frederick Pike, *Hispanismo, 1898-1936* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971); Antonio Niño Rodríguez, *Cultura y diplomacia: los hispanistas franceses y España de 1875 a 1931* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1988).

internal differentiation and social grades by creating "Indians" where previously none had existed, so too in Hispanics, the population so designated correctly senses the loss of ethnic and national identity for a category that best satisfies bureaucrats in the United States Bureau of the Census. Unlike Latino, Chicano, or Hispano, which are Spanish-language ethnic terms of self-designation, Hispanic is an English-language word imposed from above for purposes of state. Spanish citizens like the word Hispanic because it evokes a colonial nostalgia for a once great empire now lost, and projects a vision of a mighty Spain into the future.

For Spain and for many of the nationally identified corporations that have underwritten the celebrations of the Quincentenary, 1992 has been proclaimed as a celebration of "The Encounter Between Spain and America." The word "encounter" is a curious one to describe the commemoration of 1492. The only encounters I have ever experienced occurred in California when I first visited the state back in 1974. The meaning and ritual of "encounter" in the contemporary lexicon entailed stripping naked and jumping into a hot-tub to relax and to get in touch with one's own feelings and those who shared the steamy effervescing waters. Certainly this type of encounter is not what Felipe Gonzales and his ministers had in mind. But by choosing the word "encounter" to represent the 1992 state ritual of commemoration they consciously chose to signify a meeting of equals. Anyone who knows the history of the Americas probably understands that the word "encounter" mutes the nature of what transpired in 1492. Call it "contact," "conquest," "colonization," or whatever, but to imply that a meeting of equals occurred in 1492 is a blatant act of mystification that distorts the power dynamics that shaped the nature of Christopher Columbus's first meeting with the native residents of the Americas.

Why was such a distortion being promoted in Spanish state-sponsored celebration? The best answer to this question is probably found in another: Exactly who was American in the "Encounter between Spain and America"? Certainly not the numerous indigenous groups of the hemisphere who were decimated by contact, conquest, disease, and exploitation in the centuries that followed 1492. 1992 was orchestrated not as a eulogy, it was to be a celebration. Needless to say, much to the dismay of American Indian groups. In all the media materials generated for the United States and the English-speaking public, America was not imagined as Costa Rica, Bolivia, or for that

matter any of the weak or strong states in Spanish America. The only republic in the hemisphere arrogant enough to call itself America has been the United States. For moderns from just about every country, going to America means, going to the U.S.A. At the level of state choreography the "Encounter between Spain and America" in 1992 was imagined as a meeting of equals. Spain, on the eve of its own entry into the European Common Market, by proclaiming an encounter projected itself as an equal in the global community still dominated by the United States.

Throughout the quincentenary year, The Spain 92 Foundation, that country's official organ for the Quincentenary in the United States, published a magazine called *Encounters* devoted to a discussion of "the Hispanic contributions to the United States." Flipping through the pages of *Encounters*, one finds a monopoly-type board game called "Columbus! The Game of Exploration, Conquest and Trade," prominently advertised, which, in my mind, captures some of the official Spanish political meanings of encounter. The promotional literature for the game states that the object of "Columbus!" is to:

Explore and conquer the New World: force the other players out of the game through trading and selling commodities, trading commodities for outposts, collecting tributes, and challenging other players for outposts.

The game is played as follows:

Players stock their ships with olive oil and salt pork on the perimeter of the board, which represents Spain. They also purchase beads, wine, and guns on the perimeter in order to trade with the Indians on the interior of the board. The first player to stock his or her ship, is the first to enter the interior, which represents the New World. Players trade the beads, wine, and guns with the Indians for sugar, alligator skins, pearls, and outposts. Players may redeem sugar, alligator skins, and pearls when they return to the perimeter (Spain), gaining a profit on the transaction. Players either pay tribute when landing on outposts held by other players or they challenge each other for possession, using the Spanish cards. They use

guns to fortify their outposts, which then cannot be challenged. The game winner is the last remaining solvent player.

