

Do Latinos Consider Themselves Mainstream? The Influence of Region

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journals.sagepub.com/home/spx**Jessica Vasquez-Tokos¹****Abstract**

Drawing from 89 in-depth interviews with Latinos, this article asks how Latinos perceive their relationship to U.S. mainstream society. As regional location matters to racial identity, this comparative study focuses on field sites in California and Kansas—locations with different proportions of Latinos—to investigate how regional dynamics are embedded in racial meaning-making. Showing a region, race, and class intersection, Californians who were poor or working-class in their youth use social distancing strategies and “reactive Americanization” to avoid stereotypes fueled by a dense Latino population. By contrast, most Latino Kansans leave racism undetected, the smaller Latino population in Kansas deflating negative group stereotypes. Region also influences ideas about the mainstream: Californians pointed to local racial heterogeneity to argue for a *multiracial* mainstream, whereas most Kansans did not make that argument. Regional processes of class-inflected racialization are a contextual factor that shapes Latinos’ sense of mainstream inclusion and their incorporation trajectories.

Keywords

Latinos/as, racialization, assimilation, region, class status, national identity

While assimilation theory forecasts that intergroup contact will lead to an “interpenetration” of peoples and cultures over time (Park and Burgess [1921] 1969), a gap in knowledge remains concerning whether or not immigrants (and colonized indigenous people) and their descendants perceive themselves to be included in the mainstream. American identity is predicated upon “exclusionist norms” such as whiteness (Flores-Gonzalez 2017) and advantaged groups see diversity as a threat to national unity (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Yet, American identity, like all national identities, is not static but actively contested by cultural communities with different beliefs and experiences (Bonikowski 2016). Racialized understandings of U.S. national identity exemplify this debate: with Whites as the gold-standard membership bearers, racial minorities are “legally part of the U.S. nation-state but simultaneously subordinated to it” (Collins 2001:3). This article asks whether Latinos believe that they belong to the national community. Considering national identity “from the bottom up” (Bonikowski 2016) and departing from the usual tech-

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nique of using outcome measures to assess incorporation, this qualitative study asks the following: How do Latinos perceive their relationship to the U.S. mainstream?

To answer this question, in-depth interviews with Latinos in California and Kansas were conducted regarding race, racism, and their opinions on their group's relationship to mainstream U.S. society. Prior research indicates that regional location matters to racial identity (Cheng 2013; Pulido 2006) but a question remains about how region influences integration among Latinos living in areas with different population demographics. To assess the question of how region links up with Latinos' perceptions of their position relative to the mainstream (i.e., Latino integration), two sites (differentiated by Latino concentration and proximity to the southern border) are studied to zero in on the importance of regional dynamics. Findings illuminate that region, as it interacts with race and class, is a contextual factor that plays a significant role in Latinos' sense of mainstream inclusion and, relatedly, their racialization and incorporation trajectories.

How Do Groups Become “Mainstream”? Assimilation, Racialization, and Region

Definitions of the mainstream are scarce, with much scholarship assuming it to be White and middle-class but not explicitly stating these parameters. In theorizing assimilation, Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003:10) are exceptions in offering a robust definition of mainstream that links to the Chicago School, “posit[ing] a conception of the mainstream as rooted in . . . a *composite culture* evolving out of the interpenetration of diverse cultures and beliefs.” Tracing the genealogy of scholarly definitions of the mainstream, Alba and Nee note that this “more flexible and open-ended” notion “receded into the background” in later sociological writing which gave way to an overly homogenized Anglo-American middle-class host society that constituted the end-point of assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003).

Segmented assimilation theory, developed in response to inflows of migrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean in the 1960s, suggested that a nation is not uniform but is composed of various “segments” into which newcomers integrate. Segmented assimilation offers a launching pad to study two issues intertwined with race: region and class status. First, segmented assimilation's emphasis on context of reception invites the investigation of region. This study extends the context of reception insight by broadening the scope beyond ethnic enclaves to examine sites with disparate racial demographic makeups. With immigration flows “restocking” racial minority immigrants (Jiménez 2010) differentially in certain regions, migration trends create distinct racial contexts that I propose become significant backdrops for racial identity, meaning, and belonging. Second, segmented assimilation theory's concept of “reactive ethnicity”—where a hostile receiving environment leads to “the rise rather than the erosion of ethnicity,” accentuating group differences and consciousness—is implied to be a lower-class phenomenon (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:148). More recent research concurs that class background splinters integration pathways (Vallejo 2012) and indelibly marks a person's style and orientations (Streib 2015). Moving chronologically from understanding the mainstream as a “composite culture” to “White middle class” to “segmented,” it is time that scholastic definitions of mainstream society get matched up with lived experiences of those who live *in* U.S. society but may not consider themselves to be *of* it.

In tension with assimilation literature is scholarship that stresses racialization. Racialization refers to processes that create or perpetuate socially constructed categories that are not genetically based but founded on “perceived innate or biological differences and imbued with meanings about relative social worth” (Chavez 2013:26). Racialization of Latin American immigrants and U.S.-born Latinos as nonwhite marks them as second-class and marginalized (Telles and Ortiz 2008). Mechanisms of racialization include being constructed as foreign or a “permanent

immigrant group” (Jiménez 2010), being racialized “despite assimilation” (Vasquez 2011), deemed “perpetually inferior” (Lacayo 2017), and seen as a source of diversity that can be “consumed” for Whites’ material gain (Woody 2018).

The racialization perspective holds that Latinos still suffer systemic racism (Feagin and Cobas 2014; Vasquez 2011; Telles and Ortiz 2008). “Anti-Latino subframes”—mental constructs and racialized worldviews—that allege Latinos are criminal stymie progress by bogging group members down with stereotypes that uphold White supremacy (Feagin and Cobas 2014; Vasquez-Tokos and Norton-Smith 2017). Visible racial nonwhiteness, signaled by dark skin (Ortiz and Telles 2012; Vasquez 2010; Vargas et al. 2016), triggers racialization. For example, when people define an individual (“socially ascribed race”) as “Mexican,” the likelihood of experiencing discrimination *increases* relative to being perceived to be White (Vargas et al. 2016). Nationally representative survey data confirm that 38 percent of sampled Latinos say they have experienced unfair treatment on account of their Latino identity (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Krogstad 2018). In turn, undergoing discrimination relates to “dissatisfaction” with “the way things are going in the country” (Lopez et al. 2018) and deflates a sense of national inclusion and national identity (Molina, Phillips, and Sidanius 2015). Overall, the tension between the assimilation and racialization lines of scholarship begs the question of Latinos’ subjective opinions about their inclusion.

