

HISTORIAS: LATIN@ VOICES IN OHIO

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This article explores Latin@ life in Ohio. It discusses oral history participants' personal experiences and revealing reflections on the past, how they inform the present and will continue to impact the future of the Latin@ community in the state. It explores issues of language, identity and cultural expression of participants and how those issues are informed by their own communities. This article stems from the oral history project titled, "Oral Narratives of Latin@s in Ohio," being archived at the Center for Folklore Studies at the Ohio State University.

I arrived to central Ohio in 1992. The census then showed a significant number of Latin@ in Northeast Ohio. In fact, I remember hearing that if I wanted to experience the Latin@ culture, I would need to travel to Cleveland or Toledo. Cleveland was known to have a large Puerto Rican population (Acosta-Belén and Santiago, 2006), and one could find Mexican and Mexican-American culture in Toledo. During my first years in Columbus, Ohio, I witnessed the slow and steady growth and visibility of Spanish speaking business, organizations, and the first Festival Latino¹ in 1996, which allowed Latin@s to enter into the consciousness of the rest of Ohio's population. That was my initial experience, and one that provides only a cross-section of the presence of Latin@s in Ohio.

A few decades later, the 2010 U.S. Census² reported that 3.4% of Ohio's population is Latino/Hispanic. Although the numbers now have shifted from those of the 70s, 80s and 90s, and Columbus is now the leader in growth with a population of about 50,000, it is also

important to note the presence and growth in rural areas like Mt. Vernon, Celina, Portsmouth and others; in fact, the Appalachian region in Ohio has seen an increase in Latin@ population over the last decade (Barcus 2007, 398-400). Some of the major heritages are Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban; however, a large number of Salvadoran and Guatemalan have steadily moved into the state over the last decade. These numbers tell us part of the history of Latin@s in the state of Ohio. It does not tell us about the personal histories of migration, the efforts and struggles to maintain and recover culture and language, and the occasional but real experiences with various kinds of discrimination and feelings of isolation. In an effort to reclaim a communal past, I highlight a few oral history interviews that chronicle life in Ohio in as early as the 1940's—although this, by no means, suggests that it is the earliest record of Latin@ presence in the state. José Solá finds that “census documents do not register Latino Americans residing in Ohio until the 1930s, [yet] oral history projects and local histories show Mexican migrants living in Lorain in the years immediately after World War I” (Solá 2011). I will discuss how individuals talk about their relationship to the Latin@ culture and the Spanish language as a source of pride and pain; about boyhood in South Lorain in the 1940s and 1950s; and how young Latin@s in college sometimes feel isolated and marginalized. Participants’ perception of their neighborhood is not always one of hardship and discrimination, but they are aware that these issues exist. However, what I find most valuable to document is how, in most cases, they have invested time in their own community to preserve their language, food, and celebrations. In doing so, they create an easier path for cultural and language preservation for future generations.³

Oral History as Testimonios

The practice of oral history is not new. We can think of how ancient cultures preserved their history through storytelling, generation after generation. The Greeks, Chinese, Persian, as well as the indigenous cultures of the Americas, have used oral history to bear witness in court, travel, and religious settings, to name a few (Ritchie 2015, 1-3). While orality has been the norm in many cultures, past and present, its reliance on memory and personal perspectives has relegated orality to a type of suspicious or incomplete practice⁴. However, it is precisely this

account—the personal narrative—that is often missing when we talk or hear about the Latin@ population. Using oral history/testimonio is a path to self-representation for many unrepresented groups throughout the United States, and perhaps too around the world. In *Present Past*, Andreas Huyssen recognizes the power that exists in the memories of non-dominant groups; he argues that their “lived memory is active, alive, embodied in the social—that is, in the individuals, families, groups, nations, and regions. These are the memories needed to construct differential local futures in a global world” (28). Indeed, collecting oral history allows participants to engage in what Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes described as “acts of cultural survival” (2008, p.103), because to tell one’s story is to create, preserve and be the gatekeepers of our own history.

