

**Ni De Aqui, Ni De Alla: Examining Acts of Belonging in the Lancaster City Latinx  
Community**

A Thesis

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(Abbreviated Thesis Introduction and Conclusion)

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how Lancaster City's Latinx<sup>1</sup> residents have carved out spaces for self-determination and expression in the arts. I examined how the Latinx community views their inclusion (or exclusion) in the burgeoning arts and culture sector of Lancaster City. This study revealed that the Latinx community believes that there is little Latinx representation in the mainstream arts and culture sector in Lancaster City despite the high concentration of Latinx. The history of segregation and discrimination in Lancaster City have impacted how the Latinx community conducts acts of placemaking and belonging. This study is the first to document ways in which the Latinx community have attempted to create spaces for expression since their arrival in Lancaster City. The study confirms that the Latinx community has a rich arts and culture sector of its own despite periodic loss of critical cultural resources over time. Research conducted in the study sparked exciting conversations about what inclusion and placemaking in the Latinx community looks like, what the Latinx community wants/needs, and tangible ideas for moving forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Latinx is a gender neutral term used in place of the traditional Latino or Latina. Latinx avoids the gender binary by using an 'x' instead of the gendered 'a' or 'o.' Usage of the term Latinx was a deliberate choice. Hispanic, a commonly used identifier and identifier used by the US Census, only includes countries who have been occupied by the Spanish. This usage excludes Brazil and some Caribbean countries. Latinx includes countries that are part of Latin America and the Caribbean without referencing the history of colonialism that can be offensive to individuals that identify as Latinx. Latinx is a more preferable term because it is more inclusive geographically and socially.

## INTRODUCTION

Lancaster City is a third class city<sup>2</sup> (i.e. population below 250,000) located in the Southeastern part of Pennsylvania. Lancaster's downtown area boasts a lively arts scene and diverse community (The Pennsylvania Manual, 2016). Lancaster is usually associated with its rich Pennsylvania Dutch and Amish cultures; however, in recent years, Lancaster City has become more popular for its eateries, art galleries, and overall quirky character (Laneri, 2016, Loftus, 2016). Articles appearing in *Paste* magazine and *The New York Post* cite the farm-to-table food culture, vintage shops, and boutiques as part of what makes the city 'cool.'

Simultaneous to the increase in attention by travel and entertainment journalists, Lancaster City officials and the Lancaster City Alliance<sup>3</sup> have recently revealed a ten-year economic plan that boasts of the city's revitalization and improvements in quality of life. The study, titled *Building on Strength*, cites an "upward trend" in Lancaster City's improvement with a focus on continuing aspects of a 1998 15-year strategic plan (Lancaster City Alliance, 2015). The study credits the increase in tourism to the creation of a downtown arts district.

While the *Building on Strength* study paints a relatively strong image of Lancaster City, data proves that the improvements peddled by tourism marketing do not reflect the entire

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<sup>2</sup>Pennsylvania State's definition of city class based on population. The classification is outlined in *The Pennsylvania Manual* a guide to Pennsylvania state and local government.

<sup>3</sup> The Lancaster City Alliance is a non-profit, non-governmental community-service organization with a focus on economic development and community engagement. It is the result of a merge between two pre-existing community organizations: The James Street Improvement District (JSID) and the Lancaster Alliance.

narrative of Lancaster City residents reality. Poverty in the city has increased from 27.6% in 2010 to 29% in 2015 with a .6% increase in the unemployment rate and disproportionately impacts Latinx and Black residents (US Census Bureau, 2015). This is important to acknowledge because as the city gains more attention for its arts and culture sector, officials should also examine *who* is represented and *how* they are involved in decision making or creating processes.