Assimilation and racialization may be affected by regional location. Prior research points to the importance of regional context and warrants further investigation regarding how population demographics relate to racial identity and integration. Drawing on geography, “regional racial formation” stresses how “place-specific processes” are always necessarily embedded in racial meaning-making (Cheng 2013:10). Racial formation is “situated in smaller-scale contexts (neighborhoods, localities, regions) . . . [and] intertwined with complex geographies of race” (Cheng 2013:10). An advantage of regional analysis is the ability to discover “regionally specific identities” (Cheng 2013:10). Even as national racial narratives deserve attention, “class structures and racial divisions of labor take shape and racial hierarchies are experienced at the regional and local levels” (Pulido 2006:11). Region is fertile ground for comparison. Illustrating how place is crucial to identity development, Robert Smith (2014:522, emphasis added) finds that, in racially diverse and immigrant-dense New York, the hypervisibility of Mexican identity is “tied tightly to gangs and . . . *made it seem* most Mexican youth . . . were in gangs.” Smith’s finding suggests that stereotypes are magnified in regions with high concentrations of Latinos. Oppositely, it is feasible that colorblindness, or the nonacknowledgment of race (Bonilla-Silva 2003), is more easily deployed in geographies lacking racial diversity. This proposition is weighed in the analysis that follows.

Even as racial discourses circulate nationally (Chavez 2013), they are contoured at the local level. Region—which refers to population demographics, racial and migration history, racial hierarchy, and race relations—shapes understandings, claims, and deployments of race. Location in the United States remains an undertheorized vector in race scholarship (Robinson 2014), one gap being how “material and interpretive understandings of place bind together to shape what we do and how we think” (Harrison 2017:5). This study illustrates how region collaborates with race to produce patterned understandings, claims, and strategies of belonging among Latinos.

Methodology and Field Sites

The data for this study come from 89 in-depth qualitative interviews with Latinos aged 14 to 76 years in Los Angeles County California and three towns in northeastern Kansas, a slice of data from a book-length project (Vasquez-Tokos 2017a). I conceptualize region as geographic space with particular demographics, race relations, immigration history, and contemporary dynamics. The logic for the comparison is to examine how regional racial populations (specifically, a place

with a large Latino population near the U.S.-Mexico border compared with a place with a predominately non-Hispanic White population distant from the border) play into “regionally specific identities” (Cheng 2013:10) and inflect Latinos’ views of their mainstream inclusion. The majority of the 89 respondents are U.S.-born (84 percent), and the remainder are foreign-born (16 percent). The ethnicity breakdown (an open-ended question) is as follows: 64 (72 percent) respondents are Mexican-origin; 15 (17 percent) wrote in “White/Hispanic” (or “White/Latino/a”) which captures mixed-race ancestry, those who claimed “Spanish,” and people who claim Hispanic/Latino as “White”; five (6 percent) had Latino ancestry from Latin American countries other than Mexico; and five (6 percent) listed multiple Latin American origins or a combination of Latino and Native American heritage. The vast majority of Latino respondents listing Mexican origins mirrors the nationwide fact that “Mexican-origin Hispanics have always been the largest Hispanic-origin group in the U.S.,” Mexicans currently comprising 66 percent of Hispanics (Flores 2017).

The respondent pool consists of middle-class Latinos. Middle-class standing is reflected in household incomes, the vast majority (81 percent) of which stood above the national (\$51,000) median household income for 2010 when the interviews were conducted. Respondents’ class origins varied, enabling me to theorize a lingering impact of class background on identity (Streib 2015).

In the sample of 89, 52 respondents identify as women (58 percent), 37 as men (42 percent). There is virtual parity in the state residence of interviewees: 44 (49 percent) live in California, 45 (51 percent) in Kansas. Californian respondents lived in that state for a range of seven to 75 years, with a mean of 39 years. Kansan respondents lived in that state from one to 76 years, with a mean of 24 years. According to Census 2010, 16.3 percent of the U.S. population was Hispanic origin (of any race), whereas California’s population was 37.6 percent and Kansas’s population was 10.5 percent. The non-Hispanic White population stood at 63.7 percent nationwide, as compared with 41.2 percent of California’s and 79.1 percent of Kansas’s populations. In terms of a nonwhite and non-Hispanic population, the combined African American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and “Other race” categories total 24.7 percent nationwide, 37.6 percent in California, and 13.3 percent in Kansas.

The history of Latin American migration to the United States is well documented elsewhere (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002), similar push and pull factors influencing migration to California and Kansas. More than half of Mexicans (the ethnic group comprising the highest share of Latinos in the United States) live in the West (52 percent), most residing in California (36 percent; Motel and Patten 2012). As compared with southern California, a traditional immigration gateway with continuing immigration that is home to more than 10 million immigrants (one in four of the foreign-born population nationwide; Hayes 2017), Kansas saw the largest influx of Mexican immigrants to the state in 1900–1930 (Kansas Historical Society 2017). In Kansas, the southwestern part of state is a hub of Mexican migration and home to cattle production and meatpacking, whereas families arrived as laborers for the railroads and meatpacking plants in and around Kansas City (my field site in the northeastern part of the state).

Racial and class hierarchies contextualize the findings in each field site. With the poverty rate for Latinos at 23.2 percent nationwide (as compared with 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic Whites; Macartney, Bishaw, and Fontenot 2013), the concentration of Latinos in Los Angeles County makes socioeconomic status a salient backdrop for racial identities. Not just poverty rates (similar in California and Kansas; Macartney et al. 2013), but the population density of Latinos in a region creates a race-and-class context that influences Latinos’ beliefs about belonging and modulates their strategies for perceiving and managing stigma. The median annual personal earnings of Hispanics age 16 and older is \$22,000 in both states, yet given that the Hispanic population constitutes a far higher proportion of the population in California (39 percent) than in Kansas (11 percent), race and class are more easily conflated in California than in Kansas.¹ Populated by

the largest share of Hispanics of all of the states (13.5 million), 4.8 percent of California's Hispanic population lives in poverty (totaling 2.8 million), as compared with 4.1 percent (68,000) of Kansas's Hispanic population (280,000) that lives under the poverty line. The gang population also deserves attention: Los Angeles has earned the moniker of the "gang capital" of the nation, whereas gangs exist but pale in number and notoriety in Kansas.

