



The daughter of Amneris Pérez-Román, a native of Puerto Rico. Concerns for her daughter's life prospects were a key motivator in the family's decision to relocate to the United States.

LATINOS IN RURAL AMERICA

A Community-Engaged Humanities Learning Project

By Clara Román-Odio

LATINOS IN RURAL AMERICA offers a powerful strategy to open up new spaces for social dialogue. Reflecting on the role of the university as a public good, this article explores how a public humanities project and community-engaged learning connected Chicano/a history and culture to the present experience of Latinos in Knox County, Ohio. At their best, the public humanities and community-engaged learning bolster the university as an institution for promoting the public good.

Latinos have helped shape the United States over the last five centuries and constitute the country's largest minority group today with more than 50 million people. In Ohio, there are 357,000 Latinos of a range of nationalities. In 2013, there were 789 Latinos living in Knox County. A majority were from Mexico with other Latin American nations represented, as well. A grant from Ohio Humanities allowed Kenyon College to design a project for community-engaged learning that engaged with Latinos to share their thoughts and experiences with a larger audience. The grant supported the capturing of oral histories and the creation and distribution of an exhibit.

Latinos in Rural America (LiRA) sought to broaden public knowledge and understanding of the Latino/a experience in Knox County. Drawing on visits and interviews with members of the community, the project highlighted Latinos' distinctive challenges and rewards as they conduct their daily lives in a rural place. We met college professors, workers in the business sector, agricultural workers and youth of various ages, representing a range of experiences, cultural origins, and personal and family values. From these conversations emerged key themes that help frame the experiences of Latinos in Knox County. For instance, interview participants regularly mentioned how they negotiate the crossing of physical and cultural borders in order to build a sense of place. Ivonne García, who is an associate professor of English at Kenyon College described the experience. Puerto Ricans, she said, "are a migrant community that is continuous, that doesn't only cross one-way; one crosses in both directions and on multiple occasions. And that creates, to a certain extent, a life experience in which one doesn't belong to one place. If there were a country for the misfit toys, you know, that's where I would feel okay."

The proximity of many Latin American countries to the United States, the strong ties

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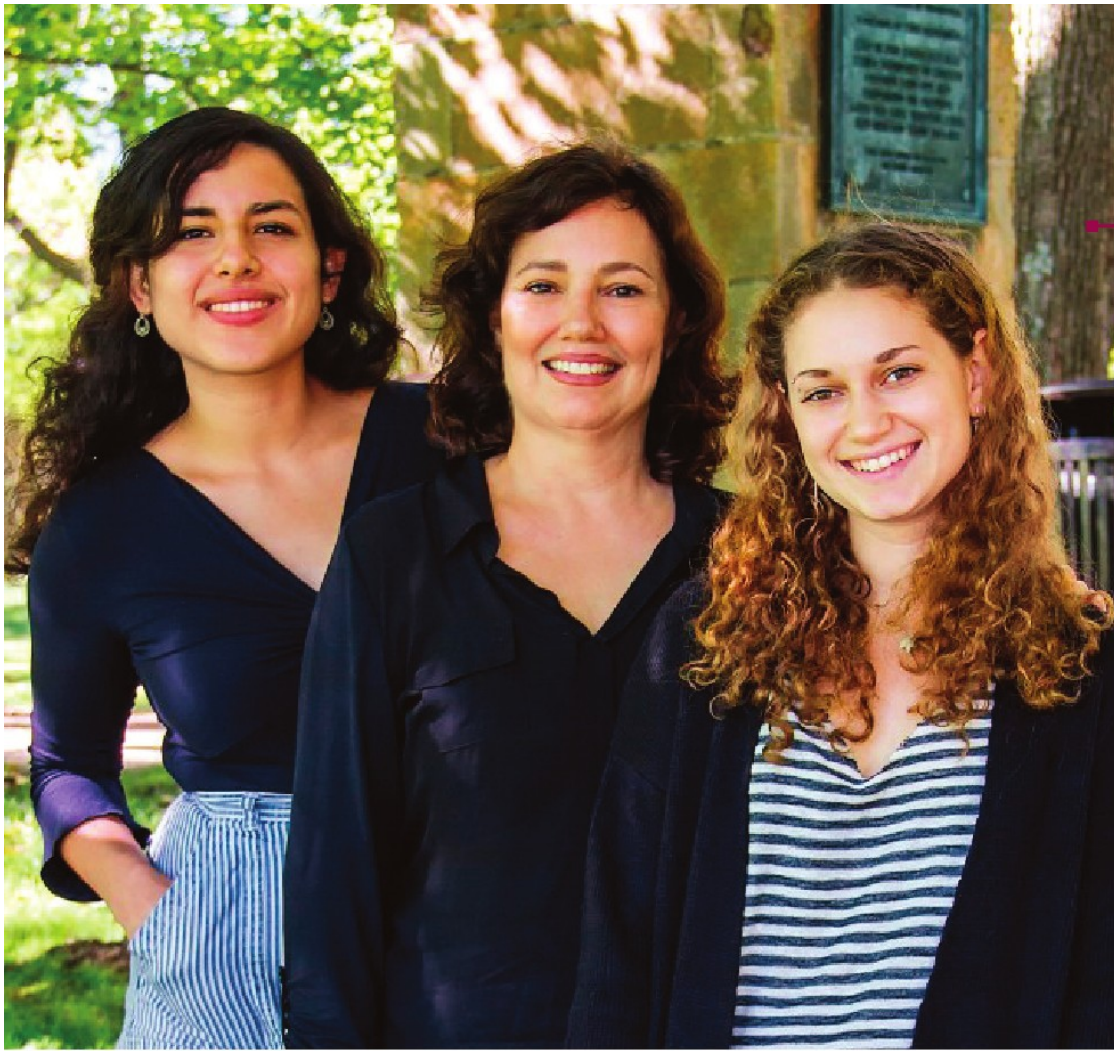


