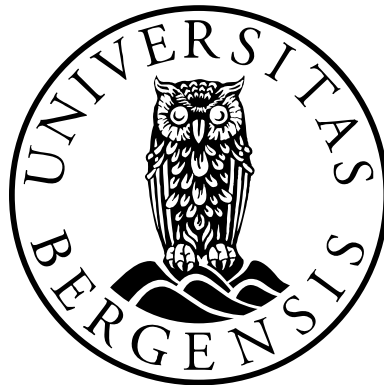


**Performing Us and the Others:
Latino identification through expressive culture
in a Texan theater company**

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Chapter 1

Part one: Introduction

On my first day of fieldwork I was having a cup of coffee at a roadside café, while going through local newspapers. An Anglo man in his 40's, dressed in jeans, a shirt and a baseball-cap sat down next to me. He introduced himself as Kevin, and we started to talk. When I told him I was a student from Norway, he asked me what I was in Texas to study. "Latinos", I answered. The previously talkative man went quiet. To break the silence, I added that there are probably many people who have different opinions about Latinos in the U.S. He then replied: "Well, I have several opinions on that. I think that if they are going to live here, they should do it the right way. Our way." "And how is that?" I asked him. "Legally. I was born here, but my forefathers were not. So people say to me: 'Well, you are also an immigrant'. But my family came here legally. That's different". When I commented that not all Latinos are illegal immigrants, Kevin said frustrated: "I'm so tired of the government taking all the money I earn and give it to people like them, who don't bother to work. You know what would happen if I quit working? I would starve. I wouldn't have anything to eat. You know why? Because the government only support Blacks and Hispanics. They don't help White guys".

When talking about Latinos Kevin immediately referred to illegal immigrants, just like the majority of the articles in the newspapers I was reading at the café that day. My conversation with Kevin reflects some of the stereotype views about Latinos in the United States; they are all illegal immigrants, they do not bother to work, and they get everything for free because they are minorities. When represented in media, Latinos are often associated with immigration, border control, drug dealing, gangs or the rising use of Spanish in the U.S. The large and heterogeneous Latino population has been reduced to simple and conflicting representations in the public sphere; Mainly as trouble (illegal immigrants), but also as opportunity (voters and consumers) (Dávila, 2008). Arlene Dávila points to the irony in that while Latinos on the one hand are becoming increasingly visible in U.S public discourse, the actual lives and experiences of U.S Latinos are "largely unexplored, misunderstood and frequently trapped in racialized stereotypes" (Dávila, 2008:1). The view of Latinos as a Spanish-speaking threat to the Anglo English-speaking America is recently posed by several political scientist, like Samuel Huntington. In "The Hispanic Challenge" (2004) he argues that "the persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages" (Huntington, 2004:30).

While on the one hand Latino culture has become somewhat mainstream, like when commercial advertisements refer to Mexican popular culture and increasingly use the Spanish language to sell products, the DREAM Act is rejected in the Senate and tougher immigration laws are being enforced.¹ Latino performing artists are mainly being offered roles on stage and screen which reflect mainstream stereotypical views, like the maid, drug seller, or the simple-minded immigrant.

Research questions and thematic focus

The aim of this thesis is to analyze how Latino identity is being expressed through performing arts, and what circumstances influence the creation of these cultural expressions. More specifically I will explore how a group of middle class Latino artists in Austin, Texas use expressive culture like theater, humor and joking when they communicate how it is like to be Latino in the United States. With the theater company Encuentros as a vantage point, and through an analysis of a theatrical production and everyday interaction, I will argue that expressive culture is an important means of revealing notions on the Self and the Other; in this case, the relationship between my Mexican American informants, Mexican immigrants and the Anglo majority society.² I will argue that these expressions are influenced by mainstream attitudes and stereotype views, as well as state categorizations of Latinos.

I will use the 2010 United States Census to portray the difficult dialectics between state categorization and personal identification. Encuentros mainly produced comedies, and the cast and crew frequently used humor and jokes in their everyday conversations. I will argue that humor plays an important role in the cast and crew's identification processes, and that humor is a way of reflecting upon and criticizing their situation as minorities, as well as a means to create inclusion and exclusion. Creating (imagined) group identity is a means to construct a sense of belonging for my informants, who are situated in-between Mexican immigrants and the Anglo middle class, and thus do not fit easily into any (official) categories. The Spanish language also has an important role as a symbol of Latino ethnic identity and thereby in-group creation. I will analyze how Spanish is used in the theatrical

¹ Like Taco Bell's use of a Mexican dog, the Chihuahua, saying "Yo quiero Taco Bell" (I want Taco Bell) in a popular television commercial, referred to in Limón (1998). The DREAM Act (acronym for Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) is a U.S. legislative proposal, which grants residency to illegal immigrants who either serve in the military or complete a college or university degree. The bill was first introduced in the senate in August 2001, and turned down several times since. Arizona's new immigration law will be discussed in Chapter 3.

² All names of persons and organizations have been changed. The use of the terms mentioned will be clarified shortly.

productions, as well as how language as a political tool in minority and education politics affects the lives of my informants.

I follow the argument of Texan anthropologist José E. Limón (1998) in that expressive culture (hereby referring to theatrical performances, as well as the everyday joking practices among the cast and crew) can tell us much about Latino's socio-political conditions. In other words, performing arts and the use of humor can reveal much about social relationships and identity management between people living close to the U.S. - Mexican border. With this thesis I wish to contribute to a broader insight and understanding of Latino lives and the making of Latino popular culture in the Southwest, which extends beyond the one-sided mainstream views of Latinos in the United States.

Who is Latino? Definitions of categorization terms³

Latinos are now the largest minority in the USA, and the number of inhabitants with Latino background is growing.⁴ According to the United States Census Bureau, there are currently 50.5 million people in the United States with Latino or Hispanic background, representing 16.3 percent of the population (Humes et al., 2011). After Mexico, they constitute the largest Latino population in the world. The Census Bureau estimates that by 2050, the number of Latinos in the US will have grown to 133 million, or 30 percent of the total population.⁵

What makes a person Latino? Is it knowledge of the Spanish language, a person's skin color, or an (imagined) ancestral connection to Latin America? The United States Census Bureau defines a person of "Hispanic or Latino origin" as follows:

Hispanics or Latinos are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2000 questionnaire -"Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano," "Puerto Rican", or "Cuban" -as well as those who indicate that they are "other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino." Persons who indicated that they are "other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino" include those whose origins are from Spain, the Spanish-speaking

³ In Spanish grammar, nouns are gender identified through using an "o" for male and "a" for female. *Latino* refers people in general, whereas when referring to women only, the term *Latina* is used. Instead of using Latino/a, which some scholars do to encompass both males and females, I will rely on the use of Latino and Chicano, except when referring to a group of women only (which will be referred to as *Latinas* or *Chicanas*). I do not connect my use of these terms to a specific viewpoint in a Latino gender debate, I do this simply because *Latino* used alone denotes both male and female in Spanish.

⁴ For information on the growing Latino population, see <http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb11-cn146.html>. Retrieved June 8 2011.

⁵ <http://www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-english/2009/September/20090921163442xlrennef0.8085836.html?CP.rss=true>. Retrieved September 15 2010.

countries of Central or South America, the Dominican Republic or people identifying themselves generally as Spanish, Spanish-American, Hispanic, Hispano, Latino, and so on.

The Census Bureau adds that “origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States”.⁶ The categories used to describe Latinos are complex, debated and constantly changing. In what follows I will give a short description of some of the central ethnic and racial categorization terms used in this thesis.⁷

Latino, Hispanic, Mexican American and Chicano

There are a number of terms used to describe the population in the United States with some kind of origin in Latin America or former Latin American territories. The term **Hispanic** was invented by the Nixon-administration in the 1970s, and is often used by Latinos with fair skin to state their Spanish and thereby European background, according to Ed Morales (Morales, 2002:2). He also writes that the term **Latino** was invented to create a separate identity from “Spanish”, and to focus on the Latin American heritage (Morales, 2002). In this thesis I use Latino when I refer to a person with some kind of ancestral, imagined or real origin in Latin America who resides in the United States, leaning on Juan Flores and George Yudice’s reasoning: “Unlike “Hispanic”, it [Latino] is not an identity label imposed by the politicized statistics of the Census Bureau and the market who seek to target particular constituencies for political and economic manipulation” (Flores and Yudice, 1990:80). While media in Austin usually use Hispanic or Latino, some claim that residents in the Eastern parts of the United States prefer Hispanic, and those in the west Latino.⁸

Mexican American refers to people in the U.S. of Mexican descent. It is an example of a hyphenated identity term, though it can be used both with and without a hyphen.⁹ Some see this widely discussed term as an assimilation of the Mexican nationality into the more powerful “America”. On the other hand, conservative critics regard the use of this term as a fracturing of the “American” culture and national identity. When assigned a hyphenated identity, a person is neither one nor the other, and at the same time attached to both countries, argues Allatson (2007:127). This will become evident throughout this thesis.

⁶ http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long_RHI725200.htm. Retrieved June 7 2011.

⁷ When I refer to race I refer to the concept as a cultural, not biological, construction. These terms will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

⁸ Ref: http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards Retrieved May 27 2011.

⁹ In this thesis I use the term without a hyphen, because this was the way both media and people I knew in Austin used it.

Chicano is an ideological rather than racial or ethnic term. It can imply some kind of political relation to self-identifying as a Latino of Mexican descent rather than a nationality-based hyphenated identity (Taylor, 1994:5). Chicano can be used to describe politicized Mexican Americans, often in relation to the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in the 1960-70s, also called the Raza movement (Allatson, 2007:62). **La Raza** means “the race” in Spanish, or more literally “the people”. The term La Raza is sometimes used to name people of Native or Latin American descent in the United States.

Tejano is the Spanish word for Texan, and can illustrate an individual living in Texas of Mexican descent (Allatson, 2007:223). The term Tejano, or Tex-Mex, can also be used to describe Texas-Mexican culture in general, like music and food (Allatson, 2007). These terms was not widely used among the people I befriended in Austin.

In general, the people I knew did not talk about themselves and others using only one single of these terms. As I will demonstrate, people often referred to themselves as both Hispanic and Latino, as well as **Brown**. The use of these problematic identification terms will be elaborated in Chapter 3. Regarding a term to describe American citizens with a European background, the term often used in academic literature is **Anglo American**. When referring directly to academic material I will use **Anglo**, as well as in general descriptions. The cast and crew, however, always said **White**, and thus I will use White when I refer to statements by my informants.

Performance, identity and anthropology

One of the first anthropological studies of performances was carried out by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali. Victor Turner links the study of performance to the anthropology of rituals, and relates it to the liminal phase introduced by Arnold Van Gennep (Turner, 1982). Latino theater has a tradition of portraying social and political issues for Latinos in the United States, with humor as one of several artistic means. Limón (1982) draws on Turners analytical model of rituals in his numerous analysis of what he refers to as Chicano joking traditions and performances. Starting in the 1960s, the Chicano civil rights movement had large impact on people of Latin American and especially Mexican descent in the United States. In this movement, theater was used as a means to get the message about equal worker’s rights out on the street. A further insight in this movement will be given in Chapter 2.

Actor and anthropologist William O. Beeman states that performance studies can be studies in the use of specific forms and movements, or it can be used as an intake to

understand other human institutions, such as political life and ethnic identity (Beeman, 1993:370). I will emphasize Beeman's last point, and use the theater company as a starting point for my study of negotiation of Latino identities. Scholar and theatrical director Richard Schecher has borrowed theoretical concepts from both Turner and Gregory Bateson, and has demonstrated that to study performance, the researcher has to explore far more than the actual performances that take place before an audience (Beeman, 1993:372). The relationship between performances and social and political issues in real life is a central aspect of this thesis.

As cultural agents, the cast and crew at Encuentros voice and envision Latino's life-worlds. While the theater company itself will be the main ethnographic arena, the thesis is not an analysis of a certain play, but rather a study of the people involved in the play and their reflections of themselves as Latinos, or Mexican Americans. Encuentros' stated aim is to represent Latinos in the United States. At the theater, every actor has a certain role in various plays. In a similar way, Latinos are being given roles by the institutions like media and the census bureau. How are Latinos (re)presented on stage, in everyday life and public categorization? The answers to these questions depend on who you ask – government officials or a man on the street. I will try to show the complex relationship between different views on Latino identities.

Texas and the border area

The state of Texas has an extraordinary history in the United States, as it has been both a part of Mexico and an independent republic.¹⁰ The signing of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2nd 1848 marked the ending of the Mexican-American war (which lasted from 1846 to 1848). As a result of the war, the U.S. annexed the land north of the Rio Grande River, which had previously belonged to Mexico. This land constituted about half of Mexico's territory, now the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.¹¹ There were around 80.000 Mexicans living in the ceded territory - about 20 percent of Mexico's population. Most decided to stay and live in what had now become the Southwestern United States of America. The Mexicans who lived in these areas suddenly became Americans, but with few civil rights (Limón, 1998).

The historical relationship between the Southern United States and Mexico is characterized by warfare, border conflicts, discrimination and various notions about the Other.

¹⁰ For a map of Texas and the surrounding area, see Figure 1 in the Appendix.

¹¹ For an illustration of the ceded territories after the Mexican-American war, see Figure 2 in the Appendix.

Limón states that this relationship is clearly expressed in (Southern) Texas (1998:10). The early anthropological perspective on the border was that it separated cultures and defined boundaries, and the Mexican and the U.S culture were thus seen as two isolated entities (Alvarez, 1995). The idea of borderlands as an own field of anthropological study stems largely from anthropological work on the U.S. - Mexican border, according to Robert R. Alvarez, professor of ethnic studies (1995:449). He claims that the cultural borders once drawn by anthropologists like Fredrik Barth (1969) are now being replaced by shifting political boundaries and global capitalism. The borders we once drew are outdated, he claims (1995:450). The border imagery is widely used when describing encounters, not only as a place of conflict and contradictions but also as a blurred borderland – as something unclear, elusive and ambiguous (Alvarez, 1995).

The Southwestern parts of USA and Mexico, where people meet and interact, has been called “Greater Mexico” by several scholars. The term expresses a “national cultural entity that exceeds geopolitical borders” (Allatson, 2007:117). One of the first to use the term was Americo Paredes, who is considered one of the founding fathers of Chicano studies.¹² Paredes started the study and interpretation of popular culture in the border area, seen from the point of view of the Mexican in the United States. His work became a foundation for other Chicano studies and scholars, what Alvarez calls the “new folklore” tradition; where the documentation and interpretation of cultural performances is used to explain socio-political conditions of people in the area (Alvarez, 1995:460). An example is the social meanings of joking among Chicano students in Austin, studied by José Limón (1982). I will rely on several of these studies throughout this thesis.

Although my field space was not located directly on the physical border between the United States and Mexico, the (imaginary) border still played an important part in expressing notions of Us and the Other. As mentioned my fieldwork took place in the city of Austin, which is located in the centre of Texas, 200 miles (320 km) from the border. But the border is still present in many ways. As scholar Emily Dickinson states:

Whether living in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Kansas or Texas, the border for Chicanos is an important presence, whether the crossing was recent or ancient history, whether they crossed the border or the border crossed them. The border, then, is both a real place of joy and hardship and a metaphor for divided identities (Dickinson, 2008:75).

¹² Chicano studies is an academic discipline that originated in the Chicano civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The study is concerned with the study of Mexican Americans, Latinos and Chicanos, related to fields like sociology, history, critical theory and arts. <http://www.naccs.org/>. Retrieved May 13 2011.

It is important to keep in mind that it is not the (imagined) borders themselves who influence a person's ethnic identity, but the social and cultural processes surrounding it. Even though Austin is not geographically located on the border, it is the large immigration from Mexico and illegal activities by Latinos which dominates the news and views on Latinos in Texas. Like the border can be seen as a place of ambiguity, as both divided and unclear, the people who live on the border can be hard to place within a certain frame of existing categories. This is the case for the people I studied in Austin. Throughout this thesis I will focus on the multiple identities; how a person can be (viewed as) both Mexican and Mexican American.

Analytical terms and theoretical conceptualization

The border image in anthropology can also be used to exemplify the theoretical concept of difference. According to Josiah Heyman (1994) difference implies that “potentially equal persons are divided, labeled (that is, emphasizing language-expressed conceptual divisions), and ranked in unequal relations of power and authority with an additional emphasis on the internalization of these linguistic contrasts into knowledge and self-identity” (Heyman, 1994:47). He points out that the border image conveys a series of linguistic contrasts, like Mexico/U.S, illegal/legal, poor/rich, and so on. Heyman argues that the border literature on difference focuses on either “divisions experienced with the self, or linguistic determination of unequal social segments” (Heyman, 1994:48). In this thesis I will focus on the experiences of identifying as both Mexican and Mexican American, while at the same time distancing from the Mexican immigrant, which is the Other in many ways, not just a person from the other side of the border.

Anthropological research on Latinos in the United States has tended to deal with the same issues which are most visible in the public sphere. While by no means underestimating the importance of studies on these subjects, I will concentrate on a group of Latinos which are rarely visible in the public discourse; the non-immigrant middle class. By non-immigrant I mean Latinos who reside legally in the United States, and have lived there for one or several generations. None of the cast and crew at Encuentros did ever explicitly refer to themselves as middle class, yet I have chosen to categorize them as such, based on their level of education and my impression of their economic situation. The difference between themselves and Mexican immigrants is highly related to class and social status. As Bourdieu (1984) writes in *the Distinction*, the concept of class is a fictive construction which exists only on paper. But, as he points out, the fictive classes can be perceived as real (Bourdieu, 1984). The cast and

crew themselves used the terms working- and middle class to describe different people's socio-economical background, and I will do the same in this thesis.

When researching performance art and expressive culture, it is important to ask: What is culture? This question has many answers. Anthony Cohen writes in *Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's View* (1993) that he views culture as “the means by which we make meaning, and with which we make the world meaningful to ourselves, and ourselves meaningful to the world. Its vehicle is the symbol” (Cohen, 1993:196). I will rely on Cohen's use of the term culture. Symbols are carriers of meaning, and Cohen argues that we have come “to see culture as the outcome and the product of interaction; or, to put it another way, to see people as active in the *creation* of culture, rather than passive in receiving it” (Cohen, 1993:196). The concept of culture as process is well established in today's anthropology. But the essentialization of Latino culture or identity is present in many situations, like in people's view on Latino culture as static, and in the categorization of people based on their ethnicity or physical appearance.

Us and the Other

The relationship between us and the Other is a central part of this thesis. In *Ethnic groups and Boundaries* (1969) Fredrik Barth argues that ethnic groups are created through interaction with others, through the use of signs of cultural difference to mark the group's boundaries. When the book was published, this view on the creation of ethnic identity became the standard in anthropology. In this thesis, my informants talk about and define themselves in relation to two constructed groups: Whites and Mexicans. By Mexicans they refer to the working-class Mexican immigrant, as opposed to themselves as Mexican American. When I use the concept of identity I will take Richard Jenkins' terms of ascribed and self-ascribed identification, which is inspired by Barth, as a starting point (Jenkins, 2008). To discuss Barth and Eriksen's views on the construction of ethnic identity I will use Simon Harrison's (2003) concepts of denied resemblance. How different are actually the groups the cast and crew view as the Other, compare themselves with, and identify themselves in relation to? Harrison argues against Eriksen, that “ethnic and national identities are best understood as emerging through processes in which certain kinds of felt similarities, and shared features of identity, are disavowed, censored, or systematically forgotten” (Harrison, 2003:345). Even though Harrison states that these denied resemblances are the starting points for ethnic divergences, my informants do not see it this way. They based their relationship with Whites and Mexican through simultaneously creating in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion.

William S. Sax (1998) argues that the Other may be viewed as a mirror of the self. But since Selfhood and Otherness are subject to continual negotiation and reinterpretation, the Self and the Other cannot always be clearly distinguished (Sax, 1998:299). People along the border have been subject to several shifts in their own ascribed personal and/or ethnic identities. They are “constantly shifting and renegotiating identities with maneuvers of power and submission, and they often adopt multiple identities” (Alvarez, 1995:452). The deconstruction of the subject as one single entity can be found in a large amount of literature on the U.S.-Mexican border. In this view, a person can have several identities, which for example can be both Mexican and American, which are equally important for a person’s sense of self.¹³ Multiple identity theory, as described by Edwina Barvosa-Carter (1999) will be used to describe how my informants regard themselves as both Mexican, Mexican American, and mainstream American.

The cast and crew implicitly tried to distance from Mexicans, even though, or perhaps because, they were often grouped together with Mexican immigrants in the category Latino. When my informants and other Latinos tried to oppose these generalizing categories, they encountered what Tord Larsen calls the problem of the opposition (Larsen, 1999:106). When they wanted to contest categories they had to use the language created by the dominant power – the state.

Michel Foucault uses the term discourse to refer to “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972:49). I will use Foucault definition as a descriptive term – mainly referring to the dominant stereotypical images of Latinos in the US public domain, created by power-holders like the mainstream media, politicians and popular scientists. I will use the term power when I discuss who has the authority to categorize a person or a group, to maintain and produce discourses about Latinos, and thereby structures of subordination and marginalization (Briggs, 2001:3735). Foucault defines the exercise of power “as a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions” (Foucault, 1982:791). Because power is always exercised between subjects of power, each with their own dispositions for action, there is always a potential for resistance (Moss, 1998:68). This will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, through opposition against the census counting.

The creation of a group identity within the theater company will be discussed in Chapter 2, using Pierre Bourdieu’s terms of capitals. Even though his work can be viewed as

¹³ Examples of such multiple identities can be found in the works of Chicana poet and activist Gloria Alzandúa (1987).

a bridge between structuralism and the Barthian instrumentalism, critiques have accused Bourdieu of having a limited view on individual's agency. I will not elaborate this discussion, suffice to say that I do not view audience members and the cast and crew members as passive consumers. In this way, I can use Bourdieu's terms while at the same time evoking instrumentalist views on identity, with Jenkins' theories as a starting point in Chapter 3.

Chapter outline

In **Chapter 2** I give an insight in Encuentros' aims and artistic intentions, while at the same time tracing the history of Latino Theater in the United States. I will demonstrate how Emilia and Daniel have adopted strategies from Chicano Theater, but adjusted the company's means to a contemporary setting. I will show how Daniel and Emilia create a space for reflecting upon issues concerning Latinos in the United States, often through humor and comedy. Towards the end of the chapter, an emphasis will be given on Emilia's large social network, and her ability to create group belonging within the company through fictive kinship ties. I will also demonstrate how the ambivalent relationship between Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Anglos is expressed through theater, in addition to certain views on audience behavior.

A number of factors influence the way Latino identity is being expressed through performing arts. In **Chapter 3** I demonstrate the dialectics between state classification and personal identification, using the 2010 national census as a starting point. I argue that the cast and crew need to rely on categories set by the government when they identify themselves, and that they can only oppose the categories to a certain extent. Latino identification processes are also influenced by recent biological views on race. Towards the end of the chapter I will demonstrate how minorities can use culture as identity to claim rights and recognition.

In **Chapter 4** I analyze the cast and crew members use of jokes and comedy. Their everyday conversational practices involve the use of the same negative stereotypes as those used in mainstream media. I will argue that the joking among the cast and crew serves several functions: it is a way of creating belonging and in-group identity, as well as critiquing the Anglo majority. Through joking, the cast members both identify with and distance themselves from "Mexicans". Using multiple identity theory, I argue that the cast and crew can inhabit both a Mexican and a mainstream American identity. In the second part of this chapter I will argue that Spanish is an important part of the cast and crewmembers Latino identity, whether they speak it or not. The reason for this is that the ethnic category Latino is based on the Spanish language. I will further address the role of Spanish in U.S. minority politics, using the history of bilingual education as a backdrop.

In the **concluding remarks** I point out that expressive culture like theater, humor and joking reveals much about the social situation of Latinos in the United States. These forms of expression are influenced by state categorization, mainstream stereotype views on Latinos, as well as in-group identification. Expressive culture can be a valuable, not to say entertaining contribution to diversify the current public discourse on Latinos, as well as an interesting approach to the study of Latino identities in the United States.