Political climate informs racial meaning-making and is therefore an important component of site selection. Racial politics are acted out regionally. During the data collection period of 2010, Arizona Senate Bill 1070, a strict anti-illegal immigration measure that required immigration status checks during law enforcement stops, was passed. The Arizona law is cited as motivating California's Latino voters and steering the political priorities of Los Angeles Mayor Villaraigosa (served 2005–2013) who urged immigration reform and elimination of racial profiling in police practice (Walton 2012). Meanwhile in Kansas, Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach (served 2011–2019) worked for the Federal for American Immigration Reform that aimed to preserve "a European-American majority" and authored anti-immigrant laws. Kobach filed a lawsuit against Kansas which sought to halt a law granting in-state tuition to children of undocumented immigrants who met qualifications (case was dismissed). Judging by signals sent by political leadership, legislation and sentiment regarding Latinos and immigration were radically different in these spaces at the same time.

To draw a sample of self-identified Latinos, I used purposive sampling, recruiting interviewees through Latino organizations, high schools, Catholic churches, and preexisting professional networks. I also used snowball sampling, asking respondents to recommend other people to interview. Interviews lasted one to three hours and were conducted in English with the exception of one that was done in Spanish where the respondent's spouse translated when needed. All names used are pseudonyms.

The semi-structured interviews used a life history approach, inquiring about respondents' racial/ethnic identity, migration history, family dynamics, and everyday experiences around race, gender, class, and culture. One question in the interview schedule for a larger project is the backbone for this article: "How would you describe your relationship to 'mainstream society,' however you define that term?" Other questions from the interview schedule include the following: How do you describe yourself in racial/ethnic terms? What meaning does that term have for you? What did your parents try to "teach you" about being Latino/a when you were young, if anything? Are there any situations where you had a heightened awareness of your race ("magnified moments")? Was race an important consideration for you when dating? Do you feel that you have experienced racial/ethnic discrimination (If yes, could you describe the situation)? My positionality as a Latina woman likely facilitated access to interviews due to shared racial status (Vasquez-Tokos 2017b). Bearing light skin, dark hair, a Hispanic surname, and a research interest in race, I believe I am read as someone to whom recollections of racial discrimination could be safely surrendered.

I wrote field notes after every interview, capturing pertinent details like physical description and nonverbal behavior along with my first analytical impressions of the interview content. Field notes constituted a preliminary step in conducting "issue-focused" coding (Weiss 1994) as I summarized key emergent themes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist and I single-handedly conducted line-by-line coding. First, in "initial coding" (Charmaz 2014), I coded all responses to the question about relationship to mainstream society and generated codes of inclusion, conditional inclusion, and marginality. Thinking of these themes as "outcomes" requiring explanation, I amassed "excerpt files" or collections of material pertaining to the same code (Weiss 1994). Using inductive logic and moving into "focused coding" which "condenses and sharpens" (Charmaz 2014:138) the analytic categories, I combed through the data for patterns between specific type of relationship to the mainstream and codes such as racial discrimination, immigration history, state of residence, gender, multiraciality, and

class status. Region emerged in this second round of coding as a source of systematic variation. Employing rigorous comparative analysis across cases, I tested “minitheories” (Weiss 1994; hypotheses about relationships among codes) for robustness to determine whether minitheories were confirmed or disconfirmed in additional interview narratives. “Inclusive integration” or the development of a coherent framework (Weiss 1994) was the next step, which generated the organizing principles for the findings section. The findings showcase how region, as it interacts with race and class, mediates Latinos’ perceptions of their relationship to mainstream society.

Findings

The findings section first establishes a common finding that crosscuts region: Latino respondents use their middle-class status to claim mainstream status. They do not, on the whole, view themselves as White but they do cling to the “middle-class” component of the “White and middle class equals mainstream” equation to claim mainstream membership. Moving to points of regional difference, the California field site is a place where regional dynamics encourage social distancing from Latinos with lower-class origins to shore up entitlement to the mainstream. California’s racial diversity serves as a platform from which Latinos call for a redefinition of the mainstream as not monoracial White but *multiracial*. The rationale is that if the classic logic of White and middle-class status constitutes the mainstream and yet Latino respondents are *also* middle class, then the conception of the mainstream must expand to reflect this economic inclusion. The Kansas field site is presented next, the chief difference being that absent obvious and concentrated racial and class diversity, Latino respondents downplay race and racism to fit in. Most Kansans did not argue for a multiracial expansion of the mainstream, leaving unchallenged the conception of a White monoracial mainstream. Only multiracial Kansan youth questioned colorblindness and monoracial White visions of the mainstream as they strove for belonging.

Crosscutting Theme: Using Middle-class Status to Justify Inclusion

Across field sites, respondents inferred that the working definition of the mainstream is White *and* middle class. This operationalization of the term mainstream sets the stage for middle-class respondents—especially those with middle-class origins—to claim mainstream status, even if they are not White. This on-the-ground shift broadens the understanding of the mainstream to White *or* middle class. Middle-class Latinos see their class standing as an invitation to the mainstream and they do not necessarily deposit their Latino identity at the doorstep of the mainstream. Finally, middle-class Latinos claiming mainstream inclusion opens the possibility of broadening the definition of the mainstream to one that is not monoracial White but *multiracial*, a cause that Californians are picking up.

In both field sites, middle-class Latinos offered their class standing as evidence of American group membership. In a capitalistic society founded on American individualism, class achievement becomes currency with which to claim mainstream belonging. Patty and Daniel Martinez, native Angelenos who are Mexican American and now retired, draw in a household income of \$200,000 to \$250,000 annually. When I asked Patty, “What would you say your relationship is to mainstream American society?” she referenced her literal and figurative “rich life”:

It’s . . . an educated choice for life. . . . I think we have a very rich life because of the . . . choices we make to read, to travel, to learn about other cultures . . . by going to theatre . . . opera . . . concerts . . . just enriching our lives.