Donald Ritchie explains that, “memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” (Ritchie 2015, 1). Furthermore, oral history does not record monologues, but it is prompted by a series of questions carefully prepared by the interviewer, which allows for structured spontaneity on the part of interviewer and interviewee. The final product, that is, video recordings, transcripts, photographs, and related materials in today’s digital world are often archived on a website, or via podcast. Indeed, increasingly over the past decade, oral historians are addressing the need to produce digital collection of projects that are easily categorized and readily accessible (Boyd 2011). Hence, the interactive nature of digital projects allow us to enhance the viewer/listener experience of oral history by engaging the viewer to interact with maps, listen to music, access translators and glossaries, and other embedded software applications. As such, the oral history of Latin@s in Ohio⁵ exists as a digital humanities archive that intersects technology with narrative acts such as stories, memory, joking, advice-giving, as told by older and younger generations.

Oral history is a highly communal practice that collects memories, *historias*, which are not often in the minds of mainstream hegemonic culture in the United States. In, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Michael Frisch states that history, or in this case oral history, documents “how people make sense of their past, how they

connect individual experience and its social context and how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them” (188). In gathering participants for this project⁶, and before I begin recording the interview, participants receive a letter explaining the purpose and goal of collecting oral history about Latin@s in Ohio. The letter includes the following information:

The central project of the class—collecting and preserving the oral histories of Latinos in Ohio—could not be more significant and of immediate consideration. As we record the first-hand video-narratives of citizens with digital video cameras, we will compose a rich historical record of the Latino/a presence in the state of Ohio. The narratives that we collect will be edited, entered and preserved in the Oral Narrative of Latinos in Ohio internet collection at the Center for Folklore Studies at the Ohio State University. The Center for Folklore Studies will place this historical record on an international stage and provide a unique picture of Latinos in Ohio that is open to the public and on the web. In this project, rather than having historians write *about* Latinos/as, you will have the opportunity to speak for yourself and, thereby, compose your own community history.

Please know that oral histories can be short or long, sad or happy, poignant or incidental—they are simply memories from different times in your life.

When I arrive to collect their story, participants have in their possession a letter about the project and by then, we have often made contact via e-mail or a phone call prior to the date of the interview. Yet, it is the personal exchange, as I ask the questions and participants tell their history that allows us to connect and actively engage in a deeper understanding of the other. Alessandro Portelli explains that interviewee and interviewer should be ready to teach and learn, study and be studied, and that, “Fieldwork is meaningful as the encounter of two subjects who recognize each other as subjects, and therefore separate, and seek to build their equality upon their difference in order to work together” (Portelli 1990, 43). I am often asked where I am from and why I am collecting oral history. On one occasion, a group of Mexican-American men, who grew up together in the 1940’s, began to interview *me* and seemed sincerely interested in knowing about my own journey to Ohio. My experience of living in Texas immediately connected with some of these men who had lived in Texas and were familiar with

the border towns I mentioned. On this particular occasion, I often weaved in and out in my role of interviewer and interviewee but, when the focus shifted from me, I felt that I had passed a test and I could begin to collect their history. Recording life history, undeniably, involves personal moments of exchange; it is a highly collective experience.

Language as identity and cultural expression

In Ohio and across the Midwest, there are many efforts to preserve and maintain the Spanish language and cultural heritages by way of bilingual schools, Spanish language schools, after school programs, cultural centers, dances, festivals and theater. Throughout the Midwest, we can find places where Latin@ placemaking is happening; for example, Teatro Latino de Cleveland (OH); Sophia Quintero Cultural Center in Toledo (OH); Festival de los Tulipanes in Holland (MI); Dayton Day of the Dead (OH); Festival Latino in Columbus (OH); En Nuestra Lengua in Ann Arbor (MI), among others. For many Latin@s across the region—except for Chicago’s unique position as the Midwestern city with the highest number of Latin@s⁷—their experience and relationship with the Spanish language brings about different memories. Ms. Shoenhals, a young professional woman with Dominican and German heritage, explains her childhood memories of speaking Spanish with her mother:

My mom, my parents always spoke to me in Spanish. My dad knew Spanish as well, so they always spoke to me in Spanish and then, also when I was there, I didn’t have a choice, I either figure it out and not be shy and talk to my abuela or, I don’t. So that’s where I learned all my Spanish, it’s like my second home, it’s like when I went there my brain just switched and I got used to the loud noise and the chaos in the street.⁸

Ms. Shoenhals shows how the language connected her to her mother and her grandmother, a connection that might have been lost since her grandmother did not speak English.