that exist between extended families and the rich cultural identities of many Latino immigrants all contribute to the perception of circular journeys. This includes an emotional back-and-forth between homelands and the United States. Like their countrymen in other places, Latinos in Knox County experience a simultaneous sense of place and displacement. They belong to their American community, yet that belonging involves exploring what is new while transplanting what they brought with them. Family, education, faith and food culture are the defining values for Latinos in rural Ohio. Despite the distance that separates them from their countries of origin, Latinos prioritize holding on to their cultural roots.

While acknowledging the tension between assimilation to U.S. culture and preserving Latino cultural identity, Knox County residents described how being intercultural enriches their lives. Most are bilingual and plan to pass that on to their children. "Being bilingual opens a lot of doors for you," said Mario Álvarez-León, a middle school student in Mount Vernon. "Just being able to speak two languages very well, it just helps so much, especially if you're looking for a career or an occupation one day. It just opens doors for you."

The daily experience of Latinos in Knox County is a paradox of invisibility and hyper-visibility. The Latino community tends to keep to itself, and thus individuals may feel invisible or sense

PHOTOS BY PATRICIA MOTA



The project team: Patricia Mota, Clara Román-Odio and Amelia Dunnell.

(Far Top Left) Ornaments at the office of Balinda Craig-Quijada, professor of dance at Kenyon College, reflect her Venezuelan cultural roots.

(Far Middle Left) Fiesta Mexicana, a family owned restaurant, serves as a central meeting place, given its employment opportunities and efforts to support the local community. Pictured is chef José Guadalupe (Lupe) Rivera, and his mother-in-law María De Jesús Limón.

(Far Bottom Left) Family pictures at Irene Rivera's home speak of cultural values.

lack of representation within the larger population. "I am not invisible," reflected one project informant. "I am always present, but no one wants to talk to me.... Not everyone likes me, because of my clothing or because I am always working."

LiRA culminated in a public bilingual exhibit, currently archived at Digital Kenyon (digital.kenyon.edu/lkca), which is traveling throughout Ohio. Panels with text in both English and Spanish provide snapshots of Latino families in Knox County. An accompanying video presents the participants talking about their lives. Through LiRA, the collected stories of Latinos and Latinas in Knox County were documented; their stories give visibility to this community and offered them the opportunity to voice their challenges and aspirations.

The community response to the exhibit demonstrated that attendees can make connections between local issues and national debates to question the dynamics of the world in which they live. Viewers can interact with the project by providing feedback on their thoughts after having seen the exhibit. Through the exhibit, they encounter disparities, social tensions and alternative views, which leads to reflection on their changed perceptions. For instance, one exhibit viewer commented that she was shocked to learn of the income and employment disparities between Latinos and whites,

assuming, as many do, that most Latinos come to the United States specifically for job opportunities. We also found that the exhibit audience embraced cultural difference, from the bilingual/bicultural content of the text, pictures and video, to the discovery of social tensions and educational disparities.

The immigrant story is a powerful narrative founded on the hope for a better life. For those arriving, the American dream promises that hard work will result in social mobility. Yet, amidst the growing Latinization of the United States, the perception of difference can produce an outlook that establishes newcomers as a threat rather than as a positive addition to our communities. LiRA enabled an interesting triangulation where the voices of people and culture propelled intercultural development and civic responsibility. We believe that this opening of new spaces for social change constitutes one of the greatest promises of the public humanities and community-engaged learning. ♥

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