

RACIAL PRESIDENTIALITIES: NARRATIVES OF LATINXS IN THE 2016 CAMPAIGN

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The 2016 presidential nomination saw significant discussions about Latinx communities and Latinx identities.¹ Such concerns, of course, are not new in electoral politics or campaign discourse.² However, the 2016 campaign provided an especially potent and varied sampling of political discourses about Latinx communities and Latinx identities, from discussions of the GOP's so-called "Hispanic problem" and political prognostication about the so-called "Latino vote" to Donald Trump's promises to build a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border.

In this essay, I consider how some of these electoral discourses are reflective of and shape what I call "racial presidentialities." In their book *The Prime-Time Presidency*, Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles define *presidentiality* as "a discourse that demarcates the cultural and ideological meaning of the presidency for the general public."³ In another book, *Constructing Clinton*, they write that rhetorics of presidentiality "define, in part, the American community by offering a vision of this central and vital office."⁴ Rhetorics of presidentiality use the president and the office of the presidency as referents or signs, constructing broader ideologies about national identity and national culture. The presidentiality concept indexes the ways in which popular understandings of the presidency condense and construct national identities, myths, and ideologies.

With the term *racial presidentialities* I refer to a particular thread in broader rhetorics of presidentiality: those political and cultural discourses

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that use the presidency and/or particular presidents or presidential candidates to construct broader meanings about racial politics and the role of race in U.S. national identity.⁵ This term takes inspiration not only from the work on presidentiality that I cited above but also from the excellent and wide-ranging scholarship in our field on President Obama and the way that discourses around his campaign and presidency reflect and shape understandings of racial politics and U.S. American identity.⁶

Discourses about Latinx communities and the Latinx vote in the presidential nomination campaign are examples of racial presidentialities because they use the office of the presidency and particular candidates to express and shape ideologies and norms about Latinx identity, the role of Latinxs in the national community, and U.S. racial politics. As racial presidentialities, these discourses use the presidency to reflect and construct understandings of Latinx identity and normative national identity and culture. They tell us about the way our political culture positions Latinxs within the national imaginary and about understandings of race and national identity in the post-Obama era.

In particular, this essay will consider two recurrent narratives about Latinx communities and Latinxs, primarily from the primary season, as examples of racial presidentialities.⁷ The first narrative is all about Latinxs as a highly prized political and demographic constituency and a crucial ethnic voting bloc. The second narrative is all about Latinxs as threats, criminal invaders, and/or interlopers. I argue that these two narratives about Latinxs in the 2016 campaign actually work as two sides of the same coin. Despite their differences, they share similar logics that homogenize and essentialize Latinxs and fetishize difference. I conclude that these narratives reflect problematic understandings of race and ethnicity in the national imaginary. This suggests that, in spite of the election of the nation's first black president, presidentiality is still tied to what Mary Stuckey called the "norms of whiteness" of the presidency and of normative national identity.⁸

TWO NARRATIVES

Both political communication scholars and rhetorical critics have examined political campaign discourse targeted at Latinx voters. Although such outreach stems as far back as the middle of the twentieth century, it has intensified in the latter half of the twentieth century with the growth of the

Latinx community.⁹ Studies of such campaign discourse have focused primarily on the strategies by which the political parties seek to create identification with Latinx voters. Collectively they show that identification with Latinx voters has been sought through implicit and explicit appeals to so-called Latinx values and superficial Latinx cultural markers (such as the Spanish language, religion, or “hard work”) as well as through narratives of cultural pluralism or upward economic mobility (“the American Dream”).¹⁰ Building on this work, my interest in this brief essay is to consider two broader narratives about Latinx communities and Latinx voters propagated by the 2016 campaigns as well as by the broader news media coverage. Rather than systematically analyzing partisan appeals to Latinx voters, my interest is in considering these two narratives as racial presidentialities (that is, as ideological narratives shaping U.S., racial, and specifically Latinx identity). Given space limitations, my analysis of the 2016 campaign discourse about Latinxs is meant to be exploratory rather than comprehensive.

