

# Introduction

## Situating Latino Voices in a New England Community

**David Carey Jr.**

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

*Hay tantísimas fronteras que dividen a la gente, pero por cada frontera existe también un puente.*

(There are a great number of borders that divide people, but for every border there is also a bridge.)

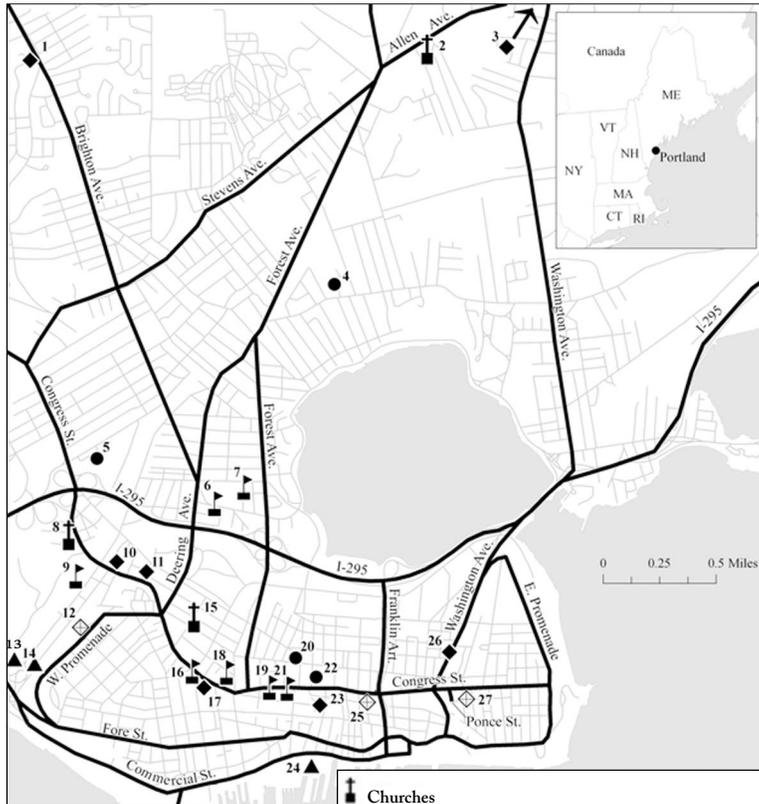
—Gina Valdés, *Puentes y Fronteras*

With the United States on the verge of claiming the third-largest concentration of Spanish speaking people in the world and the 2000 census indicating that nearly one in five inhabitants speaks a language other than English at home, learning about Latino plights, realities, and contributions is essential to understanding our changing nation and its relationship to the rest of the world. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than half of the immigrants living in the United States have come from Latin America. In light of the Census Bureau's declaration that Hispanics comprise the largest minority

(14 percent) in the United States, defining Spanish as a foreign language is becoming increasingly problematic.<sup>1</sup> Yet until Latino/as are recognized as citizens as well as immigrants (in contrast to Caucasians who are assumed to be citizens because of their physical features and [for many] their English fluency), Spanish is unlikely to gain broader acceptance here. Nonetheless, the increasing presence and influence of Latino/as is making the United States more like the rest of the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

These changing demographics have fueled a growing literature in Latino Studies that tends to focus on large Latino populations in major cities—Chicago, New York, Miami, Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> While a small-town trend also is emerging in the literature, more research is needed in small cities and communities, especially since these kinds of places play a central role in the new Latino diaspora.<sup>4</sup> Latino voices from the whitest state in the nation (96.9 percent of Mainers identify as Caucasian) elucidate how Spanish speakers conceptualize and create community in places where they represent only a tiny (yet burgeoning) percentage of the population. By 2000, 9,360 Hispanics lived in Maine, representing only 0.7 percent of the population. By May 2008, they numbered almost 16,000.<sup>5</sup> The testimonies herein reveal why Latino/as leave predominantly Latino neighborhoods in large urban areas like New York or Boston for the safety and serenity of small cities like Portland despite the challenges of marginalization, racism, and isolation. By exploring the ways migration leads to residency, this volume serves as a model for the study of new and reemerging Latino settlements, particularly ones where migrants are so outnumbered that their communities are virtually invisible, even to other Latino/as.<sup>6</sup>

