
Democracy & Education

The Changing Challenges of Transformational Resistance

A Response to “*Building the Dream: Transformational Resistance, Community-Based Organizations, and the Civic Engagement of Latinos in the New South*”

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Abstract

A long-time researcher of “education in the New Latino Diaspora” considers how ephemeral the demographic and sociopolitical contexts were for the endeavors captured in “Building the Dream” but concurs with the aptness of considering the five focal students’ participation in a local Spanish radio program as acts of transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) with particular consequences for their sense of coming-of-age into a welcoming intergenerational Latino community.

This article is in response to

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I HAVE LONG STUDIED “education in the New Latino Diaspora,” including assembling two edited volumes (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2015; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002) on the topic. I have also written an anthropology master’s thesis about bilingual paraprofessionals acting as intermediaries between public schools in Kansas and the Spanish-speaking households from which many of their students came (Hamann, 1995). I have crafted a dissertation and subsequent book (Hamann, 1999, 2003) on the creation of a binational partnership that connected a number of Georgia school districts to professional expertise at a Mexican university. Additionally, I have published two examinations of school and community responses to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in the mid-2000s in seven “flyover country” meatpacking communities (Hamann & Reeves, 2012, 2013). Because of this background, I welcome the article “Building the Dream: Transformational Resistance, Community-Based Organizations and the Civic Engagement of Latinos in the New South.” The need to document the range of Latino experiences

in more locales across the United States remains acute. Moreover, the idea of newcomer teens finding agency and voice as political actors on a radio show is compelling.

An Ephemeral Moment

Yet this paper also reminded me of how ephemeral the historic moment it documented was and how much has changed already since the time of this study (described by Petrone as January 2006 to August 2008). At the time of Petrone’s study, America had not had anyone but a White man as president. George W. Bush occupied the

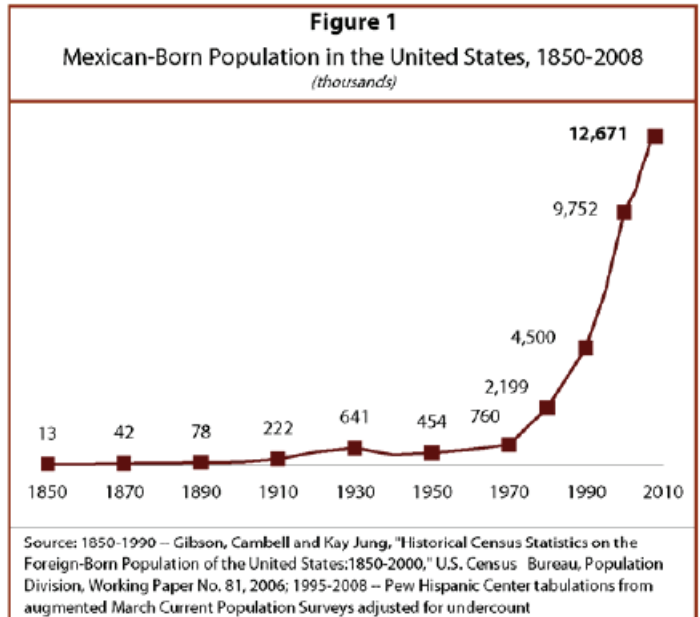
EDMUND “TED” HAMANN is an anthropologist and professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, & Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He recently coedited *Revisiting Education in the New Latino Diaspora* (2015). He began his career in Kansas, teaching in a bilingual family literacy program for a Latino community organization very similar to El Puente.

Oval Office then and was championing comprehensive immigration reform, albeit unsuccessfully. Since then, North Carolina, where the study was situated, has voted for Obama (in 2008) and for both a Democratic senator, Kay Hagan, and a Democratic governor, Beverly Perdue (also in 2008). So back when Petrone was engaged in her research, the prospect that social organizing could raise the probability of Latinos being welcome and included seemed plausible. But then North Carolina (and national) politics took a sharp turn to the right, and North Carolina voters elected Republican majorities to both state house and state senate in 2010 for the first time since 1898. In 2012, Pat McCrory became North Carolina's first Republican governor since 1988, and Mitt Romney won North Carolina's popular vote for the presidency.

When Petrone's study was conducted, the economy had not yet crashed into a great recession, so it also hadn't begun a slow but steady six-year recovery. President Obama had not yet earned the derisive title *Deporter in Chief* (for the record-high rate of deportations during his presidency [Epstein, 2014]). Nor had he won substantial Latino and liberal support for DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals executive order that since 2012 has provided temporary legal protection for young adults (ages 15–30) who were brought as children to the United States without legal authorization. Nor had President Obama yet earned both more accolades and more resistance (depending on the constituency) for a so-far-unsuccessful larger push for comprehensive immigration reform and for a second executive order—Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA). DAPA, as of this writing in June 2016, remains blocked from implementation by an under-appeal Circuit Court of Appeals ruling.

