
INTRODUCTION

“Ships That Pass in the Night”

By Paul Lawrence Dunbar (Johnson)

Out in the sky the great dark clouds are massing;
I look far out into the pregnant night,
Where I can hear a solemn booming gun
And catch the gleaming of a random light,
That tells me that the ship I seek is passing, passing.

My tearful eyes my soul’s deep hurt are glassing;
For I would hail and check that ship of ships.
I stretch my hands imploring, cry aloud,
My voice falls dead a foot from mine own lips,
And but its ghost doth reach that vessel, passing, passing.

O Earth, O Sky, O Ocean, both surpassing,
O heart of mine, O soul that dreads the dark!
Is there no hope for me? Is there no way
That I may sight and check that speeding bark
Which out of sight and sound is passing, passing?

I begin this journey with a famous slavery-era poem because it gives an inkling of the futility felt by the black American population confronted by the reality that their dreams for the future seemed to perpetually slip away from them and that consciousness of their problems was not tantamount to the solution thereof. The first stanza relates what black Americans of that time were missing out on: the “pregnant night” is the darkness before the dawn that holds possibilities for the future; the “booming gun” is the power of being heard and respected; the “random light” is the beacon that might lead blacks out of the obscurity of mental and physical slavery yet defies calculation; once this light goes out, it is not known when or where it will shine again. The speaker in this poem is aware of his plight; however, this does not ameliorate the fact that “the ship [he seeks] is passing” and

that his “voice falls dead a foot from [his] lips.” He is helpless, and his loud cries for rescue are silenced by circumstance.

This poem eloquently suggests that many anti-slavery activists were mistaken in their claim that educated and socially aware black individuals possessed the tools with which they could gain their social and political liberty in the United States of that epoch.¹ This work inspires a convincing parallel between black Americans of the pre- and post-Civil War era and Mexican Americans of the modern era. The Latino population in general in the United States has been touted as possessing enormous political potential due to their relative youth, significant numbers, and rapid growth.² Mexican Americans form the largest percentage of this population and represent a critical swing votership in many regions of the United States, especially in California (see Appendix One). According to National Geographic (November 2003), Mexican Americans comprise a near populational majority in the state of California, and according to academe, they are essentially a “sleeping giant” in the political arena.³ Popular wisdom suggests that political maturity among the Mexican-American population is only a matter of time, education, social awareness, and organization.⁴

¹ Frederick Douglass comes to mind as an educated and socially aware black person of that period. He is a powerful example in favor of my claim that it takes more than these qualities to achieve social and political liberty. Although he earned his freedom and became a well-known spokesperson for the abolition of slavery, it is plausible to argue that he did not earn any political clout since he could not vote. See his autobiography for more.

² Even Republican George W. Bush jumped on the Latino bandwagon during the 2000 Presidential elections by unearthing a Mexican-American nephew and dragging him into the spotlight to garner the Latino and youth votes across the country. According to journalist Mark Johnson in a local newspaper article in Milwaukee published in 2000, the nephew in question – George Prescott Bush – was a 24-year-old law student and youth chair of the Republican National Convention at the time of the elections, and he boasted of a native Mexican mother and of hailing from Miami (read: he attracted both Chicano and Cuban-American supporters, the two largest Latino subgroups in the United States).

³ See Montoya’s “The Sleeping Giant in Latino Electoral Politics” for a comprehensive account of the pros and cons of this oft used metaphor.

⁴ Some argue that Mexican Americans have already achieved “maturity” as a cultural group and provide interesting evidentiary support; see Diego Vigil (222-224).

The comparison between contemporary Mexican Americans and black Americans of the nineteenth century should by now be explicit, as should be the realization that the equation for Chicanos political empowerment remains incomplete and unresolved.⁵ Even if Mexican Americans were to achieve a higher overall level of education and political organization, they might still experience roadblocks on the path to political empowerment due to unresponsive or uninformed political leaders, as my hypothesis in this project suggests. The fact that Mexican Americans in general may lack basic tools for social and political advancement simply makes the goal of empowerment a more distant reality.

