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*Susana Rinderle*

## The Mexican Diaspora: A Critical Examination of Signifiers

*This article argues that the differences among subgroups of the Mexican diaspora are significant, as expressed through the variety of signifiers used to refer to various groups within this diaspora and affect intercultural communication and relations. The article first demonstrates that people of Mexican descent living within the current national borders of the United States can be considered a Mexican diaspora. It examines the lexicology and history behind five major signifiers—Mexican/mexicano, Mexican American, Chicano/a, Hispanic, and Latino—used to refer to members of that diaspora and shows how they are the subjects of diasporic and postcolonial discourses. The article concludes with comments on three specific areas in which Mexican diasporic signifiers influence intercultural communication and affect communication research validity and provides suggestions for addressing these issues in future studies.*

**Keywords:** *Hispanic/Latino communication; culture and communication; Mexican diaspora; diaspora; critical communication studies; intercultural communication; identity*

To laypersons and most scholars outside cultural studies and postcolonial theory, the term *diaspora* invokes the forced dispersion and subsequent displacement of a people, usually for religious reasons—more specifically, the historical plight of the global Jewish population (Safran, 1991). However, the notion of diaspora, and diasporas themselves, are becoming more common and complex in this age of rapid globalization. Intercultural communication processes, therefore, increasingly involve individuals with diasporic identities, and communication research is highly relevant to the analysis and understanding of diasporic existence and politics. Drzewiecka and Halualani (2002) described forms of communication that are particularly pertinent to diasporas and encouraged an examination of structural and cultural issues and the interplay between the two, stating that

understanding diaspora as a communicative phenomenon can provide great insights for communication and interdisciplinary scholars about the construc-

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tion of diasporic subjectivities away from, and in memory of, a nationalist homeland as well as the political implications of such identity construction. (p. 341)

Issues of diasporic identity and self-identification may be particularly relevant in examining intracultural and intercultural communication involving members of U.S. ethnic groups—particularly Hispanics and/or Latinos, and more specifically those of Mexican origin. Signifiers in the form of ethnic identity labels can be an important aspect of diasporic identity and self-identification, and lack of awareness of these labels and their meanings may lead to cultural homogenization and damage communication research validity. In my unpublished review of 20 communication-related journal articles of U.S. European American–Mexican and U.S. European American–Mexican American interpersonal communication and conflict, 15 looked at Mexican diasporic populations (although they did not articulate them as such) residing in the United States. Three only accepted participants that self-identified as Mexican American and two only accepted those who self-identified as Hispanic. Four studies that used the terms *Mexican American*, *Hispanic*, *Hispanic American*, or *Latino American* accepted participants that used these and other self-identifying labels. Only two studies explained the rationale behind their preference for a certain identifier, and six did not address their use of terminology at all. This suggests three potential problems: (a) culturally and communicatively dissimilar groups may have been mixed into one sample; (b) participants may not have been consulted about their self-identification and its import, which aside from being potentially invalidating to participants may also ignore important variables; and (c) failure to notice or describe the ways in which cultural and/or ethnic samples are derived and on what criteria seems a serious oversight in research designed to examine differences based on culture and/or ethnicity. Lack of sufficient attention to labels and their identity meanings may account for some of the variations in study results on the communication dynamics between people of Mexican descent and European Americans.

To address some of these problems, in this article, I synthesize the work of Clifford (1994), Drzewiecka and Halualani (2002), Safran (1991), Shain (1999), and Young (1995) on diasporas to argue that people of Mexican descent in the United States are a diaspora because they have experienced the following: (a) a history of physical displacement, (b) cultural dislocation and hybridity, (c) a yearning for homeland, (d) structural displacement and a complex structural relationship between nation-state and diaspora, (e) alienation from the hostland, and (f) a collective identity defined by the relationship between homeland and hostland. I argue that the differences among subgroups of the Mexican diaspora are significant, as expressed through the variety of signifiers used to describe them, and affect intercultural communication.

I examine the lexicology and history behind five major signifiers—*Mexican/mexicano*, *Mexican American*, *Chicano/a*, *Hispanic*, and *Latino*—used to refer to members of that diaspora and show how they are the subjects of diasporic and postcolonial discourses. Although more extensive explanations follow, briefly the five groups can be defined as such: (a) *Mexican* refers to Mexican nationals, and those born in Mexico despite their current country of residence; (b) a *Mexican American* is a U.S. American of Mexican descent, born and living in the United States; (c) a *Chicano/a* is a person of Mexican descent, born and residing in the United States, who possesses a political consciousness of himself or herself as a member of a historically and structurally oppressed group; (d) *Hispanic* denotes a person with origins or ancestry from Spanish-speaking countries (not necessarily Mexico), residing in the United States; and (e) *Latino* refers to a person residing in the United States of Latin American national origin or descent regardless of race, language, or culture. I conclude with comments on three specific areas in which Mexican diasporic signifiers influence intercultural communication and affect communication research validity and provide suggestions for addressing these issues in future studies.

## The Mexican Diaspora

What, then, is a diaspora? Drawing on the previously mentioned scholars' work, I define a *diaspora* as an identifiable group residing in a geography other than its place of origin that experiences not only physical displacement but cultural hybridity; a yearning for the homeland; alienation from the so-called hostland; a complex structural relationship among homeland, hostland, and diaspora; and a collective identity largely defined by the relationship between homeland and hostland. These six criteria not only synthesize various existing definitions of *diaspora* and may be used to define various diasporic populations but also apply neatly to people of Mexican descent in the United States as a group. Although this is a diverse group comprising individuals who were born here, others who immigrated, and various subgroups, in this section, I demonstrate how this group fulfills these six criteria and can, therefore, be defined as a Mexican diaspora.

