

Ben Lladós

AMST 135: Peoples and Cultures of The Americas

Professor Chavez

5/7/24

Take-Home Final

Navigating Borders: Home in Latinx Culture

“Home” – a seemingly simple word for many people nationwide. What does this word mean though? The term “Home” carries immense weight and complexity within Latinx culture. It evokes images of belonging and cultural heritage, yet beneath its surface lies a deeper layer of emotions, experiences, and identities. In the texts and films explored throughout this course, the concept of home emerges as a central theme. These sources challenge how the notions of home intersect with the broader themes of diaspora, community, and political identity. By unpacking these sources, we can reveal the resilience in the pursuit of home within Latinx communities and highlight the significance of this concept in shaping individual lives and collective experiences.

The concept of “home” in the Latinx community is profoundly shaped by migration. Not only is migration essential to find a new home, but it also involves leaving one’s home behind. Migration entails a profound sense of displacement and longing for the familiarity of home. In Chris Weitz’s film “A Better Life,” Carlos and his son Luis navigate challenges as undocumented immigrants in the United States. Throughout the entire film, Carlos struggles to find work because he is undocumented, barring him from many jobs. Back in Mexico, he had a support system of family and stable work with his friend’s business. By leaving Mexico, he loses his sense of “home” and is forced to create a new life in Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, he builds a

home for his son, Luis. Their story reflects the challenge migration leaves Latinx individuals with: cultural assimilation, work visas, and deportation. One example in the film is how Carlos and Luis' financial issues and the threat of deportation cause them to fight, eventually resulting in Luis running away in frustration (Weitz, 01:02:30). This constant fear of being discovered and deported creates a sense of insecurity and instability, making it difficult for Carlos to establish a sense of home in Los Angeles.

Not only does migration affect the individual that migrated, but also their family. In Erika L. Sánchez's novel "I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter," Julia struggles to find her identity as a first-generation American. As migrants, Julia's parents maintain the same values they had in Mexico and expect Julia to live up to them. Julia's sense of home is hindered by the complexity of her family's relations. Her familial home expects her to be 'the perfect Mexican daughter' that her older sister was. On the other hand, her geographic home pressures her to live the 'traditional American life,' which leaves her stranded in the middle. This concept of transnationality and being the first to experience a merge of two cultures leaves her with multiple identities and a quest for a sense of home in a new country. In the novel, Julia warns Ama to "Be careful. Please. The border...The fucking border'. I feel a wildness spreading through me. 'It's nothing but a giant wound, a big gash between the two countries. Why does it have to be like that? I don't understand. It's just some random, stupid line. How can anyone tell people where they can and can't go?'" (Sánchez, 280). Julia feels that both of her homes clash – leaving her with extra weight on her shoulders as she finds her identity in the novel. This polarization left by her parents' migration is a shared challenge for millions of Latinx first-generation Americans. The impact of migration extends beyond the individual migrant, profoundly shaping the experiences and identities of subsequent generations.

The diaspora experience within Latinx communities serves as one of the most significant factors in shaping the concept of home. Migrants from all over Latin America can forge new forms of belonging based on their shared experiences and cultural solidarity. We see diaspora create a sense of “home” by bringing together communities to make spaces of belonging that go beyond geographical boundaries. In Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, “The Homeland, Aztlán,” the concept of home transcends geographical boundaries by encompassing both physical landscapes and spiritual realms. Anzaldúa begins by prefacing “The actual physical borderland that I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S Southwest/Mexican border.” (Anzaldúa, 2). Anzaldúa then clarifies what a borderland means in the context of her story and the greater Latinx culture, explaining “The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.” (Anzaldúa, 2). Psychological borderlands play a role in Carlos and Julia’s journeys as they face challenges. For example, Carlos faces discrimination many times throughout the movie: one scene depicts Carlos walking by a wall that says, “Too many Mexicans, not enough bullets.” (A Better Life, 00:45:30). This message can create imposter syndrome and a sense of fear among all Mexicans in the area. The psychological border in this instance is just as impactful to Carlos as the physical border. In Julia’s case, her school’s culture is mixed with income levels and races. This leaves her vulnerable to bullying throughout the book, eventually leaving her with questions about her identity. This psychological border that Anzaldúa introduces is a key factor in the mental health of Latinx people around the country.