Alexandra Pagán, a jewelry store owner who moved to Cleveland as a child remembers that:

Well, when I was younger, I only knew Spanish until I got into school. Once I started school is when I tried to mostly learn English to communicate with the kids at school. It was in kindergarten and first grade when you kind of forget your language a little bit,

but me being... working with Latinos in the community, I've been able to keep my language but it's still a little hard with certain words. In English, it's a little bit easier for me still, because... I don't want to say it's my first language, but they are both neck and neck because we use them equally. At home, we only speak Spanish with the parents, especially with older family members. My son gets taken care of by my sister's godmother and my son knows both languages- his numbers and his letters in both English and Spanish, and he's only two. Being exposed to both languages is a great benefit. (Watch the video interview in <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/Pagán>).

Alexandra experience of weaving in and out of English and Spanish became part of her Latina identity and is continuing to exist in the next generation.

For Grace Ramos, who moved to Ohio in the 1970s from Iowa, it was not until her daughter entered the school system that she felt that she needed to address the use of Spanish. She remembers the first time this happened:

And she would say, "Don't speak that funny language, that funny thing." Because kids would tease her. And I said, "Well honey, you're speaking in Spanish. Your dad's speaking in Spanish ..." [the daughter would say] "Don't do that." And she did not want me to talk that way, for my husband to talk that way in front of the neighbors. (For the video interview, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/Ramos>).

Ms. Ramos was persistent and continued to speak Spanish to her daughter nonetheless. She also began to hold workshops that taught children and the community about the Mexican culture, including folkloric dancing and food. She remembers,

And I would make tortillas for the kids, you know, maybe elementary. It kind of grew, and then I did it for a while, so I was just trying to get the word out. The other part of that too was that I was unusual again, a Baptist. So my church was not real familiar with Hispanics, and Mexicans in particular, so I started introducing things. The first time they asked me what a taco was, I knew I had my work cut out. So, then we started doing things that encouraged education about the Hispanic-Mexican culture.

Carlos Martinez⁹, a young Latino of Honduran heritage remembers the shift in language use as he transitioned from the Bronx to Ohio; his experience is a common example of how a heritage language is maintained at different levels according to birth order:

Mira, hay, pues, hay más gente que hablan el español en, pues en el Bronx ¿no? y aquí, aunque hay una población del, pues grande de latinos ¿no? Nosotros, mi familia, ¿no?, como no, estamos juntos con ellos ¿no? sí, en contacto ¿no? um, pues, mira, mi hermana habla el español muy bien ¿no? y después yo, mediano ¿no?, y después mi hermanito ¿no? es, es, es no muy bien ¿no? sí, le hace dificultad hablar pero... Aunque sí entiende muy bien ¿no? ay-, habla como un Spanglish ¿no? que no se entiende pero um, sí. [Because, you see, there are more people who speak Spanish in the Bronx, no? and here, even though there is a Latino population, a large one, we, our family, is not connected to them. My sister speaks Spanish very well, right? and then me, mildly, right? and then my little brother, his is not good, it is difficult for him to speak it ... But he understand it well, right? He speaks Spanglish, which cannot be understood well, right?]¹⁰. (For the entire interview, see [here](#).)