The first criterion is physical displacement (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991). Indigenous (and later mixed-race *mestizo*) Mexicans were first invaded and colonized by the Spanish, then the French, and later the United States. The U.S. invasion and colonization resulted, among other things, in Mexico losing one half of its national territory to the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Because of this history, Mexican Americans, Chicanos, and *hispanos* alike in the U.S. West and Southwest often state ironi-

cally that “we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” Although they did not move geographically, after 1848 these groups found themselves in a new nation, with a new identity and increasingly problematic relationships with Mexican nationals and more recent immigrants who crossed the border in periodic waves that have gained momentum to the point that more immigrants come to the United States from Mexico than from any other country, at 27% of all legal immigrants (Rytina, 2004).

Economic necessity is arguably the main reason for the displacement of the Mexican diaspora, and a vital feature of the neocolonial relationship between the United States and Mexico. This necessity is a result of colonialization and its corresponding history of exploitation and the extraction of natural resources and labor power from Mexico into the coffers of its various colonizers, which have resulted in an uneven, unequal balance of economic and political power, most recently between the United States and Mexico. Partly as a result, wages north of the current U.S.-Mexico border are at least 8 times what they are to the south (Espinosa, 1999). While many Mexicans go to the United States with dreams of earning these higher wages to support their families and then returning home, many stay because of the reality of their economic condition. The fact that remittances to Mexicans, from relatives residing in the United States, constituted the second largest source of foreign income for Mexico as a nation at U.S.\$16 billion in 2004 (“Mexican Citizens Abroad May Be Allowed to Vote,” 2005) further attests to the economic motives for displacement.

Displacement that leads to a diasporic condition is physical but can also be cultural (Gandhi, 1998). Cultural dislocation leads to hybridity, a second characteristic of diasporas (Young, 1995). Hybridity is the quality of being a hybrid—a composite or mixture of two or more different entities. Through hybridity, the subject of decolonization (or colonization) becomes “a new entity which engenders the encounter between two conflicting systems of belief” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 130). This implies an ambiguity that contests the structuralist idea of stability in meanings and identity, challenges the concept of the discrete nation state, and supports the postcolonial notion of mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized in postcolonial aftermath (Gandhi, 1998). Such ambiguity, transformation, and blurring of borders are an integral part of the diasporic experience.

As a result of invasion and colonization, not only are Mexicans and Mexican Americans racial and ethnic hybrids, so is their culture. One need only look to Mexican religious syncretism for examples. One of the most powerful symbols for the Mexican diaspora today is *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, who, according to legend, was an indigenous-looking Virgin Mary who appeared in 1531 before an indigenous man, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzín, and spoke to him in his native Náhuatl tongue near the site where the recently colonized people

enerated the female deity Tonantzín. The discourse of the indigenous *Virgen* as the “Mother of the Americas” and “Patron Saint of Mexico” served as a powerful colonizing force following the Spanish conquest of the New World, as a revolutionary rallying point during Independence and the Mexican Revolution, and today continues to combine and reinforce ideologies of the Spanish Catholic colonizer and the indigenous Náhuatl-speaking colonized to the extent that Juan Diego was canonized as a Catholic saint in 2002.

Other examples of syncretism are found in Mexican ceremonies and names. One example is *Día de los Muertos*, Day of the Dead, celebrated after Halloween, which combines pre-Columbian conceptualizations of death and the honoring of ancestors, and Catholic ritual. Names of people and places offer an example of linguistic hybridity, especially in central and southern Mexico: Juan Diego Cuauhtlatatzín, San Francisco Yateé, Santiago Ixcuintla. Indeed, many small towns in Mexico, to this day, carry their original indigenous name and the Spanish name of their conquerors and are simultaneously Spanish and Indian, and neither. This illustrates the concept of *mestizaje*—“the mixture”—which is quintessentially and uniquely Mexico today. By extension, Mexican cultural hybridity is also the heritage of the Mexican diaspora; however, the diaspora creates new forms of hybridity as well between the Mexican homeland and the current hostland—the United States. Examples abound, such as the linguistic combination of English and Spanish into “Spanglish,” the fusion of “Nuevo Latino” cuisine, the increasing visibility of Tex Mex or tejano music in the United States, and even the co-optation of a primarily African American style of dress—the zoot suit—by frustrated youths of Mexican origin in the early 1940s (Cosgrove, 1984).

Members of diasporas, therefore, experience physical and cultural displacement that lead to hybridity. Such displacement often leads to a yearning for the homeland, the third element in my definition of *diaspora*. It is a separation that can feel like exile, in which return is postponed to some remote future (Clifford, 1994). This yearning includes a desire and/or active efforts to return “home,” especially when the time is right. Mexicans who emigrate to the United States because of economic displacement yearn to return home and usually plan to do so when their family’s necessity subsides. However, U.S.-born Chicanos sometimes look elsewhere for a homeland—they look for Aztlán.

Among U.S.-born members of the Mexican diaspora, Mexico itself is often deidealized as a homeland, perhaps because of its geographic proximity to the United States or to the lower status and standard of living associated with things Mexican. Aztlán is the principal image of homeland in Mexican diasporic rhetoric among Chicanos. Known as the mythic origin of the Aztecs/Mexicas who are believed to have come from the north to populate what is today Mexico City, Aztlán is said to be located in the southwest of what is

today the United States. Aztlán first became a part of the rhetoric of the Chicano Movement via “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” drafted by members of the burgeoning movement in March 1969. One might say that the significance of Aztlán is not whether it actually existed, or where, but that it embodies “a place of *mestizaje*, a site of multiple and simultaneous subjectivities” (Pérez-Torres, 2000, p. 105).