Enrichment is a class privilege. The “choice,” as she frames it, is made possible by the couple’s wealth. Homeownership in particular signals inclusion, as with Nathan Lucero, a Mexican

American Kansan who responded, “I had a home when I was twenty-three. I always . . . took care of my money. . . . We’ve done things the right way. . . . I feel like we’re mainstream.” Nathan’s pride in gaining a financial foothold “the right way” indicates that he achieved mainstream status in the trademark way prescribed by American capitalism. Oscar Cota (Mexican American) agrees, “I think we fit in. I mean, obviously we do. . . . We live in a decent neighborhood.” Daria Fernandez (Latina/White/Arab) also nods to the connection between finances and inclusion: “Me and my [Mexican national] husband have a very mainstream life. . . . We’re financially comfortable. We go on vacations.” Daria believes class privilege unlocks the door for mainstream inclusion:

I think economics plays a large part . . . With racism, a person can be prejudiced against a black but they wouldn’t mind a Kobe Bryant [retired African American Los Angeles Lakers professional basketball star] living next door to them.

California Field Site

Social distancing to eschew stereotypes. In the California field site, pervasive imagery of lower-class Latino delinquency pertains to how Latino respondents new to the middle class crafted their own “regionally specific identities” (Cheng 2013:10). In an urban context with a visible Latino underclass and gang segment of the population, Latinos from working-class and poor backgrounds engage in social distancing strategies from fellow coethnics to eschew negative stereotypes and aim for mainstream integration. Californian Latinos from working-class and poor origins worked to positively distinguish themselves from demeaning connotations attached to their racialized class origins. Anxiety over downward assimilation and “downward-leveling norms” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:285) associated with lower-class peer groups that are seen as opposed to dominant society motivates social distancing. In this way, social distancing is an intra-racial relations technique designed to safeguard relative class privilege and mainstream membership possibilities.

Marginally middle-class Latinos who are less able to distance themselves economically do so socially. John and Cindy Ortega are “Americans first” who sideline Latino identity. John, 49 years, grew up poor in an East Los Angeles *barrio*, a housing project that was a “main gang area” that he derisively calls “the ghetto.” He saw friends and neighbors die in drive-by shootings and remembered being scared to walk home at night. Viewing poverty, gangs, and Latino identity as fused, claiming to be “American first” is a strategy to divorce himself from the poverty-ridden gang route that, as a youngster, he observed often ended in death. John advances a plain American identity:

We just try to live as Americans . . . If you’re a Mexican . . . you don’t get too many of the benefits . . . You feel like you’re one step below the White people . . . [and] you do come across a lot of racism.

Having learned about his narrow escape from jail or death I asked, “I’m . . . wondering if [your] background . . . has to do . . . with not pushing your Mexican background?” John commented, “Yeah . . . why would you want to have that part of that life in your life? . . . It seems like we get labeled [as degraded] after a while.” Labeling theory argues that labels, carrying either positive or negative connotations, shape people’s perception and treatment of others which, in turn, fosters unequal outcomes. Aware of the unflattering characteristics associated with the Mexican label, John instructs his children: “You see . . . the [Hispanic] gangbanger. . . . You . . . just keep your distance . . . That’s their lifestyle, this is our lifestyle.” John’s region-specific, class-inflected understanding of “Latino” spurs him to call himself and his children “American,” a way to rhetorically root them in the mainstream. John explains the principles he imparts to his children:

That they're Americans. We do have a Mexican background. We tell them that. . . . But we're not talking about it all the time We migrated up here for the better[ment] of the family.

The lessons of John's youth and the logic of migration persuade John to attenuate his and his children's relationship with the Latino population that he overgeneralizes as lower class.

Low-class, racist stereotypes of Latinos also prompted Braedon Toledo (Mexican American/Cuban/Italian) to jettison his Latino heritage. Braedon was the only interviewee to claim he is non-Hispanic White. Nevertheless, in the context of southern California where a "devalored class stigma for Mexican Americans . . . reflect[s] many Mexican immigrants' niche in the American economy as cheap labor" (Cheng 2013:15), Braedon hoped a declaration of whiteness would override his midnight-black hair, brown eyes, and light-tan skin tone. He declares, "I would identify myself with mainstream U.S. society 100%." Braedon, who grew up with a working-class single mother, deploys social distancing by calling himself White. (Notably, high school classmates disbelieved his claim of whiteness: "I . . . got into a lot of fights about it, [classmates insisting] 'You're Mexican.'") Braedon defects from the Latino category and asserts whiteness "to command respect" and delink himself from delinquent, underemployed, poor, gang stereotypes of Latino men. Braedon's strategy of claiming whiteness may be attributable to internalized racism. Internalized racism stems from binary thinking that buys into Whites as superior and minorities as inferior. Even unconsciously, racial minorities may believe in, justify, and perpetuate their own subordination "by accepting and internalizing mainstream racist values and rationales" (Pyke and Dang 2003:150–51). Like John above, a lower-class Latino and middle-class White American cognitive binary makes the existence of a middle-class Latino American difficult to imagine for Californian Latinos with lower-class backgrounds.

Middle-class Latino respondents who socially distance themselves from lower-class Latinos diminish ties to their identity to shed negative group-based connotations and better position themselves for brighter prospects delinked from race and class. Segmented assimilation theory put forward the notion of reactive ethnicity, referring to oppositional behaviors among marginalized subgroups formed in response to a perceived rejection by the established order and mainstream authorities (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Social distancing as a means to jockey for position in the mainstream is a counterpoint to reactive ethnicity and may be thought of as *reactive Americanization*. Reactive Americanization is a tactic of leading with "American" (coded as culturally and racially White) identity to dissociate one's self from derogatory racial meanings and secure a life course unsaddled from racialized trajectories. Recall that White supremacy undergirds Americanization, from ideology to official programs (Jacobson 1998). This history of Americanization informs respondents' conception of American as reserved for Whites and thus shapes the social distancing strategy of reactive Americanization, which denigrates Latino identity and extols and mimics whiteness. Tied to racialization and class oppression, reactive Americanization is also gendered: men reported reactive Americanization more so than women because society views racial minority men as more threatening than women who are viewed as more acceptable (Vasquez 2010).