How does this concept of a psychological borderland play a role in creating a sense of home? In his essay “What’s In A Name?,” Ramón A. Gutiérrez explores the struggles of the psychological borderlands within the Latinx community, specifically how ethnic and pan-ethnic identities are often oversimplified. One example of this is his experience of being identified with generalized terms, such as being labeled as simply “Latino” or “Hispanic.” This creates an internal pressure to conform to ‘one side or another’ in the context of a psychological borderland. We see this come into play in “I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter” with Julia. Her polarization of identity creates a pressure to fit in with two completely different cultures, creating a notion of ‘picking a side.’ On the other hand, psychological borderlands form strong-knit communities of people who have migrated. The resilience that Latinx people have built due to these borderlands has placed a strong value on maintaining their cultural heritage. One example of this is Carlos’ sacrifices in “A Better Life”. Carlos leaves his home in Mexico to migrate to the US, working tirelessly to provide for Luis and embodying the determination common among immigrants. We see this multiple times throughout the movie, one example being when Carlos finally manages to save enough money to buy a truck, a significant symbol of progress and stability for him and Luis (Weitz, 00:29:55). This common work ethic helps bring communities together to create a sense of home between Latinx people across the United States. Through communal struggle, first-generation Americans build bonds that last generations and build belonging.

The concept of home within the Latinx people’s eyes is intricately tied to community and political identities. These both play a significant role in shaping their sense of belonging and cultural heritage while also passing it down to generations. Latinx individuals often find a sense of home within vibrant communities that serve as small sparks of culture where traditions,

languages, and customs are all celebrated. In Erika L. Sánchez's novel, "I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter," Julia's journey shows times when she uses her cultural identity to find solace when she needs it most. In the novel, Julia thinks to herself, "I want to be good. A good Mexican daughter. But I never knew what that meant. How could I possibly do something so nebulous, so fleeting, so transparent?" (Sánchez, 33). When Julia internalizes this, she demonstrates how when she needs a source of comfort, she leans on being a 'good Mexican daughter' despite the challenges she faces in reconciling her heritage with the expectations placed upon her.

The intersection of political identities further influences the Latinx community's search for a home. Chris Weitz's film "A Better Life" explores the impact of societal issues like racism and deportation threats on the sense of home for Latinx immigrants in the United States. Carlos and Luis navigate these threats, reflecting the broader struggles faced by Latinx communities in asserting their political identities and finding a place of belonging within American society. Scenes such as when Carlos encounters discrimination in his workplace highlight the systemic barriers that Latinx individuals often confront, underscoring the complex interplay between political identities and the pursuit of home. In his work "What's In A Name?," Ramón A. Gutiérrez analyzes the importance of cultural recognition in shaping Latinx history in America. Gutiérrez sheds light on the challenges surrounding ethnic and pan-ethnic identities within the Latinx community, pointing out "They generate the names they use to refer to themselves as a collectivity, often in their native language, thus underscoring their linguistic resistance to domination" (Gutiérrez, 20). This highlights the agency of Latinx communities in reclaiming and asserting their identities through language and naming practices. In doing this, Gutiérrez highlights the importance of linguistic resistance as a form of cultural recognition from the

Latinx community in the United States. This conformity has carried on, playing a massive role in creating the sense of home that the Latinx community has.

In conclusion, there's no simple definition of what 'home' means to the Latinx community. Its multifaceted significance serves as a place of identity, belonging, and cultural heritage for millions of people across the globe. For Latinx people, home extends beyond the physical confines of a house; it encompasses traditions and familial bonds, representing a sanctuary where cultural values are upheld to the highest standard. With every story this course has provided, Latinx culture has shined through and had a massive role in shaping the protagonists. A look at "A Better Life" and "I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter" illustrates immigrant families placing a massive value on Latinx culture and carrying that with their identity. This then inspires their children to carry that identity on with them into life as a first-generation American – giving them a place of comfort when they need it most. Home is the culture they can rely on, the culture they were born with, and the culture they carry with them. The richness of their cultural history provides comfort to Latinx people as they negotiate the challenges of identification and belonging since it is a source of pride and resiliency that cuts across boundaries and generations. The search for a home becomes a universal topic when viewed through the prisms of migration, diaspora, community, and political identities, highlighting the continuing influence of Latinx culture on the formation of personal and societal identities. As we consider the stories covered in this course, it becomes clear that home is more than just a geographical location; instead, it is a symbol of the Latinx community's enduring spirit—a legacy of resiliency, tradition, and belonging that illuminates the way ahead.

Works Cited

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