Aztlán represents a hope of unity and return that will never occur. It promises to give “bastard” Mexican sons and daughters a place where they are not rejected and will be wholly accepted; something Mexican Americans and Mexican emigrants alike do not enjoy in either Mexico or the United States. Aztlán also gives U.S.-born people of Mexican descent a birthright to the land they inhabit. It embodies the spirit of *Chicanismo* (“Chicano-ness”) by glorifying the past and reclaiming the connection to indigenous peoples and cultures. Thus, “the affirmation of a glorious past becomes the condemnation of a repressive present” (Pérez-Torres, 2000, p. 108). Aztlán simultaneously acknowledges and evokes a painful history and invokes an ideal.

Traditionally, members of diasporas were thought of suffering a one-way unrequited yearning to return to an inaccessible homeland, and although Aztlán may represent this desire among members of the Mexican diaspora, today there is evidence of a mutual reaching out—a push-pull dynamic from both sides—between a nation-state homeland and its diaspora. This fourth criterion in my definition of diaspora, often springing from physical and cultural displacement, is a structural condition of displacement, which involves a complex, structural relationship between the original nation-state and the displaced group (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002)—and between the homeland and the hostland. The relationships between the Mexican diaspora and Mexico and the United States as nation-states provide excellent examples of this postcolonial condition.

Structurally, the United States has exerted so-called pull on the Mexican population through periodic labor recruitment programs to meet its fluctuating labor needs, such as the Bracero Program begun in the 1940s, and so-called push through its repatriations and anti-immigration legislation. However, Mexico also exerts pull on its U.S.-bound population in several ways. In 1996, Mexico legalized dual U.S.-Mexican citizenship, and there are now more than 20 million dual citizens (“Texan in Mexico,” 2001) who maintain a dynamic relationship with both countries. In fact, three dual nationals, U.S. residents, ran for mayor in three separate towns in the Mexican state of Zacatecas during the summer of 2001 (Mena, 2001). Mexican president Vicente Fox campaigned in California prior to the 2000 election, and several community organizations held pseudo-voting in that state. Fox won the presidency in Mexico and California and proceeded to implement the now-defunct cabinet-level Presidential Office for Mexicans in the Exterior—headed by *Texas-born*

[italics added] Juan Hernandez (S. Muñoz, 2001). More recently, the Mexican government is close to granting expatriate citizens abroad the right to vote in Mexican elections ("Mexican Citizens," 2005), and Mexico's tourism board has launched a major ad campaign directed at U.S. Latinos to "come back" to Mexico as tourists (Harman, 2004).

In fact, Shain (1999) argued that "the Americanized diaspora exercises greater cultural and economic influence on Mexico than Mexico does on Mexican Americans, meaning that the homeland's national identity is affected more by its diaspora than the other way around" (p. 691). Shain attributed this to Mexico's national identity crisis sparked by globalization and its consequent blurring of geopolitical boundaries. He described the new welcoming orientation of Mexico toward its diaspora in structural terms, because of the U.S.-bound Mexican diaspora's increasing political and economic power and dual self-perception; the growing economic, social, and political impact of the diaspora on Mexican affairs; and changes in relations between the nations following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994.

Despite such interdependence, people of Mexican descent in the United States still generally believe that they are not, and perhaps cannot, be fully accepted by the hostland (Harman, 2004). Such alienation is the fifth characteristic of a diasporic population (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991) and aids the identifiability of a diaspora as such. The construction of Aztlán as a powerful discursive symbol illustrates this sense of alienation, as does anecdotal and historical evidence. Decades ago, an important catalyst for the Chicano Movement was the experience of racism and segregation that youths of Mexican origin faced at home on returning home from World War II after fighting and dying alongside African Americans and European Americans (Chávez, 1984). This sense of alienation continues today. A participant in Oboler's (1992) work on labeling and cultural identity said that "although she recognizes that her daughter is qualified, she fears the latter will never be considered to be American because she will always be treated as a Hispanic" (p. 25). In their research on the social construction of ethnic identity among Mexicans, Niemann, Romero, Arredondo and Rodríguez (1999) found that participants demonstrated awareness of being constructed as a group, and used it politically, and shared experiences of being mistreated or discriminated against by police, store clerks, European Americans, African Americans, and even U.S.-born Mexican Americans (which participants referred to as Chicanos/as).

It is, perhaps, because of the combination of alienation, hybridity, displacement, and yearning that members of a diaspora form a collective identity defined largely by the relationship between homeland and hostland (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991). This is the final criterion of my definition of *diaspora* and present in the psyche of the Mexican diaspora. Hurtado, Gurin, and Peng

(1994) found that “homeward orientation” was a core of first-generation Mexican immigrant political identity, as was a greater class consciousness more typical of Latin Americans. They also found that Mexicans and Chicanos have definite orientations toward the Mexican homeland and the U.S. hostland, although U.S. identity labels were more problematic for *mexicanos*, while the Mexican aspect of dual identity was more problematic for Chicanos. However, despite important differences, both identified as “*raza*” (“the race,” or “the people”). Celebrated Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa summed up the collective nature of Mexican diasporic identity despite intracultural differences by stating that “I identified as ‘Raza’ before I ever identified as ‘Mexicana’ or ‘Chicana . . . being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 62).

People of Mexican descent in the United States can, therefore, be considered a diaspora. They satisfy all six criteria established by scholars in defining *diaspora*, which I incorporated in my definition. Individuals of Mexican origin in the United States are an identifiable group residing in a geography other than their place of origin that experience not only physical displacement but also cultural hybridity; a yearning for the homeland; alienation from the hostland; a complex structural relationship among homeland, hostland, and diaspora; and a collective identity largely defined by the relationship between homeland and hostland. I turn now to the lexicology and history behind the five major signifiers used to refer to members of that diaspora to illustrate important intragroup and intracultural distinctions that may affect intercultural communication and research.