Hypothesis and Theoretical Framework

This project focuses on the relationship between Mexican Americans and the Members of Congress (MCs) who represent them in Los Angeles County, California, at the present time.⁶ Its goal is to determine which qualities politicians in Mexican-American communities must possess in order to earn their political posts and motivate their constituencies to vote, the most quantifiable political activity. I theorize that – by the time they are elected to political office – leaders in Mexican-American communities are simply out of touch with the average Chicano voter; and I hypothesize that contemporary leaders in Mexican-American communities are only marginally effective in the Southern California political arena due to this lack of ideological and practical cohesion among

⁵ Scholarly encouragement for my comparison between blacks and Latinos in the United States can be found in Moore and Pinderhughes: “Just as Chicago’s black ghettos reflect a history of slavery, Jim Crow legislation, and struggles for civil and economic rights, so the nation’s Latino barrios reflect a history of conquest, immigration, and a struggle to maintain cultural identity” (xvi-xvii).

⁶ While this project is focused on the MCs serving during the 108th session of the United States Congress (2003-2004), the relationships treated are meant to be symbolic of the relationships between Mexican Americans and their Congressional Representatives during any contemporary session.

themselves and their constituents. The ultimate end of this study is to create a profile of the ideal politician for L.A. County's Mexican-American communities.

To realize this work in a postmodernist vein,⁷ various approaches were considered. The classic works of Boorstin on the simultaneous absence and superfluity of an American political theory were among those texts best suited to my research style for this project. In The Genius of American Politics, Boorstin asserts that the very American belief that “its political life [is] based on a perfect theory” is what causes the formulation of a theory to be viewed as an unnecessary task (8). Completely trusting of the imagined political theory borne of the Founding Fathers, contemporary Americans never actually bother to create one of their own. Unlike Europeans – whose tumultuous beginnings predate the written word, requiring political theorization to describe their civilizations – the American establishment is relatively recent and successful, so Americans feel no need to theorize about their political institutions in the present (10-11).

Hence a society evolved wholly uninterested in the philosophical complexities accompanying the formulation of political theory. And hence, an American academic tradition based on human logic and experience (“his history and his geography, in his past and his present”) (Boorstin 23) has repudiated a European academic tradition based on classical theory. “The belief in a perfect original doctrine, one of the main qualities of which is practicality, may help us understand that unique combination of empiricism and idealism which has characterized American [...] life” (Boorstin 16).

⁷ Postmodernism is a vast and loosely defined strategy in academic undertakings; the author Hatch gives it a go: An admittedly “anything goes approach” (43), “[adherents to postmodernism] often challenge modern notions of truth and the search for one best way” (44); postmodernism is essentially the reinterpretation of the past into a more “symbolically rich and meaningful” entity utilizing “marvelous new materials” and “techniques” (44).

Boorstin also endorses the paucity of a concretized American theory as a facilitator of immigration. His words are best:

If American ideals are not in books or in the blood but in the air, then they are readily acquired; actually, it is almost impossible for an immigrant to avoid acquiring them. He is not required to learn a philosophy so much as to rid his lungs of the air of [his native country]. (28)

In my own words, the learning of a new national theory to immigrant populations is an obstacle to establishing oneself in a new land; the absence of an American theory makes the transition to U.S. citizenship much smoother for new arrivals. Therefore, the lack of an American theory plays an explicit role in the introduction of immigrant populations to U.S. soil in general; in the flow of Mexican immigrants to California, specifically.