The first narrative about Latinxs that we witnessed during the campaign has been quite common over the last several election cycles. It is about the “awakening” of Latinxs as a political and electoral force and as a prized electoral commodity that will be key to the election. Let’s call this one the “Latino vote” narrative. As I said, the “Latino vote” narrative has circulated for quite some time. Both political parties have increasingly acknowledged the growing electoral importance of the Hispanic/Latinx community and their potential to be “swing” voters.¹¹ The 2016 electoral campaign has once again seen significant discussion about the importance of the “Latino vote” to the election. In fact, the GOP’s so-called “Hispanic problem” has been a regular topic of discussion among journalists, commentators, and pundits since the 2012 election, in which Mitt Romney only won 27 percent of Latinx voters. In the wake of that election, many pundits prognosticated about the need for the GOP to do specific outreach to the Latinx community or otherwise doom its electoral prospects. Christine Flowers, in the *Philadelphia Daily News* in 2013, prophetically stated, “The bilingual writing is on the wall.”¹²

Any casual observer of the 2016 campaign was exposed to this narrative about the importance of Latinx voters and the Republican Party’s potential to appeal to Latinxs. The most dramatic occasion where this narrative about the “Latino vote” took shape, at least in the primary season, was after the

CBS News Republican debate in South Carolina on February 13. In this debate, Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz discussed Rubio's comments about immigration in a Univision interview from 2012. Cruz attacked Rubio for comments in support of undocumented immigrants that purportedly departed from the GOP position. Rubio famously responded that Cruz could not speak Spanish and so wouldn't have understood his comments on Univision anyway, to which Cruz responded in Spanish, challenging Rubio, in front of a live audience, which cheered at the interchange.¹³ The next day, Fox News Latino interpreted the moment as each candidate's attempt to identify with and appeal to Latinx voters ahead of key primaries in the southwest:

The Latino vote has become increasingly more important—particularly in the battleground state of Nevada—and both Cruz and Rubio have both been criticized for not being “Hispanic enough” because of their hardline stances on immigration. Both, it seemed, sought to dispel those myths Saturday night.¹⁴

A little over a week later, the narrative received more fuel during the next presidential debate, sponsored by CNN and Telemundo, which took place in Houston on February 25. In that debate, Telemundo's Maria Celeste Arrasas explicitly asked several of the candidates whether they were “missing a huge opportunity to expand the Republican base” by failing to appeal to Latinx voters. Rubio and Cruz received questions about whether they were squandering their ability to appeal to their own community. Each of the candidates took a crack at explaining how they represented Latinx values and could appeal to the Latinx vote.¹⁵

The “Latino vote” narrative has surrounded Rubio since his election to the U.S. Senate in 2010 and especially in the lead-up to the 2016 primary, where it was expected that Rubio might be the “Republican Obama.” After he announced his campaign in 2015, Ashley Parker and Jonathan Martin wrote in the *New York Times*, “For a party that skews older and whiter, and which is still struggling to attract minorities and young voters, Mr. Rubio—a Spanish speaker known for his rhetorical skills—offers an appealingly youthful face on which to base its hopes. . . . [C]omparisons with Mr. Obama will be inevitable.”¹⁶ Of course, some of those comparisons did not receive as much attention in the primary as was expected, but there was still

quite a bit of discussion about how Rubio might help the GOP woo Latinxs because of his identity.¹⁷ For example, just about a month before Rubio suspended his campaign, on February 3, 2016, the front page of Los Angeles's *La Opinión* featured a picture of a smiling Rubio, shaded like the iconic Obama "Hope" poster, and with a headline that read "Rubio: ¿El Obama Republicano?"¹⁸

Similar discussions took shape during the presidential campaign, stipulating the importance of the "Latino vote" and speculating on its potential to be the deciding swing vote, and after Donald Trump's shocking victory, assessing the role of Latinx voters in helping to win him the election.¹⁹ Before Trump was even sworn in as the nation's 45th president, political punditry had already resuscitated the topic of the GOP's so-called Hispanic problem.²⁰

The important point is that these were each just examples of a broader narrative about the role of the Latinx vote in the election and the ability of the GOP to woo Latinxs. Conversations about Rubio's ability or inability to appeal to Hispanic/Latinx voters, discussions about the broader appeal of the GOP and Trump to Latinxs, or debates about the role that Latinx voters played in the election—all of these indexed the narrative about the "Latino vote" as ethnic voting block and electoral resource. Rather than exemplify "racial neoliberalism" (or the disavowal of race via neoliberal individualism), the "Latino vote" narrative represents a kind of "neoliberal multiculturalism," which, among other things, frames multiculturalism and (racial/ethnic) diversity, via neoliberal logics, as individualized resource, commodity, or economic good.²¹