When U.S. Border Patrol agents in Portland raided Latino and Somali businesses, a homeless shelter, and factories that employed people of color on January 25, 2004, Latino and other community leaders responded by organizing meetings and a march, which city officials and other Portlanders supported with their presence. Though federal agents arrested only ten people for inadequate documentation, many more were harassed. Most were U.S. citizens or documented immigrants who caught the agents' attention because they looked like foreigners. In addition to targeting economically marginalized individuals, agents apparently were so blinded by their association of whiteness with U.S. citizenship that they failed to immediately release a Puerto Rican man who produced his voter identification card as evidence that he was a U.S. citizen. As a Puerto Rican who grew up in California and then made her way to Portland, Olga Alicea empathizes with this man's plight when she observes that even in places like California where so many Latino/as live, "the culture is still oppressively white."



**Map of Portland Latino Locations, by Rosemary Mosher.**

- Churches**
  - 2 White Memorial Seventh-day Adventist Church
  - 8 The Deliverance Center
  - 15 Sacred Heart Catholic Church
- Historic Landmarks**
  - 12 Thomas Brackett Reed Statue
  - 25 César Chávez Park
  - 27 Ponce St.
- Latino Businesses**
  - 1 La Familia Restaurante
  - 3 Uno, 2, 3 Daycare
  - 10 Lourdes' International Beauty Salon
  - 11 La Bodega Latina
  - 17 Bodega El Caribe
  - 23 The Gold Boot Two
  - 26 Tu Casa Restaurant Salvadoreño
- Latino Social, Cultural, and Educational Spaces**
  - 6 WMPG Radio Station
  - 7 USM Woodbury Campus Center
  - 9 The Station (night club)
  - 16 Center for Cultural Exchange
  - 19 Community Television Network
  - 21 Havana (night club)
- Places of Employment**
  - 13 Barber Foods
  - 14 Cozy Harbor
  - 24 Portland Fish Pier
- Services**
  - 4 Multilingual and Multicultural Center
  - 5 Portland Adult Education
  - 18 Tengo Voz
  - 20 Preble Street Resource Center
  - 22 Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project

Since immigrants of color are permanently foreign in a way that white immigrants are not, Latino/as can never fully assimilate (much less become white) nor do they necessarily wish to. They are perpetually foreigners within. In contrast, thanks to a skin color that has become normalized in the United States, white immigrants have the ability to immediately and then permanently disconnect themselves from immigration.<sup>7</sup> For Olga, “[D]iscrimination exists in not being able to see any representation of who you are in your environment.” At worst racism dooms Latino/as and Latin American immigrants to marginal economic circumstances; at best it compels them to overcome additional obstacles to achieve their dreams.

In the aftermath of the January 2004 raids, businesses suffered because many Latino consumers refused even to leave their homes for fear they would be accosted.<sup>8</sup> As Ana Manza and Eliseo Brea, who hail from the Dominican Republic, note, the U.S. Border Patrol raids “affected all of us because we are all immigrants. We come from immigrant families and what happens to one immigrant happens to all of us.” By identifying the way Latino/as and other U.S. citizens (with the obvious exception of Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and many Mexican Americans) are connected through a history of immigration and discrimination, the Latino raconteurs in this book articulate a shared experience even for those who choose to ignore it.<sup>9</sup> Their accounts provide a window into the dynamics of community making.

Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants reflect the broader trend of a growing and increasingly influential Latino population in New England and the United States, but they also hold a unique position in this phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Geographer Daniel Arreola’s conceptualization of Hispanic/Latino community types (continuous, discontinuous, and new) is helpful in situating the significance of this study. Certainly, Portland is not a “continuous” community that was founded as and remains a Hispanic place, such as Laredo, Texas, or Las Vegas, New Mexico. Nor is it a “discontinuous” place that was originally founded as Hispanic but ceded this dominance at some point and is now becoming increasingly Hispanic again, such as San Antonio, Texas, or Los Angeles, California. Like so many other U.S. cities and towns, Portland appears to be experiencing the Latino diaspora as a pioneer Hispanic settlement where Latinos are making their presence known as a new group. Yet despite portrayals of the Latino presence as a recent phenomenon by informants in this book and despite the 2000 census (which estimated that one-third of all Latin Americans in Maine had lived in the United States for less than a decade), Portland is not a “new” Hispanic place either.<sup>11</sup>