### Chicano, Latino, Hispanic, *Mexicano*: The Lexicology

The so-called battle of the name faced by members of the Mexican diaspora commenced when the Spanish arrived in the New World and conquered Tenochtitlán (the center of the Aztec and/or Mexica empire in what is present-day Mexico City) in 1521. The consequent mixing of races and cultures—indigenous, European, and African—inspired a sophisticated, complex system of racial classification and corresponding lexicology in colonial Mexico and throughout Latin America. Labels and identity continue to be a concern of this *mestizaje*, and now part of this conversation is the fact that millions of Mexicans live outside current national boundaries, and new terms for Mexicans and varying degrees of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) are being explored. According to the 2000 Census returns, 20.6 million people of Mexican descent reside in the United States (Mexico’s population is about 80 million) and comprise 58% of the nation’s Latino population, making this group the largest U.S. so-called minority group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

In the United States, the principal signifiers for members of this Mexican diaspora used by media, government, and the community include, but are not limited to: Mexican/*mexicano*, Mexican American, Chicano/a, Hispanic, and Latino. I now enter the discussion on the meanings and implications of these various terms and their impact on the diaspora, with two caveats. First, there is still much ongoing discussion about the definition, so-called proper usage and implications of these identity labels. By nature this is, and will probably remain, a dynamic, changing process—as is identity itself. Second, these terms are cultural and ethnic labels, not racial. The concept of these categories as race or ethnicity and the ongoing engagement of the discourse of *mestizaje* influence all aspects of this lexicology.

### *Mexican/Mexicano*

*Mexican* or the Spanish equivalent term *mexicano* is used to refer to Mexican nationals, and often to people who were born in Mexico despite residing in the United States and even becoming naturalized citizens or permanent residents. *Mexicano* is a derivative of the word *Mexica*. *Mexica*, or *mexitin* in Náhuatl, is often used interchangeably with *Aztec* to refer to a group that emigrated from Aztlán in the north to settle in Central Mexico. While “Aztec” means “people from Aztlán,” the group called themselves *mexitin*, which referred to *Mexitli*, the name of a primary tribal hero/god and their capital city (Krickeberg, 1983).

Many individuals call themselves *mexicanos*, even while speaking English, perhaps to emphasize their *mexicanidad*, or use both terms interchangeably (Niemann et al., 1999). Identifying oneself as Mexican or *mexicano* has meaning to those who choose this label. In a study involving 49 low-aculturated, first- and second-generation U.S. Mexicans and Mexican Americans residing in Texas, Niemann et al. examined self-definitions about what it means to be Mexican. Several themes emerged around culture and identity, such as familism, work ethic, food and celebrations, heritage and roots, experience of discrimination, low group status, and struggle for justice. Additional themes included a negative view of America, valuing bilingualness, in-group conflict with Chicanos/as, conflict with Anglos,<sup>1</sup> conflict with African Americans, and educational aspirations.

The term *Mexican* has an interesting racial history in the United States. The year 1930, 80 years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was the first that *Mexican* was a racial option on the Census. Until then, the choices were White, Black, Other, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese. A nationality (Mexican) officially became a race (Mexican). After some uproar, the 1940 Census reclassified Mexicans as “White unless definitely Indian or some other race.” The

1950 Census recorded Mexicans as “White persons of Spanish surname.” The 1960 Census classified Mexicans as “White unless definitely Indian, Negro or some other race,” and as late as 1970 the Census still classified Mexicans as White in the “Spanish heritage population” category (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987); however, this category was devised to address the perceived undercount of Mexican Americans in the previous Census (Melville, 1988). In general, the inclusion of Mexicans in the people of color group is recent—categorizing them as White made it easier to desegregate Black schools with Hispanics instead of Whites (Melville, 1988).

The term *Mexican* also carries class connotations, which has caused some people to state they are Spanish or Hispanic rather than Mexican or Mexican American. Many people presume all Mexicans are poor and arrive in the United States by swimming across a river rather than flying in a plane (Melville, 1988). So while *mestizo* identity is an important aspect of Mexican identity, there are class connotations in the United States assigned to Mexicanness that are not assigned to individuals from other *mestizo* nations.

The history of Census classification illustrates some of the problems and perils of racial categorization for the Mexican diaspora. A major cultural component of *mexicanidad* is the *mestizaje*. In Mexico and much of Latin America, race is viewed as a continuum, while in the United States race is seen as a dichotomy (Massey & Denton, 1992). The *mestizos*, originally looked down on as half-breeds in colonial Mexico, slowly grew to 39% of the population by the Mexican Independence in 1810 and 53% of the population at the time of the Revolution in 1910 (Massey & Denton, 1992). Post-Revolution ideology and rhetoric idealized and glorified Mexico’s indigenous heritage and the accomplishments of pre-Columbian civilizations, instilling pride in the mixture that was *la raza cósmica* (the Cosmic Race). Thus today, Mexico is 90% *mestizo* by blood, overwhelmingly *mestizo* in culture and ideology (Riding, 1989) and generally proud to be *mestizo*. However, the U.S. culture lacks vocabulary for conceptualizing people of racially mixed identities, and the terms that do exist have traditionally been pejorative (Massey & Denton, 1992). This creates confusion and paradox for the Mexican diaspora, which is a product of multiple heritages and discourses.

### *Mexican American*

A Mexican American can be defined as a U.S. American of Mexican descent, born and living in the United States. This signifier seems to have emerged around World War II when diasporic people of Mexican descent served in the armed forces and came into greater contact with other groups, then returned home to the same prejudice they experienced before (Chávez,

1984). *Mexican American* was originally a term of pride that indicated a person was not White, nor Mexican, but both.

