

## Exploring Latinx Identity Through Theatre

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### **Abstract**

Latinx representation in the entertainment industry today remains rather low despite Latinx folk making up a significant portion of the American population. Rather than focusing on producing Latinx stories, they're often ignored or whitewashed by having non-Latinx folk create these productions. The Latinx community, however, has a growing presence in the United States and seeks greater representation in both Hollywood and Broadway. Within the Latinx community there is a rich diversity in culture, race, and identity that fails to be normalized by the media. Terms like Latinx, Latine, and Chicanx are growing in popularity regarding identity which sparks confusion in the community, but ultimately there is no correct answer regarding one's Latinx Identity. It's a personal struggle that many Latinx folk undergo throughout their lifetime, and yet this internal conflict fails to be discussed. For this research project, I seek to explore and better understand Latinx Identity through an individualized research process and an interview process with Latinx folk of different races and nationalities. Afterwards, I hope to use these interviews to create a play that highlights Latinx Identity struggles, but also create the opportunity for greater representation in entertainment.

## **Introduction**

In October of 2020, 270 Latinx showrunners, creators, television and film writers wrote a letter to Hollywood calling for systemic change in the entertainment industry, specifically asking for greater inclusion of Latinx artists and stories (Braxton). Throughout history, the entertainment industry has refused to tell Latinx stories and in the instances that Latinx projects do get produced, they're often written and led by non-Latinx artists. Oftentimes when Latinx characters or stories are presented, they're riddled with stereotypes disrespecting the cultural and racial diversity the Latinx community consists of. The Latinx community, however, is among the fastest growing minority groups in the United States with a total of 55 million Latinos in the U.S. in 2018, making up 23% of the American population under the age of 18 (Castro). Clearly, the presence of Latinx folk continues growing, and therefore we should be striving to create more stories that represent such a crucial part of the United States' population. In this research project, I hope to explore different Latinx stories, focusing greatly on Latinx Identity through the various lenses of race, nationality, culture, and immigration. With this research, I hope to write a play for my senior thesis that highlights different Latinx experiences in uncovering identity, to create more opportunities for representation in the industry, and to educate the public about the Latinx community to break the stereotypes that it's often held to.

## **Background/Related Work and Motivation**

The term "Latinx" first gained popularity in the 2010's as a gender neutral term to identify anyone with Latin American descent. According to the Pew Research Center, the term "Latinx", however, is only used by 3% of Latinos (Simón). Within the Latinx community, there are hundreds of different identities that can relate to either race, gender, nationality, or culture.

For example, someone can identify as Latino/a/x, as Hispanic if they're from a Spanish-speaking country, as Mexican or Peruvian or Colombian depending on the country they or their family is from, as Chicano/a/x if they're Mexican born in the U.S., as Asian-Latinx or Afro-Latinx based on their race, or as a hyphenated term like Cuban-American. Truly, there is not one single answer to what Latinx Identity is or means, as it is a very personal topic and journey that people undergo. There are many factors that can impact one's Latinx Identity, such as language, family, traditions, immigration, and race/racism, all of which play a significant role in one's connectivity with the Latinx community (Corona). Works that have touched upon these factors are tv shows like Gloria Kelle's *One Day at a Time*, France-Luce Benson's play, *Detained*, Lin Manuel-Miranda's musical, *In the Heights*, and Josefina Lopez's book/play, *Real Women Have Curves*. Each of these stories explore Latinx Identity through different lenses, such as generational differences, immigration, and beauty. Together, they highlight the positives and negatives that come with being Latinx in the United States as well as depict the internal struggles that the Latinx community undergoes when determining their identity. Miranda's *In the Heights*, mirrors his own experience growing up in Washington Heights, NY, and his own struggles with the Latinx community (Romano). This musical pushed the boundaries of theatre – musically, casting-wise, and story-wise – making it one of the few musicals consisting of a mainly POC (People of color) cast with a strong emphasis on the Latinx ethnicity telling the story of what it means to be Latinx in the U.S. My research and play aim to continue this narrative by discussing and depicting Latinx Identity through different races, nationalities, genders, and ages, creating a story that will help create a better understanding of what it means to be Latinx.

Above all, however, my main motivation for this research project is my own experience and confusion with identity. I am a Peruvian-born Latina that has lived in the U.S. for over 17

years, mainly in liberal cities and communities, and I am also a green card holder. My experience as a white-passing, documented Latina is very different from other Latinx folk, and yet I still struggle with identity. There have been instances, where I don't feel Latinx or Peruvian enough, but I have also never felt U.S. American enough. These thought processes and internal struggles are ones that many people in the Latinx community experience, especially those who live outside of their native country. This internal conflict has sparked curiosity and desire to explore other people's experiences with identity and discover what similarities and differences these stories share. Through my research I will be exploring how having/lacking certain privileges, opportunities, and experiences affect one's Latinx Identity. My inspiration to write a play discussing Latinx Identity, stems from my overall goals of normalizing these struggles, educating my audience on Latinx Identity, and creating opportunities for people of color in theatre.