Part two: Ethnographic context and method

The city of Austin: Place, space and belonging

The city in its complex sense, then, is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity.

- Lewis Mumford (2007:83)

In this section I want to present some conceptions of place with regards to different neighborhoods, concerning my informant's place in Austin both geographically and socioeconomically. How does public space in Austin produce and maintain differences between people from different social backgrounds?

My first impression of Austin was that it is a mix of architectural expressions. Downtown stand tall glossy skyscrapers, while just a few blocks away there are tranquil street corners with one story houses and small trailers selling Tex-Mex food and cupcakes. Petty cabs are transporting people wherever they need to go, and country bars stand side by side with salsa dancing venues and tattoo shops. The city is quite large, but seems like a small town. Austin is the state capital of Texas, and has approximately 812,000 inhabitants.¹⁴ Its population doubles every 20 to 25 years, and one reason for this is a significant increase in its Latino population.¹⁵ In 1990 there were less than 23% Latinos in Austin. After the 2000 Census the numbers had increased to almost 31%, and today the percentage is around 35%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. 28% of the Latino population is of Mexican descent.¹⁶ In addition to Latinos, people with Asian background also contribute to the population

¹⁴ Per April 1, 2011. Retrieved May 5 2011: <http://www.cityofaustin.org/demographics/>

¹⁵ Top ten demographic trends in Austin, accessed 13.05.11:
www.ci.austin.tx.us/demographics/downloads/top_ten_trends4.doc

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=ACS_2009_3YR_G00_DP3YR5&-geo_id=16000US4805000&-ds_name=ACS_2009_3YR_G00_&-_lang=en&-redoLog=false

increase in Austin. Since around 2005 Austin has been a so-called “no majority city”. This means that Anglo Americans are no longer the ethnic majority. This pattern of change is evident in many larger American cities, especially along the coasts. In New York this happened in the early 1980’s, and the U.S. Census Bureau has predicted that inhabitants with European origins in the United States will be outnumbered by people with Latin American, Asian and African background within a few decades (Sanjek, 2000). Austin can thus be seen as a general example of a medium-sized, fast growing city in the United States.

While a city like neighboring San Antonio is more connected with its large Latino population, this is not the case with Austin, which is known for being different than the rest of Texas. First of all, it is a city where people vote Democratic in a Republican ruled state. Another distinguishing aspect is encompassed in the city slogan *Keep Austin Weird*. This slogan is used by a wide range of people to reflect the city’s emphasis on small local independent businesses (Long, 2010). It also reflects that Austin is home to many artists and musicians. The hosts numerous theater, music and film festivals each year, and has many theater companies and performance venues in different neighborhoods. Joshua Long (2010) writes that in Austin there is room for both individual expressions, subcultures and what may be called non-mainstream projects, activities and performances. In conservative Texas, Austin is a “weird” city. Because Austin is more liberal than other Texan cities both politically and artistically, it may be quite different to be Latino in Austin than in any other part of Texas.¹⁷

Latino localities and geographical divides

Crossing highway I-35 from the West to the East side, there is a clear difference in types of businesses. On the East side there are more piñata-shops, quinceanera-photographers and stores with Spanish names.¹⁸ You can often hear the rhythm of Latino music and smell the tacos from the Mexican food trailers. But not all Latinos live in this area, and many of those who do, daily cross the highway to attend the university or go to work.

Although public information is presented in both English and Spanish all over town, there is no doubt that English is the dominate language in Austin. But as in many other cities there are areas where the Spanish language is more present, and in Austin this is the East side. In 1928 it was decided through the Master Plan for city development that the city’s East side would

¹⁷ By liberal I here mean more left-leaning politically.

¹⁸ *Quinceanera* is the marking of a girl’s 15th birthday, common in Latin America and among many Latinos in other countries.

become a “Negro-district”, where Black and Mexican American people were pushed to relocate.¹⁹ In 1962 the old East avenue, which was running north south through the city, was replaced by the Interstate Highway 35. This further marked the gap between East and West Austin.²⁰ Today gentrification is an issue, and Latinos being pushed further east is the topic of many conversations and newspaper articles.²¹ In general, most Latinos and African Americans today live east and south, and Anglos west and northwest. In my Austin travel guide the East side is barely mentioned, and there are no recommendations for restaurants or activities in East Austin. Is there no reason (for tourists/foreigners/Anglos) to spend time there?

The people working at Encuentros live spread throughout the city. At an extraordinary rehearsal at one of the actor’s house, the Anglo actress Lisa was late because she got lost. The actors joked about how she did not dare to come to the neighborhood, because “there are so many Brown people here!” But this was not an area with the highest Mexican population, but rather where old East side communities meet university students and Anglos moving into the area. The rehearsal space and the theater building were located in between – like the cast and crew are socio-economically situated between the working class Mexican and the Anglo middle class population in Austin. Austin’s different neighborhoods were also a topic among the non-Latinos I befriended. I was warned by many of my Anglo contacts not to live too far east, because it was unsafe. I ended up renting a room in an apartment complex in south central Austin, living with an Anglo Texan woman.

These historical and geographical aspects are important for placing my informants in a socio-economical context. They are also relevant concerning the differences between the people at Encuentros and Mexican immigrants in Austin, which will be dealt with throughout the thesis. The cast and crew at Encuentros are living on the border in many ways. They are between the US and Mexico, between Mexicans and Americans, being middle class, but not White, minority, but still resourceful.

The field universe in an urban setting

Regarding the differences between urban and rural anthropology, Kathinka Frøystad (2003) writes that “city-anthropologists need to be more conscious of their choices regarding how, and how big, their field universe should be” (Frøystad, 2003:43).²² She writes that these

¹⁹ <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hda03>. Retrieved January 13 2011.

²⁰ For a map of the city of Austin which shows IH-35 dividing the city, see Figure 3 in the Appendix.

²¹ Gentrification is the renewal and upgrading of urban property by middle-class or wealthy people, often resulting in displacement of the original residents.

²² My translation.

choices have to be made based on at least three different classifications: theme, network and geographical location (Frøystad, 2003:46). My field universe is limited both in theme and network: Latino expressive culture being the theme and the community surrounding Encuentros the network. But the geographical location is not bounded in the same way. My informants do not live in the same area, but tended to meet in the same places for rehearsals and informal get-togethers. More importantly, cast and crew members and the issues they portray have relevance far beyond Austin, possibly for Latinos in the entire U.S.

Frøystad points out that when the field universe is limited, the informants thereby become more homogenous - we cannot use the informants to generalize over an entire large city. An overview of Latinos in Austin based on the daily lives of my informants, is thus not sought-after. While holism as a concept was merely used by anthropologists in rural setting many decades ago, Frøystad writes that holism today can be to pick one main theme (in my case a theater company and its community) and relate it to other social matters (like state categorizing, stereotypes and joking about the Other). To get information about other relations, the anthropologist should follow the informants through various social fields, which may not be related to the subject of study at first sight (Frøystad, 2003). While my involvement with the cast and crew was mainly related to the rehearsals and performances, I got to spend time with them in many different settings: At PR meetings, grocery shopping, dinners, workouts, road trips and parties. This proved to be productive, as I got to know my informants on a more personal level and learned more about the community that surrounds the theater.

Not different enough?

The cast and crew members are not the stereotypical Latinos presented in the public discourse. They are not (illegal) Spanish-speaking immigrants, but well-educated English-speaking people who have lived in the United States for generations. Because of my informant's middle class economic standard, poverty is not an issue in relation to how their meanings and identities are constructed. There is still a bias in anthropology towards studying what is considered more anthropological, namely the exotic and unprivileged. During one of my first weeks in Austin I had a conversation with a White woman in a store in south Austin. When I told her that I studied Latino performing arts in Austin, she asked me why I did not do this in a "more Latino" place. "Why don't you go to San Antonio?" she asked. "There are far more Latinos there!" This woman was one of several persons who questioned the point of doing fieldwork in Austin. In comparison to Austin's 34% Latino population, the percentage

is over 60% in San Antonio.²³ It seems to me that this made some people draw the conclusion that as an anthropology student I should go there, because since there are more Latinos there, there is also “more Latino culture”. This quantitative classification of culture has led me into many discussions in both Norway and Texas on what and where “Latino culture” is. In choosing my field location, the quantitative number of Latinos was not the most important factor. Because I wanted to study expressive culture, I chose to conduct fieldwork in Austin because of the city’s reputation for its vibrant art scene.

The unspoken conception of how some locations for fieldwork are more anthropological than others are also pointed out by Gupta and Ferguson (1997). They claim that fieldwork in rural societies far away from one’s own starting point is viewed by some scholars as more prestigious than conducting fieldwork in an urban setting that resembles one’s own society. The further away, both geographically and culturally, the more anthropological the fieldwork is. Like the geographical locations of fieldwork, there is also a hierarchy regarding the anthropological-ness of certain research themes. While the different and unfamiliar (from an Anglo, “Western” research point of view) is easily defined as anthropological, “phenomena and objects that are similar to “home” are less interesting research subjects” (Gupta, 1997:16). For example, a Native American ritual can by some people be viewed as more anthropological than the daily activities in a group of urban Latino actors. One of the reasons people questioned my fieldwork on a Latino theater company may then be that my informants were viewed as too similar to the majority of Austin’s inhabitants. But I want to argue that these (perceived) similarities and the in-between-ness of my informants makes the topic especially interesting. The increase in the Latino middle class demands for more studies of urban, well-educated Latinos, and due to the extraordinary history of Texas mentioned above I found the combination of Austin and Texas particularly interesting.

Description of field and method

When I arrived in Austin I had a few contacts, but no exact idea of what my main research field would be. My first effort was to get involved with a Mexican American arts centre, but this did not work out. I then sent some messages to my contacts, wondering if they knew someone in an organization involved with Latino performing arts. One answer caught my eye: “If you like theater, you might try the director at Encuentros. Great organization with good

²³ http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=ACS_2009_3YR_G00_DP3YR5&-geo_id=16000US4865000&-ds_name=ACS_2009_3YR_G00_-&-_lang=en Retrieved May 31 2011.

people, and well connected”. Having been involved with theater production in Norway, I contacted Encuentros. Already at my first meeting with the people who run the theater company, we reached an understanding. I could observe all the rehearsals and shows, and be a kind of all-round intern.

Encuentros – theater by and about Latinos

”It’s really important that we produce Latino theater. Because honestly, no one else will!”

- Daniel, Encuentros’ artistic director

Encuentros was formed many years ago, and is one of a handful Latino theater companies in the Austin area. The companies differ somewhat regarding use of language and artistic forms of production. Encuentros is run mainly by two people, Emilia and Daniel. They are close friends, and in their late 50s. They were both born in Texas, and met when they were students. While Daniel is the artistic director, Emilia takes care of public outreach and set design. Both cast and crew consist of Latinos, with a couple of exceptions. The first time I met Emilia, she told me that she was proud of having a well connected community. After talking with several artists in Austin, I have the impression that the company is well known both for their plays and their large network of friends and acquaintances. This network, or the *familia*, is a large resource to the company, both as volunteers and promoters. To use Pierre Bourdieu’s term (1986) Daniel and Emilia inhabit a great deal of social capital, and they are well established and active participants in the city’s art scene.²⁴ They run the theater company in addition to having other jobs, and the cast and crew also have daytime jobs and work with Encuentros in evenings and on weekends.

The network involved in the production consisted of around 30 people, including stage managers, set designers, people involved with public relations, along with friends and relatives. In front of every production an audition is held, and some actors have been part of several productions in a row. Likewise, there were also some new actors involved in the production I was involved in. Almost all of the actors had some kind of higher education, and several of them knew each other from previous work or studies. Most of them were in their thirties, many with young children and families. We may say that my informants are representative of a growing group of Latinos in the United States, which receives little

²⁴ More on both *familia* and social capital towards the end of Chapter 2.

attention from both academic circles and public media; the upwardly mobile, middle class, well educated, English-speaking Latinos.

Nearly everyone in the Encuentros-community had moved to Austin from other parts of Texas, mainly San Antonio and south-western cities closer to the Mexican border. Most of them moved to attend college or the University of Texas. They have all lived in Austin for several years, and it is my impression that all of them were permanently based in Austin and regarded the city as their home. When I asked the costume designer where she was from, I got surprised when she told me that she actually was fifth generation Austinite.²⁵ None of the people at Encuentros were born in Mexico. Some of them knew Spanish, and a couple of people in their 50s told me that Spanish was their first language, but English was their preferable language of use. During my fieldwork I never heard a single member of Encuentros talk about relatives in Mexico, while I often heard them speak of visiting their families in The Valley or stories from family reunions elsewhere in Texas and the United States.²⁶ When travelling to Mexico was mentioned, it was as a destination for vacations and honeymoons. The cast and crew's physical place of belonging is Texas, not Mexico.

Method: Being the Norwegian Latina intern

My own background from theater production and interest in Latino popular culture probably helped me become accepted at Encuentros. As one of the youngest in the community, many people who were 15-30 years older than I seemed to care and were concerned about me in a parental way. They called me to make sure I got home safe at night, and gave me reflectors to use when I rode my bike in the dark. Being 25 years old and female probably affected the way people treated me, but not in a significant manner. At parties and other social gatherings there were often people of all ages, from newborn babies to grandparents. My nationality did not restrict my relationship with the people at Encuentros. Most of the time, it did not seem to matter. People often told me that Mari is a typical Mexican name, and some people thought I was Mexican before they met me in person. As the director José told me one day: "When I

²⁵ Austinite is the nickname of a person who lives in Austin. In the beginning of my fieldwork I assumed that when I asked someone where they were from and they answered Austin, Austin was the place they were born. At a weekly Spanish conversational class I attended, an older man told me that he had been working as a teacher in Corpus Christi for 30 years. When I asked him if he was from Corpus Christi, he answered: "No. I'm from Austin. Or, I'm born in Corpus, but I've been living in Austin for more than 30 years. So I'm from Austin". The question "where are you from?" has different answers in the United States and Norway. A Norwegian's answer will be his or her place of birth. An American is more likely to answer his or her place of residence at that time, or for the past few years.

²⁶ "The Valley" is the informal name of the (Lower) Rio Grande Valley. It is located on the southern tip of Texas, by the Mexican border.

first heard your name, I thought you were Mexican. Someone told me: ‘Mari is gonna help us out’, and I thought you were a Mexican girl”. “But then I wasn’t”, I answered. Emilia then joined the conversation and said enthusiastically to me: “You are! You are Mexican. You are a Mexican coming via Norway!” When people pointed out that I was Norwegian, Emilia tended to call me a Norwegian Latina: “You know, your name being Mari and everything, you could have been a fair skinned Latina! I know some people who have relatives from...well, I’m not sure which parts [of Mexico] they are from, but they have fair skin. Mari is a very Latina name; I have several friends named Mari.”

I had few language problems, neither in English nor Spanish, although I take into account that my informants and I may not always have understood each other completely. I also want to point out that when I analyze jokes and conversations between cast and crew members, these are my personal interpretations. The cast and crew did not explicitly explain the meaning behind their jokes, which were spontaneous and seemingly unplanned expressions. Even though I did not speak much Spanish with the cast and crew at Encuentros, my knowledge of Spanish was certainly an advantage. Not only since the script contained many Spanish expressions, but several people tended to use words or expressions in Spanish in emails or promotion (see Chapter 2 and 4). Several people also told me that since I had learned Spanish, they understood that I was sincerely interested in learning about Latino culture.

At Encuentros I was an observer, a participant, an intern, a student, a researcher and a friend. In retrospect, I see that I mainly accepted the role of an intern. Cato Wadel states that the role of an apprentice can be a constructive starting point for students doing research (Wadel, 2002). Like most fieldworkers (and people in general), I had several roles: I was mainly a student, eager to learn about every aspect of the production and life in the Encuentros-community. But I was also a young woman far away from home, glad to make friends and socialize. During fieldwork it is not only important to reflect upon one’s cultural and personal dispositions, but also that one holds the position as a “temporal newcomer”, usually with no social network to begin with. While everyone knew that I was a researcher, the cast and crew also became my good friends, whom I celebrated important occasions and talked about serious matters with. Finn Sivert Nielsen states that on fieldwork, there is a fine line between being researcher and friend (Nielsen and Brottveit, 1996:3). I have purposefully excluded personal information about the cast and crew which is not relevant for the thesis.

Everyday life in the field

My main sources of information are personal interactions which took place during rehearsals and performances with Encuentros. I followed the cast and crew as they prepared and performed the play called *Nuestra Vida* (*Our Life* in Spanish).²⁷ When I did not spend time with the cast and crew, I would go through local printed and online media in both English and Spanish, attend seminars and lectures at the Mexican American department at the University of Texas, participate in Spanish conversational classes, and attend Latino cultural events, such as festivals. I conducted a few formal interviews towards the end of my stay, but they will not be of large significance. The information I collected consists of conversations, narratives and participant observation. Rehearsals and performances took place four times a week; the next section gives a description of the fieldworker arriving at the first rehearsal.

I arrived at the location of the rehearsal space 15 minutes early. To pass some time I took a walk around the block, noticing the small one-story wooden houses with porches in front, in what I imagined to be typical southern architectural style. On one street intersection there was a gas station, on another a liquor store. Neon signs were blinking in the windows. It was close to 6 pm and dark outside, and I was the only person on the sidewalk. A few cars occasionally passed by.

I went back to the building, and entered through the main door. Two women passed me in the hallway, speaking Spanish between them. I was nervous. Who were these people I was about to meet? I entered the assembly room, where I assumed the rehearsals were going to take place. The room was large, with white walls and no windows. A big dark cross hung on the back wall. People sat around a large table and talked, and greeted me when I entered the room. I introduced myself and asked if they would mind if I was present during rehearsals. The first person who answered smiled at me and said: “You can come as often as you like”.

As is the case with several theater companies, the rehearsals do not take place at the same location as the performances, but the production team move in to a theater a few days before the first show. The rehearsals took place at a local religious non-profit organization called “La Luz de Jesús” (The Light of Jesus) or La Luz for short. The assembly room consisted of desks and tables used for religious meetings. There was also a large open space in the back of the room, which functioned as the stage area. Here actors rehearsed the scenes, adding more and more props as the weeks passed. During rehearsals the entrance door remained closed, and no

²⁷ More about the play itself in Chapter 2.

person would enter from outside. This closed off space created a period of intense socialization, where the cast and crew gradually got to know each other better.

A typical rehearsal lasted for about three hours, and consisted of going through one or several scenes in the manuscript. The director, José, would talk about his intentions for the scene, and direct the actors while they were reading lines out loud or acting out the scene. The actors sometimes had suggestions, and once in a while they asked me for my opinion on a certain matter. Every now and then one actor or crew member brought take-away food, usually tacos, which everyone ate during the break. About once a week some of the cast and crew went to have a beer either before or after rehearsal, thereby creating a social bond with the other people involved in the production. There was usually an informal atmosphere at the rehearsals, with the actors and director often bursting out in laughter. To begin with I was usually sitting by the stage, observing and taking notes, without making any comments unless asked. But as the weeks went by and I felt more at ease, I was more able to give constructive feedback to their questions about their position on stage or other topics.

Before each performance the actors arrived early to put on their make-up and costumes, and often practice their lines in the dressing room. The crew members also arrived about one hour prior to the show. During this time before the show the actors and crew talked and joked with each other. Right before the show the stage manager gathered everyone present, and said a few words about the upcoming performance, about the group sticking together or the cast party the following night. After the performances the actors gathered in the dressing room to clean up their things, talk, and leave their costumes ready for the next performance.

My role during performances was more participating than during rehearsals. Together with two other crew members I was responsible for coordinating the props. That meant putting everything in its right place before the performance, and changing props on stage in between the scenes. This was a great opportunity to interact with people before, during and after performances. I spent much time in the dressing room with the actors, and with the crew backstage. Being a crew member added another embodied dimension to my relationship with the group. After the production moved into the theater, our relationship changed: at rehearsals I was an acquaintance, backstage I became a friend. In an indirect manner I was also present on stage during performances. There was a baby involved in the play, for which a doll played the part. The baby had no name in the script, and at the third rehearsal the director, José, said: "We'll name the baby Mari. Hopefully nobody will realize it's a Norwegian baby". Gradually Mari became the baby's name. As a result I was frequently called "Baby Mari" by some of

the actors, something which probably also reflected the fact that I was one of the youngest among the cast and crew. The next chapter will give a further insight into Encuentros' aims and place in the history of Latino theater, as well as the importance of Daniel and Emilia's social connections. The chapter will also demonstrate aspects of the relationship between Mexican Americans and non-Mexican Americans.

Chapter 2

The Politics of Latino Theater

Introduction

Theater does even more than engage participants and spectators in the immediate context of the theatrical event. It evokes and solidifies a network of social and cognitive relationships existing in a triangular relationship between performer, spectator, and the world at large.

- William O. Beeman (1993:386)

In this chapter I will explore Encuentros' socio-political roles. Using actor and anthropologist William O. Beeman's quote as a starting point, I will discuss Encuentros' relation to the history of Latino theater, the artistic community in Austin and the relationship between performer, character and spectator. The chapter starts with a description of the play produced by Encuentros during my fieldwork. The resemblance between the lives of the actors and the characters in the play will be used to highlight how fiction relates easy to reality in Encuentros' plays. With the play as a foundation, Encuentros will then be placed in a historical context of Latino theater in the Southwestern United States, mainly in relation to one of the first and probably most known Chicano political theater companies, Teatro Campesino.²⁸ Encuentros' aims will be described through the opinions of the two driving forces in the company; Daniel and Emilia. What are their artistic and political intentions with the company? I will then move on to look at the relationship between Encuentros and its audience and surrounding community.

Throughout this chapter I will argue that Encuentros' productions do more than provide its audience with just entertaining performing arts. Although the company does not directly encourage to political activity, it plays an important part in Austin's Latino arts community – by portraying characters and topics Latinos can relate to and reflect upon. One reason for their audience turnout, large number of volunteers and coverage in local media is Emilia's large social network and ability to create an internal group – the *familia*. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) has several terms which can reveal the power structure in social life. I will use his terms of social and cultural capital to highlight the role of Emilia's social network, as well as views on behavior at the theater. This chapter will also demonstrate how the

²⁸ For a definition of the term Chicano, see the introduction.

ambivalent relationship between Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Whites is being expressed through performing arts.

***Nuestra Vida* – portraying urban, middle-class Latinos**

During the spring of 2010 Encuentros produced the play *Nuestra Vida*, Spanish for *Our Life*. The play is a comedy/drama about a group of contemporary Latino young adults, living somewhere in the United States. *María* and *Robert* are newlyweds, living in a nice apartment. *Juana*, *Robert*'s mother, has been living in the guest bedroom for some time.²⁹ Conflicts arise when *Juana*, who is getting older, wants to continue to stay in her son's house instead of moving to a retirement community. *María* does not agree with this. She wants privacy in her own home, and dreams about having a baby with her husband. A baby they never have time to make, because *Robert* is working as a medical doctor and his mother never leaves them alone. We also meet the couple's friends and relatives, who all have their opinions on the mother-in-law situation. During meals and social gatherings *Juana*'s presence causes both arguments and comical situations. She is at home when she is not supposed to be, cares too much about other peoples business, but also makes the best *enchiladas*, to *María*'s irritation.³⁰ The play ends with *Juana* accepting to move into a retirement community, and admits that she actually likes it there - and *María* finally becomes pregnant.

According to the playwright, *Nuestra Vida* is about modern family views and habits in the United States colliding with traditional Latino family values. Having a parent living in the household is quite common in many Latin American, Latino and other Catholic families. But *María* also has her own reasons for wanting *Juana* to move; the wish to have a baby. Could it just be that the mother in law is too nosy? Viewed this way, the play can appeal to more than Latino or Catholic audiences. But as the playwright stated in a newspaper interview, the play is mainly about modern middle-class Latinos. Having a parent in a retirement community is not only a question of breaking with traditional family values, but of economic resources. Along with *Robert*'s profession as a medial doctor, and props like the flat-screen television in the living room, it is indicated that the characters belong to the middle class. The following section will focus on the relationship between the characters in the play and the lives of the actors, to show how Encuentros manages to portray current issues about the modern Latino experience in the United States.

