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“Expressive Culture”

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"Libertad," Ester Hernandez (1976):



What is meant by the term *expressive culture* and does it denote something different than the term *popular culture* when analyzing the varied articulations and manifestations of Latinos in the United States?

Anthony Macías

Expressive Culture

Latina/o expressive culture emerged from the late 1960s social movements in the form of politicized communal articulations of self-expression, self-definition, and self-determination. As Latino Studies scholar Frances Aparicio argues in her article, "U.S. Latino Expressive Cultures," the Puerto Rican and Chicano Movements used political art and "nationalist texts" as "didactic tools for creating consciousness and empowerment," and for inspiring mass mobilization. The movement-era bilingual cultural renaissance in art, music, theater, and literature served to "offer alternative narratives" and "alternate images to counteract negative, exoticized, stereotyped" portrayals in the "dominant media," and hence in the "popular imagination" of "both Latino and non-Latino audiences." Latino expressive culture can be understood as part of an ongoing process of Latinas and Latinos physically "appropriating public spaces" in neighborhoods, towns, and cities, of metaphorically "claiming space" in the national American imaginary, and of staking a claim "for the local and collective presence of Latino cultures in the larger narrative of U.S. history." As such, Latino expressive culture is about negotiating a sense of belonging, about agency and "oppositionality" versus co-optation and commodification, about "absorption" versus "difference," and about resisting full integration, mainstreaming, and institutionalization.

Examining Latina/o expressive culture allows us to assess the role of popular culture in Latino life, and the impact of Latinos on the development of

not only American society, but also U.S., borderlands, and transnational popular culture. By unpacking this keyword we can explore the relationship between cultural production, circulation, and reception; between the culture industries' means of production and the community's diverse sites of popular cultural creation and consumption; and between cultural politics and media representation. This keyword highlights, but does not simply celebrate, Latino culture with a little "c" from the bottom up, created by and for everyday people, recovering historical memory and revealing emergent, subversive, and satirical examples of cultural resistance, cultural persistence, and style politics.

To be sure, any definition of Latino expressive culture as emerging in the 1960s ignores earlier forms, from the *son Cubano* to *bomba y plena*, from the cosmopolitan *bolero* to the *corrido* and the *ranchera*, from zoot-suited *pachuca* styles to customized classic low riders, from Latin jazz to the mambo, and from the revolutionary writings of Jose Martí to the masterpieces of the Mexican muralists. Nevertheless, the cultural productions of the Puerto Rican and Chicano nationalist movements typically invoked or incorporated many of these traditional and modern antecedents, while presenting them to broader audiences in a more assertive political context. Moreover, subsequent, post-movement Latino cultural expressions, from Chicana feminist poetry and plays to queer performance art and traveling Chicano painting exhibits, to name just a few, have been in critical dialogue with the legacy of heteronormative, barrio-centric cultural nationalism. In this way, analyzing expressive culture can help avoid

essentialistic, fixed, authoritatively authentic, static subject positions in favor of multifaceted, heterogeneous communities and complex cultural identities. Such analyses can open a window into cultural practices and productions that build bridges between artistic genres and academic disciplines in illuminating, instructive ways.

Using this category of analysis raises the question: What is--or should be--considered expressive culture? This in turn initiates a debate regarding the difference between the terms expressive culture and popular culture, and whether this keyword includes folkloric, literary, artistic, and performative practices in ways that mass culture, media/communication studies, and pop culture paradigms do not. On the one hand, then, the debate is about disciplines and fields in, or approaches to, Latino Studies. Thus, if your training is in media studies, then you study media, not expressive culture. If your training is in film studies, then you may not necessarily consider Chicano or Latino films to be expressive culture. Similarly, if your training is in English or Literary Criticism, then you might not call Latino novels and poems expressive culture, *per se*. In African American studies, black expressive culture includes oratory, humor, fashion, and body language such as poses, stances, and styles of walking. In Chicana/o Cultural Studies, forms of expressive culture include not only music, art, and visual culture, but also slang, tattoos, graffiti, low-rider bicycles, and even *barrio* front yards, with their ample flowers, chiles, and cacti. On the other hand, put less subtly, the divide is more about identity politics, about whether

you are keeping it real by being folkloric, authentic, or nationalist, and hence, truly expressive of the everyday, working-class values and spirit of a resistive, culturally-distinct community, or whether you are a bourgeois, assimilated *vendido* (sell-out).

These two perspectives are both reflected in and disrupted by the distinction between the terms expressive culture and popular culture. In other words, expressive culture can be seen as a more inclusive category that incorporates underground, subcultural styles, from social dance scenes to new media blogs, independent films, and Morrissey fans, as well as genres that might not be considered Latino culture, from graphic novels to children's literature. In contrast, popular culture includes areas of expression that are either more vulnerable to mainstream appropriation, or are indeed already part of mainstream American culture, from Hollywood cinema to network and cable television, theater, visual and fine art, popular music, sports, and magazines.

Ultimately, we should not get hung up on terminology, academic training, or distinctions between lowbrow and highbrow, *rasquache* and assimilated, real and fake. By the same token, keyword definitions should not foreclose further debate, dialogue, and discussion. Popular culture can arguably include domestic sphere cultural expressions like black velvet paintings and *altarcitos* (home altars), as well as public sphere sites like Nuyorican *casitas*, Central American community gardens, and Chicano *cultura* shops/café/bookstores, not to mention community traditions like the Puerto Rican Day Parade, *quinceañeras*,

and Mexican weddings, while expressive culture can arguably include Latino artists, musicians, actors, directors, and producers who work primarily in mainstream media or who perform or exhibit their work in both community spaces and more mainstream institutions. In the end, as Frances Aparicio concludes, "it is imperative that we increase the public knowledge about Latino expressive cultures in a manner that gives voice to Latinos' own collective self-conceptualizations, rather than representations that objectify their lives and silence their voices."

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