The Columbus Game, like the 1992 Quincentenary game, was the capitalist game of trade and markets. Spain was eager to refresh memories of "Hispanic contributions to the United States" as a way of forging and nurturing a foreign policy lobby for its economic interests in the U.S. States throughout the world have recently discovered how influential Jews in the United States have been in shaping foreign policy toward Israel. African Americans exercised a fair amount of influence establishing this country's economic policies toward South Africa. Mexico recently established a sub-secretariat in the Ministry of Foreign Relations devoted specifically to the needs of "External Mexican Communities," most notably those in the United States. One can only suspect that this may have been one of the many reasons Spain spent millions of *pesetas* refreshing the memories of their former compatriots regarding what the mother country contributed to their lives and culture in the United States.

Both in Spain and the United States, the impact of trade on economic prosperity was one of those anxious and recurrent themes that was officially articulated during the quincentennial year. In his bid for the 1992 Democratic Presidential nomination Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey described U.S. trade relations with other parts of the world, using language evocative of "Columbus: The Game." Senator Kerrey's campaign ad for the New Hampshire primary election said:

What's happening in the world economy is like a hockey game where others guard their goal to keep our products out —while we leave our net open. It costs us jobs and destroyed companies. We are becoming a low-wage nation and all George Bush has done is go to Japan and beg for a few concessions. I'm Bob Kerrey —and if I'm President, the time for begging is through. I'll tell Japan if we can't sell in their market, they can't sell in ours. And if they don't get the

message, they'll find out this President is ready to play a little defense too.<sup>8</sup>

In the television ads produced for President George Bush's reelection campaign in 1992, the economy was more explicitly projected onto a Columbian stage. In this instance, the voyages of Christopher Columbus were cast as acts of daring, adventure and individualism; by now a very familiar and clichéd Columbian tropes.<sup>9</sup> Paul Wilson, an advisor to the Bush re-election campaign explained to Robert S. Boynton of *Harper's Magazine* how the U.S. economy would be linked in the Bush campaign ads with the voyage of Christopher Columbus.

The metaphor for the spot —the central image— would be a tall ship in the ocean, a re-enactment of Columbus discovering America. The idea would be that Bush is setting our course in a new direction, with as much significance as the very discovery of America [...] You'd have long glorious shots of the ship cutting through the waves, and next to that I would juxtapose a guy in a house under construction saying, 'Housing starts are up 6.5 percent.' Then right after showing Desert Storm footage I would have a farmer from the Midwest saying, 'We've more grain than ever before,' or 'We've seen an explosion in our exports.' [...] I'm using Columbus as the metaphor for this new direction and our new beginning, to say that we are pointed in the right direction. You also have the analogy of the captain, or somebody in charge who makes things happen [...] The point is to start bigger than life, because the presidency is bigger than life.<sup>10</sup>

Even in the popular press the elite message about the Quincentenary that was produced for mass consumption in the United

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas B. Rosenstiel, "Messages from New Hampshire," *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1992, A6.

<sup>9</sup> For a description of Columbus as a symbol of adventure and individualism see Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Voyages, the Columbian Exchange, and Their Historians* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Robert S. Boynton, "30 Seconds to Victory," *Harper's* 285, 1706 (July 1992), 33-44, quote appears on page 35.

States was that the Columbian voyages had created a truly global universe of communication and that the challenge in 1992 was to make the U.S. economy respond to that highly competitive global market. Such was the message in the special edition that *U.S. News and World Report* devoted to the Quincentenary, entitled "America Before Columbus." The lead story "Culture Clash," explained that "America before Columbus was home to sophisticated, principled societies as well as savages." The three other lead stories in the issue were: 1) on the death of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, 2) the campaign by Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari for the ratification of the North American Free Trade Association Treaty, and 3) competition among Japanese, German, French and U.S. computer makers for control over the global market for this technology. President Salinas de Gortari stated the U.S. predicament well: "You are losing markets to countries producing goods with higher wages than yours: Germany and Japan [...] If we [Mexico and U.S.] don't get together we won't be able to cope with this competitiveness from Europe and Pacific Asian countries [...]." <sup>11</sup>