²⁹ The character's names will in italics throughout the thesis, to separate them from the cast and crew.

³⁰ An *enchilada* is a rolled tortilla filled with beans, meat and/or vegetables and covered with sauce.

In the script it is stated that the characters in the play are five Mexican American males and females, and one Caucasian woman. There are no references to a former life in Mexico or Mexico at all in the play. I therefore assume that all of the characters are fully established, and probably also born in the United States.³¹ The only Anglo character, *Sarah*, is a friend of *María* and *Robert's*. The only place it is pointed out that she is Anglo is in the description of the character in the script. There are no lines that refer to her being non-Latina, the only way the audiences can tell is by her fair skin. One can also discuss how Anglo *Sarah* actually is. She is definitely the character that expresses most enjoyment of Mexican food, and has many opinions about it. She also likes to watch Mexican soap operas, or *novelas*, with *Juana*. It is obvious that *Sarah* knows and appreciates different aspects of what we can generally refer to as Latino popular culture. Even though she is not Latina, she is quite similar to the rest of the characters in the play. As I will show further in this chapter, the differences between Latinos and non-Latinos are not necessarily so large, even though they view each other as the Other.

The costumes are similar to what the actors wear on a daily basis. The actor who plays a medical doctor told me that he bought his costumes in the same store where he usually buys clothes for himself. While the doctor wears very formal clothes, the rest of the actors have more casual clothing, like jeans and sweaters or blouses. The characters and the actors who play them are in the same economical situation, age, and marital status. In many ways, both the actors and the characters are representing the Mexican American or Latino middle class, who are educated and established in the U.S. society.

Food in the play – an indication of taste?

Food plays an important part in *Nuestra Vida*. *María* is unhappy because *Robert* does not like her way of cooking. Throughout the scenes the characters gather around the dining room table to eat, and food is the topic of many conversations and discussions. The dishes prepared by *Juana* are traditional Mexican food, while *María* tries to make the family more health conscious, by for example serving turkey instead of beef. She also tries to change *Juana's* recipes to make them healthier, but this is not popular around the dinner table. Everyone agrees that *Juana* makes the best food, something *Robert* keeps commenting on. *María* tries hard to meet her husband's culinary expectations and still be health-conscious, but keeps failing. Several of the actors said that they also had tried exchanging beef with turkey in

³¹ *Juana* is a probable exception, more on this on page 81 in Chapter 4

dishes at home. One of them commented that her husband couldn't even tell the difference. This discussion is probably present in many households, and not only in the health-conscious city of Austin. *María's* replacement of tortillas with whole grain pasta can indicate that her food habits are influenced by Anglo middle class trends. This adds to the image of *María* as Mexican American, not Mexican. Does *Robert's* scepticism about adding turkey to the dish instead of beef represent his scepticism towards Anglo food trends, or does he just (pretend to) like his mother's cooking more than *María's*? These aspects were never explicitly mentioned in the script or discussed among the cast and crew. In *Distinction* (1984) Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes the connection between taste and social class (Bourdieu, 1984). As shown, this was a topic both on stage and in the actor's private lives. According to Bourdieu, people try to "climb the social ladder" by incorporating the tastes and habits to those who have the power to define what good taste is. This power belongs to the White middle and upper class. We will see further examples of this definition power towards the end of this chapter.

The playwrights view: Representing Latino lives

Nuestra Vida is written by a young Latina woman who grew up in Texas, named Teresa. During one of my conversations with Teresa she told me that writing about middle class Latinos was important to her. In a local newspaper article, she stated that after going to several auditions for stage and screen she had realized that there were many Latina women auditioning for the same stereotypical roles: the maid, the babysitter, and the single mother. Because of this, she decided to write a play about "strong, smart and professional Latinos". "There's a need for modern Latino plays," she stated in the article, and added that "the power is in the writing". Portraying other Latinos than those usually shown on stage and screen is an important goal for the production of *Nuestra Vida*, while at the same time not ignoring Latino values: "Although we want to deal with current topics, we can't close our eyes to the injustice and discrimination that exists, and we don't want to leave our culture behind; our language, values and traditions", Teresa said in another interview. Regarding Latina playwrights, Elizabeth C. Ramirez writes that "writing itself is a political act, just as the performance of the work is an act of empowerment" (Ramírez, 1990:103). As we can see, there is an act of empowerment reflected in Teresa's writing of *Nuestra Vida*. The actors and the playwright, as well as the characters in the play, belong to a group of Latinos who seldom receive attention in the public discourse; the upwardly mobile middle class.

One of the first actors whom I got to know personally was Christina. She was in her early 30's, and had moved to Austin attend college a few years ago. During a formal conversation with Christina about my research, I asked her whether it mattered or not if a character she auditioned for was Latina. She answered that she was very proud of her culture, and to play a Latina character. But she pointed out that what can happen if you have an agent, "the agent can typecast you".³² Christina also pointed out that the most important thing for her was to play a character she finds interesting, regardless of the character's ethnicity. On another occasion, when we talked about an audition she was going to for a female lead in a classic British drama, she wondered if her skin color might be an issue: "I don't know if the character has to be Caucasian, but I think my skin is white enough". Although it was not important to her whether the character was Anglo or not, she still had to relate to it because her race might be important to her agent and the company casting her. She also expressed that because she is Latina, her agent might only send her to auditions for stereotype Latina roles. The next section will demonstrate some anthropological views on the term stereotype.

Stereotypes: Constructing difference

One of the first to use the term stereotype in social science was Walter Lippman in 1922 (McDonald, 1993:220). He wrote that both political leaders and the general population made assumptions about a range of matters "which they did not really understand, and which concerned persons or peoples of whom they had no direct knowledge" (McDonald, 1993:220). He argued that these false assumptions claimed to represent reality, even though they were not acquired through direct experience (McDonald, 1993:221). Maryon McDonald argues that "the cultural worlds in which we live are all in some sense category-based and when different category systems meet, they do not match up..." (McDonald, 1993:222). In her opinion, stereotypes emerge at the encounter of different category systems. This lack of fit between categories easily becomes a way of expressing dichotomies, like rational/irrational or modern/traditional. These encounters are specifically visible at the boundaries, of us/them or self/other (McDonald, 1993). Using McDonald's terms, the encounter between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans, as well as between Mexican Americans and Mexicans, are encounters between different category systems. But the *category systems* may not be as

³² According to Encyclopedia Britannica, type casting can be: 1: to cast (an actor or actress) in a part calling for the same characteristics as those possessed by the performer. 2: to cast (an actor or actress) repeatedly in the same type of role. 3: stereotyping. <http://www.britannica.com/bps/dictionary?query=typecast>. Retrieved June 11 2011.

different from each other as they may seem. As we shall see in the next section, there were many similarities between Latinos and non-Latinos in the play.

Latinos and Whites in *Nuestra Vida*

The characters in the play had several lines which reflected their views on ethnicity or race. The last scene particularly stands out: One of the reasons why *Juana* likes living in the retirement community is because she has met a man she likes. When her son *Robert* hears the man's name, which is *Andrew*, he yells out: “*Andrew? Is he WHITE?*” Whereas *Robert's* friend replies: “*Pues, ain't nothing but White people living in that place!*”³³ These lines always caused laughter among the audience during performances, and several of the actors laughed and made comments *every single time* these lines were brought up during rehearsal. While *Robert* is shocked that *Juana* is interested in a White man, it is also apparent that the retirement community where *Juana* lives (and retirement communities in general) is a place where the Other reside – hence the line “ain't nothing but White people living in that place”.

But how different are the Latino characters from Whites? After the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth, 1969), the concept of ethnic groups in social anthropology commonly refers to “aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as culturally distinctive” (Eriksen, 1997:34). According to the Barthian tradition, ethnicity is created through the encounter between different groups. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1997) uses the relationship between Serbs and Croats following the breakup of Yugoslavia as an example: “Only in so far as cultural differences are perceived as being important, and are made socially relevant, do social relationships have an ethnic element” (Eriksen, 1997:39). People who regard themselves as members of a certain group, like Mexican Americans, are relying on the Others, the outsiders, to define the limits of their group. But Simon Harrison (2003) states that it is not the differences that create tension or difficulties, but rather its denied resemblances. Harrison's view is that while differences are often seen as the source of ethnic conflicts, the perceived similarities of the ethnic Other are actually what is threatening (Harrison, 2003:239). As demonstrated above, there are many similarities between Whites and both the characters and the cast members. But despite these similarities, the differences existed as social constructs, and were frequently highlighted. The lines mentioned above reflect the ambivalent

³³ *Pues* means *well* or *then* in Spanish.

relationship between Whites and Mexican Americans, which was also present in the cast and crew's everyday lives.³⁴

Encuentros is also portraying people from other social backgrounds than the middle class. Among the themes in other productions by Encuentros are the U.S./Mexican border patrol and comedies about Mexican food and religion in the United States. Daniel has also adapted non-Latino scripts into a Latino setting. Once Emilia told me about a play which reflected upon the often difficult relationship between Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. This certain play was about a man who came from Mexico to Texas with very large expectations, which the Latinos who already lived there reacted negatively to. The Mexican Americans who had lived in the U.S. their entire lives complained that "The Mexican thought that every possibility in the world was here. We know how it's really like". Emilia ended the recounting by saying that Encuentros' plays do not provide any answers; they just make people aware that issues like this exist.

Expressing difficult issues through humor

"Many people say that the Mexicans come here and take all our jobs. Have you seen the movie "A Day without a Mexican"? It's a comedy, but still. It's about one day when all the Mexicans leave, and people are like: 'Where's my nanny?' There's no one to wash the dishes, clean the hotel room, take care of the children".

- Emilia

The movie "A Day without a Mexican" is an example of a form of expressive culture which uses humor to highlight the negative views on Mexicans/ Latinos in the United States, despite the fact that their presence can be an important resource for the country.³⁵ I have watched several of Encuentros' previous productions on video, and have been told a great deal about them through conversations with the cast and crew. In general, most productions by Encuentros have humor as a recurrent ingredient. Daniel told me about a play they produced several years ago, which did not have any humor in it. It was a touching story about how the border between Mexico and The United States separates families and creates moral conflicts, and the play got great reviews in Austin newspapers. Still, the performances were not visited by many people, according to Daniel. When I asked him what he thought was the reason for

³⁴ There was also ambivalence between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. This will be explored in Chapter 4.

³⁵ The movie was released in 2004.

this, he answered that there were probably some rumors in town that the play was really sad, and then nobody wanted to come and see it. When I commented that *I* would go to see a play even if the story was sad, he said that *Latinos* rather would go to the theater to see a funny play than a sad one. “People want to come to the theater and see people like themselves, and have a laugh. I mostly produce plays like that, plays with humor. But it’s always important to portray the full specter of the characters’ feelings too”.

In Daniel’s opinion, plays should contain humor to attract the Latino audience. The use of humor as a means to portray social and political problems in Latino lives is recurrent in productions by Encuentros. In her doctoral thesis called “Pocho Humor”, Jennifer Alvarez Dickinson (2008) explores humor as a tool for negotiating Latino or Chicano identities. She emphasizes the humorous way of dealing with serious issues: “The construction of a congenial space through shared laughter, whether textual or performative, allows the artist to weave serious messages into the work with the expectation that the audience will keep an open mind and listen” (Dickinson, 2008:299). In the next section I will show how the use of humor, among other aspects, places Encuentros in a tradition of Latino theater in the United States.

Contemporary Latino Theater: From Teatro Campesino to Encuentros in Austin

“There are so many classifications of Latino theater; it’s not just one thing. You know, it’s *by* Latinos, *for* Latinos, *with* Latinos, *about* Latinos. And they take all those different forms”.

- Nicholas

To learn about the history of Latino theater, I contacted a man who is widely known in Austin for knowing everything there is to know about Latino theater in the Southwest and beyond. Nicholas was an enthusiastic Mexican-American man in his 60’s, eager to tell me about what seemed to be his great passion in life: “There is certainly a lot of history about Latino theater, theater for and by Hispanics, which dates back into the last century.³⁶ And I’m not talking about just the 80’s or 70’s or 60’s. The first theater that happened in Texas happened in the El Paso area, with explorers!”³⁷ Charles Ramírez Berg states that Mexican theater actually predates Anglo theater in America. The first plays were brought to Mexico with the Spaniards during the colonization of Latin America, and in the sixteenth century amateur actors came to

³⁶ Like many other people I talked to, Nicolas used both “Latino” and “Hispanic” interchangeably.

³⁷ El Paso is located in Southwestern Texas, on the Mexican border.

what today is the Southwestern United States mainly to perform religious plays (Ramírez, 1990). In the nineteenth century professional Spanish-speaking troupes entered the U.S. from Mexico, continuing the traditions of religious plays and other performances. After the Mexican revolution in 1910 many Mexican companies emigrated to the U.S., and theater in the Southwest flourished (Huerta, 1982). Nicolas told me that during the 1920's and 30's companies would travel around the Southwest and perform. Most of them came from Mexico, but some of them were also based in cities like San Antonio. Those were professional actors and actresses that provided the Spanish speaking audience with theater. There was one group called the *carpas*, know for their tents. "My mother has memories of them", Nicolas recalled. "She remembers those shows coming in, these families of actors, and they would travel with their tents and do their shows". As we shall see further in this chapter, Encuentros have been inspired by the *carpa*-traditions.

El Teatro Campesino: The rise of political Latino theater

Until the 1960s Nicolas was growing up in Texas feeling "out of place, distanced, lucky to hold a spear during a Shakespeare production". But different types of Latino theater began to emerge, from the work of Mexican or Latin American contemporary playwrights to classics from the Spanish golden age. "At the same time", Nicolas said, "The movement began to come in with political theater". What Nicolas referred to as "the movement" was the Chicano movement, the Mexican American cultural and political civil rights movement in the 1960 and 1970s (Allatson, 2007). The contemporary Latino political theater began to emerge when Mexican American Luis Valdez founded El Teatro Campesino in California in 1965 (Huerta, 1982).³⁸ By using one act skits (or sketches) called *actos*, Valdez mobilized Latino fruit pickers and farmers into joining labour unions, and exposed socio-political problems related to workers' and immigrant rights (Huerta, 2000:26). Valdez supported union leader César Chavez, one of the most prominent Chicano labor activists at that time. To begin with, the target groups of Luis Valdez and other Chicano theater troupes were working-class Mexican Americans. Later they expanded their repertoire to include "social, political, and cultural issues revolving around the Chicana/Chicano experience in the United States" (Ramírez, 1990). Nicolas ended his recounting by telling me that "performances would take place on trucks in the field, in the streets, and later in parks and university areas, as the movement got

³⁸ Spanish for The Farm Worker's Theater.

affiliated with the Chicano student movement”. Street theater was an importance means of spreading the political messages of the plays.

El Teatro Campesino inspired other Chicanos, and several Chicano theater companies emerged in the United States. In 1978, Luis Valdez wrote and directed a play named *Zoot Suit*³⁹. *Zoot Suit* was the first play *by* and *about* Latinos to be performed on Broadway in New York. The play marked a turn in several ways. It opened up doors to the theaters for other Latino plays and playwrights, and producers and artistic directors became interested in expanding their markets towards more Latino consumers when they saw the profits the play generated (Huerta, 2000:6). *Zoot Suit* also led to increased professionalism. Jorge Huerta points out that “just as the Teatro Campesino early *actos* had inspired people to create their own statements in that genre, now the people involved in the *teatros* had a totally different kind of professional production to invigorate and stimulate them” (Huerta, 2000:7). As a result of this success, Chicano and Chicana playwrights started to flourish in the 1980’s and 1990’s (Huerta, 1982). But regardless of this evolvement, there are still not many parts for Latinos in professional mainstream theater.

Encuentros’ relation to Chicano theater

There are several similarities between companies from the Teatro Campesino-era and Encuentros. While Teatro Campesino’s plays started out in Spanish, but gradually increased the use of English, Encuentros’ plays were both in English, Spanish and bilingual. The early Teatro Campesino based many of their plays on stories related to real life experiences in the community. Encuentros’ storylines are rooted in the life-experiences of Latinos in the United States. The use of comedy and humor to convey messages about social issues for Latinos in the United States is the common denominator for the historical *carpa*-performers, Teatro Campesino and Encuentros . Teatro Campesino and other Chicano theaters drew inspiration from the Italian *Commedia dell arte* theatrical form, where humor and satire is used to comment on current social issues and critique the established order. *Commedia dell arte* is an Italian theatrical tradition, which started in the 1600’s.⁴⁰ Just like in the *carpa*-theater companies, the *actos* in Teatro Campesino were based on an improvisational style. But

³⁹ *Zoot Suit* is the name of a high-waisted, wide legged suit that was popular among Mexican Americans in the 1930’s and 1940’s. The play is based on a murder case in 1942 called the Sleepy Lagoon murder, a case involving Mexican American youth in Los Angeles. In 1981 it was made into a motion picture, also directed by Valdez (Huerta 2000).

⁴⁰ This improvisational theater form included the use of masks and recurring characters. While Encuentros did not use improvisation nor the similar form pantomime, one of the characters in *Nuestra Vida* had the role of the clown or commentator, which was often present in ancient Greek and Italian comedies.

Encuentros' plays were based on scripts, not improvisation. Daniel told me that Encuentros's productions relate more to the work of Italian dramatic and director Dario Fo, who is known for his satirical plays of critical social and political character. Fo also uses methods from *Commedia dell arte* in his work.

One afternoon I was at Emilia's house making a vegetarian version of the Mexican soup *pozole*. Emilia's kitchen was filled with colourful paintings, several of the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁴¹ While cooking, we talked about the connection between Teatro Campesino and Encuentros. I asked her how she got involved with Latino theater.

"I've been doing theater since the seventies. Daniel and I started doing theater at UT, where we met and became friends.⁴² I remember you and I talked about Chicano theater the other day, and I was absolutely involved with that. I worked with several Chicano Theater companies; I was even touring with them. But the overall theme of these companies was to deliver a political message, and there was not much focus on the acting itself. It was very epic theater.⁴³ The problem with epic theater productions is that they often preach for the choir, they only reach the same people with their message".

Emilia's point is also reflected by Jorge Huerta, who writes that for many Chicano theater groups in the 60s and 70s the message was more important than the medium (Huerta, 2000:3). The use of *actos* was especially useful, because they were easy to create and act out, and did not require many props or actor training. Most of the performers in the Teatro Campesino and other Chicano theaters had no formal training as actors. But as I will demonstrate in the next section, to mediate a political message is still the most important thing for some Latinos involved with theater in today's Texas.

Different views on Latino theater

In early April I attended a theater seminar and workshop in Austin. The seminar was held by female actors and playwrights who called themselves Chicanas, and talked about their involvement in Chicano theater. They also acted out some *actos* they had performed when

⁴¹ Often called Mexico's patron saint, this image represents both the Catholic Virgin Mary and the indigenous goddess Tonantzin.

⁴² UT is short for The University of Texas, usually referring to the Austin flagship.

⁴³ Epic Theater is a genre mainly created by the German dramatic Berthold Brecht. The purpose of the genre is to show contradictions in a society, and the possibilities of change. The audience should be aware that they are watching fiction; actors frequently address the audience directly out of character and often play multiple roles. (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed 24.02.11. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/189683/epic-theater>).

they were students in the 1970's. Both comedy and political slogans were used in the *actos* to address feminist and political issues. Several of the women on stage expressed that the goal of Chicano theater was to share information and transmit a political point of view, and that this still is the main point today. None of the Chicanas had any formal training as actors, they said, but that did not seem to matter. Their focus had been to build consciousness and share information. Like one of the women expressed it: "Everyone said we were bad actors. We couldn't care less. We had something we wanted to say, and we were going to say it." They also expressed how street theater was used as a tool to share information with their fellow students: "We did theater everywhere. In schools, bars, at people's houses (...)"

Among people who attended the seminar were both (former) actors and activists, almost all of them Latinos. Many of them seemed to agree with the women on stage, nodding their heads in approval while the women were speaking. One man in the audience commented that "theater is a powerful educational tool" while a representative from a Latino political organization in Houston said "theater is a bridge to get the message out on the street". Another actress added: "The more exposed you become to the message in the play, the more aware you become of these political issues in your personal life". While Daniel and Emilia probably would agree with the last view, the participants in the seminar emphasized the political message above the artistic expression, which differs from Daniel and Emilia's view of the importance of the art itself. There was also some skepticism towards institutional theater at the seminar. A woman in the audience said that she was not sure if theater belongs in an institutional form, because it may lose the message. One may say that these Chicanas expressed skepticism towards the changes Chicano theater went through after the Zoot Suit-era. The steps towards more professional actors and productions did maybe not correlate with what they think is the main purpose of (Chicano) theater. The artistic focal point at Encuentros is quite different from the Chicana women's view presented above.

Although the main goals of Encuentros relate to the Chicano plays from the 60's and 70's, Encuentros wants to focus more on the professional artistic and aesthetical aspects of their productions. Once Daniel and I went on a road trip to Austin's neighboring city San Antonio, he told me about when he had watched a traditional Mexican religious play in the area we were passing by on our way:

"It was very boring, and lasted forever. It was just some people who knew each other who acted it out in someone's garden. They did not care much about costumes, props or anything,

and they were not very good actors either. It seemed like the most important thing for them was to deliver the message, and not necessarily produce a good play”.⁴⁴

There is certainly an underlying political aspect in Encuentros stated aims. But to what extent can it be called a political Latino theater company? I never heard anyone in the cast and crew use this expression. The actors were recruited based on their skills as actors; Encuentros is not a theater company that requires its members to have a certain political point of view. The people involved related to the vision of Encuentros in different ways. While Emilia had previous experience with working with political theater, Daniel told me that he had not initially been interested in the political aspect with theater. These contrasting views of the role of Latino theater were also represented among the larger theater group. Although Daniel and Emilia had some slightly different intakes to the meaning behind Encuentros, they have managed to create a company which combines both of their visions. Overall, Encuentros’ goal is not to actively engage in activism for social change, but to display and make people reflect on the themes of their production.

History is an important factor for the political aspect of Encuentros’ productions. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of social movements; not just the Chicano movement, but the ongoing fight for African American rights, women’s liberation and other civil rights. We have to take into account that the Latino theaters operate under quite different circumstances today. With the words of Jan Cohen-Cruz: “Whether and how the political waters are raging affects the forms political theater generally takes” (2001:96). In order to attract an audience and survive as a company the political aspects of Latino theater companies had to change together with the political landscape. Another difference since the Chicano movement-days is the performance related activities. There were neither talks nor discussions in relation to the themes in *Nuestra Vida*, like Emilia experienced when she first started working with theater: “But now it’s too expensive”. When she was touring, she used to sleep in hostels, or on people’s floors. While she understood that people get older and do not want to sleep on the floor anymore, “it is harder to accomplish things like that these days than it used to be”. This may also be due to a currently different political situation.

⁴⁴ The fact that the play Michael did not like was a religious play may be of importance. In religious plays in general, the theme may be more important than the artistic performance in itself, just like the political Chicano plays.

Mainstream theater?

Daniel and Emilia want to produce plays that reach a broad audience, with high artistic quality. As mentioned earlier, from the 1980's audiences gradually expected a higher level of performance standard in Latino theater. Huerta (2000) relates this to the increasing number of middle class Latinos. Often, he writes, the more educated audiences seemed tired of the same ideas and the same styles of early Chicano theater (Huerta, 2000:13). This is similar to Daniel and Emilia's statements on this subject. The expression "mainstream", which both Daniel and Emilia used themselves, can be defined as both commercial and inclusive to a broad audience.⁴⁵ When I talked to Daniel about what mainstream means to him, he said that it is about attracting an audience, mainly by having a storyline many people can relate to. What is defined as mainstream is a constantly changing concept. Mainstream art also has to be seen in relation to what is non-mainstream. One night Daniel and crew worker Steve told me about another, more experimental theater company in Texas, which is quite different from Encuentros:

Daniel: "When *Juana* enters the stage and screams "surprise!" she should be naked!"