The second narrative about Latinxs prevalent in the campaign probably needs less explanation. It seems diametrically opposed to the first. Following Leo Chavez, I call it the "Latino threat" narrative.²² Rather than painting Latinxs as a prized cultural and demographic voting block that needs to be embraced, this second narrative is about Latinxs as a group that needs to be policed and removed. Rather than seeing Latinxs as "new Americans" and as the future of the GOP and the nation, this narrative sees Latinxs as interlopers, criminals, threats, and dangers. Obviously, Donald Trump's rhetoric presented us with the most visible iterations of this narrative. Whether calling Mexican and Latin American immigrants criminals and rapists during the primary campaign, harping on the promise of a border wall paid for by Mexico, or suggesting that Mexico sends criminals over the

border, the examples of this “Latino threat” narrative have been quite abundant. This narrative presents and reaffirms the conflation of Latinxs, Mexicans, migrants, and undocumented immigrants into an amorphous figure of danger. It calls for the literal and physical exclusion of this threat.

In the first narrative, the “Latino vote” narrative, Hispanics and Latinxs are conceived as an ethnic voting bloc united by their cultural, linguistic, and ideological homogeneity. The homogeneity of this community leads to speculation about how it can best be marshaled as an electoral and political resource. Latinxs are defined by essentialist factors like shared language, cultural values of hard work/family, and ethnic heritage, or by particular ideological positions (as, for example, on immigration). The GOP either woos this voting block by appealing to these factors, or it fails to do so by being inauthentic and betraying its interests. The gendered and sexualized nature of this metaphor of “wooing” is important because part of what this narrative does is feminize this “Latino vote” as already constituted and ready to be attracted by the right mix of appeals or the right (male) politician. The endpoint of this gendered metaphorical frame is precisely that, as one journalist put it, the Republican Party could eventually “consummate” the union between Hispanics with the right candidate or appeals.²³

In contrast, the “Latino threat” narrative portrays Hispanics/Latinxs as an amorphous demographic, cultural, and physical threat, united by deviance, criminality, and foreignness. It presents Latinxs as an imminent danger to the nation that demands swift and decisive action. These metaphorical dimensions can also be chained out, just as with the “Latino vote” narrative. As a visceral and very real threat to the nation, Latinxs must be excluded and prevented from recontaminating the national body: thus the call for a wall and for mass deportations.

Of course, there are important and obvious differences between these two narratives. The ultimate implications of the “Latino threat” narrative are exclusion or even force to combat the threat, whereas the “Latino vote” narrative does not necessarily imply such a response. Although Latinxs are defined as a kind of homogenous voting block, marked off from the white norm, they are not *de facto* worthy of exclusion. Instead they are fetishized as a demographic, cultural, and political resource; as potential “new Americans.” Also, there are clear exceptions to these two narratives, such as conversations that took place about the diversity of the Latinx community after Trump’s win in Nevada or Rubio’s defeat in Florida.²⁴ Nevertheless,

“Latino threat” and “Latino vote” represent two very common narratives about Latinxs that have circulated in electoral discourse and in many other contexts. And, of course, these narratives have a substantial precedent in political discourse. Arlene Dávila summarized them some years ago, “Are Latinos friends or foes? . . . Nativist and anti-immigrant groups view Latinos as America’s most impending threat. Others see them as the single most important, up and coming ethnic group. In dispute is whether Latinos will mongrelize America, . . . or, perhaps, [be] the new base for the Republican Party.”²⁵

Notwithstanding these differences, I argue that these two narratives actually work from the same logics and affective investments about Latinidad and racial identity. Both of these narratives present Latinxs as a singular and homogenous community, defined by common and essential demographic, linguistic, cultural, and ideological factors. Both of these narratives are highly affective, motivated by complex mixes of desire and disgust, attraction and repulsion. Both presume that Latinxs are a “sleeping giant,” awakening to a singular purpose, whether for good or for ill. Both of these narratives frame Latinxs as singular and homogenous, ignoring the many differences and tensions that animate Latinidad and Latinx communities. Both ignore the longstanding and complex presence and contributions of Latinxs in the evolution of the U.S. nation and national imaginary. As political theorist Cristina Beltrán argues, both views employ “a homogenizing logic that portrays Latinos as culturally distinct and engaged in a transformative endeavor capable of reshaping America’s political landscape.”²⁶ The difference is whether this new homogenous cultural and demographic bloc is seen as transforming the nation for good or for ill.