For Chicanos, Latinos and Hispanos living in the United States the capitalist game of trade and commerce that was being played by state elites in 1992 meant very little. Certainly the global flow of workers, capital, information and technologies daily structured their lives in many imaginable and not so imaginable ways. Far removed from control over these activities their responses to these global forces were primarily local, anchored to a cultural politics about their place in the body politic. 1992 did not evoke memories of military triumphs and global empires yielding bountiful resources, only memories of domination and subordination forcibly imposed by militants of one state and then another. True, the memory of 1492 lived on more vividly for some than for others, but when it did, it did so as a history of conquest that was still emblazoned on their bodies and signified as physical color. The contact between Spaniards and American Indian groups had produced a consciousness of racial mixture and racial purity. And this is what is still remembered at many places in various ways.

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<sup>11</sup> "America Before Columbus: The Untold Story," *U.S. News and World Report*, 111, 2 (July 8, 1991). President Salinas de Gortari quoted on p. 41.



Every Christmas season at Taos Pueblo in New Mexico, for example, memories of the Spanish conquest are still performed by the town's native residents. Beginning on Christmas Eve, and for the two days that follow, the Matachines Dance is staged. The dance is very unique in New Mexican folkways because it is a dance that Pueblo Indians and Hispanos step together. The Matachines Dance was introduced in New Mexico shortly after the 1598 Spanish conquest of the Pueblo Indians. It was a didactic drama in which the Pueblo Indians were forced to relive their own defeat, their humiliation and dishonor, and to mock themselves performing those versions of history the conquistadors wanted remembered.<sup>12</sup>

The story line of the Matachines Dance is a simple one. It recounts the defeat of the Aztec Emperor Montezuma and his conversion to Christianity by Malinche, the mistress and interpreter of Hernán Cortés; an event that has no basis in fact. While this story-line is the dominant narrative of the dance, there is a counter-narrative, that is danced simultaneously. The counter-narrative ridicules, subverts and mimics, the serious and measured steps of Montezuma and Malinche as they prepare to enter the church and embrace Christianity. The subversion of conquest history is enacted by two individuals called the *abuelos* or grandparents, who are played by Hispanos. Malinche, Montezuma and their retinue are played by Taos Indians. Thus, in the casting of the narrative and counter-narrative there is a visible ethnic opposition.

The grandfather is a gruff trickster who, together with the grandmother (the *abuela*) who dresses as blonde wife, disrupts the proceedings of the official dance drama shouting obscenities and telling Malinche: "*Engáñalo mijita, engáñalo, como engañó tu mamá a tu papá, engáñalo mijita*" (Deceive him my child, deceive him my child, like your father deceived your mother, deceive him my child). The climax of the official Matachines narrative is the conversion of

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<sup>12</sup> There is an enormous literature on the Matachines dance drama in New Mexico. See, Sylvia Rodríguez, "The Taos Pueblo Matachines: Ritual Symbolism and Interethnic Relations," *American Ethnologist*, 18, 2 (May 1991), 234-56; Flavia W. Champe, *The Matachines Dance of the Upper Rio Grande* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); John W. Robb, "The Matachines Dance: A Ritual Folk Drama," *Western Folklore*, 20 (1961), 87-101; Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 83-87.

Montezuma, and his entry into the local church to pay homage to the newly born Christ child. The counter-narrative of the grandparents ends outside the church where the grandmother gives birth to a white Barbie doll in a very scandalous manner.

The narrative of the Matachines Dance is about the Pueblo Indians' ambivalence toward Christianity as the religion of Spanish conquest. In the *abuelos* counter-narrative, the holy alliance of Malinche and Montezuma is mocked by the unholy union that gives birth to the grandmother's white baby, and by the grandfather constantly telling Malinche, the Mexican mother of mestizos, to deceive Montezuma and not to be taken advantage of. The social history of Taos Pueblo and its Hispano neighbors is a history of inter-marriage and racial mixing. Ambivalence toward this reality both by the Pueblo Indians and by Hispanos is what the counter-narrative of the dance continually juxtaposes to the legacy of the forced subjugation that Christianity symbolizes.