Steve: "That would be just like at The Vanity".

Daniel: "You see Mari, there's this theater company in Houston where the actors use every opportunity they get to take their clothes off. And they get *a lot* of funding from governmental organizations, because it's "*art*" (Daniel makes quotation marks with his fingers). They've had several shows where the content is all about sex. I've seen their productions a couple of times, once because I got a free ticket, another time because I just had to go and see what they were up to. They charge a lot more money than we do, but they're sold out every night".

Steve: "Sex sells, sex sells".

Daniel: "One of the shows was just this woman on stage talking about and showing her intimate body parts. That was it, but they still sold out".

Steve: (resigned) "Sex sells".

Sexuality can be both artistic and tabloid, depending on the way it is portrayed. However, I understood Steve's point of view after going to Houston to see some of The Vanity's plays. The way Daniel and Steve talked about the performances at The Vanity, it seemed like they would not do a production which contained a lot of tabloid sexually explicit material just to

⁴⁵ According to Collins English Dictionary (2003), mainstream is "1. the people or things representing the most common or generally accepted ideas and styles in a society, art form, etc. 2. adj. belonging to the social or cultural mainstream: mainstream American movies".

attract a larger audience (and thereby make more money). So “mainstream” in this case does not mean to lose the company’s artistic integrity.

Both The Vanity and Encuentros are funded by both public means and private donations. While Encuentros did not arrange for talks and discussions like in the Teatro Campesino-days, they did occasionally hold receptions for members of certain Latino organizations, which also got discounted ticket prices. These organizations were among Encuentros’ sponsors, in addition to funding from governmental arts foundations in Austin and Texas. Some of the actors at Encuentros are members of one or several Latino arts organizations, or “the Hispanics with money-associations”, as one of the actors humoristically nicknamed one of them. Having connections in these organizations is important for Encuentros’ economic funding. In the next section I will focus on Encuentros’ relation to external factors, like the audience and their large social network. I will start by comparing Emilia’s promotion strategies to commercial advertising towards Latinos. In the last section I want to show how Encuentros uses Spanish words and expressions in their plays and promotion material to mirror the ways many Latino people express themselves in daily interaction, while at the same time creating a sense of group identity among cast, crew, potential audience members and sponsors. I will particularly address this through the use of the term *familia*, and discuss how this can cause both inclusion and alienation.

Recognition, audience and funding at Encuentros

In early March I went to San Antonio with some friends from outside Encuentros. Some of them were Latino, and some were not. I was introduced to their friends and families, and the first time I entered my friend Isabel’s parents’ house it was like entering a scene from *Nuestra Vida*. As we entered the living room on the first floor, she said to me: “My grandmother is upstairs watching *novelas*, let me just go and check if she needs anything.” She went upstairs, and I heard her say: “I’ll get you something to drink, grandma!” Her grandmother answered: “Ay *m’ija*, that’s *so* nice of you!”⁴⁶ I was perplexed. These were the exact same sentences as in the first scene in *Nuestra Vida*! Isabel told me that her grandmother had moved into her parent’s house after she moved out to go to college. I asked her what her youngest brothers and sisters felt about living with their grandmother: “They love having her living with them, someone in their house who can spoil them. But she’s quite nosy too, you know. And she watches *novelas* in Spanish all day long”.

⁴⁶ *M’ija* is short for “mi hija” in Spanish, which means “my daughter” or “my child”.

As I recognized a scene from *Nuestra Vida* at Isabel's parents' house, so did audience members see familiar scenes from their own lives in the play. After Encuentros' performances, I tried to ask the audience on their way out what they thought of the play. The usual response from Latina women was "I loved it!", and "it was great!" One woman said: "I can recognize myself in the characters. There is so much we [Latinas] can identify ourselves with". Schechner suggests that the ultimate meaning of performance is mediated through the restoration of behavior, or the mediation of experiences in the world in a theatrical frame in front of an audience. How meaningful a theatrical performance is to an audience member relates to how the audience member feels the force of the original unmediated experience (Schechner, 1985). While audience recognition was an important factor to attract a Latino audience, Daniel pointed out to me that the intention of the plays was not just to mirror back people's lives. "The plays should not only question who we are, but where we are going. After going to see our plays, people hopefully feel like their lives are worth the time and energy to create stories that speak to them in both language and relevance". To create a bond between audience and performances, linguistic tactics were an important means.

Creating inclusion - linguistic tactics

The idea of "trans-creation", for the advertisers a gimmicky term aimed at maximizing specificity in targeting differentiated consumer publics, is appealing and apt as a characterization of border culture expression and self-definition (Flores and Yudice, 1990:70).

Producers of either products or popular culture want to reach out to their target consumers. Emilia's inclusion of Spanish expressions in adapted scripts and promotion material can be compared to commercial advertiser's outreach to the Latino consumer market. Flores and Yudice (1990) show how advertisers both change product slogans to Spanish, but also incorporate what they call a Latin feel to reach the Latino market. Such a means is found in Citibank's slogan "We always say sí at Citibank" (Citibank being pronounced see-tee-bank in Spanish) (Flores and Yudice, 1990:69). In this example Citibank uses a bilingual pun to attract the Latino consumer with a sense of humor and inclusion. Flores and Yudice claim that

"ironically, this [the marketers] practice of linguistic and cultural adaptation on the part of commercial publicity is more suggestive than the traditional public sphere of Latino

expression, especially those dimensions of it that go beyond mere responses to hegemonic negation” (Flores and Yudice, 1990:69).

I want to argue against this view: Using linguistic means and “trans-creation” as a tool for effective publicity is exactly what Encuentros accomplishes successfully. Whether it is a line in a script or a spontaneous everyday expression by the cast and crew, this form of expressing culture is highly effective and well-planned.⁴⁷

Familia: creating social bonds through fictive kinship

“The audience rocked the theater with laughter, Latino-style. You’ve got to see *Nuestra Vida!* It’s your *familia* on stage!”

- Excerpt from Encuentros’ e-letter

Many people involved as either actors or crew members often talked about Encuentros with great appreciation. Like when two men in the stage crew, Steve and Roger, discussed another arts organization they were volunteering for, that took up much of their time:

Steve: “It’s not like we’re getting paid or anything! With Encuentros I may not get paid either, but I *want to* help out. Daniel is always there for me and helping me out, and I felt so bad when I had to tell him that I couldn’t be backstage for this show”.

Roger: “But he understood, right?”

Steve: “He completely understood! And then I structured my schedule so I could do some volunteering (...) Encuentros *takes care of you.*” (My emphasis).

This example shows how people involved wanted to contribute to the productions, regardless of payment, because they felt taken care of. As mentioned in the introduction there is a large social network connected to Encuentros, and Emilia told me that one of the reasons why this network exists is because “they are like a family”, as she expressed it. By referring to cast, crew, sponsors and friends as *familia*, Emilia made people feel more connected to the company. The network is tied together regardless of background or actual family ties. Constructing fictive kinship through the use of language can be a way of creating group identity. Michael Herzfeld (1992) states that while fictive kinship is a well-known tool for creating state nationalism, it is also used by subjects of the state, and he uses godfathers as an

⁴⁷ More on the Spanish language in Chapter 4.

example. While godfathers create actual families ties through the rite of baptism, Encuentros use linguistic means to create useful networks create fellowship through eliminating differences.⁴⁸ While the term *familia* was mainly used written in e-mails and newsletters, it was occasionally also used in conversations.

Emilia and David were not the only ones using *familia*. The Centre for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas starts their e-letters with “dear CMAS *familia*”. The concept of *familia* as a reference to extended family is well known in research about Mexican American families. Rothman, Gant and Hnat (1985) say that “Mexican Americans frequently extend the definition of family membership beyond *la casa* to include individuals labelled *compadre* and *familia*” (Rothman et al., 1985:201). The extended family members may or may not be related, but the overall important factor is the “volunteerism based on a sense of responsibility for each other” (Rothman et al., 1985:202). When Encuentros create a community of individuals who are dedicated to and engaged in the company, they can both reach further with the company’s message and recruit volunteers for the performances.

However, as Herzfeld mentions, with the creation of fictive kinship one can also construct the external other (Herzfeld, 1992). While Encuentros did not intentionally seek to exclude Whites by creating *familia*-ties, it may have an alienating effect on the non-Latino potential audience members. In Encuentros’ case, the Others are not necessarily unwanted, but their rhetoric may have an alienating effect. In this case, it may be because Whites do not have the same concept of extended family relations as Latinos. The somewhat stereotypical idea that family ties are especially important to Mexican Americans, and likewise Whites presumed inability to understand these relations is reflected in the actor’s discussion of the extended family ties in *Nuestra Vida*:

The playwright Teresa is present at the first rehearsal, and asks the cast if they understand in what ways some of the characters are family, even though some of them are not related biologically. All of the actors reply: “Yes, sure, why not?” (At that time I did not understand all of these relations, but I kept quiet). Teresa: “Cause the last time someone performed this play a lot of the audience did not get it. But of course, they were all White”. Director José then comments: “White people don’t get these extended family relations”. The actors then start pretending they are “White people” in the audience asking questions about the play:

- “But the girl is White, why is she married to that Mexican guy?”

- “How can the family friend just walk into the couple’s house without knocking, she is not related to them? Why do they call her family, when she’s not?”

⁴⁸ The Mexican equivalent of godfather is *compadre*.

José then pretends he is asking the ‘White audience members’: “What, don’t you White guys have friends who are like family?” Everyone laughs, and the topic switches.

There were different degrees of *familia*. The cast and crew were the closest unit, and the volunteers and family members of cast and crew were connected in a more peripheral way. Arranging parties and barbecues were also important factors in creating and maintaining these fictive kinship ties. The *familia* consist almost exclusively of Latinos, except from Lisa, the White actress, and two peripheral production assistants. Although there were a couple of Whites in the community, they were the exception that proved the rule. Lisa’s presence was necessary for the play; she was casted because there was a Caucasian character in the script of *Nuestra Vida*. Both in the play itself and in the cast and crew’s everyday lives, the Other is needed in order for the Latinos to reflect upon themselves (Sax, 1998). Also, having a non-Latino person present in the play is important because in everyday life Latinos do not exclusively interact with other Latinos only.

Although the *familia* consisted of Latinos, they (as well as the main themes of the play), were not so different from non-Latinos. This will become evident in the next section.

Reviews: Emphasizing “Latino family values”

Nuestra Vida got great reviews in Austin newspapers. The reviews mainly emphasized that the play was “a warm-hearted comedy about modern Mexican American family relations”, and that it took place in a “middle-class assimilated Latino environment”.⁴⁹ The couple consisting of a Mexican American man and an Anglo woman was also highlighted: “The fact that the couples are mixed contributes to the sometimes conflicting family expectations. *Nuestra Vida* approaches serious topics with a sense of humor”. Another newspaper stated: “*Nuestra Vida* has the strengths of situation comedy, and shows an upwardly-mobile Latino family”. Comedies in theater may often experience a problem with being taken seriously. As the reviews above show, this was not an issue for *Nuestra Vida*. As mentioned previously, Encuentros is a respected company among people involved with Latino arts in Austin. One reviewer stated: “When you watch a play by Encuentros, you can feel the love. Maybe because of their heart-warming plays, or maybe it’s because they just all care for one another”.

In the reviews, the important place of family in the play was a recurring theme. One particular review stated that *Nuestra Vida* was: “a thoughtful family drama of the deep

⁴⁹ All quotes are paraphrased from actual newspaper reviews.

attachment of Latino sons to their mothers”. This relates to the common notion of Latinos affection towards their mothers. But is this the case for Latinos exclusively? Simon Harrison demonstrates his point of denied resemblance by pointing to a study of American family life in the 1960s (Parsons, 1975 in Harrison, 2003). This study, carried out by Schneider, shows how the Irish American respondents answered that what made their ethnic group special, was their relationship with their mothers. Interesting enough, this was also expressed by several of the other ethnic groups in the study. Both the Jewish and the Italians stated that understanding the relationship with their mothers was crucial to the understanding of their particular ethnic group (Harrison, 2003:344). The focus on the importance of the maternal figure is indeed present in Mexican and Latino culture, exemplified with the reviewers comment above. This emphasizes Harrison’s point that it is the similarities, rather than the differences that constitutes the starting point for defining ethnic identities. What is interesting about this example is that they all believe that their view of the mother is distinct for their own group, even though it is not. How did this happen in the first place? Harrison answer’s his own question by saying that “It was as though American culture possessed a generic schema of “The Ethnic Minority Family”, a single model for conceptualizing any ethnic group and the ‘distinctive’ attributes it ought typically to have” (Harrison, 2003:344). Obviously, Latinos have much in common with other ethnic groups residing in the United States. Following Harrison’s argument, what was considered typically Latino by the reviewers has the potential to reach out to a broad non-Latino audience.

Audience and economic funding

One morning I came to Emilia’s house to do some errands with her before that day’s performance. When I entered the kitchen Emilia was completing the program folders. While finishing the work together, we talked about how many of her neighbors had donated money to Encuentros. “Not that much, maybe 500 dollars, but we’re thankful for everything we get. Some people in our neighborhood also come to see our shows”.

The public outreach group mainly consisted of Emilia and her friend Julia. I was allowed to participate in the meetings, which took place at a popular independent café. Usual topics of discussion at the meetings were how to raise money for the upcoming production, and how to get audience for *Nuestra Vida*. In the script for the play, the characters are described as Mexican American. I was once asked to write some sentences about the play to one of Encuentros’ sponsors. When I sent the text to Emilia, I had written “the play gives insight into a Mexican American family”. Emilia changed “Mexican American” to “Latino”.

When I asked her why she did this, she answered that she wanted the play to appeal to all Latinos, not just Mexican Americans. During one of the first meetings, I asked Emilia who the target groups of the play were. She answered that those who come to see their plays are often people who usually don't go to the theater. She added that she "would of course love for them to go see other plays too, not just ours". The audience mainly consisted of Latina women in their 40s, sometimes bringing along their husbands and relatives. There were also people in their 20s and 30s, I was told that many were friends and family members of the actors and directors. There were not many children in the audience, as Emilia had written on the flyers that the play contained some swearing.

While Emilia said that their target group was people who did not see a lot of theater, the promotion of this particular play was mainly towards Latino organizations with some relation to the University of Texas. This is not necessarily a contradiction, but points out that they targeted their promotion material towards middle class academics much like themselves, maybe because of the characters portrayed. One critique against institutionalized theater (opposed to theater performed in parks and other public spaces, like the early *actos*) is that it becomes too expensive for the working class. But Emilia also told me that she would have loved for some of Encuentros' plays to be free of charge, if they got enough funding from public and private organizations in support of the arts: "In summer there is usually a theater festival in a park downtown, which is free for everyone. They accept donations, but by saying that everyone can enter for free, they create a lot of goodwill for funding. I would much rather want 500 people to pay 10 dollars, than 100 people paying 50 dollars to see a play. And when it's free, people make donations, too". Emilia also told me that Daniel once had a great idea of renting a large tent to show performances. This way, they could continue the old *carpa*-tradition, and at the same time be independent from the larger and more expensive theaters in town, which according to Emilia often refused to rent out to smaller companies in favour of reserving their space for larger, more commercial touring shows.

Encuentros also had some performances that were "pay what you wish", meaning that they accepted any amount of payment for a ticket to a performance. Through their "pay what you wish"-performances and Emilia's desire to show a performance for free, we can conclude that she wanted to make the company's plays available to everyone regardless of economic background. But as I will show in the next section, some audience members did not behave as expected.

Latino audience – different than Anglos?

After a performance, crew member Steve, actress Christina and I talked about the audience at Encuentros' shows. That particular night, something out of the ordinary had occurred:

Christina: "Something weird happened tonight. A lady in the audience kept responding to what was said on stage, and really loudly too! Like, when one of the characters yelled at *María* (her character, who had been behaving impolite), the lady in the audience shouted 'Yeah, get over it *María!*' I got kind of distracted by the whole thing". The conversation then went on to how different kinds of people behave when they go to the theater.

Steve: "I think many Hispanics are not used to go to the theater in the same way as White people are. They are more often sitting at home in front of the TV, and comment on what's happening on the screen. So when they get to the theater, they just keep on commenting in the same way!"

Christina: "Yeah, I guess you may be right. It seems like they forget that we actors can actually hear them."

Steve: "When White people watch theater, they are more quiet and reflecting upon what's happening, while for Latinos it's easier to laugh and respond to what the actors are saying. I don't know if it's bad of me to say this."

In other plays which cast members and I went to see in Austin, usually by and with Whites, there was no commenting at all from the audience. In *Nuestra Vida* there was a physical space between stage and audience. It was not in any way directly encouraged that the audience should take part in the performance. Both Steve and Christina thought it was more probable that a Latino member of the audience would break the (unspoken) rule of ordered silence and thereby behave incorrect when they watch theater. Being a passive observer is seen as more correct and tactful than yelling comments at the actors during a performance. Since the middle class, or those who inhabit much cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) have the power to define what is correct, or tactful, it is their way of behaving at a theater which is seen as the appropriate one. Behaving tastefully can be seen as inhabiting cultural capital, which those who yell out during performances thereby lack. To Steve, this is a difference between Hispanics and Whites.

When Emilia told me that she wants to attract audience members who do not usually go to the theater, I was under the impression that she referred to the working-class. People who belong to the working-class may lack knowledge of the social codes in a theater, meaning that they do not reflect upon that it is rude to speak out loud during a performance.

Steve and Christina, who have worked with institutionalized theater for many years, know these codes. If Encuentros wants to offer theater to those who usually not go see it, meaning the working class, they may have to deal with these conflicting notions. It is also important to bear in mind how audience members have different reasons and views on the experience of going to the theater. It is interesting how Steve and Christina characterize Latino and White behavior, and the fact that it is more probable that a Latino will behave wrong at the theater; or in other words to behave opposite of the White norm. This example is also related to the general stereotype characteristics of Latinos as noisy and talkative. The assumptions on how Latinos supposedly are like bring us to the subject of the next chapters: Classification and stereotype views on Latinos.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the relationship between the theater company, the people connected to it and the history of Latino theater. I have given an outline of a theater company which seeks to make Latinos aware and reflect on their social situation in the U.S., but not encourage to political activism. Like Emilia said, people get an opportunity to reflect on issues that are often hidden in other forms of popular culture, but the plays do not provide any answers. While Encuentros use many of the same means as the *carpa*-tradition and Teatro Campesino, Encuentros is a modern, contemporary theater company. It is influenced by Chicano theatrical traditions, but adapted to and aimed at a modern Latino mainstream audience. In many ways, the goal is to include Latinos into the mainstream.

When middle class characters are portrayed through plays which are accessible to a broad audience, Encuentros is trying to reflect the diverse lives of Latinos in the United States. I have argued that *Nuestra Vida* have many similarities to the lives of the cast and crew, as urban middle-class Latinos. But the plays are not only a mirror of their lives; it also raises important questions regarding Latinos in the United States. I have chosen to call attention to the ambivalent relationship between Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans and Anglos. Even though the differences between these constructed groups may not be so large, differences were pointed out both the lines in the play and everyday conversations.

By adding expressions and phrases in Spanish to their plays, like companies do in advertising, Daniel and Emilia want to create recognition with the Latino audience members. Through using the concept of *familia* in both promotion and personal interaction, Emilia successfully creates a broad social network which contributes both as audience members and

volunteers. I have argued that Daniel and Emilia use both language and their social capital to navigate in Austin's artistic and cultural space.

The theatrical performances at Encuentros are influenced by several factors. In the next chapter I will analyze how different views and categorizations of Latinos affect the cast and crewmembers self-identification, and further difficulties with defining a specific Latino identity.

Chapter 3

Race and Ethnicity: State Classification and Personal Identification

Introduction

Latinos in the United States are often seen as a homogenous group, both by U.S. government officials, media and members of civil society. Through the use of performing arts, the cast and crew at Encuentros portray how it is like to be Latino in the United States. But what factors influence how Latino identity is being expressed? The aim of this chapter is to discuss the creation of Latino social identity from both an official and individual perspective, and I will argue that state categorization is a significant influence for my informant's self-identification. I will base the term identity on Fredrik Barth and Richard Jenkins' definitions (Jenkins, 1994), in that identity is created through forms of social interaction, through the dialectics of internal and external identification. According to Jenkins, the study of ethnicity is important to debates about social identity (Jenkins, 1994:198).

In the first part of this chapter I will discuss state categorizations, using the United States 2010 census as a starting point. How does state categorization influence people's view on themselves and others? How the cast and crewmembers, as well as Latinos in general, deal with having to place themselves into fixed ethnic and racial categories, and to what extent are they able to oppose them? The second part of this chapter discusses how the cast and crew identify themselves, and I will argue that the terms they use are closely connected to state categories. I will further analyze the way the cast and crew talk about their relationship with others.

Belonging to the large category "Latino or Hispanic" may be both a resource and a challenge. I will illustrate how my non-immigrant informants are categorized together with Mexican immigrants, and thus may be the subject of new immigration law enforcement. I will also show how a person's Latino identity can also be used to claim political rights, and biological views on Latinos as a racial category. I will rely on Jenkins' terms when separating between group and category, which are inspired by Barth's work. A category is nominal term constructed by others, whereas a group is a form of virtual identification created by its members (Jenkins, 1994). The members of a group recognize each other as such, and may also recognize their category. While discussing terms like Latino, Mexican and Mexican American, I will also show how these categories have changed over time.

State categorization

“I have dealt with this my whole life. How do people see me? How do I see myself?”

- Dr. Ramirez

In January 2010 I attended a lecture on ethnic diversity at a predominately minority college in the Austin area. The speaker at the lecture was a man who called himself Dr. Ramirez. Originally from Peru, Ramirez had a Ph.D. in Spanish and Latin-American studies from a reputed U.S. university. Dr. Ramirez started the lecture by telling a story about when he moved to California from Peru when he was 10 years old. The first question in his first test at school was “define your race: Black, White, Asian or Mexican.” He did not know which box to tick of. The teacher came up to him and said: “I can give you the questions in Spanish if you’d like?” Ramirez asked the teacher if he could tick of two boxes. The teacher said no, but he chose both Mexican and White anyway. Back in Peru as an adult scholar he held a lecture in public relations. When the lecture was over, he asked the audience if they had any questions. The only question he got was: “Where are you from?” “Peru”, he answered. The audience member replied: “No, you sound funny. You are not like us”.

Dr. Ramirez stressed the difficulties with identifying himself according to the categories set by the US government, like censuses and school tests: “I deal with these things constantly! My six year old daughter has the same problem today. But now there are too many boxes! We tick of the category ‘other’”. Like many minorities in the U.S, Dr. Ramirez had experienced both the difficulties with relating to state categories, and not being recognized as either fully American or fully Peruvian. In everyday conversations, newspaper articles, census forms and academic literature, a number of terms and expressions are used to describe and categorize residents of the United States with some kind of imagined, real or official origin in Central, South or Latin America. The most debated issue concerning state categorization during my fieldwork in Austin was the national census.

The 2010 Census –counting and classifying

The United States Census was first conducted in 1790, and is carried out every 10th year. In 2010 every household in the country received a form by mail, which consisted of ten questions. The questionnaire was to be completed and mailed back before census day April 1st. The households which did not return the form were visited by a census worker between

May and July, to complete the mandatory questionnaire.⁵⁰ Daniel, Emilia and Julia were concerned with Latinos completing the census form.⁵¹ They used social media to encourage others to complete and return their forms, and talked about it with friends and acquaintances. One afternoon the members of Encuentros' community outreach and promotion group gathered at Emilia's house, to make promotion material for *Nuestra Vida*. While sitting around the kitchen table, someone asked who had completed the census form. Daniela, a bright graduate student in her twenties who have starred in several of Encuentros' plays, admitted that she had not returned the form. Emilia was surprised: "What, you haven't returned it?" Daniela explained that she had gotten the form in the mail, but that none of her friends cared about the census. Julia then said with a friendly, but quite firm voice: "Then you need to set a good example to them, and fill it out!" The other two agreed and expressed similar encouragements until Daniela said: "OK, OK, I'll fill it out! But it's so hard!" "It's really not" Julia answered, and offered Daniela some help to complete it. Julia and Emilia then explained the importance of completing the census, focusing on that the number of people living in a certain area affects how many economic resources each area receives.

