Participants in the 1970 National Chicano Moratorium Committee Against the Vietnam War march in Los Angeles. David Fenton/Getty Images

Opinion

How Latinos Can Win the Culture War

First, white gatekeepers have to stop hoarding power.

By Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Mónica Ramírez

Ms. Méndez Berry is a journalist, cultural critic and editor. Ms. Ramírez is the founder of the Latinx House, and the author of the “Dear Sisters” letter that helped inspire the Time’s Up movement.

Sept. 2, 2020

The story about Latinos in America is an old one. And it isn't true. Created generations ago by whites to demonize Mexicans and then Puerto Ricans, the racist caricature of Latinos as a menacing foreign monolith persists, even as two-thirds of us were born here and we come from more than 20 different countries.

While we are everywhere in this country, from big cities to small towns, Latinos are largely missing from American media and culture, which makes us vulnerable. President Donald Trump knows this and exploits these fictions for political gain.

Mr. Trump has accomplices. White gatekeepers in media, art and entertainment have long excluded or misrepresented Latinos, particularly Indigenous and Black Latinos, building the cultural scaffolding for the current administration. To defang these old falsehoods, we have to go after their enablers, transform media and cultural power structures and amplify and defend Latino storytellers. We must flex our power as a community.

Representative Joaquin Castro of Texas gave voice to this in a recent column for Variety: "There is a dangerous nexus between the racist political rhetoric and the negative images of Latinos as criminals and invaders that Americans see on their screens." Mr. Castro added, "Hollywood needs to reckon with its systemic injustice and exclusion of our communities."

Indeed, all media and culture industries must be held accountable, along with the advertisers, investors and funders who bankroll their behavior.

In Spanish, we say that “la cultura cura” — culture heals. But the U.S. culture industry, which creates seductive images that reverberate around the world, is a key culprit in Latino stereotyping. Latinos buy more movie tickets per capita than any other group, but of 1,200 top-grossing films from 2007 to 2018, Latinos made up only 3 percent of the lead or co-lead actors (and we are 19 percent of the population).

Latino actors and members of the Latino Media Council protesting at Paramount Pictures in 2018. Mark Ralston/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

When we are onscreen, we're usually depicted in narrow ways. A 2019 Opportunity Agenda report found that 25 percent of Latino immigrant TV characters were portrayed as employed, while 88 percent were represented as incarcerated or the perpetrators of crime. Without alternative stories about regular shmegular Latinos, Mr. Trump's narratives sell to an audience primed by "Narcos" on Netflix.

White elites cannot muffle a huge, vibrant community for decades and not expect consequences. For Latinos in the Trump era, these consequences are deadly, from Hurricane Maria to the Walmart shooting in El Paso and the pandemic, as well as soaring hate crimes.

Latino artists and organizers are leading the way. In book publishing, 3 percent of employees in 2018 were Latino, a statistic that helps explain why the industry was surprised when Latinos were outraged by the stereotypes in the novel "American Dirt."The author-led Dignidad Literaria movement and Latinx in Publishing are organizing to demand that the industry tell Latino stories, and tell them well.

Disney attempted to trademark the phrase "Day of the Dead" for the release of the 2017 movie "Coco." Disney/Pixar

Protests by Chicano activists when Disney attempted to trademark the phrase “Day of the Dead,” played a major role in making the movie “Coco” the culturally astute blockbuster it became. Whether the goal is to shape the movie or shut it down, protests and boycotts coupled with strategic support for alternatives can work.

Plenty has been written about the toxicity of narco stereotypes, and industry insiders have been organizing against them too. Latinos can learn from Color of Change, which has investigated how TV crime shows misrepresent Black people and campaigned to shut them down, resulting in the demise of the program “Cops." Never underestimate the power of bad publicity and people power.

The facts are as important as the fictions. In the mid-19th century, when white mobs were lynching Mexicans, Spanish-language media covered those murders, leading to public protest and eventual change. Latino journalists from Ruben Salazar (killed by a Los Angeles sheriff’s deputy during the Chicano Moratorium 50 years ago) to Juan González, Roberto Lovato, Sonia Nazario, Maria Hinojosa and Tanzina Vega have played herculean roles, but their numbers are small, particularly when it comes to opinion writing.