Anti-Mexican and anti-Latino immigrant rhetoric also seems to be on the rise since the time of Petrone's study. While anti-Latino rhetoric is hard to quantify and is not new—certainly in the 1990s California Governor Pete Wilson and businessman activist Ron Unz both tapped and promoted racist stereotypes in their various anti-affirmative action, anti-immigrant, and antibilingual education campaigns in California (Santa Ana, 2002)—anti-immigrant/anti-Latino rhetoric has been stoked by the Tea Party movement, which became politically prominent nationally for the first time in 2010. It has also been stoked by 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney and his politely phrased (if still ominous) call for “self-deportation”; by the fearful rather than the sympathetic reactions to the “unaccompanied minors” from Central America who garnered national attention during the summer of 2014; and by the recent hateful characterizations by 2016 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump of Mexicans as “rapists” and as “bringing drugs, bringing crime” (Moreno, 2015; Ye Hee Lee, 2015).

When Petrone's study was conducted, immigration from Latin America, particularly Mexico, to the United States was high, as it had been at least since the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), from which the politicized term *amnesty* arose, and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Moreover, it appeared to be poised only to grow higher. Two graphs, from a 2009 Pew Research Center Fact Sheet report, reproduced here, allow easy inference of a continued upward trajectory (“Mexican Immigrants,” 2009).



However, with the recession, the slow recovery, the continued militarization of the US-Mexico border (making unauthorized crossings increasingly hazardous [Heyman & Campbell, 2012]), the rise in deportations, and a decisive pivot in populist Republican anti-immigrant rhetoric, the net movement between Mexico and the United States has reversed. While hundreds of thousands of Mexicans still come to the United States annually, both with and without documentation, the number of Mexicans leaving the United States now exceeds that of those coming. Gonzalez-Barrera (2015) estimated that between 2009 and 2014, the number of people leaving the United States for Mexico was just over 1 million, exceeding those who came to the United States from Mexico by a net of 140,000. There continue to be undocumented Mexican-origin children and adolescents in American schools and communities, but this proportion is declining with more and more Mexican-descent teens now U.S.-born (and thereby U.S. citizens). This changes the context for how current coming-of-age New Latino Diaspora teens can imagine their futures, including their political and communitarian enfranchisement.

While Mexicans remain far and away the largest source of foreign-born Latinos coming to the United States, their recently reversing migration contrasts with the major political pressures and violence that continue to push migrations from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, including the famous “unaccompanied minors,” whose circumstance were briefly nationally prominent news stories in the summer of 2014 (e.g., Preston, 2014). The story of Mexicans coming north to “take jobs no one else wanted” (Suárez-Orozco, 1998)—which is part of what brought the families of the five adolescents focused on here to New Hope—has increasingly changed. Now New Latino Diaspora communities are increasingly Central American—at least the newest arrivals are—and as Sierk (2016) has found in her dissertation about White and Latino adolescents in two Nebraska meatpacking communities, social hierarchies are emerging that rank Mexicans ahead of Guatemalans and well-established Guatemalans ahead of new

arrivals. (Sierk also found that White students tend to be oblivious to this intra-Latino segmentation.) If this pattern is also true in North Carolina and if Carlos, Ramón, Gabriel, Zelda, and Elena were teens now, instead of almost a decade ago, it would complicate the praxis of transformational resistance.

A second new demographic change is also transforming communities like New Hope. Although deportation rates have been higher under the Obama administration than that of George W. Bush (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013), large-scale ICE enforcement, notably workplace raids, grew substantially in number in Bush's second term (both the number of raids and the number detained through those raids). This, plus the hope of immigration reform, was part of what precipitated the activism of the teens studied by Petrone. But the ICE raids changed their communities and communities like theirs.

My colleague Jenelle Reeves and I have studied seven raided communities—six that were concurrently raided on December 12, 2006 (Hyrum, Utah; Greeley, Colorado; Grand Island, Nebraska; Cactus, Texas; Marshalltown, Iowa; and Worthington, Minnesota), plus one more that was raided in 2008 (Postville, Iowa). Our initial inquiry (Hamann & Reeves 2012, 2013) was to look at how school disruptions precipitated by the raids affected how the raids and newcomer Latino children and parents were described in local print media accounts (e.g., schools uncertain of whether to send elementary school-age children home to houses made empty by parent detentions). However, in 2013, when I was able to visit three of the communities that had been raided in 2006 and had a chance to talk to local educators about what they remembered of the raids and how school policies might have changed since then, to my surprise, a new storyline emerged.