The 2010 Census form was shorter than many previous forms, and consisted of questions related to homeownership status, age, sex, ethnicity and race.⁵² A debated issue concerning the census questions has been question eight and nine regarding race and ethnicity. Question eight has been present in US censuses since 1970. It is considered separately from race, which is the topic of question nine. This will be evident in the census form on the following page.

⁵⁰ See www.census.gov .

⁵¹ Julia was a member of Encuentros' outreach group.

⁵² <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/text/text-form.php>. Retrieved January 27 2011.

→ NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Cuban

Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↴

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark one or more boxes.

White

Black, African Am., or Negro

American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↴

<input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese	<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/> Korean	<input type="checkbox"/> Guamanian or Chamorro
<input type="checkbox"/> Filipino	<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	<input type="checkbox"/> Samoan
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian — <i>Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.</i> ↴	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander — <i>Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.</i> ↴	

Some other race — *Print race.* ↴

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As shown above, in 2010 there were a total of 15 different racial categories. Since 2000, people have also had the option of choosing more than one race.

Whether to complete the census questionnaire or not, and how to do it, was a recurrent topic among people I befriended in Austin. A friend of Emilia named Sam who helped out during performances, also had a temporary job at the local census bureau. Like other people in the cast and crew, he was concerned with the importance of being counted in the census. One night, crew member Steve addressed one of the difficulties of fitting into the census categories:

Sam, Steve and I talked about the census backstage before the performance. They had both read an article in the Statesman about how many people did not return the questionnaire because they did not know what race to check, and that some did not want to mail the census back as a protest that their race (meaning “Hispanic” or “Latino”) was not an option on

⁵³ Photo by Nathan Gibbs: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/nathangibbs/4442280946/> Retrieved June 7 2011.

question nine.⁵⁴ Steve said that he also found these questions difficult to answer. Sam started explaining that it is important to be counted for the economic funds to be equally and correctly distributed: “Those who do not return the census create problems for themselves in several ways. Illegal immigrants who do not return it will not have room for their children at school, because they are not registered in the census. So the schools are full, and other people get mad at them too”. Sam then pretends to be an angry parent at a school: “Whose fault is it that the school did not receive enough funding? It’s those immigrants who did not return the census!” Sam (being himself again): “In that way it can be a part of creating more discrimination. I know a woman who has a husband from Colombia, who is afraid of him being deported if they let the government know he’s in the country. But it is just people like him who make things worse!” Sam goes on and talks about this for a few minutes, while Steve keeps quiet. When Sam is done talking, Steve says: “But what are you going to choose if you’re a Chinese from Mexico, what are you going to write then?” Sam has no answer, and the conversation ends.

Although Sam told Steve why it was important to complete the census, Steve still did not know how certain people (like a “Chinese Mexican”, meaning a man of Chinese origin who had lived in Mexico and then immigrated to the United States) should fill out the questionnaire. To Steve, and probably many others, knowing why it was important to complete the census did not remove the problem with checking the right boxes. The existing categories did not represent his views on the complexity of racial and ethnic terms.

Race and ethnicity – different terms?

The terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably. Ethnicity has been present as both an analytical and descriptive term in social anthropology since the 1960s, although it has not been clearly defined. Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes that in general, the term ethnicity is connected to the classification of people and group relationships (Eriksen, 1997). Regarding race, even though it is common agreement among most social scientists that race is a socially invented term, it certainly exists as a cultural construct. And when the objects of study believe in the notion of race, it should be studied “as part of local discourses on ethnicity” (Eriksen, 1997:34). Eriksen states that the distinction between race and ethnicity is a difficult one, and there are several arguments and views on this subject. Like ethnicity, race is also a form of identity, but scholars like William J. Wilson (1973) separates race from ethnicity. He writes

⁵⁴ “The Statesman” is short for Austin American Statesman. For the article discussed, see <http://www.statesman.com/news/local/for-some-latinos-census-stymies-with-race-question-575011.html> Retrieved April 20 2010.

that while different races are separated by physical appearance, ethnic groups are created on the basis of “socially selected cultural traits” (Wilson, 1973:6). To undermine the separation between race and ethnicity, he refers to the fact that Jews, Italians and Irishmen in the United States are seen by the majority as different ethnic groups who are members of the majority (White) race. Wilson calls them “nonracial ethnics” (1973:6). While there are many different ways to define and use these terms, both have implications for a persons’ identity, and they can be hard to understand and distinguish, both for scholars and non-scholars.

Ambiguous census categories

In the census, Hispanic and Latino are regarded as ethnic categories, whereas the question about whether you define yourself as, say, Black or White is about race. Another problematic categorization issue is the racial category White. In the definition of race categories used in the 2010 census, “White” refers to “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (Humes et al., 2011:3). Although some Latinos can trace their origin to Spain, this category does not account for the fact that many Latinos originate from the indigenous population in Latin America. Based on the Census Bureau’s statement, it is possible to say that people of indigenous Latin American origin per definition are not White. Still, 53% of Latinos identified themselves as White alone in the census (Humes et al., 2011). The report “Shades of Belonging” by the Pew Hispanic Research Center, issued in 2004 (and thus basing its results on the 2000 census) state that “Hispanics see race as a measure of belonging, and Whiteness as a measure of inclusion, or perceived inclusion” (Tafoya, 2004:1). As Whites, they belong to the majority, and being White may be seen as being more included in the United States. The same report state that race is about more than physical appearance. It is also related to changing features like a person’s economic status, and their social and geographical location (Tafoya, 2004). The case of Texas is an illustrative point:

In Texas many more native-born Latinos of Mexican descent say they are White (63 percent) compared to those who live outside of Texas (45 percent). Again, it seems unlikely that skin color is the determining factor. Instead, one can suppose that the unique and complex history of race relations in Texas is a major influence. This is the only state where a large Latino population was caught up both in Southern-style racial segregation and then the civil rights struggle to undo it (Tafoya, 2004:2).

As stated above, people's view on race is affected by historical conditions. After the end of the Mexican-American war, the Mexican government demanded that the Mexican inhabitants of the new U.S. territory would have the same rights as citizens of the United States. Citizenship at that time was granted to Whites only, and therefore Mexican Americans were to identify themselves as White. But despite promises of citizenship, Mexican Americans were separated from Whites in civil society. Although they were officially categorized as White, they were socially segregated similar to the Black population in the area (Limón, 1998). The distinctions between Whites, Blacks and Mexicans were a racial distinction. As more Euro-Americans settled in Texas, the segregation between the races became more and more evident. Official segregation existed in schools until 1954 and at public places like movie theaters and restaurants until the 1960s (1971:430).

Also, the racial and ethnic categories which Latinos have to identify themselves according to are not static. Over the centuries, people of Latin American heritage have had to choose from a number of different census categories. Relating to constant changing categories also adds to the difficulties of how to identify oneself as Latino. In 1930, a person of Latino would be categorized as Mexican. In 1950 he or she would be White, whereas in 1990 Hispanic White was the correct identification term.⁵⁵ Jenkins states that external categorization is all about who has got the power or authority to do so (Jenkins, 1994:199). As I will show further, the cast and crew use many different terms when talking about themselves and members of their group. This is a general trend that may relate to the fact that the terms used in governmental categorization are in a constant process of change.

Opposing the categories

Hispanic views of race also show that half of this ever larger segment of the U.S. population is feeling left out (Tafoya, 2004:3).

In the 2000 census, 90 percent of the US population identified as one of the five main racial categories in question nine (Tafoya, 2004:1). But for millions of Latinos, it is not that simple. As already mentioned, Latinos have to indicate both their race and ethnicity in the census, which implies that those terms mean two different things. In the 2010 census, a new instruction was added before question eight and nine. The new instruction was: "For this census, Hispanic origins are not races" (Humes et al., 2011:5). This was done because

⁵⁵ understandingrace.org, retrieved June 4 2011.

Hispanic origin is regarded a separate concept from race in the federal statistical system. Interestingly, many Latinos did not take this instruction into account when completing the census. As the census report “Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010” (Humes et al., 2011) states, the new instruction did not stop people from self-identifying their race as “Latino”, “Mexican”, “Puerto Rican”, or other national origins or ethnicities (Humes et al., 2011:5). Since these responses did not fit into the census statistical system, the answers to the question on race which stated a Latino origin were classified into the category “Some Other Race”. This was the case for about one-third of the answers responding to the race question (Humes et al., 2011:6). The report also state that Latinos made up 97 percent of all those classified as only Some Other Race (Humes et al., 2011:16).

This is an example of how people’s way of identifying themselves conflicts with the state’s way of classifying its citizens. Even though many people regard Latino as a racial feature, it is not accepted in the statistical system, and thus their personal ways of expressing their identity is ignored. This can be viewed in relation to Michel de Certeau’s arguments in “Practices of Everyday Life” (1984). By using the terms strategies and tactics, de Certeau shows how individuals use tactics in their everyday lives, which premises are defined by strategies. While the government’s strategy is to classify its citizens in set of categories, the people do not necessarily respond the way they want. Those who complete the census do not control the premises for doing so, but they write Latino as a racial category, despite the Census Bureau’s specification that Latino is not regarded as a race. This can be seen as an example of using tactics. But even through they try to oppose the categories; they end up being collectively labeled as “Some Other Race”.

As James C. Scott (1989) states, this kind of everyday resistance is on the premises of those in power, in other words, those who decide which categories which do and do not exist. When opposing or resisting the power structure, it has to be done within the framework of those in power. Those who oppose it “leaves the dominant in command of the public stage” (Scott, 1989:57). Tord Larsen calls this the problem of the opposition (Larsen, 1999). The problem, Larsen writes, is how to resist something without being caught in the language of those in power. Larsen’s perspective implies that there is an asymmetry between those who speak first, and those who talk back. “The Other”, he states, “seem to have the choice between staying incommunicado or speak back in the language of ‘the first subject’ (Larsen, 1999:106).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ My translation.

The authors of the Pew-report mentioned above comment that “Some Other Race is not exactly a political slogan or a rallying cry. Nor is it a term anyone ordinarily would use in a conversation or to describe themselves” (Tafoya, 2004:1). As this comment indicates, being “Some Other Race” is not the best starting point for creating a collective identity. Not fitting into a category can be challenging in a person’s everyday life. One night at the Spanish conversation group meeting I attended weekly, I talked to a man who was born in Puerto Rico, but had lived in Mexico for a long time.⁵⁷ His name was Vincent. Vincent asked my friend Jorge where he was from:

Jorge: “I’m from the border”.

Vincent: “OK, but from which side?”

Jorge: “I was born and raised in El Paso.”

Vincent: “So you’re not Mexican”.

Jorge: “My parents are Mexican.”

Vincent: “But you’re not a REAL Mexican.”

Jorge (slightly irritated): “No...”

As born of Mexican parents, and raised in the United States, Jorge does not fit in to any category according to Vincent. The way I interpret Vincent’s answer, Jorge is thus neither a “real Mexican” nor a “real American”. And just as Vincent fails to place Jorge in a suitable category, Jorge also has difficulties identifying himself. Later that same night the theme of conversation group was a female Mexican character called Calavera.⁵⁸ Someone had been dressing up as this character at a carnival party, but neither Jorge nor I knew anything about this character. Jorge said: “I have never heard of this woman, and I’m Mexican. Well, I guess I’m Mexican-American. Actually, I am more American-Mexican”.

Implications of being categorized as Latino

The three main identification categories race, ethnicity and language are separating people, and at the same time producing collective identities (Arel and Kertzer, 2002).

⁵⁷ The participants in the meeting were mainly people who were born in the United States of Mexican parents, who wanted to learn more Spanish.

⁵⁸ Although I did not catch the full description of this character, it was probably “La Calavera Catrina”, meaning “The Elegant Skull”. Decorated skulls are often used in relation to the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead in November.

When a person checks off a census category, ethnicity or race becomes an ascribed aspect of his or her identity, despite of the U.S. Census Bureau statement that being Hispanic or Latino is, “like race, a matter of self-identification in the U.S.”⁵⁹ Although an individual can choose which race and ethnicity one wants to identify oneself with, it is on the premises of categories set by the Census Bureau. Jenkins writes those who are categorized “are object(s) of the process of definition, and implied within the situation is a meaningful intervention in their lives, an acting upon them” (Jenkins, 1994:199). Arel and Kertzer argue that public censuses play an active part in the formation of identities and social realities. National censuses make people see the world as composed of different constructed groups (Arel and Kertzer, 2002). When a person is categorized into a group, he or she is expected to share a certain common collective identity with other people assigned to the same category. In this case, the U.S.-born, English speaking Latinos in the cast and crew are in the same category as foreign-born, Spanish-speaking immigrants. While “Latino” is not an official racial category, racial characteristics such as skin color become the determination for practicing an anti-immigration law. In the following case, my informants are initially not the subjects of a new state law in Arizona, but they can still be targeted because of their physical appearance, or because they belong to the large, diverse group of “Latinos”.

Biological concepts of race

Arizona’s controversial immigration law “Arizona Senate Bill 1070” (mostly referred to as sb1070) was a debated topic both in media and among people I knew in Austin during spring of 2010. The law, signed by Arizona’s governor Jan Brewer on April 23rd 2010, requires police officers to question people if there is reason to suspect that they are in the United States illegally. Immigrants - or those who look like immigrants - need to carry their identification papers with them at all times while in Arizona. If they get stopped by the police and are unable to show sufficient identification papers, the police have the right to arrest them. The law also targets those who hire illegal immigrant laborers off the street or knowingly transport them. Sb1070 is widely regarded as the toughest immigration law in the United States, and critics have accused it of racial profiling.⁶⁰ What provoked my informants about the law was that if they would go to Arizona *they* might be stopped and questioned by a state or local police officer, even though they and their parents have lived in the United States their entire

⁵⁹ <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/compraceho.html>. Retrieved June 7 2011.

⁶⁰ “Racial Profiling refers to the discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting individuals for suspicion of crime based on the individual's race, ethnicity, religion or national origin.” <http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/racial-profiling-definition>. Retrieved March 4 2011.

lives. One day, when Daniel, I and some crew members cleaned up the rented theater space, people expressed disagreement towards the new law. To illustrate the difficulties of practicing this law rightfully, Daniel said to me: “If you and I went to Arizona, *I* would be stopped by the police, and not you, even though *you* are the immigrant”.⁶¹

The release and signing of sb1070 had consequences far beyond Arizona. Several national organizations cancelled their scheduled meeting in the state, and stores had to close down due to lack of customers when many immigrants chose to leave the state.⁶² Acquaintances of mine travelling by car to California refused to drive through Arizona as a protest. As a friend of a friend told me: “My boyfriend and I are going on a road trip to LA this weekend, but no way if we’re going anywhere *near* Arizona. That *puto* state ain’t getting one penny from my ass!”⁶³ The new law mobilized many Austin-based artists against racial profiling of Latinos. The parade in Austin on May 1st, which is normally used to promote immigration, had many banners and slogans against the passing of the new law. A local Latino DJ in Austin distributed a mixtape called “ChingArizona”.⁶⁴ Other artists made t-shirts and bumper stickers with anti- sb 1070 slogans. These examples show how people oppose political decisions in their everyday lives. The Arizona case shows another side of racial categorization, where we see the potential danger of linking a person’s physical appearance to a certain set of characteristics. This leads us to an important factor regarding race in the United States: The recent renewed popularity of biological race.

During a visit to San Antonio, my acquaintances and I went to the Institute for Texan Cultures to see an exhibition about all the different cultural groups who have settled in Texas.⁶⁵ To our surprise, the museum also contained an exhibition on race, by the American Anthropological Association (AAA). The message of this interactive exhibition was that race is a cultural and not biological construction, in relation to the current census counting. We had accidentally stumbled upon an anthropological contribution to the heated debate about race in the United States. The exhibition was titled “RACE – Are We So Different?” It was created to help promote a “more complex and nuanced understandings of race and human variation”.⁶⁶ In addition to the exhibition, which has travelled across the country since it started in Minnesota in 2007, the public education program includes an interactive website and

⁶¹ Although I was technically not an immigrant during my fieldwork, this was how Daniel expressed himself.

⁶² See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/11/us-usa-immigration-arizona-business-idUSTRE64A4EY20100511>. Retrieved May 10 2010

⁶³ *Puto* is Spanish slang for male prostitute, homosexual or coward, in this context meaning “fucking”.

⁶⁴ “ChingArizona” is made of the Mexican Spanish word “chingar”, which usually means “fuck”, and Arizona.

⁶⁵ “Cultural groups” is the term used by the Institute for Texan Cultures.

⁶⁶ <http://www.understandingrace.org>

educational materials. On the program's website, it is stated that "the program explains how human variation differs from race, when and why the idea of race was invented, and how race and racism affect everyday life".⁶⁷

In 1998 the AAA released a statement which concludes that race is a culturally constructed set of categories. This statement was published due to a large debate concerning race, biology and intelligence, which started in the early 1990's in the U.S scientific and public domain. Biological views on race began to emerge after decades of scientific agreement that race is a culturally constructed concept. One of the events which heated the debate was the publishing of the book "The Bell Curve" (1994), written by the late Harvard-professor Richard J. Herrnstein and political scientist Charles Murray. The book explores the role of IQ in relation to understanding social issues in the United States. Its controversial parts are in particular chapters 13 and 14, where the authors claim that there is a connection between genetics (or race) and intelligence. Critics of the book accuse it of disguising racism as science, as it may state that people of European and Asian origin genetically have a higher intelligence than people of Latin American and African heritage (Marks, 2005).

During the 19th century, social Darwinism was used as a way of categorizing humans and justifying political actions and ideologies of the time (for example slavery and colonialism). Many people claim that the The Bell Curve contributes to a "new social Darwinism". One of the arguments in The Bell Curve can be used against the increasing presence of Latin Americans in the United States. Since Latinos arguably has a lower IQ than Whites, they can contribute to a lower national IQ standard. These views may also affect my informants, even though they are not immigrants, because they all belong to the group "Latinos".

When the United States became a nation-state, they looked to Anglo-Saxon nationalistic traditions and legal systems for inspiration. The vision of a country with one people, one language and a unified set of traditions was central in the creation of the United States of America. This was the starting point for "the role of symbolic politics of language and ethnic identity in the United States" (Ovando, 2003:2). State categorization, political scientists and public discourses on race have implications for my informants, both in that they have to relate to an existing set of categories for their own self-definition, and that they are subject to racial profiling and biological views on race. The second part of this chapter will explain how the cast and crew identify themselves, and the challenges they meet in doing so.

⁶⁷ <http://www.understandingrace.org>

Self-ascribed identification

“Mexicans, *Hispanos*, Latinos, Chicanos... We’ll never agree on what to call ourselves”

- Emilia

As mentioned previously, the cast and crew at Encuentros used many different terms to describe or define themselves. They used Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican, Mexican American and Brown when they talked about themselves and their friends and co-workers, often using several terms in the same sentence. One of the things that surprised me when I started going to Encuentros’ rehearsals, was that my informants talked so openly about race or ethnicity.⁶⁸ While Emilia often used the word Chicano to describe her and other actors regardless of age, the actors, who were in their early 30s, did not use this term as much.⁶⁹ Is the term Chicano is only used by Mexican Americans who were politically active in the 60s and 70s, like Emilia was? Who call themselves Chicano in Austin and Texas today, and what does it mean?

To illustrate the difficulties in answering this question, I will use an example from a Latino Ethnicity Conference at the University of Texas. The conference consisted of both lectures and panel debates concerning Latinos in Texas. During one of the debates, the panelists discussed what one implies about oneself by using different identification terms. A young man in the panel raised a series of questions: “If a person calls himself Mexican American, does that mean that he does not want to assimilate [into the United States]? Does Hispanic mean that he wants to be White? And if he calls himself Chicano, does that mean that he is embarrassed to call himself Mexican? When he says he’s not Chicano, is that because he wants to take distance from political radicalism?” While several people in their 50’s and 60’ expressed that they felt it was right to call themselves Chicanos, not everyone agreed with this among the younger participants: “I call myself Hispana; I grew up with that term. Some people are angry because I won’t call myself Chicana. I’m not comfortable with that, I didn’t grow up in the seventies”, a young woman stated. Others said that they would rather identify as Native Americans. People both in the panel and the audience obviously had different opinions about what they would call themselves. A man pointed out that while young people in Los Angeles today would call themselves Chicano, Texan adolescents would usually not. As this case shows, in addition to the cast and crew’s use of multiple terms, there

⁶⁸ In Norway it is considered politically incorrect to explicitly refer to a person’s race.

⁶⁹ As mentioned in the introduction, Emilia is in her 50s.

is no general answer to what each term implies. They all have different meanings for different persons, both regionally and personally. An excerpt from a personal conversation with a Latino professor in anthropology at the University of Texas expresses a similar viewpoint. He told me that he does not usually refer to himself as a Latino, but rather Chicano or Mexican American. But if he is in a large group, he would refer to it as a Latino group, because it could consist of people from different backgrounds. He did not think that the general public makes that kind of differentiations, but he also points out the importance of regional location:

“I think it just depends on where you are. In New York, a lot of the population is Puerto Rican. But again, there are a lot of Mexicans immigrants in New York City. So I think Latino becomes a way of creating a much stronger sense of identity. But it also works in places like Texas as well”.

As mentioned in the introduction, Mexicans or Mexican Americans represent most of the Latino population in Austin. Is being Latino in Austin the same as being Mexican American? Generally it depends on who you ask or where you seek your answer – from government sources or individuals. The crew member Steve and I were talking backstage when he asked me whether my focus was mostly on Mexican Americans, or all Latinos. All Latinos, I answered, without really reflecting upon the question. Steve then answered that Hispanics are often viewed as one single group, but all Latinos are very proud of where they come from. “They come from so many different countries besides Mexico; Colombia, Nicaragua, Argentina... And a Colombian does not want to be called a Mexican, you know?” Steve emphasized that it is a problem in the United States that all Latinos are identified as Mexicans, because they are the majority. “But Cubans, they are very proud of their country. They are Cuban, not Mexican”.

Although many Latinos with origins other than Mexico experience to be collectively labeled as Mexicans, this was not a common conversational subject among my informants, probably because most of them had ancestors from Texas and/or Mexico. As they themselves all were born in the US, comparisons to and with Mexicans, as opposed to Mexican Americans, was a more frequent topic. According to both Barth and Jenkins, group identification is created, at least in part, through categorizing the Other (Jenkins, 1994:203).

In the next section I will examine how the cast and crew construct their identity in relation to Others.⁷⁰

The Others: Mexican American notions on Mexicans

“If I was a Mexican I’d have to kill you since you talked about my mother. Lucky for you I’m just a Mexican American”.

- Daniel joking with the stage manager in the dressing room

In the joke above, Daniel referred to the stereotype view of Mexicans as being closely knit to their mothers, but pointing out that he himself is not a Mexican.⁷¹ My informants talked about both “Whites” and “Mexicans” as the Others, in relation to themselves as Latinos, Mexican Americans or Hispanics. Several anthropologists have met difficulties when they have tried to categorize an ethnic group based on their differences from others. The anthropologist Michael Moerman had trouble identifying the Lue group in Thailand, because they among other things had no different language or social organization from other groups in the area (Eriksen, 1997). The cast and crew have many such similarities with the people they referred to as Mexicans, but they still distinguished themselves from them. One day, Emilia told me about a production by Encuentros which reflected some relevant views:

“The play was about how Mexican Americans have prejudices against Mexicans, but still they are into traditional Mexican culture, like dance. It’s kind of interesting that many people, who are practicing traditional Mexican dance like *baile folklórico*, think they are better than Mexicans.⁷² Just because they were born here [in the United States], or because they are Mexican *Americans*, they think they are better than Mexicans, because they are *American*, right? And that, in general, is something very visible in society, but nobody talks about it! And we just want to say, you know, that this is dividing us!”