In Los Angeles, proximity to gangs and underclass minority ghettos constitute the backdrop against which Latinos view themselves. The City of Los Angeles is the "gang capital" of the nation, with more than 450 active gangs and a combined membership topping 45,000 individuals.² In a local context where Latino identity is tightly bound to gang membership, Mexican youthfulness can become synonymous with gangs (Smith 2014). Californian Latinos from humble class origins shied away from their Latino heritage because they saw it as conjoined to danger, downward mobility, and death.

Not everyone aspires to be mainstream; some "choose the margins" (hooks 1990). Theorist bell hooks (1990) writes of "choosing the margins" as occupying marginal space with a stance of belonging and resistance. Thirty-six-year-old Mexican immigrant Vincent Venegas "owns" his

peripheral space by pointing out that he *earned* the legal right to work rather than being born into that privilege via *jus solis*. Yet, he feels his Mexican foreign-born status excludes him: “I have felt like an outsider just because of my immigration status [resident alien].” Vincent questions the value of naturalization:

When they realize that you’re not born here they are like, “Hmmm?” You can actually see that they are like, “You took my job.” I see [it] in people’s faces when they realize that I’m not American-born: “Oh, you’re . . . one of those that we’re trying to keep out.”

The backdrop of Los Angeles County and his prior gang involvement foment Vincent’s marginality: “A little bubble of . . . gang life . . . contained me.” The race, class, and gender structure of Vincent’s local environment propelled him toward a “regionally specific identity” which manifested as gang life in adolescence and “choosing the margins” in adulthood, both reflections of a regional environment that, as he said, “contains” him.

Redefining the mainstream as multiracial. Latino respondents in California point to nonwhite population growth overtaking that of non-Hispanic White population increases (Passel, Livingston, and Cohn 2012) and their racially heterogeneous environment to propose that mainstream society is becoming multiracial. The rationale is this: as the population changes, so changes the definition of mainstream. Because of the shifting racial configuration of the United States, Californian Latinos argued that the mainstream should be considered multiracial and that therefore they qualify as mainstream members.

Californian Latinos cited the state’s majority-minority status and multiraciality as reasons to consider themselves part of a distinctively *multiracial mainstream*. As Terry Camacho (Mexican American) succinctly phrased it, “We’re the face. The face is changing.” The racially heterogeneous context allows Latino interviewees to feel included. Bianca Stroeh (Mexican American) underscores local diversity that allows her family to feel comfortable: “[In my children’s classroom] if you look at them alphabetically the child before them is [Salamat] which is Filipino. And the one after them is [Suarez] which is Mexican.” Nonwhite diversity is a stronghold for Bianca’s sense of inclusion. Similarly, Martha Camacho (Mexican American/White) sees the racially heterogeneous and mixed-race student body in the elementary school where she teaches as evidence of a multiracial mainstream: “I see children who are . . . Japanese and Mexican. I see White-Mexican. I see Asian-Chinese-Mexican.” Witness to local racial diversity and racially mixed families, which both “cross” and “blur” boundaries through marriage and children (Alba and Nee 2003), Californians see their state as a vanguard of a multiracial mainstream.

The state’s heterogeneous racial demography makes Californians forerunners in the call to redefine the mainstream as explicitly multiracial. An outgrowth of regional racial demographics, the legacy of California’s racial politics also supports the push to topple the vision of a White mainstream and supplant it with a more representative multiracial vision. California was a hub for the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and a handful of Latino respondents from California were activists who aimed to diversify access to mainstream services like education, health care, and the labor market—that is, mainstream society. Chicano Movement activism pushed for admittance to the mainstream or, in other words, to make the mainstream multiracial rather than monoracial White. Sal Dominguez, a 66-year-old Mexican American, spoke of the Chicano Movement “as trying to right certain injustices” such as tracking in “high schools where students were railroaded towards vocational programs rather than college prep.” Sal spoke of the Movement, including school walkouts and boycotts, as a “necessary” vehicle to show the numerical strength of the Latino population and to agitate for equality. He recounts a conversation with Chicano Movement leader Cesar Chavez on the need for structural diversity in community and

corporate leadership that, when lacking, is a barrier to mainstream achievement. Sal repeats Cesar Chavez's words to him:

You'd go to the city council in L.A. to make your plea, and there's no Latinos. So it fell on deaf ears. We'd go to the newspapers—they were all White—couldn't get any support there. And so we lost one fight after the other, after the other.

In the context of Los Angeles racial heterogeneity, this 1960s social movement framework and push for structural diversity is a harbinger of Californian Latinos who are redefining the mainstream as multiracial five decades later.

Californian Latinos resisted White supremacy by advancing multiracialism in two ways: by diversifying *definitions* of the mainstream as well as mainstream *institutions*. Terry Camacho, an architect, and Lisandro Quiñones, an artist and art instructor, restructure mainstream occupations by their presence and efforts. Terry calls himself part of a Latino architect "first generation." In terms of structural diversity within the occupation, Terry employs 22 people and prioritizes hiring "a mix of men and women . . . [and] different minorities." In addition to making his profession more multiracial through hiring practices, Terry's on-the-ground work redesigns physical spaces in ways that benefits nonwhites, not just wealthy Whites. Terry explains what a commitment to serving multiple racial communities looks like:

Over the years I've worked with people who are extremely wealthy. . . . MGM—I did their corporate headquarters. So I work at that level where . . . these guys are, you know, billionaires. But yet, the projects I'm most proud of [include a] farmworker housing project. . . . I've done [work] in South Central where I work with all Black—the Crips—and I redid a housing project that just brought it from . . . like a war zone to something people could really live in.

Lisandro Quiñones is another example of diversifying mainstream institutions through participation. With "three degrees from [University of California] Berkeley," Lisandro found it "disappointing" that his qualifications were disregarded on his first day teaching when "a student wrote on the chalkboard, 'Who let the 'beaner' teach?'" Flattened to a racial epithet was "uncool," Lisandro says, "but only kind of made me stay there more." Survey research finds that more educated Mexican Americans experience more stereotyping and discrimination than their less-educated counterparts, partly because of their greater contact with Whites (Ortiz and Telles 2012). Lisandro's resistance ("it only kind of made me stay there more") is markedly Californian in its aim to diversify mainstream institutions like higher education; the premise of Lisandro's stalwart stance is that institutions should mirror a mainstream that is already demographically multiracial. In the context of a multiracial environment and participation in mainstream institutions, Californian Latino respondents desire to update antiquated monoracial White definitions of the mainstream and redevelop institutions so that they are included. The prospect of a multiracial redefinition of the mainstream and more representative mainstream institutions hold out hope that Latinos may eventually be legitimized as a valuable component of a "composite culture."