Jenice Contreras recounts her experience entering the school system in Cleveland Ohio, as an English learner,

En cuanto aquí, cuando te enseñan español, no es un español así útil, sino que sabe una que otra palabra so, este, tenía un poquito de conocimiento de la lengua, aunque había ciertas cosas que se me hacían difíciles so, este, mi nombre es con jota este, y siempre en vez de decir, you know, ‘j’ decía ‘g’ entonces me confundió un poco con las letras y sentí una frustración de niña no poder hablar la lengua con perfección porque soy un poco impaciente. So hice ese compromiso conmigo misma de aprenderme la lengua y de perfeccionarla eh, lo mejor que pueda. So, ahora cuando le digo a la gente, “Oh, inglés es mi segundo lenguaje” me miran raro y dicen, “¿Cómo es cierto? Hablas inglés perfecto” y yo digo, “No, no, no tan perfecto” este, pero sí hice ese compromiso con la lengua. Cuando llegué a la escuela aquí, estaba en el programa bilingüe, estuve en las escuelas públicas de Cleveland y estuve en el programa bilingüe por dos años entonces, en cuanto las experiencias, esa fue la primera vez que yo me sentí distinta, porque en la

isla, pues no había esa diferencia entre razas o entre grupos so, una dinámica cultural que tuve que aprender que va más allá que simplemente la lengua pero más relacionado con esto, la dinámica de las culturas.” [Well, here, when they teach you Spanish, is not a functional Spanish, just a word here and there, so I had an understanding of the language (English), but there were words that were difficult for me. My name has a “J” and instead of saying “J” I always said “G” and I was confused about the alphabet and was frustrated as a little girl for not speaking the language perfectly, because I was impatient. So I made a promise to myself to perfect it as much as I could. So, now when I tell people that English is my second language, they say “how is that true? You speak it perfectly,” so I say no, no, it’s not perfect, but yes, I committed myself to the language. When I arrived to Cleveland, I was in the bilingual program with the Cleveland public schools and I was in a bilingual program in the island for two years, so with regard to experiences, that was the first time that I felt different, because in the island, there weren’t racial or group differences, that was a cultural dynamic I had to learn that goes beyond language, that is, cultural relations.] (For the video interview, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/Contreras>).

Although Ms. Contreras did not experience a loss of her native Spanish language, she does admit that it was difficult to pass it on to her two sons, who grew up in Cleveland, did not go to a bilingual school and had a father who was a non-Spanish speaker. Her interview reveals that the lack of bilingual or dual language programs in the K-12 system, continues to be a struggle for Latin@s who are growing up in Ohio and experience language loss due to low ethnolinguistic vitality.

Perhaps one of the most telling interviews in regards to language loss, gain and pride is that of Guillermo Arriaga. His family moved to Ohio in the 40s and entered the school system in the 60s; he recalls his experiences as a young boy entering the school system:

In sixth grade we got these mean teachers from the south and they hated us, they treated us like the blacks. And I remember going in the bathroom and looking in the mirror and saying, “God, why didn’t you make me white? Why did you make me who I am?” I didn’t like myself... In school, if you spoke Spanish you got paddled for it.

Everyone was allowed to sit with their friends but Latinos were always separated and you don't speak that language. Others [groups] were speaking other languages like Italian... (For the video interview, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/guillermo-arriaga-0>)

There are a couple of common threads about the participants' relationship to Spanish. One is that of *Home*, of a special family language and as inherently intimate and integral part of their identity. Another is that of *Loss*. Each participant talks about how the school system, in one way or another interfered, challenged or punished his or her use of Spanish in schools. Spanish, in this instance, is connected to pain, as each tries to keep the language alive, fights to pass it on the younger generations, siblings or their own children. However, because of the inadequate or lack of support from the school system, younger generations are not able to maintain the language. Carlos Martínez directly speaks about how moving from the Bronx, where he lived in a primarily Latin@ neighborhood, affected his language fluency and how it continued to be a struggle as he entered the school system in Columbus, Ohio. Guillermo Arriaga's story is particularly touching because he remembers re-learning Spanish at different points in his life. First as a child as he continued to speak in Spanish at home while being punished from speaking it at school; then as a college student as he was learning about his heritage and met key civil rights leaders such as César Chavez and Reyes Tijerina; and lastly, as an adult, when he became a school teacher in Lorain, Ohio and needed to communicate with a large Spanish-speaking student body and their families. His resiliency to keep his language alive is one that is informed by pride and service to his community.