Here Emilia stressed the ambivalent relationship between newly arrived Mexican immigrants, and the Mexican Americans who have lived in Texas for generations. She also emphasizes that the ambivalence is *dividing us*, in other words that it is dividing Latinos as a group. While

⁷⁰ The Others were Whites and Mexicans, Blacks or African Americans were totally absent in this context. One reason for this may be the low population of Black people in Austin.

⁷¹ Daniel may also have pointed to stereotype views of Mexicans as being violent and aggressive when he implied that killing would be the solution to his provocation.

⁷² *Baile folklórico* is Spanish for folkloric dance.

one might assume that Mexican immigration is seen as a challenge by Anglo-Americans only, José Limón points out that Mexican immigration to the U.S. is an ambiguous issue for both Whites and Mexican Americans (Limón, 1998:163). He argues that there is a difference between newly arrived Mexican immigrants, and the Mexican Americans who have lived in Texas for generations. The newly arrived Mexicans inhabit a social and cultural marginality, and therefore become the Other (Limón, 1998).

Another example undermines this point. One stormy night towards the end of my stay in Austin, I was at a party with the cast and crew at one of the actor's house. Friends and family members of the cast and crew were also present, and there was a festive atmosphere. The performances were all finished, and I was telling Steve and Emilia about my plans to spend a few days vacationing in Mexico. Steve replied: "You don't have to go to Mexico! We have Mexico here! There is a Mexican market in Austin, haven't you heard of it?" I had not, so Steve enthusiastically told me about it: "It is located outside of Austin, on the way to Houston. You should go there; it will be useful for your research! It's a place where you can buy everything, from refrigerators to food. Often there are people playing the guitar and dancing, many families go there right after church on Sundays. They don't close that late, maybe around 6 p.m., but there's always a *fiesta*-atmosphere! Many families spend their entire days there." When I asked Steve and Emilia if they had ever spent the day there, Emilia said that she had been there a couple of times, but that she does not usually go there. Steve had been there once, but not in a long while.

When Emilia and Steve told me about the Mexican market, it was almost as if they told me about a theme park. They had both been there, but they told me about it with a certain distance to what was going on. It was something *they* did, *them* being the Mexicans. The cast and crew at Encuentros could be mistaken for being Mexican immigrants because of their physical appearance, which could lead to uncomfortable situations as demonstrated with the Arizona-case above. This may be one of the reasons why Emilia and Steve implicitly distanced from "the Mexicans". But belonging to a large, collective group can also be beneficial, and using culture as identity can be an important means of claiming recognition.

Using culture as identity

Being a part of a collective group may be an efficient means for demanding recognition and political rights (Arel and Kertzer, 2002). This use was also present in the everyday life of the cast and crew. One day at rehearsal, the actor Vicky expressed how someone had used her ethnicity as Latina to make her demand her rights at work:

Vicky came into the rehearsal room and was clearly upset. She had a conflict at work, and had talked to a counselor about it. Vicky recounted how the counselor had told her to not let any supervisor break her down, that she should stand up for herself and be a proud Latina: “She pulled the Latino card on me, and then I couldn’t give up! When someone tells me to not give up and be a strong Latina, I just have to keep going”. “I hate it when they do that”, director José interrupted. “Like ‘don’t let the White guys screw you, just like they screwed our forefathers’”. Everyone in the room agreed that it was very effective to “pull the Latino card”.

Although Vicky’s problem at work was not explicitly relevant to the fact that she was Latina, the counselor still referred to her ethnicity when she encouraged her to stand up for herself. The counselor’s reason for “pulling the Latino card” may be seen in relation to the long history of using ethnic identities as a way of claiming civil rights for minorities. The examples are numerous: From the “Black is beautiful”-slogan of the Black civil rights movement, to homosexuals’ appropriation of the term gay. According to the UT professor mentioned earlier, this was also the case for the term Chicano. He told me that what some people do not realize, is that Chicano is an old term: “It was around in the forties and fifties, just describing people in the neighborhood”. A Chicano, he said, usually referred to a lower class person, so when the term got picked up in the 1960s as part of the civil rights movement, many older people did not like it, because it had a negative connotation for them. But like the term “Black” had a negative connotation, “Chicano” was used as a form of empowerment.

Anthony Cohen states that this form of empowerment, by him called reversal of stigma, became apparent during the last quarter of the 20th century: “Blacks became “beautiful”; ladies became “women”; Eskimos and Lapps became, respectively, Inuit and Saami (Cohen, 1993:203). More recently the “wise Latina” campaign can be seen as a similar case. On August 6, 2009, Sonia Sotomayor was elected the first Latina Supreme Court judge in the USA. Sotomayor had previously stated that being a “wise Latina” might help her be a good judge.⁷³ This made Republicans react negatively, and accused her of claiming both ethnic and gender superiority. However, it also generated a “wise Latina” campaign, with t-shirts, media activity and demonstrations. Cohen states that when a reversal of stigma is happening, one is positing one’s culture as identity (Cohen, 1993). Both Vicky’s counselor and Sonia Sotomayor connected being Latino with something positive, a reason to demand justice at work and be a good judge. But José’s negative reaction in the conversation shows

⁷³ <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1910403,00.html>. Retrieved June 7 2011.

the two-sided aspect of the situation. While identifying as a “proud Latino” can be a positive connotation, José associates it with being part of a historically oppressed group.

According to Gerd Baumann (1996) ethnic groups are defined with reference to a common culture they are supposed to share, thus culture is seen as something fixed and static. He argues that “whereas the Civil Rights Movement demanded equal individual rights for all citizens regardless of who there were, the Black Consciousness Movement addressed its constituents, not as citizens, but as a distinctive community with its own culture” (Baumann, 1996:12). The same may be said about the Latino Civil Rights Movement. Here, culture becomes something people “have” or “are members of”, an essentialized aspect of a person’s identity. In the next section we shall see how traditional and biological views of culture and ethnicity are being used in negotiations of Latino identities.

Being Native American in Austin – genetics and “traditions”

For the audience at Encuentros’ plays to recognize the experiences of the characters, there has to be an external framework of meaning of what it is to be Latino, what Jenkins calls “a repertoire of culturally-specified practices” (Jenkins, 1994:199). A common understanding of these practices is thus necessary both for internal definition and audience recognition. In Austin, several organizations or motive powers want to portray Latino culture, or make people support their political agenda by using different forms of artistic expressions related to tradition and culture. In this section I will describe some people who identify as Native Americans and their wish to make native Texan Latinos identify themselves as such. The aim with this section is to show how some people refer to static or primordial aspects of language, culture and race genetics when they express what being Native American or Latino is. Like Encuentros, they also posture culture as identity, but with a more explicit relevance to “traditional culture”. This way of expressing ethnic identity may be rooted in traditional minority politics, and based to views on biological race. By demonstrating these people’s way of representing Latinos, as opposed to Encuentros’ use of modern comedy theater, I want to illustrate some different means used in Austin to express what being Latino is.

In March I attended a panel debate at the University of Texas, where the theme was how indigenous people from Texas can come together for social change. One of the topics of the debate was that Native Americans are described as minorities by the United States government and public media, but never as a nation.⁷⁴ The debate started with a statement

⁷⁴ The mythical homeland of the native Latinos in the Southwestern US is called Aztlán – land of the Aztecs. During the Chicano movement, Aztlán was used as a symbol of a proposed homeland for Southwestern Latinos.

from a woman in the panel: “No one identifies me as Native American, even though my grandfather spoke Nahuatl”.⁷⁵ Two people in the panel presented themselves with their name and tribe: One as a member of a Texan/Mexican native clan, Dr Miguel, and the other, John, as Cherokee. Dr Miguel had long, dark hair in two braids, a colorful vest and a shirt. He worked for an organization which goal is to make Latinos identify as Native Americans in the 2010 census. When it was his turn to speak, he started with telling a story:

“An old Comanche man walks along the beach.⁷⁶ He sees this other man on the shore, walking back and forth. He walks up to him to see what he is doing. The old man sees that hundreds of starfish are stranded on the shore, and the other man is throwing them back into the water, one by one. The old man approaches the other, and asks him why he does it. “Because if I don’t help them back into the water they will die!” “But there are so many stranded starfish – hundreds, maybe thousands! Will it make a difference?” The other man picks up a starfish, looks at the man and says: ‘It will for this one’”.

Dr Miguel ended the story by saying: “So a lot of people don’t think that they can change the world. But we can, one step at the time”. And to him, changing the world was to make more Latinos aware that they are Native Americans. “Many Hispanics are afraid of identifying themselves as Native Americans. Many do not know their tribe, because many natives got de-tribalized when they had to call themselves White”. When Dr. Miguel talked about the importance of identifying as Native Americans, he used traditional storytelling as a narrative device. But he also used biology:

“Even though you have a Spanish last name, you are not necessarily Hispanic. 40 millions incorrectly call themselves Hispanic and Mestizo, after the Spaniards gave them Spanish last names and christened them.⁷⁷ DNA studies show that 80-90% of tested Hispanics were 100% indigenous. There were not enough Spaniards to make a Mestizo race. 900 soldiers and then 3000 families arrived from Spain. That’s not so many”.

Dr. Miguel referred to DNA and genetics to state his point. The woman who started the debate connected the knowledge of a native language to ethnic identity. When the debate

⁷⁵ Nahuatl is a language and language group from Mesoamerica, which has been spoken in Mexico since the 600s. Nahuatl is the native language of the Aztecs. It is currently spoken among 1.5 million Mexicans. <http://www.native-languages.org/nahuatl.htm#language>. Retrieved February 2 2011.

⁷⁶ Comanche is the name of a Native American ethnic group.

⁷⁷ Mestizo is a term which in an American context is used to describe Latin Americans of mixed European and Native American descent.

ended, she cited the first lines of a book she had brought: "Chicanos and Chicanas are indigenous to the Americas". As mentioned earlier, Mexico had to give up almost half of its territory to the United States after the Mexican-American war. For Latinos native to the Southwestern United States, this area may indeed (and is by many) called their native land. Similar views on Native Latinos were present in the local Spanish-language newspaper *Ahora Sí*. In an article entitled *Indigenas quieren hacerse contar en el censo* (Indigenous people want to be counted in the census), María Rocha from the Institute of Indigenous Cultures in Austin states that "no matter how hard people try to learn English or wear Western clothes, the reality is that we have an indigenous past". Rocha also added that recognition helps to counter discrimination with a sense of pride and belonging.⁷⁸

Identifying as Native American can thus be a way of creating a sense of belonging to the United States. In "Pocho Humor" (Dickinson, 2008), Rafael Perez-Torres points out that during the Chicano Movement, Latinos adopted an indigenous identity as a tactical position, with a sense of alienation as a starting point: "Chicanos became Natives. Identification with the Indian gave birth to a Chicano/a critical subaltern identity in solidarity with other indigenous groups throughout the Americas" (Perez-Torres, 2006:9 in Dickinson, 2008:131). Identifying as Native American through expressing primordial traditions and biological views on race and ethnicity is one of several ways of constructing a Latino identity.

On several occasions contacts in Austin took me places to "show me Mexican culture", as one of them expressed it. An Anglo acquaintance drove me an hour outside of Austin so we could see a traditional Mexican Mariachi-band play, pointing out that "this is so important for you". Overall, what people chose to show me was what we can call traditional Mexican folklore, not Mexican American and not particularly modern.⁷⁹ Bettina Ng'weno writes that in order to claim rights, ethnic groups should be both different and culturally distinct, and have "un-modern traditions" (Ng'weno, 2007). She argues that ethnic minorities are generally labeled as traditional and pre-modern by the majority, and that the minorities themselves should use these conceptions to claim rights effectively.

Ethnic identity is a resource that can be used as a means in different ways and different contexts. While on the one hand it is seen as something a person is born with, it can also be viewed as a choice or something changeable (like those Latinos who choose to identify as

⁷⁸ My translation. <http://www.ahorasi.com/reportaje-%c2%bb-un-mal-conteo-cuesta-mucho/>. Retrieved March 3 2010.

⁷⁹ More contemporary performances and musical expressions did certainly exist. For example, a woman in the Encuentros' community participated in a performance that explored traditional Mexican folklore dance using contemporary American dance elements and Latino hiphop-music. But this was not the kind of performance most people outside Encuentros took me to when they wanted to "show me some culture".

Native American). Arild Hovland calls ethnic identity a paradox: One can choose one's ethnicity, but at the same time one cannot. Ethnicity is both a resource and a hindrance (Hovland, 1996).

Conclusion

Both state categorizations like the census as well as biological views of race affect the ways people identify themselves. The dialectic relationship between state categorization and in-group identification is a foundation for both the theater company and cast and crew's expressions of Latino identity. Through the United States census the cast and crew are obliged by law to identify themselves according to a set of given categories. The census counting is based on people checking the "right" box according to their self-ascribed identity, based on interests for themselves and their communities, like the distribution of economic resources. But some of them found it hard to categorize themselves, because the categories created by the Census Bureau do not always reflect how they view themselves. When people write "Latino" as their race in the census, they try to oppose the given set of categories. But even though there is room for oppositional expressions, they get caught in the language created by the power-holders. Despite of the use of tactic by writing Latino as a racial category, those who do so end up in the category "some other race", which make them left out of the official statistic.

Through the example from the Native American conference, I have argued that essentialized cultural traditions can be an important means of constructing a common ethnic identity. This form of expressing Latino identity differs from Encuentros, which use modern comedy theater. What they have in common is that they use culture as identity, and the fact that they have to relate to categorization terms created by the Census Bureau and use these categories as a starting point for their expressions and oppositions.

The cast and crew members also reflect on who they are, and who the Others are, through jokes and imitations of themselves and others. In the next chapter I will further analyze the cast and crew's everyday interaction, focusing on their use of humor, joking and the role of language.

Chapter 4

Joking, Language and Identity

Introduction

The rain was pouring down on our way to a cast party. By the time we reached the front porch of Vicky's house, everyone were soaking wet. One of the crew members complained that his shirt was drenched, whereas actor David replied optimistically: "Why do you complain? Our backs are always wet anyway, from swimming across the river!"⁸⁰

In accounts of anthropological fieldwork, both from students and well established anthropologists, there is often a point when the anthropologist discovers something unexpected, which leads her fieldwork in a new direction. In my case, I was initially going to study how Latino identity was expressed through theater. But already on the first day of rehearsal it became evident that there was a frequent use of humor, both in the scripts and among cast and crew. Humoristic commentaries and jokes were not only present in the plays, but also at rehearsals, backstage during the shows and at social gatherings. And what characterized this use of humor and jokes, just like the theme of the plays, was that they dealt with the relationship between "us" (Latinos or Mexican Americans) and "them" (Mexican immigrants and Anglos).

The focus in the first part of this chapter will be how stereotypes are present in comedies and joking, and the social function of jokes. Jokes and humoristic stories have a long tradition among Latinos in the Southwest. A joke can be interpreted in numerous ways; as a way of releasing tension, to deal with difficult or controversial issues, or simply to engage in social interaction (Driessen, 2001). The joking among the cast and crew is a complex matter. I will argue that when they joke about Mexicans they do not only joke about the Other, but also the Mexican part of their selves. I will address this by using Edwina Barvosa-Carters (1999) theories on multiple identities. In one way, joking and humor is used to create in-group solidarity and belonging by distancing oneself from non-members of the group. At the same time it is a means of self-reflection. I will also argue that it is a way of

⁸⁰ The term "wetback" is a common derogatory term used about people with Mexican heritage, pointing to the fact that some illegal immigrants enter Texas from Mexico by swimming or wading across the Rio Grande River.

reflecting upon the uneven power relationship between Anglos and non-Anglos, and the fact that the cast and crew as Mexican American are situated in-between these categories.

As shown previously in this thesis, recurrent themes in Latino expressive culture are stereotypes, identity and the U.S.-Mexican border. Jennifer Alvarez Dickinson's concept of "Pocho humor" will be a basis for the first part of this chapter (Dickinson, 2008). The term Pocho can have many different meanings, but Dickinson defines it as an "Anglized Mexican"; a Chicano or Latino whose Mexican parents moved to the United States, and who has "forgotten" about his or her Mexican background (Dickinson, 2008). I will also use theoretical concepts from Texan anthropologists Americo Paredes and José E. Limón to analyze the joking situations which took place during my fieldwork.

The use of the Spanish language is evident in certain cast member's jokes. Language is regarded as one of the most important ethnicity markers and a common ground for creating belonging and mobilization among minority groups (Flores and Yudice, 1990). In the second part of this chapter I will argue that even though some of the actors do not speak Spanish, they are still connected to the Spanish language. The reason for this may be that the ethnic category "Latino" is based around an (expected) knowledge of Spanish. Knowledge of Spanish is not just important for the cast members as Latino actors, but also for their personal identification as Latinos. I will rely on Flores and Yudices (1990) view that "Latino identity is mediated and constructed through the struggle over language rights" (Flores and Yudice, 1990:59). The development of bilingual education policy can be seen in relation to minority politics in the United States, and I will demonstrate the political role of the Spanish language through the history of bilingual education. I argue that the reason why Spanish is so central to my informants is because the ethnic group "Latino" is based on language. But first, I will look at stereotypes and joking.

Jokes and joking

Both the jokes in Encuentros' plays, as well as the jokes between cast and crew, were based on stereotype views of Others.⁸¹ Keith Brown (2004) states that "the ways in which people describe otherness in their daily interactions are important, because they can both affirm social solidarity and membership, while they can also be a way of transmitting stereotypes" (Brown, 2004:7). This will be evident throughout this chapter, which I will start with an example of one of the jokes that took place during my fieldwork.

⁸¹ For a general introduction to the term stereotype, see page 27 in Chapter 2.

One afternoon, a crew member had brought some bagels to rehearsal. To cut the bagels in two, Steve used a large knife which he carried in his belt. I was surprised by the fact that he carried a knife, and when Steve saw the surprised look on my face he said: "We're in Texas, everybody carries knives!". "I thought everyone in Texas had guns, not knives", I answered. Steve then explained that he always carried a knife, and shouted out ironically: "I'm Hispanic, I need to carry a knife!" "Why, in case of a gang fight?", I replied jokingly. "I need to have it in case I run into the police or government authorities", Steve joked, "If they try to take away my green card!" "Like I even have one," he added, thus completing the joke. Our conversation then went on normally.

Although Steve never said why he actually carried a knife, I suppose he did it for practical purposes. In this joke Steve played with common stereotypes that all Hispanics or Latinos are undocumented immigrants. As born and raised in the United States, Steve definitively had a green card, a card that shows that a person is allowed to work and reside in the United States on a permanent basis. But when he made the joke, he pretended that he had not. The reasons behind this kind of joking will be analyzed throughout this chapter. I will now look at how stereotypes are present in film and theater, and how they are contested.

Stereotype Latinos on stage and screen –tactics and challenges

UT professor Charles Ramírez Berg has done research on Latino stereotypes in motion pictures. In his view, stereotyping is a result of three combined processes: category making, ethnocentrism and prejudice (Berg, 2002:15). He defines it as "a negative generalization used by an in-group (Us) about an out-group (Them)" (Berg, 2002:15). Berg mainly refers to stereotypes portrayed in mass media and Hollywood movies, and has identified six basic Latino stereotype film characters in U.S. cinema: *El Bandido* (the Mexican bandit), the Latin lover, the Harlot (the female bandit), the Male Buffoon (a simpleminded comical character), the Female Clown (the counterpart of the Male Buffoon), and the Dark Lady (the female Latin lover) (Berg, 2002:66). All of these characters are in some way the opposite of the typical White Anglo Saxon Protestant, or WASP.⁸² In other words, these stereotypes are the Others; what the Anglo Americans are not. According to Berg, these stereotypes "reveal the mainstream's attitude towards Others" (Berg, 2002:4). Research on humor in the Southwestern United States shows Latino humorist's awareness of the power of using

⁸² A White Anglo Saxon Protestant is "an American of Northern European and especially British ancestry and of Protestant background; *especially* a member of the dominant and the most privileged class of people in the United States". Encyclopedia Britannica, retrieved June 2 2011: <http://www.britannica.com/bsp/dictionary?query=wasp>

stereotypes in jokes as a form of critique. This is evident in Americo Paredes' and José Limón's (1982) analysis of jokes, and also in jokes by characters and actors at Encuentros, which I will deal with later on. Dickinson categorizes Berg's stereotypes into three categories: the criminal, the inept/subservient and the hyper-sexual (Dickinson, 2008:142). Several of these characters are found in productions by Encuentros.

As indicated in Chapter 2, some of the lines that caused the most laughter among the audience in *Nuestra Vida* were about the relationship or differences between Latinos and Anglos in the US. Other popular lines were about the mother-in-law *Juana*'s failed attempts to speak correct English, and her assumptions of other's capability of understanding it:

The somewhat naive mother-in-law *Juana* has been pretending that she is ill in order not to move to the retirement home. When the family friend *Eva* comes to visit, *Juana* reveals that she is not sick at all, just pretending:

Eva: "I didn't want to ask you about preparing food for the party, since you are ill."

Juana: "But I'm perfectly fine."

Eva: "I know, that's why I didn't want to ask you to...wait, what do you mean you're perfectly fine?"

Juana: "*Perfectamente bien.*"⁸³

Eva: "I know what it **means** (audience laugh)...forget it. So you haven't been feeling lightheaded and confused?"

Juana: "No. I lied."

When the audience laughs at *Juana*'s language problems, some may also laugh at the stereotype view of Mexican immigrants. *Juana*'s language problems play upon the stereotype view of Mexicans as unintelligent and unable to speak proper English, although they live in the United States. These kinds of jokes were also present among the cast and crew.

As elaborated in Chapter 2, the characters in the play *Nuestra Vida* are middle class, well-educated Latinos, who have no explicit references to living close to the border or a former life in Mexico. The characters in *Nuestra Vida* do not fit into any of Charles Ramirez-Berg's stereotype characters. Even though *Juana* sometimes seems like a simpleminded character, she often shows wit and intelligence when she tries to avoid moving to the retirement home. When writing the script for *Nuestra Vida*, the playwright was consciously portraying different characters than those usually seen in mainstream media and popular

⁸³ *Perfectly fine* in Spanish.

culture.⁸⁴ However, in other plays produced by Encuentros, the characters are often purposefully stereotyped by the playwright. An example of this is the play *Borders*, about two people patrolling the border between the United States and Mexico. Unlike the characters in *Nuestra Vida*, the main characters in *Borders* were Mexican immigrants who had migrated to the U.S. and gotten jobs in border control. In the play there was more use of Spanish than in *Nuestra Vida*, and the male lead often mispronounced words and expressions in English, which lead to comical misunderstandings. In addition to being hyper-sexual (claiming that he does not need Viagra, even though he can buy it cheap in Mexico), the male lead was also somewhat simpleminded, which relates to the Male Buffoon in Berg's description. Berg writes that what makes audiences laugh at the Male Buffoon is that his characteristics are so different from the WASP American mainstream; for example that he is highly emotional and has trouble speaking correct English (Berg, 2002).

When a Latino actor plays a stereotypical Latino role, and does it with enjoyment and knowledge of the stereotypical traits of the character, Berg argues that the stereotype role can function as "a parody of the stereotype, and healthy in breaking down stereotypical representations" (Berg, 2002:72). However, using a stereotype Latino character to break down stereotypes about Latinos may not necessarily have another outcome than using a character which is not stereotypical. Berg questions whether *any* use of a stereotype "can resist without in some ways serving to reinforce it" (Berg, 2002:72-73). The stereotypes can be taken as truth, especially when they emerge over and over again in popular culture. They become a part of the narrative standard (Berg, 2002).