California field site summary. Middle-class Californian Latinos leveraged income, retirement savings, wealth, and homeownership as reasons why they envisioned themselves included in the U.S. mainstream. And yet class origin is formative for Californian Latinos who grew up in economically stressed areas with Latino gangs present and reacted to their association of working-class and poor Latinos with gang membership by engaging in social distancing and emphasizing their cultural Americanness (reactive Americanization). Californians referenced the region's racial diversity and nonwhite population growth to express a need to redefine the mainstream as multiracial. A multiracial definition of the mainstream would include Latinos and free them to be American, Latino, and mainstream simultaneously.

Kansas Field Site

Eschewing race and racism. Most Latino respondents in Kansas deflated racial distinctions and deflected attention from race which enabled them to claim mainstream status. With the backdrop of a predominately White context that lacks continuing immigration that refurbishes race- and class-based stereotypes, most Latino Kansans viewed blending in as feasible. Kansan Cynthia Herrera-Redgrave (Mexican American) remarked,

I've always . . . felt like I fit in. . . . I've always just felt like people looked at me and thought I was American and have treated me like that. . . . I'm American but I have Mexican roots. I was born here.

In contradistinction with Latinos in California who face stringent stereotypes due to a continuing influx of immigrants who “replenish” the population (Jiménez 2010) and accompanying negative imagery, the less-dense Latino population in Kansas lends itself to less confining notions of Latinos. Social identity theory tells us that the labels used by outsiders can become internalized and recast people’s ideas about themselves. With this in mind, Cynthia’s having “always” felt American is telling. As a mother, Lorena Cota (Mexican American) compares her Kansas reality with an imagined reality in a locale with more Latinos: “It would be nice to have my kids in a community that has the same background. Then, I think . . . is it good? I don’t know. I’m sure there are different issues wherever you are.” Lorena refers to “place-specific considerations” (Harrison 2017) that draw people to or deter them from specific places as she perceives that “different issues” would affect her family if they lived elsewhere. Lorena’s family in Kansas did not report social distancing like its Californian counterparts. In a less-popular receiving area with a small Latino population, the push-back against immigration and anti-Latino racism is less pronounced.

Surrounding environments shape people’s ideas about themselves and their fit in society. Twenty-four-year-old Mexican immigrant José Romo makes the case that small-town Kansas aids his acceptance. He speculates that in larger Kansas cities, he would have to do the social distancing work that his Latino peers in Los Angeles regularly do:

People here [in Lawrence] accept you . . . they say hello . . . I feel calm here. I feel better than if I would live in Kansas City . . . or Topeka . . . Because in the big cities . . . there are a lot of Mexicans and . . . lots of problems with Mexicans: shootings, drugs . . . So people in Topeka see a Mexican and [ask] . . . “Is he one of the calm ones?” (Laughs).

In a smaller community, José skirts negative connotations associated with Mexicans in cities with higher Mexican population densities. This intra-state imagined comparison also sheds light on how states encapsulate cities with different racial populations and racial climates that lead to variegation in racialized experience which single-sited studies miss.

Racism certainly exists in Kansas, but the small size of the Latino population translates to racist stereotypes that are less bold and pervasive and, when filtered through colorblindness, are taken less personally. Orlando Puente (Mexican American) tells a story attributable to racial discrimination and yet he rationalizes that it is his large physical size and style that “throws people off.” Orlando, bearing dark skin and hair, two hoop earrings dangling from each ear, and tattoos that extend from beneath his t-shirt, engages colorblind logic. He recalls driving to a gas station in his low-rider car and encountering a White woman who acted intimidated: “I see her switch her purse over to this side . . . like I’m gonna snatch her purse.” He pinpoints the reason for the assumed threat to nonracial features:

I have tattoos all over my arms and . . . earrings . . . I can’t say that I’ve ever had a bad experience with somebody getting on me for being Mexican . . . I don’t know if she just thought I was a threat because I was a rough-looking guy with tattoos.

Even as Orlando's tattoos are embodiments of his love for his family (the names of his grandfathers and their birth and death dates), the White woman may have read them as race and class signifiers that indicate he was criminally inclined. A plausible explanation is that not having a sizeable Latino community with whom to share stories leads Orlando to reject the notion of racism. Without race as a ready explanation, Orlando generates a nonracial rationale. Functioning as a defense mechanism—because he could alter his personal style if he chose—a nonracial interpretation allows him to maintain equanimity and “not be bothered.”

Paloma Lucero (Mexican American/White) attests to the power of colorblindness in a predominantly White region and the efficacy of class advancement as a strategy for integration into mainstream society. She says,

When my mom was growing up [in] the '60's I don't think that a lot of time was spent talking about the fact that she was Mexican . . . For me, growing up I didn't spend a lot of time talking about the fact that I was Mexican. . . . [We] are really integrated into American society. . . . The entire family . . . [we're] not standing out like a sore thumb.

By the time Paloma's (third) generation came of age, upward mobility strategies had taken hold and gave her the sense that her Mexican identity was unremarkable. Paloma's family's achievement of middle-class status and their lack of racial awareness keeps race talk at bay and facilitates their feeling of seamless integration.