*Mexican American* is seen by some as an expression born of classic colonization in which continuity is allowed between what existed before and what conquerors impose, as opposed to internal colonization, which destroys preexisting institutions and culture. Therefore, the term allows for a duality that is the Mexican American's lived experience and acknowledges a heritage that is more than just Spanish (Tanno, 2004). However, that dual identity is also regarded as more assimilationist and more oriented toward U.S. Americanness or Whiteness than Mexicanness (Hurstfield, 1978; Mirandé & Tanno, 1993a). While the term denotes certain regional, class, and generational traits, Mexican Americans tend to identify more with the dominant society and culture, and intercultural research conducted with people that self-identify as Mexican American supports this assertion.

### *Chicano/a*

Chicanos generally view the term *Mexican American* as oxymoronic and the outsider terminology of the oppressor (Hecht, Sedano, & Ribeau, 1993) and prefer instead to name themselves. A Chicano/a may be defined as a person of Mexican descent born and residing in the United States who possesses a political consciousness of himself or herself as a member of a historically and structurally oppressed group. This signifier came out of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and denotes a dis-assimilationist perspective that heightens awareness of linguistic, social, and identity differences and strives to be more dualist and gender inclusive with the "o/a" ending. It asserts uniqueness and difference but equality. The origin of this term is somewhat ambiguous—some say it is a shortened version of *mexicano* with Náhuatl pronunciation, and therefore some Chicanos/as spell it with an X—Xicano/a—to emphasize their indigenous roots even further. The various ambiguities and dialectical tensions involved in *Chicano* suits the multiple subjectivity of the diaspora. "On the one hand, the term 'Chicano/a' signifies an identification with struggles for change...on the other hand, the term 'Chicano/a' identifies a subjectivity marked by a heritage and cultures distinct from and devalued by Euro-American society" (Pérez-Torres, 2002, p. 105).

Despite the pride and empowerment that *Chicano* means to instill in members of the diaspora, the term tends to have negative connotations for Anglos (Fairchild & Cozens, 1981) and even Mexicans (Niemann et al., 1999) who sometimes use it as synonymous to "low-life Mexican" (Mirandé & Tanno, 1993b) or *pocho*, which is a pejorative term for people of Mexican descent born in the United States who are, therefore, Anglicized and more like *gringos* than *mexicanos*. Fairchild and Cozens (1981) looked specifically at the impact

of three ethnic labels (Chicanos, Hispanics, and Mexican Americans) on the stereotyping behavior of a sample of Anglo university students. Researchers hypothesized that Chicanos would receive a larger percentage of negative stereotypes, and Mexican Americans would be stereotyped most positively. The study found that, indeed, Chicanos received a larger percentage of negative stereotypes; Chicanos were more often viewed as “ignorant” and “cruel.” Mexican Americans were more often described as “faithful,” and Hispanics were characterized as “talkative” and “tradition-loving.” This illustrates how the different names for the diaspora, indeed, have different significance, even for members of dominant U.S. European American society. But why does the word *Chicano* hold such negative connotations? Could this be the dominant ideology’s response to subalterns that resist discursive colonialism and name themselves?

### *Hispanic*

*Hispanic* is a broad signifier that denotes a person residing in the United States with origins or ancestry from Spanish-speaking countries. It was first widely used in the 1970s by the U.S. federal Office of Management and Budget to refer to “a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture of origin, regardless of race” (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987, p. 64). In 1980, the Census Bureau included the term *Spanish race/Hispanic* as a category. However, 55% of people of Mexican descent identified themselves as White, and 38% gave responses that were coded as “Spanish Race” (which was to include terms such as *Mexican*, *Chicano*, *mestizo*, etc.; Massey & Denton, 1992). This prompts the following questions: Why did so many *mestizos* self-identify as White? Did they want to be European American, or be accepted by European American society? Did they see themselves in class terms or as Whiter than other members of the diaspora? Massey and Denton (1992) found that among U.S.-born and foreign-born members of the diaspora, the probability of identifying oneself as White increased with age, education, income, and occupational status, which supports predictions of assimilation theory. So, perhaps more affluent members of the diaspora identified, or aspired to identify, as more White than Mexican or *mestizo*.

Nevertheless, overemphasis on Whiteness is the major criticism of the term *Hispanic*. The word is considered overly broad, imprecise, oversimplified, homogenizing, and an overcategorization (Melville, 1988; C. Muñoz, 1989). It erases the qualitative differences between recent immigrants and established minority groups (Olivarez, 1998). It unrealistically blends differences of class, race, ethnicity, and language and expects a uniformity that does not exist (Melville, 1988). Its etymology evokes Spanish or Iberian origin and, therefore,

obscures the indigenous roots of Mexican Americans (Fairchild & Cozens, 1981). Indeed, there is nothing in the word that refers to people indigenous to the Western hemisphere. In fact, in 1980, the year the term was first included in the Census, the Spanish American Heritage Association went on record to assert that a Hispanic is a Caucasian of Spanish ancestry, and therefore Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans are not Hispanic (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987). The term also blurs categories that are important to the groups themselves and is disliked by most members of the diaspora, with the exception of New Mexicans that prefer to identify as Hispanic or *hispano* because of 400 years of distinctive Mexican and/or direct Spanish settlement and history (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987). However, some argue that this preference is actually a sign of alliance with White, European ancestors and a distancing from the Native Americans and *mestizo* Mexicans that also populate the region in large proportions (C. Muñoz, 1989).