When Encuentros wants to oppose stereotype views, they have to existing stereotypes created by the majority as a starting point. Here we find the problem of the opposition, as referred to in Chapter 3.⁸⁵ Dickinson (2008) states that to make a critique of Latino stereotypes portrayed on television, in film and/or performing arts, the artists first have to enact them. She follows Berg when she states that "stereotypes can evoke immediate laughter, but stereotypes are only humorous if the audience is aware of their exaggeration. The risk is that the stereotype will be taken at face value and will reinforce preconceived notions of identity and cultural difference" (Dickinson, 2008:129). This is a challenge for Encuentros, which have used stereotypes in several of their comedies. It is important that the audience recognizes the act of imitation through stereotypes in order to grasp the critique of these negatively portrayed images of Latinos. In other words, they have to understand that the

⁸⁴ See page 26 in Chapter 2.

⁸⁵ See Larsen (1999) and page 54.

stereotype, like the lead character in *Borders*, is shown as a critique (in addition to entertainment) and not as a realistic character. I will now move on to look at how stereotypes are present in the cast and crew's jokes, and the meanings behind the joking.

Different forms of joking

A joke can take many forms. Either as structured kinship obligations, as first described in anthropology by Radcliffe-Brown (1940), as ritual enactments, structured storytelling, spontaneous remarks, irony, sarcasm or stand-up comedy. Jokes can be innocent, provocative or simply a harmless reflection on a current situation – the landscape of joking and humor is varied and complex. Keith Basso has shown how Apache Indians imitate the “Whiteman” in order to construct an opposite Other (Basso, 1979). Renato Rosaldo (1993) argues that joking remains a vital part of Chicano cultural expression, both as a source of relief and of positive identification (Rosaldo, 1993). To Radcliffe-Brown, who studied joking relationships in Africa, joking is a “social art form that strengthens and promotes social solidarity by safely venting aggressive feelings” (in Limón, 1982:155). While Radcliffe-Brown's study was about joking *relationships*, when the cast and crew members made jokes the person or group who is being made fun of was seldom present. Almost every joke about Whites or Mexicans were made without a present “butt”, a term used by Basso (1979) to describe the victim of the joke. The most obvious reason for this may be that the jokes I observed took place in a closed physical space, where there were not many Whites or Mexicans present. Although it did occur that the White actress was the subject of jokes, the jokes were rarely directed towards any specific person.⁸⁶ The jokes were about a generalized group of people.

Texas native Américo Paredes was one of the first to analyze what he called Chicano joking traditions in the Southwestern United States (Limón, 1982). While Paredes and José Limón analyzed what Mary Douglas calls standard jokes (Douglas, 1968:365), as in “have you heard the one about the Mexican who...”, the joking among the cast and crew at Encuentros were what Douglas refers to as spontaneous jokes, in form of impulsive comments during social interaction (Douglas, 1968:365). The jokes by the cast and crew can be divided into two main categories: Jokes about Mexicans and jokes about Whites. (As mentioned earlier, Black people were totally absent in the joking context.) Both jokes about Whites and

⁸⁶ Even though I sometimes was the only non-Latino present, people rarely made jokes on my behalf. I suppose this was because they did not know me that well, and thus wanted to be polite.

Mexicans were based on stereotypes, like “White people’s” inability to understand extended family relations.⁸⁷ However, the majority of jokes were about Mexicans.

Joking and identities: the Mexican Self and the Mexican Other

During the first rehearsal of *Nuestra Vida* director José asked actor David to read his lines slower, so that the rest of the cast would understand what he said. David immediately replied in a humoristic tone: “We’re Mexican – that’s how we talk!” The cast and crew often referred to themselves as Mexicans when they made jokes, or they pretended to be Mexicans. This pretending often took form as small improvised skits:

José told David to place himself in the kitchen area of the stage. David immediately started to pretend he was making tortillas by clapping his hands together, with a smile on his face, looking enthusiastic and childish. A couple of the actors laughed, while others did not react or care at all. The “sketch” lasted less than 10 seconds.

Here, David resorted to the stereotype view of the ever-happy, naïve Mexican. Making tortillas the hand-made way, as opposed to using a machine, can point to the imagined old-fashioned or backwardness of Mexicans. When the cast members were acting “Mexican”, they used both body and speech language and played with the symbolic connection (as for example seen in media) between being Mexican and a certain set of cultural traits. The joke mentioned above may relate to what Spradley and Mann (1975:134) call joking reversals – the joke is used to confirm the opposite of what is pointed out in the joke. If David, a middle class businessman when not working as an actor, had actually made handmade tortillas in his kitchen every morning (which I assume he does not do), he would probably not have joked about it. In one way, David confirms that he is not an old-fashioned Mexican, or simply not a stereotype Mexican, by indirectly indicating distance from the character he acts out. But on the other hand, he may be joking with the Mexican part of his Self, as Mexican American. Viewed this way, the jokes can both deny and affirm his Mexican-ness. The at any given time “Other”, in other words, always embodies aspects of the self (see Sax, 1998).

Dickinson shows that Latino stand-up comedians like Carlos Menica and George Lopez also make a distinction between “two kinds of Mexicans”, and thus highlight the often complex relationship between the two groups, in their case separating between “immigrants” and “citizens” (Dickinson, 2008:88). Even though the cast and crew made a clear distinction

⁸⁷ See pages 40-41 in Chapter 2 for a joke about family relations.

between Us and Them, they often took on the role as Mexican when joking (as shown in the example above), although they distanced themselves from Mexicans in other, or the very same jokes. This shows the cast and crew's ability to emphasize their Mexican identity at some times, where at other times communicating their Mexican American-ness.⁸⁸

Dickinson (2008) writes that the Pocho, the Anglified Mexican, is culturally impure. If we place the cast and crew into the category "pocho", Dickinson's argument can be used to demonstrate how the cast and crew are situated in-between being Mexican and American, which can explain their wish to both identify with and distance themselves from both Mexicans and Whites:

The concept of "pochismo" speaks directly to an incongruous cultural bind rooted in nationalistic ideas of identity and belonging, and reinforced by political borders and systems of legal documentation. [...] pochos are not "American enough" for the dominant culture, and not "Mexican enough" for Mexicans (Dickinson, 2008:71).

The ambivalence felt by "pochos" may stem from the nationalistic idea that a person should have one nationality, or in other words, be either American or Mexican. When the cast members joke, they can be both the "immigrant" and the "citizen". But just as they are both, at the same time they can be seen as neither, caught between categories. But these conflicting notions on being either one or the other, mainly created by a nationalist assimilation policy in the United States, can be solved using multiple identity theory. Edwina Barvosa-Carter (1999) states that with multiple identity theory Chicanos can have their Mexican *and* mainstream American identity. She defines multiple identities as "a concept in which the self is made up of a number of different but integrated identities" (Barvosa-Carter, 1999). With a collective acceptance of multiple identities, it is thus not necessary for Latinos to assimilate into the Anglo mainstream, she argues. Following Barvosa-Carter's argument, even though my informants have embraced many Anglo "cultural values", it does not mean that they have lost their Latino identity. The identities exist simultaneously, and they are highly aware of it.

Barvosa-Carter also argues that if a person who inhabits several identities also possesses a willingness to self-reflect upon them, this can have a positive outcome in form of societal change. The next section will further analyze the self-reflective part of the cast and crew's joking.

⁸⁸ For example when Emilia said "many people say that the Mexicans come here and take all our jobs", see page 29 in Chapter 2.

Self-satirical jokes and the maintenance of social order

The fact that the cast and crew joked about the Mexican part of themselves, or reflected upon themselves through joking about Mexicans, can be related to Paredes' concept of self-satirical jokes. During Paredes' fieldwork in Mexico, South Texas and East Chicago between 1962 and 1963, he collected and analyzed more than 200 jokes by Mexicans and Chicanos (Dickinson, 2008:46). Among other categorizations, Paredes determined two kinds of joking traditions involving Mexican Americans and Whites in Texas (Limón, 1982). One of them is the Stupid American joke, where the Anglo American is taken advantage of by a Mexican, often involving a language misunderstanding. The other kind is called the self-satirical joke. Here, the Mexican Americans make fun of themselves, and their "inability to manage American culture, particularly in its technological dimensions" (Limón, 1982:141). Both of the joking traditions described by Paredes are also found among other ethnic groups, and thus is not something used by Mexican Americans exclusively (Limón, 1982:141). These two kinds of joking traditions were evident in the humor both on and off stage. The self-satirical jokes apply to *Juana* in *Nuestra Vida*, to the male lead character in *Borders*, and in the example with David's tortilla-making mentioned above. Another example shows the self-satirical aspect of the jokes:

One of the first days of rehearsal, the actors were going to rehearse a scene which included a television set. The only TV in the rehearsal space was rather old and large, as opposed to a flat screen TV (in the play, Daniel used the flat screen from his own kitchen).

Vicky: "This TV is huge!"

José: "It's really heavy!"

Vicky: "It's a box!"

David: "We're Hispanic; of course it's a box. We don't have any flat screens; we don't even know how to use one!"

When David said that Hispanics do not own or know how to use a modern flat screen television, he may have referred to stereotypes of Latinos as being poor, unintelligent and old-fashioned. But David clearly exaggerated. Stereotyping is also about exaggeration; or to overcommunicate a person's or a group's supposed characteristics. As in storytelling, the exaggerations are used as a means of highlighting the point of the story, as David does in the example above. Paredes concluded that "the Stupid American joke is a socially sanctioned

release of repressed, aggressive ethnic feelings, while the self-satirical form, when told by Mexican Americans, reveals ambivalent notions toward the self and the ethnic other” (in Limón, 1982:141). Implicitly, in Paredes’ analysis of joking there is a functional connection between these jokes and the preservation of social order (Limón, 1982:141). His work is useful for understanding the jokes that took place among the cast and crew. Regarding the maintenance of social order, the joking can be seen as distancing from the White middle class, to preserve their identity as Latino. At the same time it is a distancing from working-class Mexican immigrants. This may be due to a wish to not being pushed downwards the socio-economic ladder. The cast and crew may wish to maintain a position from where they can kick both up and down, and at the same time identify both up and down, depending on the social context. This becomes possible by inhabiting and playing with multiple identities.

The social meanings of jokes: different approaches

In 1980, José R. Reyna published a book based on his ethnographic study of jokes in Texas between 1969 and 1971, called *Raza Humor* (Reyna, 1980).⁸⁹ He concludes that a great deal of what he refers to as Chicano joking is based on the illusion of the American Dream, and its implications for Chicanos (meaning those who have resided in the United States for some time) and Mexican immigrants. Therefore, common themes for Latino jokes are the border and border crossing, misunderstandings by immigrants caused by little knowledge of English, racism and stereotypes (Reyna, 1980). These are the same themes as I observed both in theatrical productions by Encuentros and in everyday joking between the cast and crew. Like when the cast members discussed international restaurant chains, and one of the actors said jokingly: “One thing is the same around the world. If you look into a restaurant, the busboy is always Mexican”, implying the stereotype view that all Mexicans have low-prestige and low-paid jobs.

José E. Limón has published several works on Latino joking and humor. Much of Limón’s work is a continuation of Paredes’, but contrary to Paredes Limón believes that jokes cannot be reduced to a reflection of inner anxiety and anger. He argues that jokes are also modes of shaping and maintaining social order, and have great potential for social action (Limón, 1982). With this argument, Limón also contradicts Mary Douglas’ statement that the joke is just a play upon form, and does not offer any alternatives to the current social situation (Limón, 1982:157).

⁸⁹ For an explanation of the term Raza, see page 5 in Chapter 1.

Limón looks to the social drama of Victor Turner (1974) when he argues that joking is a step in the process of reshaping group ideology while seeking redressive measures (Limón, 1982). The redressive measures refer to the third step in Turner's four-stage social drama. The social drama starts with a crisis between (at least) two parties, followed by a mounting crisis. Then follows the redressive phase, in which the parties try to solve the conflict, and this is where "both pragmatic techniques and symbolic action reach their fullest expression (Turner, 1974:41). Finally, there is either a restoration of the social situation prior to the crisis, or "the social recognition and legitimization of irreplaceable schism between the contesting parties" (Turner, 1974:41). Limón claims that such a social drama took place among Chicanos at the University of Texas at Austin during the years 1966 to 1975 (Limón, 1982:158). He points to a crisis which emerged when Chicano students entered the Anglo-dominated UT, and the ways in which the Chicano students joked about being (historically) oppressed by Anglos. I will not claim that the same was the case during my fieldwork in Austin during the spring of 2010. Although the cast and crew navigated in a world dominated by the Anglo majority, there was no rupture, no crisis, maybe due to a calm political landscape as opposed to the civil rights movements in the 1960s and 70s. I will therefore emphasize Limón's point of the creation of community.

Humor and the creation of solidarity and belonging

Using Turner, Limón stated that jokes are symbols for expressing community, or *communitas* (Limón, 1982). When it comes to jokes as a means of creating community, both Douglas and Limón agree. Douglas states that "laughter and jokes, since they attack classification and hierarchy, are obviously apt symbols for expressing community in this sense of unhierarchised, undifferentiated social relations" (Douglas, 1968:370). The cast and crew used humor to create in-group inclusion, whether they referred to the group of cast and crew members as Mexicans or Mexican Americans.

According to Vassiliki Neofotistos (in 2004), even though people can create stereotypes of the Other inside their own group, they are at the same time able to maintain a friendly relationship with the people outside the group, whom they are labelling and joking about. This is also the case among the people at Encuentros. While they made jokes about Mexicans and Anglos, they all had relationships with these people at work and in their social lives. Several people at Encuentros are married to Anglos or have Anglo friends, and I seldom heard anyone express stereotypes about other ethnicities in a discriminating non-joking context. Although the cast and crew joked with stereotypes of themselves and portrayed

stereotypes in their plays, I follow Limón's argument that "Texas-Mexican joking is not an exercise in self hatred; rather it takes account of societal differences in expressive ways that strengthen in-group identity and pride" (Limón, 1984:48).

The jokes made by the cast and crew can at first sight be seen as pure entertainment – the goal is to make other people laugh. Telling a good story, and being a good comedian was highly valued among the cast. But the joking was also a way of creating social ties through making fun of both the Other and each other, as well as a way of deflecting (potential) ethnic and racial tension (see Dickinson, 2008:13).⁹⁰

Opposing the majority

Both Radcliffe-Brown and Mary Douglas, among others, state that in order to understand the purpose of joking and its place in a consistent system, one has to understand the surrounding social structure (Douglas, 1968). In the case of my material, we may say that in order to understand why the cast and crew are making jokes about Whites and Mexicans we must understand the relationship between these groups in a historical perspective. The reason the cast and crew joke about Mexicans as the Other, may be because they are opposing being categorized in the same group (as mentioned previously). This is also related to class and social status, in that the Mexican immigrants are generally seen as belonging to the working class. By joking, the cast and crew bring critical issues and themes out in the open, and mark their presence and participation in the Anglo-dominated U.S society. I argue that the jokes made by the cast and crew (as well as the scripted jokes in the play) can be seen as acts of opposition against the cultural and socio-economic Anglo majority, and their view of Latinos as belonging to a lower class. By using stereotypes there is a consciousness-raising concerning their very existence. In this new context, the stereotypes change meaning. Like a reversal of stigma (Cohen, 1993), the cast and crew appropriate the terms used by the majority to alienate or exclude them. By joking about themselves as Mexicans, using self-reflective jokes, there is therefore a subversive potential. Their everyday joking expressions about themselves as Mexicans cannot be controlled by the majority.

Both joking practices and the Spanish language are tools for expressing aspects of Latino identities. In Chapter 2 I showed how language is one of Encuentros' artistic means for creating audience recognition and a Latino group identity among members of the company. I will now further analyze the role of language, by placing the cast and crew member's use of

⁹⁰ The joke about how the Anglo actress supposedly did not dare to enter the "Brown neighbourhood" is an example of such a joke, see page 14 in Chapter 1.

Spanish into a broader socio-political context, and demonstrate the personal importance of the Spanish language for certain cast and crew members. This way, I expand the picture which shows the influences for the performances and expressions of Latino identities.

The Spanish language and Latino identity

During rehearsal, when the actors were going through a scene, David enthusiastically interrupted: “The next time we’ll do the scene in Spanish”! Christina looked worried and replied: “Oh no. We could do it in Jiddish; that would have been easier”. They went through the scene once more in English, but the following time David started to say his lines in Spanish with an exaggerated accent. Not all English-speaking Latinos are bilingual, and in the following sections the connection between being Latino and Spanish language abilities will be demonstrated through the use of language among the cast and crew. While several of the actors were bilingual, I will argue that being Latino and monolingual posits a challenge in the Encuentros-community. The actor David, director José, and other members of the cast often spoke English with a Spanish accent to make a joke. Sometimes they also spoke Spanish with an American accent. By speaking grammatically incorrect English with a Spanish accent, I argue that they distanced themselves from the Latinos who actually speak this way. At the same time, while switching from English to Spanish, they showed that they had knowledge of the Spanish language.⁹¹ José R. Reyna argues that because Latinos feel neither fully American nor Mexican, they use their knowledge of both English and Spanish to claim superiority over both groups (Reyna, 1980). According to Dickinson; “being bicultural and often bilingual gives Chicanos and other Latinos a sense of advantage over both Americans who do not speak Spanish and recent immigrants who do not speak English” (Dickinson, 2008:89). When the cast members joke with the Spanish language, it may be just another way of marking their distance to Mexican immigrants, as well as monolingual Anglos.

Language use and pronunciation in *Nuestra Vida*

While English was the main language in *Nuestra Vida*, there were also some expressions and words in Spanish. The mother-in-law *Juana* spoke the most Spanish; it is possible that Spanish was her mother tongue, but there was nothing in the script that indicated where she was from. She was the only one who called her son *Robert* “*Roberto*” throughout the play.

⁹¹ The cast and crew did seldom use Spanglish (the combination of English and Spanish words in a sentence or conversation). While they sometimes uttered expressions, swearing or particular words in Spanish, they did not use both Spanish and English words to create full sentences.

Other Latino names in the play, of a character or a Mexican dish, were pronounced with a Spanish accent, also by the Anglo actress Lisa. On the first day of rehearsal, the pronunciation of names was up for discussion:

Lisa: “So her name is *Juana*. How should I pronounce that name? Should I say *Juana* (with a Spanish accent) or *Johanna*?”

The rest of the actors: “*Juana*, no doubt. That is her name.”

Lisa: “OK then, so how do I react when *Johanna*, I mean *Juana*...” (The other actors interrupt her by laughing at her mistake). “Oh come on guys, obviously I am the only White person and the only non-Spanish speaker in this cast.”⁹² (Joking:) “There are so many things in this script I don’t understand! Like, what are these things the characters talk about? Tacos? Enchi---enchiladas?” (People laugh).

It was obvious that Lisa knew about these Mexican culinary traditions (they are very common in Austin and even in mainstream grocery stores in Norway). The reason she made this joke may be because she *did* know about the dishes. If she had not, she probably would not have made the joke. While everyone agreed that *Juana* had to be pronounced in Spanish, there were no discussions about *Juana* saying *Roberto* instead of *Robert*, like the rest of the characters do. The character *Juana* also pronounced some English words with a Spanish accent. It is relevant here that *Juana* was the oldest person in the play. *Robert*, *María* and the rest of the characters were all in their thirties. *Juana* may be the only character who was not born in the United States. While the rest of the characters watch the movie *Real Women Have Curves*, about a Mexican American girl growing up in Los Angeles, *Juana* watches *telenovelas*; Latin American soap operas. The reason why nobody questions the fact that *Juana* pronounced words with a Spanish accent may be related to an assumption that the older generation use more Spanish because they (possibly) originate from a Spanish-speaking country. This may imply that the younger Latino generation is evolving towards a more English-only way of speaking. I will analyze certain cast and crew members’ relationship with the Spanish language in the paragraphs to come.

⁹² She was not the only non-Spanish speaker.

Language among cast and crew: Emilia and Christina

“Some people speak Spanish, some speak a little Spanish, and some do not speak Spanish at all. Even though a person’s last name is Rodriguez, that doesn’t mean he speaks Spanish! A lot of Encuentros’ audience approach me after the show and say they are ashamed because they don’t know Spanish, and did not understand the Spanish expressions in the play. Or maybe they understand Spanish, because their grandmother spoke it, but they cannot speak it themselves.”

- Emilia

A late night in February I got lost while riding my bike home after a visit to Emilia’s house. I was passing through the campus area of the University of Texas, which covers a large area in northeast central Austin as an integrated part of the city centre. Looking for San Jacinto Street on the West side of town, I stopped and asked a young Anglo man for directions. At this point I had heard Emilia pronounce Spanish street names with a Spanish accent, so I asked the man for directions to San Jasinto with a Spanish pronunciation. “It’s to the right”, he answered, “but here in Austin we call it San Jasinto” (pronouncing it with an American accent). I thanked him and said that I was new in town, and had just heard someone pronounce it in Spanish. “No, that’s not right. We speak English here”, he replied.⁹³ Emilia pronounced every Spanish word with a clear Spanish accent, like the name of a Mexican restaurant or a town in Texas. Through my meeting with the Anglo man I learned that not everyone in Austin pronounced street names like Emilia and most of my other Latino acquaintances did. In addition to pronouncing Spanish names with a Spanish accent, Emilia used Spanish words as a way of creating a sense of Latino group identity in the company.⁹⁴

Although Emilia was bilingual when I met her, it had not always been that way. As a young girl growing up in Texas in the 50’s, she did not learn Spanish at home or at school. While Emilia and I were driving to San Antonio to do some errands, she told me about her relation to the Spanish language:

“I feel like I have a basic level of Spanish, like a seventh grade student. I learned Spanish on my own. My mother spoke both English and Spanish, but she would not teach me Spanish. When I grew up, everything was about *becoming American*. And that meant learning English.

⁹³ This conversation also shows the young man’s negative attitudes towards Spanish-speaking residents in Austin.

⁹⁴ See pages 38-41 in Chapter 2.

There was no bilingual education back then. If you spoke Spanish in school, you were punished! So we did not speak Spanish, not even in the playground. My grandmother spoke both English and Spanish, but when she was with her friends she spoke Spanish only, she didn't care that it was considered *un-American*. So when I was with them I listened to Spanish.”

Emilia understood what her grandmother said in Spanish, even though she could not speak it herself at that time. Some years later she studied Spanish, and she is now able to have everyday conversations in Spanish, “but not intellectual elaborate ones”, she said. Emilia’s experience with only learning English despite of having at least one bilingual parent, is common among Latinos who grew up in the in United States in the 1950s and 60s. While speaking English was associated with the middle class and upward mobility, speaking Spanish was seen as a sign of being a working-class Mexican immigrant. But in 1968, the Bilingual Education Act was passed in the United States, in which Texans played a great role. It was Senator Ralph W. Yarborough of Texas who managed to pass the act, which was signed by Texas-born Lyndon B. Johnson (Andersson, 1971). Senator Yarborough wrote the following illustrative anecdote to the Hearings before the special subcommittee on Bilingual Education in the Congress:

Imagine the situation that confronts a certain youngster from my part of the country. A youngster spends his formative years in the warm, friendly environment of his family and friends – an environment in which Spanish is spoken. At the age of 5 or 6 he is taken to school. What a profound shock he encounters the first day there, when he is made to know in no uncertain terms that he may speak no Spanish at school. He must speak English, a language which he scarcely knows, both in the classroom and on the playground. If he is caught speaking Spanish, he will be punished (Yarborough in Andersson, 1971:430).

It is easy to imagine that Emilia’s parents had a similar scenario in mind when they decided to teach Emilia English only. Both because of the obvious advantage of speaking the language used to teach in school, and also since speaking Spanish was considered un-American. Theodore Andersson refers to sociologist Rolf Kjolseth, who has determined two models of bilingual education: The Assimilation model and the Pluralist model. While the pluralist model “comprises an optimal structure for promoting ethnic language maintenance”, an analysis by Kjolseth reveals that most bilingual education programs at that time, contrary to the program’s stated aim, are closest to the Assimilation model (Kjolseth in Andersson,

1971:343). The Manual for the Bilingual Education Act states that “instructional use of the mother tongue can help to prevent retardation in school performance until sufficient command of English is attained” (Andersson, 1971:432). The goal was to teach children English, and not necessarily to preserve their native language.