It is precisely because these narratives share similar logics, because they are two sides of the same coin, that Donald Trump was able to slip between them. Consider Trump’s celebratory Cinco de Mayo tweet, which consisted of an image of Trump, sitting at his desk enjoying a taco bowl from an establishment in his own Trump Tower, while giving a thumbs up and smiling for the camera. The tweet proclaims exuberantly, “Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!” Of course, this message is absurd for many reasons: because it presumes that eating a taco bowl is a way to identify with Hispanics, let alone Mexicans; that it is a way to celebrate Cinco de Mayo; that celebrating such a commodified and mainstream holiday is an expression of affinity for

Hispanic culture; that there is such a thing as a “Hispanic culture.” The tweet is absurd because it presumes we could take such an expression as sincere given Trump’s other statements during the campaign; it is absurd because it presumes that Trump Tower Grill has the best taco bowls. . . .

However, the logic behind this tweet is not that far off from those claims that were made about Rubio wooing the Latinx vote because of his language, religion, or background, or discussions about whether the GOP could appeal to Latinx voters through its brand of religious conservatism and “family values.” Trump’s tweet works from and riffs off the “Latino vote” narrative: the logic of Latinxs as “sleeping giant,” as cultural and ethnic homogeneity, as naturally open to wooing by dashing politicians who press all the right cultural buttons. The tweet relies on the same warrant as the “Latino threat” narrative: that Latinxs are a singular, homogeneous, and essentialized community united by their difference from the white norm in the United States. The tweet demonstrates how the narrative of Latinxs as an awakening “sleeping giant” and as a wave of invaders and criminals are two sides of the same coin, working from a similar logic. One view positions racial and ethnic difference as an object of attraction and desire, a cultural and political resource that needs to be captured, while the other positions that same difference as an imminent and existential threat that needs to be purged.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I suggest that these two narratives and their undergirding logic are characteristic of contemporary racial presidentialities in the “post-Obama” era. In this respect, discussion of President Obama’s race during his campaign and presidency are instructive, although they are obviously outside the purview of what I can cover here. As Aimee Carillo Rowe showed, President Obama was racialized, deracialized, and reracialized in various ways throughout the 2008 campaign—painted as too black and un-American, postracial, cosmopolitan, foreign, and threatening. Carillo Rowe’s ultimate point is that postracial or “color-blind” racialization works paradoxically, both fetishizing and fearing difference.²⁷ In the same way, racial presidentiality in the post-Obama era is characterized by the tension between the maligning and celebrating of racial “difference” and between the avowal and disavowal of “race.”²⁸

There are moments in which such homogenizing and essentializing logics about Latinxs can function as what Gayatri Spivak might call strategic essentialism, as when rhetorics of Latinx unity and Latinx identity are used strategically and provisionally by immigrant rights movements.²⁹ But the point I want to emphasize is that the celebration of difference in these campaign rhetorics works hand in hand with the persistent strains of nativism and “old” racism in political culture. As Tom Nakayama and I argued in another context, expressions of “old-school” racism and “post-racial” celebrations of diversity may actually feed off each other and work from similar logics, which reassert “whiteness, racialization, and racial exclusion.”³⁰

With Donald Trump’s victory, a particularly virulent and nativist strain of racist discourse and ideology has received official sanction through the symbolic and institutional power of the presidency. In his contribution to this forum, Terrill suggests we might call Trump’s rhetoric a “post-post-racial” discourse of racism. In contrast to Terrill, I have focused on the broader context of racial presidentialities that circulated in the campaign and our political culture. Ultimately, I argue that Trump’s brand of racist threat narrative is not incompatible with neoliberal modes of discussing race, ethnicity, and national identity as resources or commodities. Both narratives, of resource and threat, share an undergirding logic of race as homogenizing and essentializing difference from a presumptively white norm. While this may be obvious in the “Latino threat” narrative, even those explicit discussions and celebrations of the racial/ethnic politics of the presidency—like discussions of Rubio’s electoral prospects or the speculation over the so-called Latino vote—also reassert these essentialized views of race/ethnicity and entrench the “norms of whiteness” that have characterized presidentiality and national identity.³¹

As the 2016 presidential election makes clear, racializing logics still undergird presidential politics. While Terrill and I have focused on analysis of the racial presidentialities in the 2016 campaign, the other essays in this special forum illustrate how the postpresidentiality politics of race are tied into similar postpresidentiality politics of gender, class, and sexuality. Collectively, this work helps to draw scholarly attention to the ways in which the president and the presidency are powerful cultural repositories for and symbolic and institutional terrains of struggle over normative notions of national identity and the national community. If we are right about the

increasing importance of and fundamental problems with the nation's contemporary rhetorics of (post-) presidentiality, then public address scholars are uniquely positioned to use our critical skills and research to intervene into this struggle to protect and expand norms of public discourse, civic culture, and community.