Boyhood in South Lorain

Most Latin@s that moved to Lorain, Ohio between 1920 and 1940 first arrived to South Lorain. According to Pepi Osiel, one the interviewees, there were about 600 families from Mexico that moved in the 1920s; two decades later, in the 1940s and 1950s, Tejanos¹¹ and Puerto Ricans began to arrive. The first wave of Latin@ families came from Mexico and Texas as migrant workers; the second group were Puerto Ricans who moved to work primarily in the steel mill factories. Very few documents exist to record the history of these communities in the area;

however, a couple of locally funded publications did emerge to provide a historical record to their presence. Frank Jacinto, a Lorain educator, authored a booklet titled, *The Mexican Community in Lorain, Ohio*¹² and the book, *Hispanic Community in Lorain*¹³. Although many of the interviews I have collected speak in some form or another about growing up in Ohio, I will focus on a group I interviewed in April 2015. These men, who grew up together in South Lorain, formed a breakfast group in 2001 that has met every Tuesday at 8:30am at a local restaurant. The weekly gathering is an opportunity to reminisce, connect with old friends, and celebrate birthdates. These men are now in their late 70s to early 90s. In the following transcript of the interview, I do not identify names because often, when one participant was speaking, others filled in some memory gaps or added their own perspective to what was being said. What follows is a condensed summary of the conversation, in essence, a collective story of boyhood (for the entire interview, see <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/breakfast-group>).

We lived in a mixed neighborhood. We had everything; Lebanese, Greek, Hungarians, Blacks, Polish and Appalachian whites... we were in our own little world. We had games that we played, we didn't have no playground. We had an empty lot. We used a rag and tape to play baseball, or sticks about 18 inches long and we would call the game "stick in the mud." For this game, a hole went down in the mud and everyone had a stick and someone would come by and would try to knock it down. When a stick was knocked down, the person that knocked it down then used his stick to pick it up and throw it as far as they could go and the person with no stick had to go retrieve it. We made a game called "hide the belt." Someone would be selected to hide the belt and the other participants would go look for it. Sometimes, you would find it but you wouldn't say you found it because you wanted to get the greatest amount of people closest to it so that you can take that belt and whack them with it. This is what we would do, this was part of our growing up in South Lorain. We played marbles, of course. There was another game we used to play when it was raining... this is what we would do. We had no rec hall, we had no supervision... we didn't have bicycles until years later.

The best part of our growing up, the stuff that was effective, was that everybody respected everybody in the neighborhood. No matter where, people didn't lock their

doors and everybody respected everybody's space... I am still flabbergasted that when I was 7 or 8 years old, sometimes I would leave the house in the morning after breakfast and I didn't get back home until 8 or 9 o'clock at night! We didn't do anything mischievous, we didn't do anything wrong.

All of what has been said here, is the reason why I didn't want to leave Lorain, because it was peaceful over here. You never heard of anybody getting stabbed or shot...

Collectively, at one point in the interview, the participants described Lorain as a place of safety and peace. Some of the participants' parents left Mexico escaping the revolution; others remember Fort Worth, Texas as a place of crime, of prejudice and discrimination, where police was quick to arrest anyone. Although the participants do not directly say it, it is implied in their description that Mexican and Mexican-Americans were often the targets of these arbitrary arrests. They believe that because there were a lot more Mexicans in Texas, they were more likely to be harassed, which in their experience did not happen in Ohio. Nonetheless, their interview also reveals instances of segregation that, as children, would not have directly affected them. For example, their fathers worked in the steel plant. These men were crucial to the national defense at the start of the World War II, working seven days a week and sixteen hours a day. According to one of the participants, all the top jobs were done by the Mexicans—meaning that the labor intensive jobs in the coal plant and welding in the blast furnace was the responsibility of the Mexicans, while the English, Scottish and Hungarians had jobs in the machine or water shop. One of the participants comments that his dad worked at the plant for 32 years and died with a black lung.