A similar preoccupation with Spanish conquest of America's Indian peoples and the place of racial mixture is also at the center of the foundational fictions that animated the Chicano Movement in the mid 1960s. In choosing the dates that structured and demarcated Chicano history, 1519, the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlán, figured prominently as the date that had begun the legacy of racial mixture, gender oppression, and indigenous cultural subordination to Europe. In the Chicano chronology the principal actors of 1519 were not Cortés and his soldiers, but Doña Marina, or Malinche, the violated and seduced Indian woman who in Mexican history figuratively gave birth to Mexico as a mestizo (or mixed blood) nation. In Mexican history Malinche had long been considered a symbol of Indian passivity, of betrayal, and of social and economic subordination to the conqueror. Octavio Paz, in his 1961 book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, referred to Mexican as *hijos de Malinche*, *hijos de la chingada* (the children of Malinche, children of the violated mother).<sup>13</sup> For Chicanos, such a depiction of Malinche was but a profound reflection of the self-hatred Mexicans expressed toward women in general, and more particularly toward the indigenous peoples,

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<sup>13</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

from whom the mestizo had been born through the process of biological mixing.

In her poem, "I am a Chicana," Sylvia Gonzales expressed why Chicanas had reappropriated and revalorized the symbol of Malinche for their own sexual emancipation as women.

I am a Chicana  
 Waiting for the return  
 of la Malinche,  
 to negate her guilt,  
 and cleanse her flesh  
 of a confused Mexican wrath  
 which seeks reason  
 to the displaced power of Indian deities.  
 I am a Chicana  
 Waiting for the coming of a Malinche  
 to sacrifice herself  
 on an Aztec altar  
 and Catholic cross  
 in redemption of all her forsaken daughters.<sup>14</sup>

For historian Adelaida R. Del Castillo, Malinche was the primordial source of two concepts that were at the core of the Chicano Movement —*mexicanidad* (an identity tied to Mexican history and culture) and *mestizaje* (a racialized identity created through the biological mixing of Europeans and American Indians). Malinche, notes Del Castillo:

is the beginning of the mestizo nation, she is the mother of its birth, she initiates it with the birth of her mestizo children. Even her baptism is significant. She is, in fact, the first Indian to be christianized (catechized and baptized to Catholicism) in her native land, that land which metamorphizes into our mundo mestizo —again she is the starting point! Thus any denigration made against her indirectly defames the character of the [...]

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<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Gonzales, "I Am Chicana," in Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, eds., *The Sexuality of Latinas* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1989), p. 442.

chicana female. If there is shame for her, there is shame for us; we suffer the effects of those implications.<sup>15</sup>

For Chicanos Malinche was the symbol of their mestizaje. Their mixed-blood heritage was what physically marked them in the United States and what transformed them into a visible race.

Their hybridity and historical devolution from conquered Indians, Chicanos asserted, was the source of their cultural vigor and vitality. Indeed, the themes of hybridity, of multiple identities, and of suspension betwixt and between worlds, has been a major theme in Chicano cultural production in the United States. Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, describes this cultural process well when she states that Chicanos live not only in a socio-economic borderland, but also in one that has broad cultural dimensions.

To live in the Borderlands means you are neither *hispana india negra española ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata*, half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps while carrying all five races on your back not knowing which side to turn to, or to run from [...]<sup>16</sup>

Using very similar language, performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, describes himself as a product of mestizaje in the United States, as “a child of crisis and cultural syncretism, half hippie and half punk [...] In my fractured reality, but a reality nonetheless, there cohabit two

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<sup>15</sup> Adelaida R. del Castillo, “Malintzin Tenépal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective,” in Rosaura Sánchez, ed., *Essays on la mujer* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center Publications, 1977), pp. 124-49, quote comes from 126.