Another author contributing to my cause in this endeavor is Patricia Zavella, who bases her work on personal experience and whose literature on the unique and specific social location of Chicanas inspired my narrative voice for this project. As a Mexican-American woman herself, Zavella's research problems in "Reflections of Diversity Among Chicanas" emerged from her own experiences in U.S. society, much as my own did. By going into detail about the social location – "the intersection of class, race, gender, and culture" (75) – of Mexican-American women, she provides thorough context for her scholarship. She also places great importance on the historical background of her study, emphasizing the past as a solid and legitimate explanation of the present (76).⁸

As the reader of this project continues, he or she will see that I do the same as Zavella, providing in-depth descriptions of Mexican Americans, their cultural labels,

⁸ The past as a tool for understanding the present is a topic that has been around the block several times in the 1990s. The author Nord provides a short, sweet introduction to the subject, and Cohen debates the notion of the "usefulness" of history throughout his work.

their history as a population in California, their modern political activities, etc. Also, in my section on the MCs that represent Mexican Americans in L.A. County, my research is based on empirical logic and experience in my pursuit of information about them.

My bottom line is that the theoretical framework for this project is loose and informal, as this work is intended to be about universalism and broad understanding; it is not meant as a discursive foray into the myriad theories of cultural studies scholarship.⁹ This is a thesis written for the edification of the average lay individual, not for the scholars and political analysts one might think. I was once a voter in a primarily Mexican-American community in the region in question, and in this investigation I search for answers to questions borne out of personal experiences.

Research Methodology

Research for this project began at the Universidad de las Americas – Puebla, in the library and the computer labs, consulting written texts as well as Internet publications.¹⁰ The policy concerns and ideological bases of politicians who represent Mexican-American communities were accessed online at the websites of the MCs themselves. Internet inquiries as well as online Census Bureau data provided me with a shortlist of Representatives that would constitute the Congressional subjects of my study.

This roster of MCs led me to the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., where I attempted to track them down in person and inquire about their stand on minority politics within their Congressional districts. After many phone calls, several appointments made,

⁹ For all interested parties, initiation into the vast literature on cultural studies in the modern and postmodern eras is facilitated by the works of Hall (on its emergence as a legitimate discipline) and During (he edits an all-encompassing reader on the subject that includes articles by Foucault, Hall, and Hooks).

¹⁰ Although the accuracy of information retrieved from the Internet varies by website, quality assurance guarantees return users, so Internet sources and materials are constantly increasing in value (Skomars 51).

and several outright rejections, I was able to distribute 14 concise questionnaires on The Hill. After more phone calls, more appointments, and more rejections, one questionnaire was returned to me completed and a high-level employee in another Congressional office gave me some “off-the-record” time to answer questions and discuss Mexican Americans from the district his employer represented. By the end of my quest in Washington, D.C., I had spent six nights, seven days, and over a thousand dollars in order to get in touch with one MC on the record and another one off. A journal of this experience and the questionnaire itself have been included at the end of this work as Appendices.

Following the nearly futile quest for any Congressional response, my investigation led me to the corresponding Congressional districts in Los Angeles County, California. Additional questionnaires distributed this time to Mexican-American voters in these communities yielded more successful results; Chicanos in L.A. County were definitely more accessible and vocal than their Congressional representatives. The questionnaire they received – also included here as an Appendix – combined socioeconomic information with perceptions about MCs, so that correlations could be drawn between specified socioeconomic levels and political attitudes. I found a diverse sample by going to local colleges, places of work, and private homes. The point of these inquiries was to extract a general spirit of Mexican-American communities toward the political climate of their districts. Combining numerical information with the small polling samples provided a more complete picture of the political aura of the region. I also took advantage of the vast library system of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), in order to solidify my explorations. This concluded the field portion of my research; it was now time to sit down and tell the story of Mexican-American

abstention and the ostensible lack of Congressional accountability within their communities.