Ruben Salazar CaraMar Publicity

The future journalist Juan González in 1969. Bev Grant/Getty Images

This means that we don't set the national agenda, and too many abuses of our community, from police brutality to wage theft, are never exposed. Organizing inside and outside the newsroom is the primary reason this country's mainstream media has begun to represent the people it covers, as documented in Juan González and Joe Torres's indispensable book "News for All the People."

If a U.S. media outlet today doesn't have several Latino writers, editors and columnists it should be embarrassed and it should be hiring; mastheads must be published and visible; the N.F.L's Rooney rule, which requires each football team to interview candidates of color from outside the organization when hiring for major jobs, should be instituted across the industry; bylines, articles, sources and salaries should be scrutinized. Just 13 percent of the Los Angeles Times newsroom is Latino in a city that is almost 50 percent Latino. As a result of organizing by the paper's union and its Latino caucus, the newspaper's owner committed to a 25 percent Latino staff in the next five years.

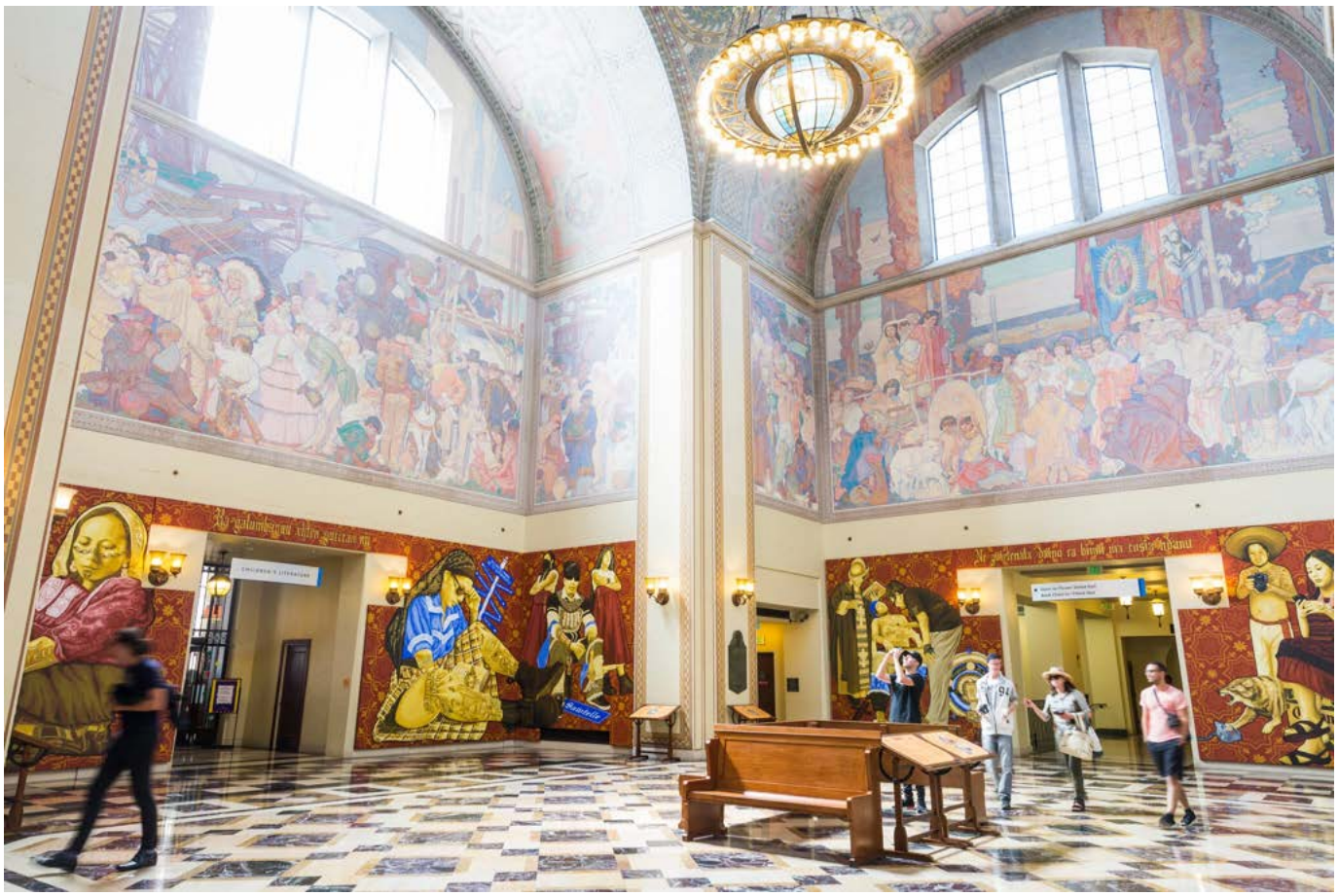
The inventory of exclusion is long. Latinos have been shut out of prestige magazines that confer authority, awards and book deals. New York City is about 30 percent Latino — 2.5 million stories to tell. Yet on its contributor page, The New Yorker magazine does not appear to list a single Latino; the magazine declined to confirm or deny. Because of the publication's union, some newsroom inequalities have recently been addressed. The New Yorker should tackle racial inequalities too, so that excluded groups, including Latinos, particularly nonwhite Latinos, are hired as high-level editors and writers and the magazine can credibly cover Nueva York.