There have been several recent studies that explore the symbol of Malinche in Mexican and American culture. See, Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), p. 194.

histories, two languages, cosmologies, artistic traditions, and political systems which are drastically counterpoised."<sup>17</sup>

The legacy of conquest and mestizaje evoked in these artists, intellectuals, and militants by the symbol of the 1492 Columbus voyage, that Hispanos and Indians still perform when they dance Matachines at Taos, that dominate the historical claims of the Chicano Movement, and that first gave force to Latino identity in Chicago, are all rooted in a concrete embodiment of the past. The body politics and the physical bodies through which mestizos were born were acts of violence signified through sexual intercourse. The Spanish conquest of America's native peoples was a sexual conquest of their women. A "cosmic race" was forged, asserted José Vasconcelos, when Spaniards copulated with Indian women. Their mixed progeny, the mestizos, became the living symbols of Mexico's national history and civic mythology, the corporeality of the victor and vanquished, both celebrated and denigrated, but nonetheless present and embodied. Vasconcelos juxtaposed this attitude toward Indians with that that developed in English colonial America. Here Indians were pushed back, removed, exterminated, their bones placed in glass cases, their brains in glass jars. Rarely were they socially or culturally assimilated into the body politic, though the biological realities always revealed a different story. In British America the desire was to distance, to deny and to obliterate the history of contact with Native Americas, thereby fueling the fiction of the polity's racial purity. The result was a very different history of race relations in Spanish America and British America. Whereas Spanish America developed taxonomies of elaborate racial mixtures, the British American racial system was monochromatic. It recognized only primary colors —white, red and black— as boundary markers, subsuming all racial mixture into this simple typology.<sup>18</sup> As in Spanish America where sexual intercourse became a dominant symbol of the national past, so too in the United States of America conjugal sexual intercourse was to become a dominant symbol of the kinship order and its body politic, opines anthropologist David Schneider. But whereas in Mexican nationalist romance intercourse was linked to rape, violence, and racial

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<sup>17</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Documented/Undocumented," *Multi-cultural Literacy* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1989), p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> On the history of race mixing in the hemisphere see Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).

mixing, in the United States the symbol was tied to conjugal fidelity. From this flowed the idea that relatives or blood-relations were created through the rules of nature (the mixing of blood and substance) and that such relations could only be propagated through the legal institution of marriage. Nature and law thus created kin. The culture's basic definitions, that between top/bottom, male/female, public/domestic, official/unofficial, law-abiding/criminal, insider/outsider, we/they, and capitalist/communist, were all anchored to the symbol of conjugal sexual intercourse.<sup>19</sup>

Let me use three examples from recent experience to elucidate David Schneider's point. Take, for example, the April 1980 arrival of 125,000 Cuban refugees in the United States, that became known as the Marielitos Boatlift. In the first days of the exodus when the movement was a trickle, President Carter welcomed the Cubans as refugees from Castro's totalitarian communism. As the numbers arriving in Florida mounted, the public rhetoric, particularly in conservative news magazines, shifted radically. "Cuba is unleashing a new human wave against this country," the *New Republic* noted. Jack Watson, a Carter-aide stated that "Castro [...] is using people like bullets aimed at this country."<sup>20</sup>

In two months the Marielitos went from being political refugees yearning to breath the air of democracy to feared bullets. Initially the press admitted that Castro also had freed several hundred criminals. Quickly that number was imagined as gigantic and the dominant media stereotype of the Marielitos became that of single males, petty-thieves, anti-social criminals and homosexuals. In the case of the Marielitos, the nation's borders, the borders of moral community regulated by law, were under attack, and that attack was sexual. Cuban men of modest means, dark-skinned single men who were not members of families, homosexual men—as one reporter put it, "Men counter to the spirit of machismo," who by their practices challenged compulsory heterosexuality, were lumped together as criminals. The United States of America is a moral community of law abiding citizens. Families formed

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<sup>19</sup> David Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> For this description of the Marielitos Boatlift I have relied extensively on the fine essay by John Borneman, "Emigres as Bullets/Immigration as Penetration, Perceptions of the Marielitos," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20, 3 (1986), 73-92.

by marriages are its foundation. Only such a kinship ideology helps us explain this particular xenophobic response to immigrants.