Chapter Summaries

This scholarly excursion begins in Chapter One with the situation of this study in the context of globalization as well as with definitions essential in the narration of this tale. Next, statistical data and documentary sources team up to describe Mexican-American communities and their internal diversity. And finally, the major tenets of my hypothetical argument – contemporary Mexican-American political inactivity and the inaccessibility of their Congressional representatives – are introduced, to be more thoroughly discussed and supported by documentary and anecdotal evidence in the following chapters.

In order to comprehend the contemporary Mexican-American population in L. A County, one should go back to its colonial beginnings under the Spanish Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; Chapter Two takes us there. Next, the Treaty of Hidalgo, the early formation of Chicano politics, and the evolution of specialized interest groups and highly politicized student movements in Southern California constitute integral background for contemporary Mexican-American political activity, which follows in the next chapter.

Chapter Three entails a thorough discussion of the products of history; that is, the outcome of centuries of Chicano presence in California and Chicano interaction with U.S. institutions and societal constraints, as well as Mexican electoral traditions in the

twentieth century and their expression in current California politics.¹¹ Diverse community organizations, politically charged, university-based movements, as well as individual political preferences – drawn from completed questionnaires administered in several Mexican-American communities in L.A. County – are dealt with in Chapter Three.

Analysis of the aforementioned questionnaires comprises the final section of the third chapter. Some of the inquiries addressed in this section include the following: What are Mexican Americans looking for in a Congressional representative? Are they satisfied with current leadership? Are their representatives accessible or responsive? What political issues are most important on an individual level? Discussing the various responses to these questions opens the floor for debate about the characteristics that an ideal Congressional representative for the subjects of my study would possess, a debate that takes place further ahead in Chapter Four.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to investigating the individuals who currently represent Congressional districts in L.A. County with significant Mexican-American populations. Internet research revealed critical information about the MCs, such as social background, ethnicity, place of origin, education, policy concerns, and stands on minority politics and Mexican Americans (or Latinos) as a community.

Field research followed, and my experiences on Capitol Hill are summarized and analyzed in Chapter Four, after a brief treatment of the formulation of leadership in minority communities. My D.C. experiences contributed to the articulation of answers to the following questions, among others: Are constituents and their suggestions or requests

¹¹ Elaboration on this topic occurs near the end of Chapter One as well as throughout Chapter Three. In the meantime, Lopez, Puddefoot, and Gándara provide a concise description of the “products of history” in Los Angeles: “Lower income communities, like many Latino communities, typically suffer from economic blight, deteriorating infrastructure, failing public facilities, poor housing conditions, low-end real estate values, and precarious health and safety problems” (41).

really a priority to MCs? Do Congressional representatives agree with their constituents as to what are the most important issues and policy concerns in their districts? Are MCs meeting the needs of their Mexican-American constituents? And finally, a question that will only be answered at the end of this project: How closely do actual MCs resemble the ideal counterparts that I construct further ahead?

In the next section, the needs and desires of the Mexican-American communities of L.A. County are summarized, to be followed by the policy goals and societal awareness of their Congressional representatives. Here a key issue must be tackled head on: Is there a crossroads? Are the two political actors compatible? Who is farther off the mark: the Mexican Americans that do not vote for their leadership and policy choices? Or the Members of Congress who tend to appear out of touch with or indifferent to the real needs of their constituents?

Finally in this chapter occurs the presentation of the ideal MC I assemble based on all the data considered throughout the course of this project. The realism of this constructed paradigm becomes the center of debate, and then a discussion is engaged concerning the characteristics of the ideal Congressional representative for the Mexican-American communities of Southern California. These characteristics include, but are not limited to: professional training and education, race and ethnicity, political party affiliation, policy concerns, and political strategy.