Funders and investors working to build Latino power must understand that information is essential community infrastructure. They should invest in independent Latino journalism like Futuro Media Group, L.A. Taco, Revista Étnica, Conecta Arizona, 80grados, Radio Ambulante and Latino Rebels instead of bankrolling perennially "diversifying" but never "diverse" organizations.

The Mexican-American critic Shea Serrano's one-man media empire is a model. He created a scholarship to support emerging Latino journalists.

Spanish-language journalism must be supported too: El Centro de Periodismo Investigativo in Puerto Rico played a pivotal role in bringing down Gov. Ricardo Roselló; imagine if we had an ace Latino investigative shop dissecting Washington. Cultural criticism, watchdog reporting and the opportunity to tell our own stories are crucial to building collective identity and confronting injustice.

Imagination is essential too. When you sleep with one eye open, it's difficult to dream. That's why our art is a survival strategy. It was on abundant display in Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a 2017 citywide series of exhibitions, funded by the Getty Foundation. Getty's support enabled La Raza newspaper and U.C.L.A.'s Chicano Studies Research Center to organize 25,000 images from its archive, offering an electrifying insider view of the 1970s Chicano power movement.



Murals by the Oaxacan artist collective Tlacolulokos at a Los Angeles Public Central Library in 2017. Emily Berl for The New York Times

At the Los Angeles Central Library, the Oaxacan collective Tlacolulokos painted a glorious mural depicting contemporary Indigenous Zapotec culture, supplanting the library's mural from 1933, which showed Native Americans genuflecting to European colonialists. While there were problems with the Getty initiative — too often it shined a spotlight on white Latin American artists over brown and Black U.S. Latino artists — it was thrilling in its ambition and scale.

A detail of the murals by the Oaxacan artist collective Tlacolulokos in the public library in Los Angeles. Emily Berl for The New York Times

We need much more: Every major museum should commit to a similar initiative in the next three years, and museum boards and staffs, particularly curatorial teams, should look like the cities they operate in, or forfeit public and private funding.