## **Methodology**

As this project seeks to understand Latinx Identity and the journey that Latinx folk undergo, before writing the play I will conduct preliminary research on the history of the Latinx community in the United States. This includes reading books that highlight the history of Latinx in the US – like *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* by Paul Ortiz and *Inventing Latinos: A New Story of American Racism* by Laura E. Gomez – as well as reading articles that establish the varying terms used in the Latinx community, determining the difference between race and ethnicity, and reading case studies, blog posts, and interviews that present factors that affect identity, like immigration status, nationality, language, and traditions.

Following this individualized research, I will conduct interviews with different Latinx folk, hopefully in person, but remotely if needed. My goal with these interviews is to find common contributing factors and common struggles that Latinx folk face throughout their journey toward identity, as well as use these interviews as stories and characters in my play. I hope to interview a maximum of 50 Latinx folk of varying races, gender, ages, and nationalities in order to discover the many routes one can take toward identity, but also how these various people differ in their experiences. The following set of questions will guide the interviews:

1. Name, age, gender, race
2. Where are you from? Where is your family from?
3. How did you arrive in the United States (if not born here already)? What has your experience been like as a Latinx in the U.S.?
4. What kind of traditions did you grow up with?
5. What stereotypes have been placed on you? What stereotypes do/did you hold toward the Latinx community?
6. Have you faced prejudice for your race or ethnicity? What was that experience like?
7. How do you identify? How did you get to that point?

The goal is for these interviews to become conversations, and for these questions to start discussions that will lead to more specific questions about the interviewees experiences. Before conducting these interviews I will be asking the interviewees if they are comfortable with me using their stories and names in my play or if they would like to remain anonymous. I am also aware that my interviews might require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before conducting them or using them in my playwriting process.

Meanwhile, I will also be researching Latinx Theatre specifically and how to write for Latinx Theatre. This will include reading plays that present Latinx stories and characters as well as reading books, articles, and journals that highlight key factors about playwriting. The short essay “Latinx Theatre for Young Audiences” by Ramón Esquivel presents an introduction to writing Latinx Theatre, such as focusing on various races and not solely on one race. Taking these factors into consideration, I will begin writing my own play with a focus on docudrama (documentary drama) and verbatim theatre that will use the interviewees as characters and their words for dialogue. In order to do so, I will need to record and transcribe the interviews. I believe a docudrama and verbatim theatre will truthfully highlight Latinx Identity and help bring light to the many struggles the Latinx community undergoes.

### **Expected Results**

Latinx Identity is an incredibly personal topic, therefore, I expect the answers from the interviews to vary depending on the person and their experiences. There are no two people that share the exact same story, so it is to be expected that everyone’s answers will be different. I do, however, expect to find similarities within the contributing factors that have affected the interviewees’ identities as well as similarities in the struggles they have faced that I will then highlight in my play. The ultimate deliverable for this project, however, will be a play on Latinx Identity that will consist of about 100 pages and a series of scenes that explain different stories within the Latinx Community. I hope these stories expand the world’s knowledge about the Latinx community.

## **Budget**

\$200 - Funds to allow access to resources (buying books, access to articles and case studies, etc)

\$300 - Necessary recording equipment, such as microphones and a recording device

\$300 - Interviewee compensation

\$600 - Transcriber compensation

Total: \$1,400

## **Timeline**

January 25, 2021 – January 29, 2021: Meeting with mentor to establish research foundation and discuss goals for research project

February 1, 2021 – May 10, 2021: Individual research phase, reading books, articles, and case studies on the Latinx community, Latinc history in the US, and Latinx Identity

May 11, 2021 – May 17, 2021: Compile all research and finalize a list of questions to guide interview process

May 24, 2021 – August 20, 2021: Conduct interviews with different Latinx community members

August 21, 2021 – TBD: Get interviews transcribed (TBD because the timefram for this is up to the transcriber I find and how long the interviews are, all of which are contributing factors to length of time it will take to transcribe interviews)

September 20, 2021 – December 20, 2021: Conduct individualized research on playwriting and writing for Latinx Theatre

December 27, 2021 – January 7, 2022: Begin outlining and drafting ideas for play

January 10, 2022 – May 10, 2022: Write play

May 16, 2022 – June 13, 2022: Receive feedback on play from mentor and peers

June 14, 2022 – November 13, 2022: Continue drafting and workshopping play and receiving feedback from mentor until it is complete

November 14, 2022 – February 13, 2023: Finalize any additional work needed for senior thesis



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