Education programs like the Bilingual Act are embedded in larger political and historical events. When bilingual education was introduced in Mexico by the federal government in the 1930s, its purpose was to help Indians improve their lives through education. However, it was also to “Mexicanize” the indigenous population, and the programs did not seek to preserve their culture. In *The Comparative Education Review*, Susan J. Rippberger states that “in essence, the program was to help Indians ‘improve’ themselves by becoming non-Indian” (Rippberger, 1993:56). Bilingual education is used as a means of national development, both in Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere.

The role of Spanish as Latino identity marker

There have been many changes in both bilingual education and views on the Spanish language since Emilia grew up in a small Texan town in the 1960s. While speaking Spanish was prohibited at school during Emilia’s childhood, learning a second language is now mandatory in many schools. It is possible to see the changing political opinions on Latinos in the U.S. through the evolution of bilingual education. Carlos J. Ovando (2003) argues that a consistent language ideology does not exist in the U.S. Because of this, the role of language in the United States has not maintained a steady track, but shifted within changing historical, social and political lines (Ovando, 2003). Ovando calls the 1960s to 1980s the Opportunist Period. While the Bilingual Education Act marked a turning point away from the “Darwinian sink-or-swim educational practices” from the 1880s to the 1960s, the results were not that successful (Ovando, 2003:8). Critics of the Act, like Noel Epstein, saw bilingual education as “an instrument for maintaining ethnolinguistic enclaves that someday would threaten the unity of the United States” (Epstein 1977 in Ovando, 2003:8). This comment is strikingly similar to those made by Samuel Huntington (among others) in the early 2000s. There is an obvious connection between language practices and nationalism, and the “Latino threat” often associated with the increasing use of Spanish and bilingual educational practices in the United States today.

While Emilia represents Latinos who grew up speaking English only, others had different experiences. The director José is about the same age as Emilia, but he spoke Spanish with his parents. Although Spanish is his native tongue, I only heard him speak Spanish once.

José, Steve and I often sat backstage and talked when there was nothing else for us to do at the theater. One day, the stage manager Roberta, aged 25, sat down with us. We were in the middle of a conversation about recycling, when José suddenly started to speak Spanish: "Mari, you speak Spanish, but I keep forgetting! So we should speak some Spanish now!" The conversation continued in Spanish, however it did not flow as easily as before, mainly because of the stage managers lack of vocabulary. We quickly switched back to English.

Roberta was not the only young Latina I befriended that was monolingual. At a social gathering with some people not connected to Encuentros I met Jenny and Brenda. They were in their early 20's, and referred to themselves as Hispanic. Both of them had parents who spoke Spanish, but they spoke little or no Spanish themselves. During a conversation with the girls, they told me that they could understand what their Spanish-speaking grandparents said, but that they could not answer them in Spanish:

Jenny: "I don't wanna speak Spanish, because I don't know it that well."

Brenda: "Even though I know some Spanish, I will rather speak English. The people I talk to usually speak English anyway, and it's embarrassing to speak Spanish when I'm so bad at it."

Jenny: "We're Hispanic, we're supposed to speak Spanish!"

I have previously argued that as middle class Mexican Americans, my informants can be seen as neither Mexican nor mainstream American. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the cast and crew needed to relate to external notions on what "to be Latino" is, and these notions affected both their views of themselves as well as the topics of the plays produced. There exists a demand for Latino authenticity from both Latinos and non-Latinos, like knowledge of the Spanish language (Valdes-Rodriguez in Dickinson, 2008:299). As shown above, Jenny and Brenda feel like they should speak Spanish because they are Latina. In other words, we may say that because they do not speak Spanish, they are not "real Latinas".

The Spanish language is an important part of being Latino. Historically, Spanish has been used by Latinos to unite in order to have political impact. As shown in Chapter 3, the terms Latino and Hispanic are used to group together people who often have very different backgrounds and ethnicities. . The linguistic background is said to be the one thing Latin American descendants have in common (except for those who originate in Brazil). Arel and Kertzer state that despite different levels of identity such as ethnicity and class, Latinos are able to mobilize "a broad national and transnational federation" because of their linguistic background (Arel and Kertzer, 2002). As demonstrated in the examples above, it is important

to keep in mind that not all Latinos in Texas speak Spanish, like not all Latinos are Catholic or embrace other (stereotypically) traditional Latino values.

Not speaking Spanish was not only a challenge for Jenny and Brenda, but also for some of the actors at Encuentros.

Bilingual difficulties: Christina's case

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Encuentros have changed the language in some of the scripts they have adopted, by adding Spanish to plays that originally were in English only. But bilingual scripts were a challenge for some of the actors who did not speak Spanish. Christina was one of them. Although her parents are bilingual, Christina did not speak Spanish herself. To illustrate the anxieties towards script with Spanish lines, she told me about a play she had starred in where the producer had translated almost half of the English-only original script: "I've just been waiting for a phone call that they would add more Spanish to *Nuestra Vida* too", Christina confessed. "But thankfully it did not happen". During a formal interview with Christina at the end of my stay, I asked her how it was like starring in a fully bilingual play, which she did prior to *Nuestra Vida*:

"It was a great experience! It was a great way for me to improve my Spanish. I was not born bilingual (she laughs at her choice of words), my mother speaks Spanish but I only speak English. But I understand some of it, and some of the other actors helped me with my pronunciation. Because some of them are really particular that you have to get it right. I remember I was so happy when someone said to me that it sounded like I was a native Spanish speaker. That meant a lot to me."

While Christina focused on the positive aspects in the interview, during private conversations she told me that it was not always easy being monolingual: "I am Hispanic, but I am not bilingual. And when everyone else in the cast and crew speak Spanish, it's hard". Christina told me that she did not speak Spanish because she did not learn it from her mother. As demonstrated above, she often mentioned that the other actors were very picky about her Spanish pronunciation, and it was important to her to please the other actors by getting the words right. It became clear to me that having to speak Spanish in a play was a stress factor to her. One night, Christina told me that she was much less nervous before the premiere of *Nuestra Vida* than she had been before the premiere of the previous play she starred in. The main reason for this was that *Nuestra Vida* was mostly in English. Even though there is no

official language in the United States, everyone is expected to master a certain level of English. Mastering a language is highly related to class and social stratification, because a person's language abilities often determine one's chances in society. Not knowing Spanish in Encuentros was seen as an obstacle, for example when starring in a bilingual play, like in Christina's case. This represents another side of the stories usually told in U.S. media, where not knowing English is stressed as both an obstacle to obtain work and participate in mainstream society.

Possible reasons for not learning Spanish

While there is a significant age difference between Emilia and Christina, they both grew up not learning Spanish from their bilingual parents. But whereas Emilia chose to take Spanish lessons, and use Spanish expressions actively today, Christina remains monolingual. Even though Christina did not try to learn Spanish, she felt like she should know how to speak it because she is Latina. The supposition that all Latinos (should) speak Spanish may come from grandparents or other family members, co-workers, media and non-Latinos. Because language is such an important identity marker, my young Latina acquaintances felt a pressure towards mastering Spanish. Not speaking Spanish makes them feel both embarrassed and stressed. Like Emilia commented, audience members came up to her and felt ashamed because of their lack of Spanish skills. But despite their wish to speak Spanish, none of the young girls actually made a serious effort to learn it. Could it be that speaking Spanish still is connected to belonging to the working class? All of the girls had a fairly good socio-economic status, which may have been symbolically lowered by speaking Spanish. The friction between feeling obliged to speak Spanish and not wanting to be connected to the working class may be one of several reasons why the girls did not actively seek to learn Spanish.

Another reason may be the recent political attitudes towards bilingual education. The period from the 1980s to present (2003) is often referred to as the Dismissive Period, when the anti-bilingual side began to gain power, after 20 years of development and research on bilingual education. (Ovando, 2003).⁹⁵ These were the times in which Christina, Jenny and Brenda grew up. Political activists in the entire country pushed for a return to the sink-or-swim days, at the same time as more and more students were in need of bilingual education.

⁹⁵ Some people say that the Obama administration is more positive towards using economical resources on bilingual education than previous governments. Others say he has chosen a middle ground between the English-only conservatives and the "advocates of cultural preservation": <http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/28/the-bilingual-debate-transitional-classrooms/>. Retrieved June 8 2011

Although there have been changes from the assimilation politics of the 60's, the recent anti-bilingualism movement may have indirectly influenced the girl's choice. But despite the resistance against bilingual education and related minority politics, gradually more public information is presented in both English and Spanish, especially in states and cities with large Latino populations. In Austin, all public information is presented in both English and Spanish, from information about voting to the possibility of taking one's driving license in Spanish. An Anglo acquaintance from the Spanish conversational class I attended actually chose to take his driver's license in Spanish, because it was cheaper.⁹⁶ But notions on the increase of Spanish are complex, as the comment from the young Anglo man at the start of this chapter demonstrates.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed the use of joking and humor and the role of the Spanish language for the cast and crew members. A common matter concerning these two subjects is that both humor and language is actively used to express Latino identity. An analysis of the joking practices among the cast and crew revealed that the jokes were based on stereotypes, and that they served several purposes in addition to pure entertainment. First of all, by joking about Mexican immigrants as opposite of themselves, they signaled difference from working-class immigrants. By doing so, they also defined their selves and their belonging to a collective group. The jokes can also be a way of critiquing and opposing the Anglo majority's generalizing and stereotyping of Latinos, while at the same time both distancing themselves from Mexican immigrants and acknowledging their own Latino identity. The use of humor can offer a sense of community and belonging to those Latinos who share the experience of being in-between; neither fully Latino nor fully American. But as I have argued using multiple identity theory, a person can also be Mexican and mainstream American at the same time.

In the second part of this chapter I argued that the Spanish language is both a resource and a limitation for the cast and crew. While not speaking English is presented as the main problem concerning Latinos and language in most newspaper articles and political statements, being Latino and not knowing Spanish is seen as a hindrance to the cast members careers as actors and even themselves as Latinos. Through the examples with Christina, Brenda and

⁹⁶ This also implies that the Spanish-speaking population in Austin is situated lower on the socio-economical ladder than those who speak English.

Jenny, I demonstrated that for many Latino youths, while not fluent in it, the Spanish language is still an important part of their identity.

As seen through the history of bilingual education in the United States, governmental language politics can be used as a tool for including, assimilating and excluding a country's language minorities from a broader fellowship. The main issue in language debates is not only the use of language in itself, but the correlation between language, culture and identity. The reason why language is so important is because the ethnic category "Latino" is based on language. This is also one reason why they use Spanish as a means to create recognition in their plays, as demonstrated in Chapter 2. A person can be Latino with no knowledge of Spanish, but what then makes the person identify as Latino? That his or her parents speak Spanish? Not necessarily, but consciousness about the Spanish language is nevertheless a common reference point. And this common reference point is an important part of what defines and connects Latinos in general, both as audience members at Encuentros' plays and the artistic community.

Next, this thesis will be concluded by a summary of points, along with some thoughts on the future of Latino performance art in the United States.

Concluding Remarks

At the start of this thesis an Anglo man expressed his opinions about the presence of Latinos in the United States, and thereby illustrated how Latinos are often ascribed a stereotypical and negative identity. The aim of this thesis has been to analyze how Latino identity is being expressed through performing arts, and what circumstances are shaping and influencing the creation of cultural expressions. I have argued that among cast and crew members of the theater company Encuentros, difficult topics concerning Latinos in the United States are being reflected and debated through the use of comedy theater, humor and joking. And these expressions, as well as the cast and crew's views of themselves and Others, are influenced by a dialectic relationship between governmental categorization, mainstream stereotyping and in-group identification.

Summing up

I started this thesis by giving an outline of Encuentros, a Latino theater company based in the city of Austin. Encuentros' stated aim is to portray how it is like to be Latino in the United States. This company is not first and foremost political, but its founders are heavily inspired by Chicano theater – the political Latino theatrical form which started during the Latino Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Like the *teatros* from this era were influenced by and contributed to the political situation at that time, productions by Encuentros also reflect the contemporary political landscape, which is quite different than during the 1960s. The characters and themes portrayed in their plays are based on a combination of political views on Latinos, popular mainstream stereotypes and their depictions and representations of themselves, which can be either Mexican cultural traditions or how these traditions can sometimes collide with modern American views and habits (like the theme of elderly care problematized in *Nuestra Vida*, as demonstrated in Chapter 2).

Artistic contributors to Encuentros want to preserve the Latino culture; “our language, values and traditions”, as the playwright Teresa states in Chapter 2. I have demonstrated how this is done through incorporating the Spanish language in scripted lines and promotion material. This use of Spanish expressions also mirror how many of the cast and crew members use Spanish words when they speak, and I have shown how Emilia used Spanish to create an in-group identity for the members of the company, as well as audience members and external sponsors. I have relied on Flores and Yudice's (1990) arguments on the importance

of Spanish as Latino identity marker to state that in the theatrical productions, as well as for the cast and crew, Spanish has an essential role.

In Chapter 3 I have analyzed the external influences for the theatrical performances. The state plays an important part in identity formation and negotiation, and the relationship between state categorization and personal identification is mainly demonstrated through how people relate to the 2010 Census. As mentioned previously, the people at Encuentros are neither Mexican immigrants nor the typical White Anglo Saxon Protestant, but they rather occupy a position in-between. Being Mexican is seen as belonging to the working-class by the mainstream majority, and therefore it can be considered negative to be mistaken for a Mexican or being placed in the same group as one. It may also be negative due to the recent resurgence of biological views on race, which can be used as a tool to claim political rights for minorities. However, the cast and crewmembers did not express any explicit hostility towards Mexican immigrants. As Emilia stated they want everyone to come and see their plays, regardless of socio-economical background.

In Chapter 4 I have argued that both the scripted performances and everyday use of humor not only express the socio-political situation for Latinos in the United States, but also the ambivalent relationship between Us and Them; Us being the cast and crew members as Mexican American, and Them being both Anglos and Mexican immigrants.

Difference and sameness

When I analyzed the lines in Encuentros' plays, as well as everyday conversational topics, I discovered that it was often pointed out how the characters or cast and crewmembers were *different* from both Mexicans and Anglos. An example from rehearsal is when the director José commented that "White people don't understand [Latino or Mexican] extended family relations". During rehearsals the actors often distanced themselves from Mexican immigrants by imitating and joking about them. Through using Simon Harrison's (2003) term of denied resemblance I have argued that the differences between Us and Them are not necessarily so large, but that this difference-making certainly exist, and it is an important means of creating belonging and group membership in the company. Constructing an opposite Other is also important for the creation of a person's self (see Sax, 1998).

Even though there might not be a large difference between the cast and crew and Mexican immigrants when it comes to cultural traditions, there is a significant difference in class and social status. Emilia was highly aware of the division between Mexican immigrants and themselves as Mexican Americans, and she pointed out that "negative notions of

Mexicans are *dividing us*”, thus referring to Latinos as a collective group, regardless of socio-economic background. This shows the complexity of these identification processes: Emilia switches between the collective Us, (all Latinos), her Self, and the group of middle-class Mexican Americans. She marks her own belonging to both groups, and as demonstrated throughout this thesis, identities are contextual. Different identities are communicated in different situations, and often several identity terms are used simultaneously.

Joking with stereotypes shows knowledge and opposition

The cast and crew used stereotypes about Latinos in their jokes, both in performances and in everyday interaction. They played with the Anglo majority’s fear of people of color when the Anglo actress Lisa was accused of not daring to enter the “Brown neighborhood” where they rehearsed. Conceptions of Latino’s strong family loyalty were dealt with when the son *Robert* did not dare to speak up against his mother in the play *Nuestra Vida*, and the actor David joked about how the cast members were always wet on their backs from having swum across the Rio Grande. This use of humor suggests knowledge about prejudice and stereotype views on Latinos, and humor provides a frame where the cast and crew can oppose the Anglo majority society’s prejudices and negative views on Latinos. Following José Limón (1982), Latino joking can be a tool for critical symbolic action.

Mainstream stereotypes express much about people’s prejudices about others. When opposing stereotypes through the performances and jokes, the cast and crewmembers relied on stereotype conceptions of Latinos expressed in the public domain. Likewise, they had to use the categories created by the Census Bureau when they identified themselves in the census, even though these categories did not always reflect how they viewed themselves. When people wrote Latino as an answer to the question on race, even though Latino was not considered a racial category, they were only registered as “Some Other Race” in the federal statistic system. In both situations the contestation is happening inside the already existing frame, which is the language of the power-holding Anglo majority. I have argued that the common aspect of the cast and crewmembers’ opposition to stereotypes on the one hand, and state categorization on the other, is what Larsen has called “the problem of the opposition” (Larsen, 1999:106). The opposing subjects are captured by the terms created by the majority.

But I have also shown that when the cast and crew make jokes, the social context and power-relationship is different. Even though they have to use the majority’s terms, they can play with them as they like and thus appropriate them. The majority cannot control the jokes

made by Latinos in their everyday interaction. Thus, in this arena there is room for opposing the existing categories and stereotypes.

Mexicans as Self and Mexicans as Other: complex identities

The jokes about Mexicans made by the cast and crew show the complexity in identifying as Latino. When they joked about Mexicans, Mexicans were ascribed negative characteristics like old-fashioned, poor, and unintelligent, for example when David said that Hispanics do not understand how to use modern technology. In other words, the Mexican was shown as the Other, as the opposite of the modern, urban middle-class actors. At the same time, while joking, the cast members referred to *themselves* as Mexican, often in the same jokes (as in the joke “we’re Mexican, we need to carry knives!”) In my analysis I have argued that they joked about both the ‘Mexican as Self’ and the ‘Mexican as Other’ in the very same joke. Again, this demonstrates that the at any time given Other always embodies aspects of the Self.

To express Latino identities there has to be a common set of frameworks to describe the meaning of “Latino”, in order for audience members to understand and validate the expressions. Through this thesis I have demonstrated that the question of what these sets of frameworks consists of is hard to answer, and that there are many views on this subject. The analysis of my fieldwork data turned out to be a complex matter, mainly because my informants were hard to place into a set of existing categories. But after a while I realized that it was this in-between-ness of my informants which made the study especially interesting. The reason why it was hard to find categories that would describe my informants precisely, were that they were not the “typical Latinos” often portrayed in anthropological research. Although they experience prejudice and racism as minorities, the cast and crew are resourceful and well-established members of the Texan society and art scene. The in-between-ness of my informants has been a recurring theme throughout this thesis. They were not immigrants, but neither mainstream Anglo Americans. However, I have argued that by using Barvosa-Carters (1999) argument on multiple identities, the cast members can be Mexican American, Mexican, and mainstream American simultaneously.

The future of Latino theater

It is not a new phenomenon that current themes of racial discrimination, unequal power structures and ethnic identity (as well as everyday observations, sex and gender), are reflected upon through humor. People have always dealt with difficult conditions through humor, as when the ancient Italians performed their satirical reflection on political leaders through

Commedia dell'artes, which have been an inspiration for Latino Theater in the U.S. The comedic plays produced by Encuentros contribute to a rich tradition of mediating sensitive and controversial issues in a humoristic way, reflecting upon the stereotypical views of Latino immigrants, and the ambiguous state between being American and not American, Mexican and Mexican American, Latino, Chicano or Hispanic – or all of the above simultaneously.

The future of Latino theater in the USA is, according to Daniel, to reach out to a broad audience, and show both Latino and non-Latino audiences the diverse lives of Latinos. Since I left Austin, Encuentros have produced several plays and been involved in new creative projects. Both actors and entire productions have been acknowledged for their work, and Daniel recently told me online that Encuentros had been rewarded a distinguished prize for their new play, from a well-known performing arts institution.

Latinos are not only increasing in numbers, they are aware of their increasing power as active participants in shaping both the cultural scene and the political landscape.⁹⁷ But Latinos involved with performing arts face numerous challenges. As Teresa states in Chapter 2, it is still hard for Latino actors to obtain parts in film and theater that are not stereotypical representations. However, Daniel and Emilia have created a space for producing plays that challenge the one-sided portrayals in popular culture. Both through their daily use of humor and their theatrical productions, the cast and crew at Encuentros mediate aspects of being Latino in the United States. Understanding the complex relationship between Mexican Americans and non-Mexican Americans is important, because there is an increasing presence of urban, upwardly mobile, middle class Latinos. Anthropology has an important role to play in challenging a discourse dominated by one-sided views of Latinos in the United States. Although there exist several analyses of Latino theatre, humor and joking practices, this field is not widely explored in today's anthropology. It is important to acknowledge these forms of artistic and cultural expressions as a way of analyzing the social situation for Latinos in the United States. For the cast and crew at Encuentros, as well as other inhabitants of this borderland, the presence of Latinos is more than just a hidden minority; they are not only a part of the nation's past, but an increasingly important part of its future.

⁹⁷ For details on Latino population growth see <http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb11-cn146.htm>. Retrieved June 7 2011.

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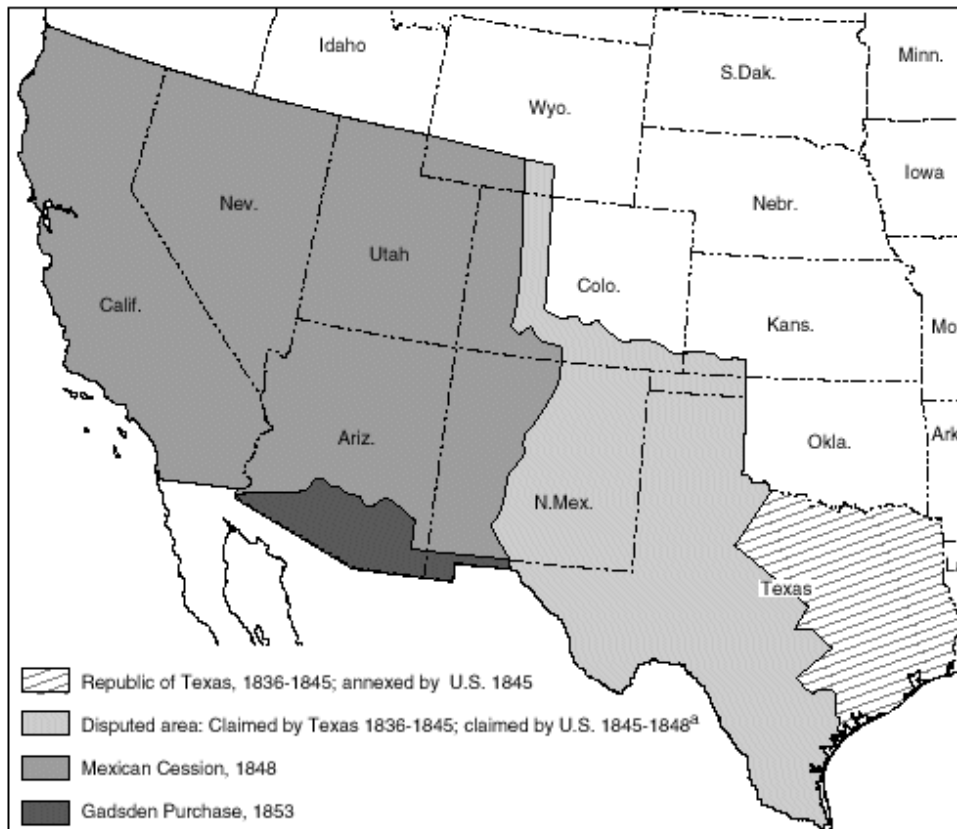
Appendix

Figure 1: Map of Texas



Retrieved from: http://www.fusionassociates.com/Corporate_Team_Building/tx/Texas

Figure 2: Historical Map of the United States: Expansion 1836 – 1853



^aWhen Texas was officially recognized as a state in 1845, it included the light-gray area, which was also claimed by México. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo resolved this dispute, with Texas claiming the disputed land. In 1850, Texas transferred part of this land to the federal government, which became the eastern portion of the territory of New Mexico.

Retrieved from:

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Figure 3: Map of Austin, Texas