The criminal non-family depiction of Latin American immigrants vies with another representation that is equally potent; the immigrant as a carrier of disease that threatens the healthy body. This is an antique trope in American nativist thought. To see the latest iteration, think back to the early reporting on AIDS in 1984-85. One of the early hypothesis about the disease was that white middle class homosexuals in United States had contracted the disease through passive sexual intercourse with promiscuous black Haitians. Haitians had transported the virus from Africa where it was wide-spread in the heterosexual population. Africans contracted the virus from close contact with monkeys, among whom the diseases had long existed. And there you have modern scientific racism revisited; biology at the service of ideology.<sup>21</sup>

My third example comes from California, where the state's economic woes has provoked a middle class hysteria that at the moment is focused on Mexicans and Central American immigrants. Treating these immigrants like animals because they have violated the law—they are illegal aliens after all—is well known and routine. But in the last three years, and with absolutely no basis in facts, middle class San Diegans have branded single male immigrants as rapists and thieves, and the women as promiscuous welfare-dependent mothers. To stop the rapists and thieves, a movement called "Light up the Border" was started. Respectable middle class white families drive to the hills overlooking the US/Mexico Border and shine their car lights on the fence that separates the two countries. Citizen arrests of undocumented workers regularly occur and many of these arrests have been violent and resulted in immigrant deaths.

Governor Pete Wilson, trying to allay middle class fears over the state's fiscal crisis, has gone after welfare mothers, as his most publicized economic reform measure. He has proposed that there be no additional support payments for children born outside of wedlock. There be no welfare benefits for anyone who has arrived in California during

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). On nativism and disease see, John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1969); Alan Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

the last 3 years. Instead of rehabilitating the economy, Wilson has scapegoated the most vulnerable group, prolific, unmarried immigrant (read Latina) women on welfare.

What I have been trying to illustrate with all of these examples is that in the dominant Anglo American culture of the United States marital intercourse is the central symbol that defines how nature and law are imagined. The moral community that stems therefrom is one that grants citizenship principally to those persons that mirror the nation's body order and resists penetration and excludes those who do not.

In Spanish America, in those countries that had dense pre-Columbian populations, the process of nation building began when single Spanish men sexually violated Indian women. The result was cultural, social and biological *mestizaje*, the heritage of race mixture that *Hispanos*, *Chicanos* and *Latinos* recognize and remember in the United States when they are asked to commemorate 1492. In the United States the hemisphere's history of racial and cultural blending is systematically denied. How citizens are made, how they are incorporated, what kinds of bodies are deemed worthy of full participation in the body politic depends on how well a person conforms to Anglo-American middle class kinship ideals. *Chicano*, *Latino*, *Hispano* are today vibrant political identities precisely because in the 1960s and 1970s these labels became emblems of subversion and of legal struggle for political and economic equality.

And yet, despite all the advances that have transpired in the socio-economic and political status of these minority groups, the Latin American immigrant is once again being targeted as a stranger and unmeltable ethnic that threatens to pollute the purity of the body politic and the sanctity of life in the United States. One only has to turn on the television any night to hear the rhetoric of the political wars in California and other states that border Mexico. In California, gubernatorial careers are being made on the backs of economically necessary, but politically unwanted Mexican workers. So long as immigrants from Latin America are treated as a species of subhumans, so long as their language is deemed an inferior idiom spoken by domestics, porters and waiters, I suspect that oppositional consciousness will flourish among them in the United States. Such consciousness invariably manifests itself as a political identity before long, no matter whether one is commemorating 1492, 1776, or even the Fourth of July.



The development of other hybrid political identities, such as Asian American and Women of Color, amply demonstrates how disenfranchised interest groups that have created political identities to litigate their rights. Through such contingent identities, anchored to the present, looking to the future, but always facing backward for their symbolic arsenals, is how Latinos, Chicanos, and Hispanos defined what the voyages of Christopher Columbus meant to them.

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