As a Latinx resident, I am specifically interested in how Latinx residents perceive representation of Latinx arts and culture within the city's regular offerings. Rather than looking at Lancaster's mainstream arts and culture offerings and situating Latinx involvement within, I have chosen to primarily document and cross-examine Latinx arts and culture offerings past and present as a way of contextualizing the current state of involvement and representation. I classified mainstream arts and culture offerings as those that are not culturally targeted or generic. I deliberately chose to interview primarily Latinx stakeholders because I wanted to provide a space to allow the community to share its story. Additionally I wanted to document, for the first time, a kind of chronology of arts and culture initiatives for the community. Additionally, I chose to look at what Latinx offerings already exist as a way of better understanding what the Latinx community has done to carve out spaces for arts and culture for themselves. I wanted to understand why these spaces were necessary and compare them to what is happening in the city in general.

## Statement of Personal Intent

To begin, I must disclose my personal connection to Lancaster City's Latinx community. I grew up in "The Ward"-specifically on Howard Avenue between Christian Street and Duke Street. I lived in the ward from 2001-2010 (or from age 11 to age 20). This part of town, a historically segregated area, is avoided by many White and middle class residents because it is "dangerous." I suppose I can attest to this via my personal experience with "dangers" of living in the "inner city" to some degree. However, I've always felt apprehensive of labeling all of Southeast Lancaster as dangerous. The perceived threat of danger in this particular area is code for the area being predominantly working class, Black and Latinx residents. The Ward, despite some of the real crime and neglect by the city, felt like home because I was surrounded by people that looked like me, spoke the language I heard at home, and cooked with the same scents I smelled every day in my kitchen. At the same time, I was one of a small group of kids in the area that went to a predominantly White private school. I learned to code switch<sup>4</sup> at an early age and knew what it felt like to be out of place among people I might otherwise identify with solely based on the opportunities presented to me.

Growing up on Howard did teach me from an early age that certain kinds of people in Lancaster City live in certain parts of Lancaster City. At eleven years old, this was shocking as I moved to Lancaster City from the Bronx. Despite my age- just barely a pre-teen- I recall feeling a special kind of isolation from Downtown Lancaster living in The Ward that I never felt in my

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<sup>4</sup>Codeswitching is a linguistic term that can also be interpreted as the act of alternating between languages, identities, or cultures. In conversations about race and identity politics, it is the ability to switch between one set of cultural rules to another i.e. Latinx cultural norms to Mainstream cultural norms in a given space.

old hometown. I have since moved to the Chestnut Hill area of Lancaster City-a much more affluent neighborhood and have felt the same twinge of isolation that I felt as an eleven-year-old navigating class politics in a new city. My new neighborhood has its perks: there's less crime, but less of an intimate community, and much Whiter, middle-class, educated residents. I feel the need to disclose this personal information because I feel that being wholly objective and divorcing my personal experiences of nuanced discrimination would rob my research the urgency and sincerity with which I conducted and would like to present it.



## CONCLUSION

Through this research and documentation of conversations, I have begun what I believe is the first step in establishing a sense of belonging in the Latinx community in Lancaster City. I have documented what we've done, provided a brief history (that I hope will be further fleshed out and owned by the Latinx community as I am not the only voice in this conversation), and have documented how we as a community perceive our current place in Lancaster City's development. Lancaster City has a Latinx community with an arts and culture sector of its own whose success has manifested in projects, organizations, and programs that are constantly relegated to the outside of the city's core arts and culture development. Because of this lack of support, most of these manifestations of self-determination fizzle out or die off as enthusiastic leaders move on or grow weary. Today, representation of Latinx in the arts and culture sector is slowly starting to change. The desire for more representation is evidenced by recent initiatives like the Latinx mural arts project at Millersville University and Paloma Players. So the question is no longer *if* there is a Latinx community that wants to create or be part of an arts and culture sector, but *how* does Lancaster City's cultural community help maintain and cultivate spaces for the creation of sustainable models for the Latinx community (and eventually all marginalized communities) to continue to thrive in the arts.

I strongly believe that the *how* can be solved by encouraging and supporting spaces created by Latinx community leaders for the Latinx community. Physical spaces like the old

PRCC or temporary spaces like those created by traveling festivals and acting troupes are spaces where the Latinx community unquestionably belongs. Today, the community has few dedicated spaces that they can use for refuge or edification. Temporary spaces are necessary, however there is something about having and maintaining a space dedicated to cultural expression and preservation that helps a community feel like they belong.