The war affected Mexican families in Lorain in a couple of ways. There was separation of families as sons left for war, and fathers were typically absent due to the demands of the steel plant. The long hours and labor-intensive jobs also drove many of these men to alcoholism, which further alienated them from their families. Yet, what these men remember most, is how, under these circumstances, the community came together to look out for one another. As they grew up, they had to move from the safety of their mixed neighborhood school in South Lorain to the middle school and high school of North Lorain. It is here that they began to notice friction with their white classmates. One participant comments, "I could see the friction as we

got older, between the races, I could see that, and it was really shocking to me because they didn't think I was Mexican, but when I see them treat my buddies, I thought there was something wrong. As we got older, I realize that we were being treated differently." This shift was also experienced by young girls like Maria Leibas, another interviewee, who felt racial discrimination when she moved to North Lorain to attend high school. Another participant remembers, "At the age of 16, I drove my parents' car, it wasn't a new car but it was a car, and we used to have school dances on Friday nights and after the party or the dance, a lot of us used to get together and go to a drive in restaurant. We laughed and talked and ate our hamburgers and fries. This young girl asked for a ride home and I said, 'yeah, I'll give you a ride.' She lived on the East side of town and I took her home, and I didn't know anything until Monday of what had happened. Her father asked her who had brought her home, and she said it was somebody from school. He asked who it was, and she said it was 'Art, Art García.'" The father of this young girl punished her for allowing a Spic¹⁴ to bring her home. The participants discussed never using or hearing racist words, like Spic, to refer to one another when they were children.

Although instances of racism and discrimination existed, boyhood, as experienced by this group of men, is described as inclusive, safe and fun. Growing in a mixed neighborhood, with different languages and races, added to the richness of their experiences, but not colorblindness. For example, they knew who the Black, Lebanese, Hungarian families were and where they lived, yet the games they played unified them. They also point to a common experience of growing up with fathers that they rarely saw due to the demands of the steel plant. Documenting these memories allowed them to share their individual and collective experience, and even learn more from each other. For example, at the beginning of this interview, I asked everyone to introduce themselves and talk about when and how they arrived to Ohio. When the last participant was done speaking, Moe, who the group considers the leader, added:

Yo te conozco desde que tenías tres años y nunca me habías dicho eso a mí [I've known you since you were three years old and you never told me about that.]” To which Echo

responds, “What?” And Mo responds, “Lo que le dijiste a ella” [What you told her], and Echo says, “¡Porque nunca me preguntaste!” [Because you never asked me!]

Such exchanges reminds us that personal histories can be revisited and rewritten every time there are others there to witness them.

Homegrown young Latin@s

To end this chapter, I discuss the growing presence of Latin@s in Ohio. Latin@s between the ages of 5 and 25 are the largest underrepresented group in K-12 schools and universities.¹⁵ There is a significant and rapidly growing number of young first-generation Latin@ college students in the state. Predominantly White Midwestern institutions are still grappling with best models that support student retention, completion and leadership models.¹⁶

The lack of recognition and concern of Latin@ needs within the campus community, in particular those students who attend small liberal arts colleges—which is perhaps common in most historically White institutions in the Midwest—continue to send the message that young Latin@s belong at the margin of the higher education community.¹⁷ While many factors contribute to the success of Latin@s at universities, what seems to be lacking is connection with campus mentors, other Latin@ students, and culturally appropriate leadership initiatives. The lack of culturally-relevant programs reveal a troubling pattern: when these young men and women—many of them first generation college students—begin to tell their college experience, they often talk about wanting to quit, to go back home, and feeling that this space, the university, is not for them.

Damaris Garduño, who has since graduated and works as a science teacher, comments about her experiences¹⁸:

My sister got married at age 18. And my other sister works about one day a week. Even after she went to a community college and has an associate’s degree. She has no idea what is going to do. And I think that a lot of the times, the answer is like, to get married, or to like find a guy to sustain you or that will make everything better... And I don’t know, there have been times when I, while I’ve been here, that that’s crossed my mind, like oh maybe if I just go home and like have these offers [marriage proposals] anyways from

this guy, and this guy. If I just go and do that then I don't have to do anything and, I'm smart enough, I can go and I can get connected.