In my concluding remarks, I discuss my personal experiences living in Los Angeles and in Mexico, the point of departure for the Mexican and subsequently Mexican-American culture that flourishes in Southern California. I came to Mexico three years ago in order to understand Mexican citizenship and political ethics, in hopes that

this would lead to illumination regarding the neglected citizenship of Mexican Americans in L.A. County. Most of my theories behind the political inactivity of Mexican Americans in the United States floundered as I made some interesting discoveries concerning Mexicans in their native land; I discuss these personal discoveries in the Conclusion of this venture, and this leads to my assertion that the solution to the quandary of Mexican-American political action in Southern California not only lies within obtaining the ideal Congressional representative, but also within reforming the Mexican-American population to embrace advanced democratic citizenship.

Justification for Project: To Whom It May Concern

To close the Introduction of this project, I dare to answer several potentially dangerous questions: Why is it important to write this thesis? What benefits will it provide and for whom? Do Mexican Americans even warrant special treatment as a distinct group?¹² At first glance, the importance of this thesis lies in the belated correction of the American historical record in a revisionist way: Latinos, and Mexican Americans in particular, have been involved in the making of history on this continent since prior to the conception of the United States as a nation. As a North American cultural group predating the “Founding Fathers,” arguments of sheer chronology support their inclusion into the “official” record.¹³ The benefits to this inclusion are unmistakable: it is always edifying to tell a truer story than the incomplete story told before. Revisionist studies and

¹² The questioning of the status of Chicanos or Latinos in general as a special interest group requiring a customized political strategy is now arguably obsolete, according to the author Fox, since an unmistakable Latino agenda indeed exists, and its principle goals are to achieve political credibility as a group and respect for Latino languages and cultures (183).

¹³ Prior to the 1960s, Latinos only comprised about 4% of the U.S. population and were therefore “virtually unknown to most Americans and ignored by policy makers and politicians” of the era (Chavez 4); their presence on the U.S. academic radar, therefore, only includes a fraction of their historical significance.

histories have become vital tools for the expansion of the disciplines of cultural studies, and this project is no exception. The time for Latinos to shed the cloak of an “invisible minority” (Moore and Pinderhughes xx) and to embrace membership into the “imagined community” (Madrid 100) of the United States is long overdue.¹⁴

However, upon further reflection, I opened my eyes to the fact that nearly every tome I skimmed on the political activities of Mexican Americans in particular and Latinos in general began by citing a dearth of research in this area.¹⁵ But in reality, nearly all these volumes contained significant amounts of information on the subject, therefore disqualifying the introductory “justifications” of each scholarly work. After having invested enormous amounts of time and energy into this project, I realized that my initial purpose in this endeavor was not the most gripping. While Mexican-American inclusion into the North American historical record is a completely valid rationalization for this assignment, the surprising scarcity of literature on the Members of Congress who represent Mexican-American communities provides even greater impetus for the fulfillment of this enterprise.

Throughout my intermittent investigations over the past three years into the topics treated here, I did not once come across a book or scholarly article that was solely dedicated to Congressional leadership in districts inhabited by large numbers of Mexican Americans, unless the leadership discussed was of Chicano heritage themselves. And more recently, I engaged in an Internet search of books and scholarly articles that lasted approximately three days, and again the results were disappointing.¹⁶ The literature on

¹⁴ Both the works of Moore and Pinderhughes and Madrid support this line of argument.

¹⁵ Examples of this include Diego Vigil, Hero, Rocco, and Rodríguez.

¹⁶ My exhaustive Internet search (15-17 March 2004) covered all major online book suppliers (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Borders, BookFinder) as well as all academic journals listed under the “Chicano Studies”

Mexican Americans and their political activity is vast indeed, but the literature on the Congressional Representatives of Mexican-Americans communities is not. Therefore, the chief purpose of this endeavor must be to fill this inexplicable void in American scholarship.

and “Political Science” headings at the official UCLA Libraries website. The only books I encountered wholly comprised of information about U.S. Members of Congress serving districts in any region were produced by Congressional Quarterly itself (while useful, it cannot boast of impartiality); and most of the articles I found (in a search at online journal archive, www.jstor.com) on the subject of Congressional leadership in minority communities dealt mainly with black populations.