One principal described to me getting a call about two months after the December 2006 raid to come to the local school district central office after school. When he did so, he was told in person by the superintendent to prepare for the arrival of more than 80 Burmese students to his elementary school the next day. The employment calculus of the local meatpacking business had changed. With Latino employees detained in large number during the raid and the hiring of new Latino employees raising the prospect that at least some might be seeking work with falsified authorizations, employers began turning to refugee populations (who were easier to prove employment eligibility for) to replace the detained workers. With details varying very little, the other communities I visited confirmed that they too had seen unexpected growth in their Karen (from Burma), Sudanese, Somali, and other populations. The common denominator was that these newest families were mostly formal refugees.

While the pseudonymity of New Hope keeps me from verifying whether there too this dynamic is underway, this does seem common across the New Latino Diaspora. The nascent and fraught interethnic relationships between Latinos and Whites captured in “Building the Dream” is now likely both more established (almost a decade later) and demographically more complicated. The problematic Mexican newcomer/established White resident dualist dynamics that precipitated the La Voz radio show and the creation of El Puente (the community organization) are

likely now tripartite (White, Latino, and Asian and African refugee), with the Latino portion of these three also becoming less Mexican and more Central American by background. Of course, solidarity across difference is possible, but it is harder to erect, and it requires challenging hierarchies like the ones Sierk (2016) described. Would Southeast Asian refugees feel welcome at a venue like El Puente? Would La Voz have been as successful if it included youth with a cross section of first languages? Would refugees feel willing, able, and compelled to participate in marches for legalization, and how might established members of the host community react to all that?

Coming of Age in New Hope

As readers have just seen, I gave comparatively lengthy attention to the changing context for political debate, community building, and coming-of-age in places like New Hope. However, for Petrone, describing the context of New Hope was a means to an end. Her primary emphasis was on the educative and social value of transformational resistance, and it is to that topic that we shall now more directly turn. According to Petrone, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) described that transformational resistance as a conscious, collective, and political sensibility and described that that both individual and social change are possible. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal further distinguish transformational resistance from three other kinds: reactionary, self-defeating, and conformist. As we can infer from their titles, these other types of resistance may generate light and heat, but they do little to improve an unequal status quo.

So, a first question we can ask is: Did the five students' participation in the radio program really constitute transformational resistance? At least within the time frame of the study, participation in El Puente's *Nuestra Voz* radio show brought together students who, though all Latino in a relatively small town, might not have otherwise particularly associated with each other given their different compartments, different facility with English, different residency statuses, and different academic trajectories. This change in social capital likely was transformative. Additionally, participation in the program compelled four of the five to take on speaking roles at a rally for immigration reform that, among other things, won them the attention and respect of other generations. Based on these two transformations, it seems that participation in the radio program enabled the successful coming-of-age of these five young people and their welcome into New Hope's larger Latino community. Whether this was enduringly transformative for these individuals and whether it was truly socially transformative are harder to know, given that we know very little about how both these students and New Hope have fared since 2008. It seems plausible, however, that the greater nativism extant in a lot of New Latino Diaspora communities would mean that students like this would develop more cultural capital within the Latino community, but perhaps less outside of it (where community activism would be less rewarded, while conventional measures like school participation and outcomes would still earn accolades).

However, I think in this case that it is the posing of the question that matters more than the definitiveness of the answer for these five young adults in this one place. The posing of the question asks us to

consider more abstractly how young Latinos in the New Latino Diaspora come of age and what mechanisms they can avail/create to gain a sense of enfranchisement. There is an abundant literature that chronicles how this can and has gone wrong (e.g., Gándara & Contreras, 2010, Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005), as well as a literature that describes Latino students who are successful, at least in conventional ways, like academic performance (e.g., Flores-González, 2002; Romo & Falbo, 1996). But I don't think the point of discussing transformational resistance is to consider whether those who engage in it do or do not become more academically successful. That perspective ignores the issue of *who* gets to determine *what* constitutes academic success. Conventional academic successes (good grades, good test scores, graduation) are defined by the state and the school; these are not bastions of Latino political engagement or power. Here, instead the claim to transformation comes from the students and their community. The five students successfully came of age. They gained voice, getting to articulate their thoughts and have them publically applauded. They got to help make community in a new geography, and then they got to be *of* that community.

Are these accomplishments better measures of transformation? I think they might be. Among other things they allow these young adults, others like them, and the communities they are part of to define success rather than have it defined per dominant (and stratifying) extant social norms. Petrone captured a specific, compelling, historic moment in New Hope. Even if what is documented here could not happen quite this way again, in New Hope or anywhere else, the issue of how the subordinated can enfranchise themselves, can affiliate with and feel part of something bigger, and can have that sensibility reciprocated through the respect of elders is still important. Be it through community organizations, radio shows, marches, or other mechanisms of jointly constructing and celebrating solidarity, this remains important work. In Petrone's memorable turn of phrase, that is what constitutes "building the dream."

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