NOTES

1. The term *Latinx* (pronounced "La-teen-ex") is meant to challenge the gender binary inherent in terms like *Latino* or *Latina/o*. See Josh Logue, "Latina/o/x," *Inside Higher Ed*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/12/08/students-adopt-gendernonspecific-term-latinx-be-more-inclusive>.
2. See, for example, Anne T. Demo, "The Class Politics of Cultural Pluralism: Presidential Campaigns and the Latino Vote," in *Who Belongs in America? Presidents, Rhetoric and Immigration*, ed. Vanessa B. Beasley (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 247–71.
3. Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 2.
4. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality and Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 3.
5. J. David Cisneros, "Marco Rubio's Prospective Presidentiality: Latinx Politics, Race/Ethnicity, and the Presidency." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103 (2017): 90–116.
6. See, for example, Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Barack Obama, the Tea Party, and the Threat of Race: On Racial Neoliberalism and Born Again Racism," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 4 (2011): 23–30; David A. Frank, "The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' Address, March 18, 2008," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12 (2009): 167–94; Mark Lawrence McPhail and Roger McPhail, "(E)Raced Men: Complicity and Responsibility in the Rhetorics of Barack Obama," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 673–91; Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, "One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 125–54; and Robert E. Terrill, "Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009): 363–86.
7. I focus on the primary season because, as I describe below, it featured the most explicit and sustained discussions of Latinxs and Latinx identities, whereas, for a number of reasons, these issues receded somewhat into the background during the presidential campaign itself. Nevertheless, both of the narratives discussed in this essay were present in the news media and punditry both during and after the presidential election.

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10. Stacey L. Connaughton, *Inviting Latino Voters: Party Messages and Latino Party Identification* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Stacey L. Connaughton, Dina Nekrassova, and Katie Lever, "Talk about Issues: Policy Considerations in Campaign 2004 Latino-Oriented Presidential Spots," in *The Mass Media and Latino Politics*, 309–22; J. David Cisneros, "Latina/os and Party Politics in the California Campaign against Bilingual Education: A Case Study in Argument from Transcendence," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 45 (2009): 115–34; Demo, "The Class Politics of Cultural Pluralism"; G. Christina Mora, *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014); and Zachary W. Oberfield and Adam J. Segal, "Pluralism Examined: Party Television Expenditures Focused on the Latino Vote in Presidential Elections," in *The Mass Media and Latino Politics*, 291–308.
11. Connaughton, *Inviting Latino Voters*; Demo, "The Class Politics of Cultural Pluralism"; Subervi-Vélez and Connaughton, "Democratic and Republican Mass Communication Campaign Strategies."
12. Christine Flowers, "Immigration Reform: A Matter of Rights . . . and Lefts," *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 7, 2013.
13. "The CBS News Republican Debate Transcript, Annotated," *Washington Post.com*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/13/the-cbs-republican-debate-transcript-annotated/>.
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16. Ashley Parker and Jonathan Martin, "Stressing Youth, Rubio Joins Field," *New York Times*, April 14, 2015, A1.
17. Pilar Marrero, "El Potencial de Marco Rubio con los Latinos," *La Opinion*, February 4, 2016, <http://www.laopinion.com/2016/02/04/no-descartan-atractivo-de-marco-rubio->

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18. Further discussion of these claims can be found in Cisneros, "Marco Rubio's Prospective Presidentiality."
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 22. Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
 23. "Rubio's Tough Line on Immigration Makes Sense," *Legal Monitor Worldwide*, April 16, 2013.
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 26. Cristina Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

27. Aimee Carillo Rowe, "For the Love of Obama: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Relation," in *The Obama Effect: Multidisciplinary Renderings of the 2008 Campaign*, ed. Heather E. Harris, Kimberly R. Moffitt, and Catherine R. Squires (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 221–32.
28. Enck-Wanzer, "Barack Obama"; and McPhail and McPhail, "(E)Raced Men."
29. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. On this point, see Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (New York: Seagull Books, 2007), 76, 94. Also see Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity*.
30. J. David Cisneros and Thomas K. Nakayama, "New Media, Old Racisms: Twitter, Miss America, and Cultural Logics of Race," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 8 (2015): 121–22.
31. Stuckey, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency," 43. See Dávila, *Latino Spin*.

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