Colorblindness runs deep, illustrated by respondents' refusal to name racism. Nathan Lucero is a dark-skinned Mexican American who blunted racial discrimination with colorblindness. Dark-skinned Latinos were not exempt from muting racism with colorblind rhetoric, which is remarkable because dark skin is associated with being perceived as Mexican/Latino and leads to reports of experiences with discrimination (Ortiz and Telles 2012). Nathan told me about racist incidents with customers at the bank where he was an executive, such as when “a gruff older gentleman” demanded “to speak to a White man” to conduct his financial transaction. Deflecting racism, he answered my question about his fit in mainstream America by saying, “There's never been a situation where I felt any different than anybody.” Nathan's turnabout from detailing an experience of racial discrimination to asserting sameness with fellow (White) Kansans is an assertion of agency to try to (in vain) reduce systemic racism to individual-level problems one might surmount through toil and attitude. In remaining silent about racism, he refused to let racism belittle his Americanness. In a context without Latino confederates with whom to identify and discuss racism, Nathan adopts colorblindness to preserve himself. In predominantly White spaces, it may be a “strategic decision of people of color to disengage and not challenge micro-aggressions or structural racial inequities” (Evans and Moore 2015:452). Even as this demure tactic does not disrupt the reproduction of inequality, it may be personally beneficial as it allows racial minorities to navigate White spaces and institutions and avail themselves of resources (Evans and Moore 2015). Turning a blind eye to racism or explaining away racism is an ideological move to fit in. This approach is possible in a predominantly White space where racial discourse is less acute, racial stereotypes less severe and pervasive, and where small Latino group size thwarts racial consciousness building.

Kansans defined racial discrimination differently than Californians: most Kansans understood discrimination as personal insults and interactional affronts whereas Californians had a more nuanced understanding of racial discrimination that included institutional discrimination. This definitional difference of discrimination allowed for Kansans to feel *included* but *subordinated* (Collins 2001). Adriana Guthrie (Mexican American/White) remarked, “I'm included in anything that I want to participate in.” Not blockaded by institutional discrimination, she claims mainstream status. Yet, she also complained that her White mother-in-law held racist and sexist views of her, routinely saying, “little things like . . . ‘My hands just can't clean [the refrigerator]

but your hands are used to cleaning all the time so you should clean it.” Adriana brushed off such remarks without retort. Not locked in by pervasive negative imagery attached to Latinos in Kansas, Kansan respondents interpreted racist slights as aberrant callous words or attitudes not indicative of structural inequalities.

A crack in the monoracial White mainstream in Kansas. Multiracial youth in Kansas cast doubt on the mainstream as monoracial White, their own experience of multiracial families grounds for questioning it. Assimilation theory discusses intermarriage and mixed-race progeny as mechanisms of “boundary blurring,” that is, an “expansion of the mainstream culture to include elements of the minority cultures” (Alba and Nee 2003:287). If “social and cultural distance” between racial groups is “reduced” through racial intermarriage and multiracial offspring (Alba and Nee 2003:287), multiracial youths’ experiences around racial and cultural blending offer rationales for broadening the bounds of the mainstream.

Multiracial Latino youth in Kansas (all teenagers with Mexican American and White parentage) view their parents and attendant cultures as “compatible.” By extension, both Latino and White heritages, and subsequent racial admixtures, are eligible for mainstream inclusion. Shane Flores remarks, “Those two backgrounds [Mexican American and White] have always been conjoined . . . in my life so they’ve . . . merged together. . . . I . . . consider us an average American family.” Shane normalizes racial intermarriage and concludes that he and his family are “mainstream American.” Multiraciality that includes whiteness bolsters the claim to mainstream given that “American” is widely viewed as possessing a White core, only the boundaries up for debate. Kaleigh Guthrie similarly says that she is included in mainstream society, seeing her heritages as inseparable, never thinking, “I’m doing this for my Mexican background [and] I’m doing this for my White background.” Exhibiting “everyday biculturalism” (Vasquez 2014), with her heritages easily combined in daily life, her mainstream inclusion is necessarily multiracial, even if it is unarticulated in comparison with her Californian counterparts.

Multiracial Latino Kansans represent a potential shift in reconceptualizing the mainstream. Illustrative of Latino youth employing an “incorporationist trope of multiculturalism . . . to contest the limited meaning of Americanness” (Flores-Gonzalez 2017:135), Camille Herrera describes her interracial family as representative of a racially mixed mainstream: “I think [multiracial] describes what America is really. No one is really just ‘American.’ We’re all different.” In contrast to the small percentage of the U.S. population that consider themselves more than one race (2.9 percent as of Census 2010; Jones and Bullock 2012), Camille has a personal stake in asserting that “most people now aren’t just one race.” As an ideological tool, highlighting multiracial identity is important because “it makes everyone feel like they fit in.” By establishing *difference* rather than homogenous whiteness as pivotal to American identity, Camille carves out a place to belong. In contrast to “happy talk” diversity discourse that values diversity but presumes a White mainstream (Bell and Hartmann 2007), Camille is invested in opening space for multiracial inclusion due to her morphology and biographical standpoint. Butting against normative whiteness cracks its monolithic façade and destabilizes its superior rank.

Being multiracial and seeing parents’ Latino and White heritage on even footing in the home can inspire a desire to humanize the group that is devalued outside the home. Tristan Redgrave calls his parents’ backgrounds “pretty compatible,” saying that “they represent in their own little special way whether it’s foods, culture, [or] language.” Loving his Mexican immigrant grandparents and witnessing slights against their group leads multiracial Tristan to humanize Mexicans for others:

I feel like I have this chip on my shoulder when it comes to ethnicity and I gotta stand strong for it. . . . I have to say something just to prove them wrong . . . Mexicans . . . get a bad rep[utation] with stereotyping. I try to change people’s minds.

Having a blueprint for cross-racial sharing in his home, Tristan uses his grandparents' struggle of migration to advance cross-racial understanding. He views it as "a privilege . . . to have that knowledge . . . to share with people and inform them." Seeing Latinos and Whites as harmonious in his family life provides a framework for recalibrating wider-scale racial attitudes and flexes the boundaries of who is welcome in the mainstream.

Multiracial youth in Kansas puncture the vision of the mainstream as monoracial White because they experience multiple racial backgrounds as compatible. Racial compatibility—or in assimilation terminology, acceptance or interpenetration—is an avenue to redefining the mainstream as multiracial. These multiracial Kansan youths' ability to "see" race represents variation in adherence to colorblindness and satisfaction with an abiding White monoracial mainstream that typified the region.