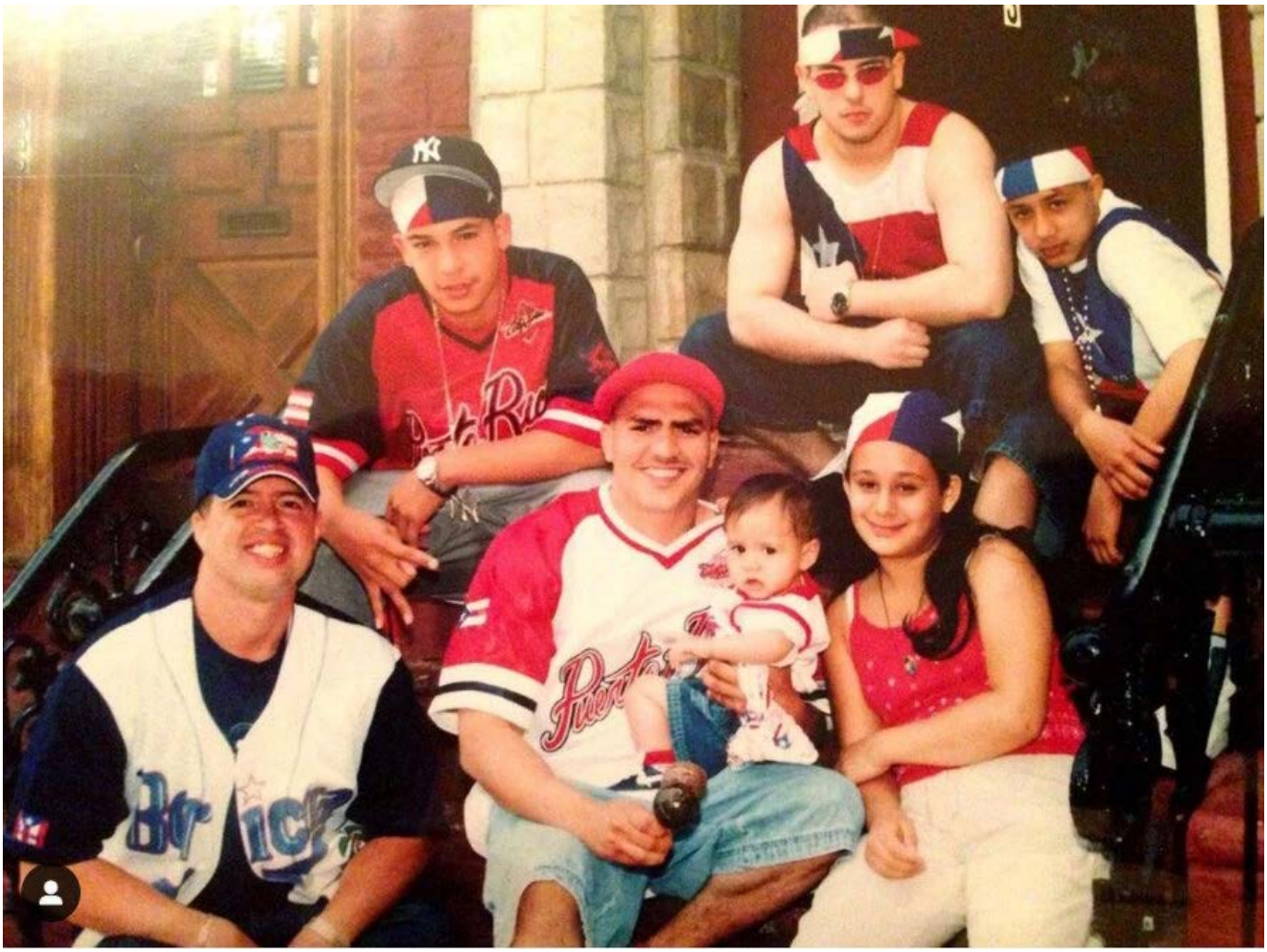
Imagine if Hollywood took a cue from Pacific Standard Time: if it made a Oaxacan blockbuster based on the Tlacolulokos murals; an Afro-Dominican futurist fantasy; a drama about the Chicano power movement; a Guatemalan buddy comedy. What if one summer all the blockbusters featured Latino stars, saving cities, planets, people, aliens?

Pacific Standard Time brought Latino artists and arts organizations from the margins to the center of the Los Angeles art conversation, and demonstrated their dynamism. Let's be clear: Latinos have not been ignored because we are uninteresting.