Throughout her interview, Ms. Garduño expressed how she felt isolated in the small liberal arts college she attended, which often made her question whether she belonged there. Yet, she sought out connection with other Latin@ students who helped her navigate college and offered a place for community (for the entire interview, see <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/Garduño>).

Yoselin Melgar, also a graduate who had successfully secured an internship in D.C. after graduation, remembers days when things were academically hard:

Those were the most difficult day, and finals week too because I thought, "What am I doing at this university?" I miss my family too much and I am so miserable here, and studying hard and I can't even see them. But I hope that all this effort will pay off in the future, and I am afraid that all of this hard work might not mean anything in the future. (For the entire interview, see <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/melgar>).

Erika Cuevas remembers her first year in college:

My first year I felt, well I came early for a pre-orientation program, where there were a lot of white students and I was like, "I picked the wrong pre-college program" and I was like, "I just want to go home now" it was the first week and I was like, "No. Just like, push yourself. Talk to people."

As the interview went on, she expressed that being involved in campus life helped greatly with her transition, she said,

I'd say to definitely just seek out people who you think you already have something in common with. Um, I feel that's why a lot of first-years who are anxious about preserving their sense of being Latino, join Adelante or they join La Tertulia... And now that I've been here I'm trying to help with the improvements, but it's a lot to take on and, a lot to try to accomplish in four years before you leave. For the entire interview, see [here](#).

Both, Ms. Melgar and Ms. Cuevas, reflect on their first year of college as of homesickness. Although an experience that is often shared with many other freshman college

students, their lack of connection to Latin@ culture and language heightened their isolation. They expressed feelings that they were even losing their fluency in Spanish.

Similarly to the breakfast group mentioned earlier, young Latin@s, born and raised in Ohio, expressed that strong family ties contributed to their sense of belonging. Surprisingly too, many of the participants I interviewed grew up in primarily Latin@ and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods and experienced racial tensions and diversity as they moved to other urban settings or the suburbs.

Selina Pagan's experience differs from the previous ones. Selina lives at home and commutes to her university. She is also employed and is actively involved in a project that serves Latin@ owned business and is interested in serving in the community she works for and lives in:

I'd say my story right now is a lot different from other's: I'm eighteen years old, I just graduated high school, and I actually work, I'm the administrative assistant here at the Northeast Ohio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, I work at this non-profit, and what I do is a lot of community development, well we're redeveloping the neighborhood to call it La Villa Hispana so that's, I don't want to say I'm dedicating my life to it just yet but that's one of the main focuses of my life right now.

So, with that I work a lot with, kind of like branding and marketing La Villa Hispana, it's a lot of, it's so odd it's just, it's a lot of work for someone like me, because I just started college and so I haven't, I don't know what it's going to be like just yet, it's so far it's gone smoothly, but I like, I just got out of class and came here so that's kind of my life right now and it's just constantly keep going, but what I, my goal is to transform this area into, it's not for tourism, it's not for business, it's for everyone else, that's what everybody else wants, mine's is like cultural preservation—I don't want to lose, I want some, I want to have a location where people can come and they can understand the way we do things. (For the entire interview, see [here](#).)

The experiences of young Latin@s, as in any other generation, vary. The Latin@ experience is one of intersectionality: religious diversity, racial and ethnic ancestry, sociopolitical experiences, immigration and migration experiences, and language. This adds to

the complexity and uniqueness of each story featured here. Young Latin@s are looking for preservation and connection, just as much as the generations of those who were here in the 1920s and on. While the challenges are unique in some instances—and some are particularly troubling in today’s political arena—Latin@s in Ohio, in the Midwest, are deeply rooted in this region. My interest in collecting and preserving histories and traditions derived from my own diasporic experience, the first instance of which was moving to Mexico from El Salvador as an infant, and later, moving to Ohio in 1992. I wanted to know what similarities I shared with other immigrants, and how others made their own unique paths to this state. I’ve found common stories of homesickness, cultural shock, and language struggles. There are also the things that keep us centered: love, faith, work, family, and traditions.