Oboler (1992) found that “people’s sense of self contrasted, at times dramatically, with the connotations they attributed to the label Hispanic” (p. 23). Middle-class Latinos felt the term was derogatory but recognized that was what they were called by the larger society, perhaps even to set them apart and discriminate against them. Working-class participants had an even more negative association with the word *Hispanic* and were reluctant to even discuss the term in relation to themselves. “They clearly saw it as identifying a group of people with negative attributes, and they implied that these people had nothing to do with them” (p. 23). The term also encouraged participants to see themselves in new racial terms and adopt a more racialized identity.

### *Latino*

*Latino* generally refers to a person residing in the United States of Latin American national origin or descent regardless of race, language, or culture. A recently revived signifier that has gained momentum in the last 15 years, *Latino* is arguably equally broad as *Hispanic*, but more inclusive. Although semantically the word seems more oriented to Europe (the Latin-speaking region formerly ruled by the Roman Empire) than indigenous cultures in the American continents, scholars and activists argue that it is actually an abbreviation of *latinoamericano* (Latin American) and does not really refer to anything Mediterranean in the way that “Latin” does. Hayes-Bautista and Chapa (1987) argued that, as an identity label, *Latino* is culturally neutral, racially neutral, arguably gender neutral (Spanish “o” ending is inclusive of both genders), focused on the western hemisphere, most reflective of the group’s diverse national origins, and least objectionable to most Latinos. In fact, in California, the *Los Angeles Times* style guidebook directs reporters to use *Latino* as the preferred general term for people of Mexican or Latin American

descent unless directly quoting someone who uses *Hispanic* (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987).

Also, like *Chicano*, *Latino* is a term that the people chose for themselves (Melville, 1988). *Latinismo* (Latinism and/or Latinoism) is arguably a political ethnicity used to gain advantages or overcome disadvantages and is, therefore, a response to structural conditions (Padilla, 1984). Defining oneself as a Latino is more of a political choice, like the choice of *Chicano*, and is decidedly oriented toward a more global, regional self-concept (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987; Oboler, 1992; Padilla, 1984; Tanno, 2004) that defies U.S. national borders and evokes diasporic transnationalism.

In the spirit of *Latinismo*, Hayes-Bautista and Chapa (1987) posited that the one element all Latin American countries truly share is not race, language, or culture, but a political orientation toward the United States. They say that the U.S. nation-state's orientation toward its populations of Latin American origin has long been colored by its foreign policy toward Latin America. That foreign policy was (and is), perhaps, best articulated by the Monroe Doctrine, which stated boldly that the entire hemisphere was within its sphere of influence. The identification of persons from Latin America in racial terms instead of national origin appeared to be an attempt to establish a racially distinct group of Latin Americans. This was reflected not only in the Census typology but also in accounts written by Anglos in the 1800s as they came into contact with Mexicans, particularly in California, whom they described in racial, and decidedly negative, terms. A national poll conducted decades later in 1940 by the Office of Public Opinion Research produced similar results. When asked to describe "people of Central and South America," a national sample responded in negative racial and/or cultural terms, yielding the following responses in order of frequency: dark skinned, quick tempered, emotional, religious, backward, and lazy. By 1850, Californios (those born in California when it was still Mexico), Mexicans, Peruvians, and Chileans were all lumped together as one group—Latinos—and together were treated as foreigners despite the fact the Californios were legal citizens and long-term residents of their land (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987).

I take Hayes-Bautista and Chapa's argument a step further to say that the policy represents a colonial relationship in which the entire continent south of the Rio Grande, and its diaspora residing in the United States, are constructed as subalterns that are "othered" by labels that maintain the colonial relationship and support the dominant ideology of conquest, exploitation of labor and natural resources as needed, and reduces the U.S. domestic fear of being overrun by a majority brown continent. This othering is intensified by the use of racial labels, rather than terms referring to national origin. Indeed

the annexation of other peoples, and the incorporation of foreign territories were bound up in a process by which a national identification was supplanted by a racial one—one in which the conquered race was relegated to a lower social class level than that of the conquering race. (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987, p. 62)

### *Conclusion*

The struggle over labels that the Mexican diaspora faces in the United States appears to be an exercise in othering, by the dominant strata and the subaltern subjects themselves. Forcing people with multiple, continuous identities to choose and label themselves as one thing or another fragments and partially disables them. It denies part of their identity and humanity. It puts them in a state in which they are constantly negotiating and redefining themselves vis-à-vis the arbitrary, constructed standards and hierarchies they are presented, and vis-à-vis each other as they compete for scarce resources and the dominant ideology's approval and acceptance. Perhaps the signifier *Chicano* holds the most promise as a discursive site of resistance. *Latino* may as well; however, it also may be unconscious consent to hegemony in that it allows the same sort of so-called lumping as *Hispanic* does, with the same potential drawbacks, but is regarded as more of a conscious political choice and self-definition.