Kansas field site summary. Even as class privilege was utilized to assert mainstream claims, it was less necessary a resource for Kansans who did not need to defend themselves earnestly from racial stigma because of the smaller Latino population that attracted less negative attention. Race more submerged in their majority-White environment, Latinos in Kansas were more likely than Californians to proffer nonracial explanations for incidents tinged with racism. Most Kansans spoke of "not seeing" race because their predominately White setting does not prime them to think about race. It follows that Latino Kansans' colorblindness, coupled with the tactic of shrugging off racism, facilitated their feeling of inclusion. Multiracial youth are exceptions to colorblindness and satisfaction with a monoracial White mainstream conception.

Conclusion

This research study asked about Latinos' sense of inclusion in the U.S. mainstream. Honing in on "regional racial formation" which posits that "meanings and outcomes [are] rooted in place-based, everyday knowledge and interactions" (Cheng 2013:10–11), the findings reveal that Latinos' sense of fit in the mainstream is structured by region. Even as the concept of region encapsulates historical migration patterns and race/ethnic relations, population density of racial/ethnic groups emerged as a crucial dimension of region. In addition to population concentrations, political climate (around race, immigration, poverty, and gang issues) contributed to feelings of inclusion or marginality. Supporting the proposition that racial stereotypes are magnified in regions with high concentrations of Latinos (Smith 2014), this study adds the counterbalancing finding that the nonacknowledgment of race (Bonilla-Silva 2003) is more easily adopted in majority-White locales which, in turn, can entice Latinos to perpetuate colorblindness. Regional stratification systems drive articulations of mainstream status, recasting our understanding of identity as sensitive to proximate racial demographics and race-and-class inequality.

Latino interviewees in California view the large Latino population and continuing immigration from Latin America as making the population "hyper-visible" (Flores-Gonzalez 2017) and renewing negative stereotypes. In this context of racial diversity and migration inflows, Latino interviewees in California were acutely aware of classist racism. Worry about downward assimilation undergirds social distancing and reactive Americanization. In contrast, in Kansas, a space where Whites far outnumber Latinos and migration is not a prominent regional theme, interviewees reported less incursion by racist stereotypes. Thus, Kansan Latinos did not experience Latino identity as saddled with class-inflected racial stigma that inhibits mainstream inclusion. Colorblindness smoothed Kansan Latino incorporation, most shedding racial complaints in favor of local acceptance.

Across field sites, respondents believed that middle-class status proves their mainstream inclusion; this belief is likely an outgrowth of a capitalist system that sees value in economic terms. Yet, class status is also regionally bound, making class differentially salient in spaces with

different demographic makeups. Despite having achieved middle-class status, Californians who grew up poor and working-class engaged in social distancing from Latino affiliation to eschew racial stigma. No such class divide split perspectives on inclusion among Kansans. Most Latino Kansans deflected attention to race. Possessing muted racial consciousness, most Latino Kansans balked at raising charges of discrimination and instead disregarded or excused racism using non-racial logic. A small Latino population in Kansas diverted attention away from racial consciousness and rhetoric. In addition, elaborating on the notion that there are multiple pathways into the middle class (Vallejo 2012), the regionally-distinct strategies of social distancing in California and minimizing race and racism in Kansas may function as entrance requirements of the Latino middle class in those spaces.

Turning to theoretical implications, assimilation theory's proposition of the mainstream as a "composite culture" does not yet stand true. Respondents immersed in California's racial diversity aim to move in a "composite culture" direction but Kansas's majority-White demographics endorse colorblindness, which stalls consensus-building around breaking from a monoracial White mainstream vision. Segmented assimilation theory's suggestion that race and class dimensions of a local context influence integration contextualizes these regionally distinct patterns. As a counterpoint to segmented assimilation theory's concept of reactive ethnicity, reactive Americanization is a race- and class-driven strategy that Latinos in California with poor or working-class backgrounds use to gain social distance from disparaging group-based stereotypes to best position themselves for mainstream acceptance. An irony is that internalized racism fuels this tactic and bolsters the idea, rooted in White supremacy, that "Latino" and "American" are separate identities.

The "racialization versus integration" debate is a false dichotomy that does not adequately consider the influence of region on racial identity, integration trajectory, and race relations (including intraracial relations). This study adds nuance to the picture of stratification by detailing understandings and strategies of mainstream membership that vary by region. In contrast to Tomás Jiménez's (2010) scholarship that compared locations in California and Kansas and found no notable differences, my research uncovers significant difference, possibly owing to the specificities of our field sites, time of data collection, or focal research questions. Nevertheless, Jiménez's core argument that immigrant replenishment (continued immigration flows from Mexico) supports Mexican American identity in both positive and negative ways is useful in making sense of why Californian newcomers to the middle class employ social distancing. Population inflows and sheer population density create a racial-political climate in Los Angeles where immigrant replenishment renews not just populations but also negative racial meanings. This research highlights the importance of region in shaping context-based nuances to racial identity, standing relative to the mainstream, and strategies of action around race. As the sample was comprised of middle-class individuals at the time of the interview, future research on lower-class populations may reveal different dynamics. Future research analyzing more regions of the country or different nonwhite racial groups would test the wider applicability of these findings.

The very definition of mainstream is in flux, contested, and dependent on region. Californian Latinos are advocating for a conceptualization of a multiracial mainstream that embraces the "interpenetration" (Alba and Nee 2003) of races and cultures. A multiracial mainstream argument straddles both assimilation and racialization literature because it foregrounds race as a master category that, in respondents' view, need not be (and is not, for many) unhinged from assimilation. Regional processes of racialization are intertwined with mainstream inclusion possibilities. In contrast to California, if attention to race is eschewed in favor of colorblindness in hopes of fitting into predominately White spaces such as Kansas, the mainstream as monoracial and White is less challenged. Multiracial youth in Kansas were a crosscurrent trend in breaking from colorblindness, a gesture that cracks the White monoracial definition of the

mainstream. This nascent call for greater racial awareness and inclusivity suggests that Latinos in Kansas may be following in the footsteps of those located in more racially diverse places like California. Latino respondents' claims about their relationship to mainstream society were informed by regional location and nested connotations of race and class. Latinos' articulations of their placement relative to mainstream U.S. society reveals that national belonging is nuanced by region of residence, region harboring racial dynamics that contour both hindrances and pathways to inclusion and influence the re-mapping of boundaries of what is considered mainstream.

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Notes

1. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/>.
2. http://www.lapdonline.org/get_informed/content_basic_view/1396.

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