This history of Latin@s in Ohio does not end or start with this project. However, this digital oral history allows these stories to travel across the web and social media. In doing so, it increases viewership, engagement and pride. Collecting and making available oral histories from traditionally under-represented groups dispels myths and acknowledges their presence and contributions to the state of Ohio.

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The Breakfast Group, Arturo (Art) Garcia, Amado (Moe) Peña, Joseph Osiel (Pepi) Gutierrez, Robert (Roberto) Magdaleno and, Alex (Ehco) Soto. Interviewed by author in Lorain, OH, in April 2015.

Notes:

¹ <http://festivallatino.net/index.php/page/history/> (Accessed June 2017)

² U.S. Census 2011. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/39000.html> Last updated 12/2014. (Accessed June 2017).

³ For more studies on Latin@s in the Midwest, see Foulis, Elena. *Latin@ Stories Across Ohio*. Ohio State University Digital Publications, 2015; Delgadillo, Theresa. *Latina Lives in Milwaukee*. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2015; Hinojosa, Felipe. 2014. *Latino Mennonites: civil rights, faith, and evangelical culture*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press; Millard, Ann & Jorge Chapa. 2004. *Apple Pie and Enchiladas: Latino Newcomers in the Rural Midwest*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press; Vega, Sujey. 2015. *Latino Heartland: of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest*. New York : New York University Press.

⁴ One can think of the controversy surrounding Rigoberta Menchú's testimony, in which David Stoll accused Menchú of fabrications in the text of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. For more on this, see Arias, Arturo.

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⁵ Oral History of Latin@s in Ohio is being archived at the Ohio State University's Center for Folklore Studies: <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO>

⁶ I started this Oral History project in conjunction with a service-learning course I teach about Latin@s in Ohio. Students come along to collect stories which fulfills their community engagement and achieve real-life experiential learning along with text-book and classroom based information about the Latin@ population. Linda Woods in, *Oral History Projects in Your Classroom*, further discusses the value of using this type of engagement activity in the classroom.

⁷ There have been a number of studies done about Chicago's Latino population, specifically that of the Mexican and Puerto Rican community. See for example, F. Padilla, 1985; Rúa, 2001; Pérez, 2003; and DeGenova, N. & Ramos-Zayas, Y., 2003.

⁸ All quotes from interviews are from transcripts of the interviews collected between 2014 and 2016.

⁹ Mr. Martinez is a heritage speaker Spanish. He grew up listening and speaking Spanish at home and as a young child in New York. His Spanish variation and grammar use is commonly seen among many heritage speakers.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

¹¹ Tejanos, broadly defined, are Mexican-Americans who grew up in Texas.

¹² The copy I have has a revised date on 1999 but no original date.

¹³ The first publication came out in 1988 and is the latest edition but one came out in 2001. Both publications are out of print and not available at the library.

¹⁴ Spic is a derogatory term used to describe Spanish-Speaking people. It is a word play on the Spanish-Speakers pronunciation of the English "speak," but it is also a term that is used based on the targeted group's appearance (race and ethnicity).

¹⁵ The 2013 American Community Survey. Accessed June 28, 2017

¹⁶ For more on this, read *Latina/o College Student Leadership: Emerging Theory, Promising Practice*, by Adele Lozano (Editor).

¹⁷ Recently, even at OSU, Latino students are seeking a space to call their own. The lack of space, or removal of space, is of particular significance since it signals a lack of care for a particular group. Read more: <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/02/09/loss-of-center-leaves-ohio-states-latinos-feeling-overlooked.html>

¹⁸ Many of the young Latin@s interviewed here weave in and out between Spanish and English. Therefore, what you read here is an all English version translated and summarized by me to help with clarity.