So the process of naming engages a dialectic between self-empowerment and continual colonialization, exploitation, and control—of the subaltern and the colonizer's fear. The White fear of being overrun and overpowered by a majority brown continent is real, and evident in public discussion around the 2000 Census returns. The 2000 Census was the first to include *Hispanic or Latino* as a category but added further confusion over race. While there were separate categories for Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans, *Hispanic* was broken into several confusing categories such as "Hispanic non-White" and "White, non-Hispanic." San Antonio-based Chicano writers Rodríguez and González (2001) expressed their frustration over Census categories and results in their "Column of the Americas," by describing them as "demographic genocide." Despite the inclusion of a dizzying array of racial categories in 2000, and despite the findings that the Hispanic/Latino population is now the nation's largest minority, Rodríguez and González asserted that "the U.S. Census has managed to convert this population of 40 million—a basically red-brown population—into a white population" by forcing respondents to choose a racial category, and viewing "other race" as a wrong answer. In a repeat of 1990 Census results, 97% of respondents who checked "other race" were Hispanic/Latino, 48% of Latinos checked "White," and 42% of Latinos checked "other race" because there was no category that adequately described their mixed indigenous heritage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Three weeks later, Orlando Patterson, a Harvard sociologist, wrote in *The New York Times* that the early Census returns were misleading and dangerous since they fuel “fears of decline and displacement among some whites, anxieties that are not only divisive but groundless” (Patterson, 2001, n.p.). Reference to divisiveness and Whites’ fears of displacement is, perhaps, ironic considering U.S. European American society exerts these very processes on the Mexican diaspora. Patterson stated reassuringly that Whites are still a majority even in areas found to be majority Hispanic because when “Hispanic whites” are included in the count of White people, the majority of the United States is White. He pointed to the fact that 48% of Hispanics characterized themselves as White—assuming that they did so freely and without reservation, and not out of lack of viable category options or the need to internalize and emulate the dominant group’s identity.

### Signifiers and Identity: Implications for Intercultural Communication

The fact that this fear of the other and/or the brown exists is itself reason enough to reexamine the elements and processes that traditional research approaches factor into intercultural and interethnic communication research. How might such a telling fear influence intercultural and/or interethnic communication events? How does it influence intercultural communication research methods? How are the various discourses of colonization, diaspora, and identity created, maintained, and changed by communication? How does a subaltern or diasporic identity affect the way an individual communicates?

Scholars might engage these questions more actively in their research and practice greater self-reflexivity as they conduct this research. To begin this process around communication dynamics pertinent to people of Mexican descent in the United States, there are three specific issues to consider in which Mexican diasporic signifiers influence intercultural communication and potentially threaten research validity: (a) different signifiers used by communication study participants denote different identities; (b) homogenization and fragmentation of identity, and disempowerment of individuals, may occur when choice of signifiers do not accommodate duality, multiplicity, or contextual fluidity in individuals’ identity; and (c) naming and categorizing study participants, instead of allowing participants to name themselves, reinforces dominant hegemonic discourses and obscures other possibilities, identities, and lived experiences.

First, different signifiers denote different identities that may manifest differently in interaction and should be considered in research design (e.g., samples should not mix or confuse identity groups). In conducting research, scholars must understand and attend to the diasporic lexicology with greater

sophistication to ensure they are indeed studying the groups and interpersonal and/or intercultural dynamics they aim to study. This is not currently the case, witness my earlier discussion of the 20 communication studies. The problem was also illuminated dramatically in an exchange that took place in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations (IJIR)* between 1990 and 1994. The discussion began with Hecht, Ribeau, and Sedano (1990) who presented their findings on "A Mexican American Perspective on Interethnic Communication" from a study that used only participants that self-identified as Mexican American, and the results of which were triangulated using Chicano poetry. Mirandé and Tanno (1993a) took issue with Hecht et al. selecting only Mexican American respondents, claiming the signifier *Mexican American* represented a midpoint in ethnic consciousness and assimilation (citing the Fairchild & Cozens, 1982, results as support) and, therefore, not representative of the entire culture. They also disagreed with the triangulation of results obtained from surveys of Mexican Americans with poetry from a dissimilar group: Chicanos. Two more exchanges followed that further debated the history, usage, and political implications of the various terms for persons of Mexican descent, proper research methods, and insider versus outsider research (Hecht et al., 1993; Mirandé & Tanno, 1993b).

Delgado (1994) summarized the key issues in this debate. First he stated that "communications scholars have generally ignored the presence and import of Latinos" (p. 77). He suggested that the exchange between Mirandé and Tanno and Hecht et al. actually focused on the important issue of identity, and that identity choices are greater, more complex, and more situational than those already mentioned in the debate. He argued that *Mexican American* may be actually a midpoint between *Latino* and *Mexican*, not between *Hispanic* and *Chicano*, and that there are major differences between being Chicano and being Mexican American. He posited that both sides of the debate "reflect the difficulty in representing the diversity of Mexican Americans" (p. 82) and concluded with a call to action suggesting more research on Latinos be conducted by communication scholars, which should "begin with the complexity of identities as they are" (p. 83).

Delgado's cogent analysis of the *IJIR* debate and articulation of the identity issues at its heart is key to further research on the Mexican diaspora in intercultural communication. Not only should more research be conducted on Latinos, and research that consciously and conscientiously grapples with identity complexity, but also more research needs to be conducted by Latinos. Chicano/Latino/Hispanic scholars across disciplines may need to engage with non-Latino researchers, and each other, in further discussion around these issues.

Similarly, nonscholar members of Mexican diasporic groups and research participants need to be actively involved in dialogue about issues of labels and

identity. Tanno and Jandt (1994) suggested that the scientifically oriented research process itself may pose an obstacle to quality multicultural research. They argued that research methods based on the physical science model, in which the researcher occupies a position of greater power and authority than his or her participants disempowers these participants, creates artificial results, and does not adequately meet the complex challenges of a multicultural society. Greater involvement of participants as so-called co-owners and coproducers of knowledge that are intimately involved in creating, questioning, and gathering data will ensure that the subtleties of identity and terminology that are well-known to participants will become better known to researchers, adding to their sophistication on these matters, and improving study validity through collaboration.