"First Supper (After a Major Riot)," 1974, by Harry Gamboa Jr. A performance by the art collective Asco took place on the street where clashes had occurred four years earlier between Chicano war protesters and the police. Harry Gamboa Jr.

But whether they have access to gallery walls or not, Latinos have figured out ways to make their art and find audiences. On Instagram, the riveting @Veteranas_and_Rucas celebrates Los Angeles Latinas with photographs and stories. Its creator, Guadalupe Rosales, has built a community of 257,000 by shining a light on women who are seldom celebrated outside their community.

Its popularity speaks to the pleasures of reveling in ourselves at a time when our flamboyance feels like a liability. Djali Brown-Cepeda's Nueva Yorkinos does something similar for Latino New Yorkers, telling stories of migration and longing. These foster community, disrupt the country's amnesia about Latinos and demonstrate our thirst to see ourselves. We need to support more self-representation, from podcasts to public art, that do the same.



”Joe & family on their stoop the morning of the PR Day Parade. Park Slope, 2000” from Djali Brown-Cepeda’s website, nuevayorkinos.com. @oldyork___, via @Nuevayorkinos

All of these efforts are important. But the stories we tell once we have the microphone are critical. Around Latin America, the racial discourse is one of mixing Indigenous, African and European roots, but the most European-featured, light-skinned people usually end up on top, an issue that has resulted in criticism against Spanish-language channels like Univision and Telemundo by organizations like the grass-roots group Mijente.

The fact that many Latinos, particularly white and light-skinned Latinos, are resistant to talking about how white privilege operates in our own communities means that they silence Indigenous and Afro-Latinos, an internal erasure that reinforces the external one. We must dismantle white supremacy in English and en español, and ensure that Indigenous and Black Latinos are onscreen, behind the camera and running shows and newsrooms.

In order to reshape cultural power, Latinos must apply pressure from all angles. They should challenge advertisers, a tactic Presente.org and others used to get the anti-Latino Lou Dobbs off CNN. Shareholder activism is another option: by holding at least $2,000 in a public company's stock, one can submit a shareholder proposal expressing concerns about a company's practices for its investors to vote on.

This could mean investing in media and entertainment companies in order to challenge problematic practices or partnering with investor networks like the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility to shape their priorities around racial justice. For too long, Latinos have been shut out by the corporations who decide how we are portrayed; shareholder strategies have a record of making companies uncomfortable and sparking change. What if we weren't perceived as casualties of culture but as its owners?

Latinos have been fighting white supremacy since California was part of Mexico. In the past months, 21 percent of Hispanic voters said they had participated in Black Lives Matter protests, for example. From the days of Arturo Schomburg, the pioneering Black Puerto Rican scholar, to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez's friendship, the Young Lords and the Black Panthers, Black and Latino communities have overlapped — according to one study, a quarter of Latinos identify as Afro-Latino — and worked together for justice (of course, there are also Latinos who support Mr. Trump). Today's protests are important, but we also have to deconstruct the cultural context that got us here.

The Black and Brown Unity March on July 12 in Los Angeles. Robyn Beck/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

We are the second largest ethnic group in this country. Many of us were here before the ancestors of most people who call themselves Americans. Others came as casualties of U.S. colonial experiments, covert operations and trade deals.

No matter how we got here or when, this country should be grateful for the Latino community: During this pandemic, farmworkers, 80 percent of whom are Latino, have put food on the table for us all and scores of other Latino workers have propped this country up, often at great cost to themselves.

The United States must reckon with the fact that Latinos are essential to its survival and to its splendor, and have been for generations. We Latinos need to know it too.

Elizabeth Méndez Berry (@mendezberry) is the co-founder of Critical Minded and vice president and executive editor of One World. Mónica Ramírez (@monicaramirezOH) founded Justice for Migrant Women, a national advocacy and technical assistance project focused on representing female farmworkers and other low-paid immigrant women who are victims of workplace sexual violence and is a founder of Alianza Nacional de Campesinas and the Latinx House.