The work of justifying and advocating for space is exhausting and reignites historical and generational trauma from dis-investment, displacement, and containment. Thus, the need for help from established foundations, organizations, and wealthy communities is key to helping the existing Latinx arts and culture community. To be clear, this assistance does not look like existing organizations folding the Latinx community into their framework. Rather assistance from privileged and established institutions or communities looks like equal partnerships and collaborations with existing Latinx community initiatives. The Latinx community needs the support of Lancaster City officials in dollars and in advocacy to help existing Latinx leaders to sustain spaces for the Latinx community and to ensure their posterity. Lancaster's cultural community must recognize that the Latinx community has their own methods of placemaking that need to be honored and can only be done authentically by Latinx cultural leaders.

Support from the Lancaster City cultural community must also be focused and dedicated *to* the Latinx community. Many Lancaster organizations seem to be afraid to commit to supporting the Latinx community for fear of appearing divisive. Established organizations feel a responsibility to make amends with *all* marginalized groups thus hampering their ability to make amends with certain groups. Though their intentions are sincere, the impact seems to be that programs have a diluted mission or choose to avoid addressing marginalized groups altogether. Our cultural communities need to be comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations

about how historic displacement intersects with contemporary economics and public policy and thereby intersects with social and cultural development. We need to stop looking for cookie-cutter development options and dig down into the specific and unique histories each cultural sector has. We also need to address the ways cultural sectors like the Latinx community are already or have historically coped with displacement, how they view improvement in their specific communities, and honor that social and cultural difference is something to be celebrated not erased or appropriated.

The unforeseen result of avoiding difficult conversations about Lancaster City's racial and ethnic tensions within the arts and culture sector is that Latinx residents are keenly aware of their experiences of marginalization and discrimination and simply do not feel welcome to most mainstream arts and culture offerings. Most Latinx residents feel like they cannot speak openly about their experiences. Mainstream arts and culture organizations have gone the route of declaring color-blindness rather than engaging the ways in which they might be perpetuating segregation with the arts and culture sector. Thus, the mere mention of a particular ethnicities unique problems in the community are viewed as divisive, prejudiced, or problematic. I believe that it is time for the arts and culture sector to take a bold step forward and invest in consultations that will help facilitate these conversations. This will signal that the City's cultural community values diversity beyond having more Black or Brown faces in the audience.

Our recent focus in Lancaster City has been on transforming traditionally or predominantly White spaces into more inclusive and equitable spaces. I honor this work and I believe it should continue however, trying to transform traditionally White spaces is going to take time and energy and frankly, the Latinx community has waited long enough. This should not be the only way to instigate changes in Latinx representation and participation. The Fulton

Theater is an example of how years of planning, programming, and outreach are still not enough to overcome decades of ignoring audiences of color. Despite the Fulton's attempt to rectify their own ethnic and cultural blind-spots, they are understaffed and ill-prepared to truly make a change in how they reach out to marginalized communities. It takes more than the occasional showing of *West Side Story* or *Carmen* to prove that an organization is open to the Latinx community.

In order for a group of people to feel they can be part of what makes a place great, they need to feel like they belong. Roberto Bedoya declared, "One needs to reflect upon US history and its troubling legacy of "placemaking" manifested in acts of displacement, removal, and containment" (Bedoya, 2013). At the same time, one needs to also allow groups, especially groups that have been victims of dis-investment and displacement, to fully own their spaces, create their own spaces, and self-actualize in those spaces. Cultural leaders interested in helping a community thrive must then look at what the community is already doing to define or personalize their space. For the arts to help a community, there must be "an understanding of the social dynamics on that street" prior to any initiatives or outreach (Bedoya, 2013). It is admittedly far easier to enter a space like Lancaster City and believe that applying current trends in placemaking or urban development will fix all the wrongs in every quadrant of the city. However, what is easy is not always right or just and will only delay for a short time animosity between those that are in power (or those that make decisions) and those that are acted upon.