The second issue of concern for future research, homogenization and fragmentation of identity and the resulting disempowerment of individuals, may occur when choice of signifiers does not accommodate multiplicity or contextual fluidity in individuals' identity. The diasporic experience involves degrees of hybridity and multiplicity, and forcing individuals to choose one constant identity label without considering context, nor consequences, disempowers individuals. Mexican diasporic label use is often situational, not static (García, 1982), and represents fluid, inclusive and nonmutually exclusive identities. Chicana/Latina scholar Dolores Tanno (2004) reflected on the multiple contextual signifiers she uses for herself, saying, "What, then, am I? The truth is that I am all of these" (p. 40). Others asserted that "a person can alternatively identify as Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano/a or Latino/a in different situations or contexts" (Mirandé & Tanno, 1993b, p. 383). Multiplicity, and comfort with multiplicity, resists homogenization and is an integral feature of Mexican history and the Mexican diaspora. Communication research that cannot or will not adequately accommodate and address this fact, or that blends and homogenizes Mexican diasporic identities, is, at best, incomplete.

In addressing identity issues, particularly among subaltern diasporic populations like the Mexican diaspora, identity fragmentation also needs attention and care. For people of Mexican descent, fragmentation began 500 years ago with the Conquest, continued through various invasions, colonizations, and social ruptures, and lives today in continuing economic and discursive colonization and internal psychic multiplicity. González (1990) wrote "like the Mexican, the Mexican American is forever fragmented, he/she can never be from *one* country" (p. 285). The ambivalence of otherness is expressed in the dialectic of diasporic separation and inclusion: "For Ohio Mexican Americans, the discourse of otherness becomes a symbolic enactment of the sense of historical loss" (p. 289).

Research that mixes, fails to consider, or limits identity labels disempowers and disenfranchises populations by homogenizing their identities into artifi-

cial combinations or fragmenting them into artificial pieces. Because the communication research process and its findings have the power to change peoples' perceptions of themselves, care must be taken to involve participants in the process. The complexity of the diasporic experience and subtlety of context manifested in multiple, fragmented identities requires the collaboration of so-called insider participants with outsider researchers to provide insight into identity categories and their application, thus ensuring research validity and preventing disempowerment and further fragmentation of participants and their identities.

Another approach may be to employ a dialectical approach to understanding and analyzing intercultural interactions involving the Mexican diaspora. Martin and Nakayama (1999) suggested six specific dialectics (cultural-individual, personal/social-contextual, differences-similarities, static-dynamic, present-future/history-past, and privilege-disadvantage) that may provide a more complex, but more complete, understanding of identity and intercultural communication. A dialectical perspective recognizes that one individual, and individuals in relationship, may enact different levels and combinations of the various dialectics in different contexts, and even in the same interaction with another individual. This approach might not only do justice to the complexity of diasporic identity but also is flexible enough to consider the important issues of how power comes into play for diasporas during communication with dissimilar others.

The third way Mexican diasporic signifiers affect intercultural communication and research validity is that naming and categorizing study participants, instead of allowing participants to name and position themselves, reinforces dominant hegemonic discourses and obscures other possibilities, identities, and lived experiences. Collier and Thomas (1988) offered an interesting perspective in their work arguing for an interpretive perspective of cultural identity. They posited "intercultural communication often is approached by defining cultural difference *a priori* and then predicting from cultural identities to behavior" (p. 99). The definition of these cultural differences is often based on inappropriate assumptions, overgeneralizations, or simplistic categorizations. Such conceptualizations oversimplify and perhaps misrepresent the phenomena purportedly being studied, leave the parameters of what constitutes intercultural communication vague, and ignore the experience of participants. They argued for the development of a grounded theory "in which actual discourse between interlocutors is examined for its intercultural quality" (p. 99).

If we accept their proposed definition of intercultural communication as "contact between persons who *identify themselves as distinct* [italics added] from one another in cultural terms" (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 100), this has

implications for communication research involving the Mexican diaspora. The interlocutors' definition of *personhood*, *perception of difference*, and *experience of identity* take center stage instead of the researcher's assumptions. Labels and their meaning will likely be a part of such a participant-centered orientation, so communication scholars would do well to carefully heed participants' definitions and interpretations as part of the research process.

While the multiplicity inherent in a diasporic identity may still involve some othering, scholars might take care to consider the particular subtleties perceived by individuals, and not impose them. Oboler (1992) found that class and race background and values shape the meaning and social value individuals attribute to the terms they adopt to define themselves, and the self-other dichotomy is fundamental to the formation of Latino ethnic ethos. Perhaps while the U.S. mainstream tends to erase ethnic differences through a label such as *Hispanic*, Latin Americans and Latinos are more concerned with orienting their sense of self in relation to other Latin American ethnicities. The self-other dichotomy of a *Latino* may have a different nature and function than that of a *Hispanic*, or that which a researcher attributes to it.

To adequately address intercultural communication issues involving members of the Mexican diaspora, we need a more participant-based research ethic that examines people's social constructions of their identities in their own words. Several scholars call for the same shift in reference (Mirandé & Tanno, 1993b; Niemann et al., 1999). We must engage in true dialogue among scholars and between Latinos and non-Latinos and involve participants as co-owners and coproducers of research methods and data. We need to address matters of identity homogenization, fragmentation, and contextuality, perhaps by engaging a dialectical approach in examining communication dynamics. We might employ participants' and community members' definitions and perceptions of *self* and difference. We must let participants speak for themselves and implicate ourselves in our chosen research methods through self-reflexivity. This may, indeed, be one of the most powerful forms of resistance to dominant hegemonic and colonial discourses—allowing the subaltern to speak for himself or herself, and listening.

## Note

1. In this article, I use the identity label *Anglo* to refer to European Americans where the authors I cite used that term, or where *Anglo* was a more common signifier during the historical period I am referencing. Otherwise, I use *European American* as an ethnic label to refer to U.S. Americans of European descent. *White* is a racial term. Although perhaps most European Americans are mostly racially White, the two terms are technically not synonymous.

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