Portland’s Latino community points to a fourth category I call reemerging. Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants are reestablishing a



**Martinez Auto Service (South Portland).**

presence in a city that, unbeknownst to most Portlanders, was shaped by its nineteenth-century Latin American residents (some of whom became citizens). Small yet vibrant, the contemporary Portland Latino community both reflects and builds upon the legacy of its nineteenth-century counterpart and in this sense is putting down roots in fertile ground.

Though first populated by Wabanaki peoples,<sup>12</sup> Portland was founded as an Anglo city on July 4, 1786.<sup>13</sup> Shortly thereafter, due largely to a thriving West India trade and its demand for maritime workers, Portland hosted a burgeoning Hispanic (mostly Cuban) community, which thrived throughout much of the nineteenth century. Although most of these families and individuals had either moved away or assimilated (in one illustrative example Ramon and Juan Gutierrez changed their surnames to Gardiner) by the early twentieth century, the current (and more diverse) Latino community has rich historical roots.<sup>14</sup> As such, unlike the Guatemalan immigrants who were the first Hispanics to arrive in Morganton, North Carolina, for example, today's Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants represent a second attempt at establishing a pioneer settlement.<sup>15</sup> The voices in this book contribute to a deeper understanding of these kinds of places. As a reemerging Latino community, Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants complicate conceptions of how ethnic minorities position themselves in new places.

But it is not just the relationship of Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants to their receiving community that makes their situation unique. Unlike many Latino communities that are dominated by one national

or ethnic group, Portland's Latino/as are a diverse mix of peoples from such places as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, and Cuba. As John Connors suggests in these pages, Portland's small size unites Latinos of different national origins. In truth, the diversity and fluidity of Portland's Latino community is both a source of strength and weakness. While the community displays formidable organizing skills during crises such as the 2004 U.S. Border Patrol raids, less sensational though no less important quotidian issues fail to ignite an united response. Unlike the aforementioned Maya in Morganton who predominantly hailed from the highland town of Aguacatán, Guatemala, and thus organized a union around this shared provenance, Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants do not necessarily enjoy such immediate and intimate connections.<sup>16</sup>

Though such organizations as Centro Latino Maine are attempting to remedy this reality, in general Portland's Latino community tends to be reactive rather than proactive. Given the diversity of Portland's Latino/as and Latin American immigrants, it is often a shared sense of marginalization that motivates them to come together as a community. Eliseo Brea, for example, expresses a sense of solidarity rooted in discrimination and persecution when he notes similarities between his experience and that of the undocumented: "We're people who are just coming here to earn our daily bread."

At the same time, the diffuse nature of the Latino community facilitates individuals' and even smaller groups' incorporation into Portland's social fabric. By this I do not mean assimilation (although that too is a possibility), but rather the ability to be present without attracting attention. Even Latino storefronts blend into the city's landscape to the extent that many Portlanders are unaware of Portland's Salvadoran restaurant or Dominican grocery stores. As a disparate community reemerging in a predominantly Caucasian city, Latino/as in Portland chart their lives as both outsiders and insiders, immigrants and U.S. citizens, Latino/as and Americans. The chameleon nature of such complex identities and imaginings allows them to connect with a number of different communities in both their sending and host countries.

As their ability to mobilize members of the larger community around a civil rights issue demonstrates, Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants are poised to face the increasingly complex and contested process of building bridges to connect communities instead of building walls to separate them. In many ways, Latino/as and Latin American immigrants ford frontiers both within Portland and between the city and state, the United States, and the Atlantic world. Modeling a commitment to Portland *and* their



The Gold Boot Two Shoe Shine & Shoe Repair. Portland Latino/as frequently consult the Cuban-American proprietor Armando Vives (shown on the right) for personal and professional advice.

sending communities, Latino/as and Latin American immigrants encourage native Portlanders to be more worldly and in so doing make the city more cosmopolitan. In her testimony, Victoria Chicón perceives a fundamental difference between people of the United States and Latin America:

[I]n Latin America, in general we're aware of things. I mean, on a corner you see some old people or some kids at a bus stop and they're talking about what's happening in the world. But not here. I mean, here you know the news from here, but not the culture of the whole world. American culture, I mean, they're completely absorbed in that, but their historical past doesn't interest them. But we have so much of that, I think, right? The whole historical question, our heritage. *We have the advantage of seeing things more broadly.* (emphasis added)

Some informants, such as Laura Ochoa, go so far as to identify as the very interstices of immigration: "I *am* the middle" [between Mexico and the United States]. Many Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants are "on both shores at once."<sup>17</sup>

The hybridity of the Latino community and the individuals within it encourages us to reconceptualize the meanings of America and American. With the increasing influence of Latino/as and Latin American immigrants, perhaps contemporary Portlanders (and other U.S. citizens) will employ the rhetoric of their early nineteenth-century forebears who understood America inclusively as a hemisphere, not exclusively as a nation.<sup>18</sup> Whether through transnationalism, border-crossing, cultural transformation, or the economic forces that often set these trends in motion, boundaries (both real and imagined) between the United States and Latin America are breaking down and hemispheric connections are becoming stronger. For example, immigrants' remittances are a (albeit unequal) response to the foreign investment and free trade that extract wealth from developing nations and thereby compel people to emigrate. But as the multiplicity of the lives, voices, and identities in the following pages reveals, more than economics connects these regions. By adapting to the United States but not abandoning their culture and world-views, Latino/as and Latin American immigrants both experience a transformation and transform their host communities.

This cultural exchange notwithstanding, the 2006 immigration debates revealed a wide gulf among U.S. residents. The proposed 700-mile-long wall on the U.S.–Mexico border in Congressman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr.'s immigration bill HR 4437 was emblematic of those U.S. citizens who were intent on erecting barriers instead of bridges. Furthermore, Representative Sensenbrenner's desire to turn undocumented immigrants (and those who aided them) into felons reflected a broader effort to criminalize immigrants and immigration. Gus Martínez, a Mexican immigrant living in Scottsdale, Arizona, noted, "They see you are Hispanic and call you a criminal, but we are not that."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in her testimony, Blanca Santiago speaks of the tendency to associate Puerto Ricans with crime.

In response to these negative portrayals and legislative activity, Latino communities organized demonstrations that drew impressive numbers in Chicago (200,000), Los Angeles (500,000 to 1,000,000), San Diego (40,000 school children alone), Atlanta (80,000), Phoenix (20,000), Denver (50,000), and Washington, D.C. (30,000). Portland was one of over fifty cities that held rallies to recognize April 10, 2006 as a Day of Action for Immigrant Justice. Shortly thereafter, when activists organized a national boycott of work and commerce to recognize May 1 as a "Day without Immigrants," large numbers of Latino/as and Latin American immigrants again turned out and many businesses closed. Despite the exploitative living and working conditions and low wages that marginalize undocumented workers (as evidenced in

Adrian Bravo's testimony), these public protests point to the growing influence of the broader Latino community. At the same time, these events also speak to their invisibility. While the Latino media began covering these demonstrations before they happened, the English-speaking media was caught off guard. For example, in Chicago the English-speaking media failed to cover the largest demonstration in the city's history. As a result, to many English-only citizens, the rallies were surprisingly large and spontaneous.<sup>20</sup> By confronting the challenges of racism, economic marginalization, and invisibility, Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants are trying to build a more just and inclusive city. A flyer circulated by the Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition about the April 10 rally in Portland demonstrated that immigrants both deeply care about the United States ("the character of our nation is at stake") and conceive of it broadly: "No matter where we were born—WE ARE ALL AMERICA."

### **Latino Tales of the City**

Rather than being exhaustive or even emblematic, this collection of narratives explores the ways members of a diverse yet intermittently united ethnic group reconstitute their communities and identities in a predominantly Caucasian city, and in turn how living in such a place shapes them. In an effort to reflect the diversity of Latino/as and Latin American immigrants in Portland and the United States, the interviewees include community leaders, religious leaders, students, factory workers, manual laborers, social workers, professionals, business owners, and the homeless. In addition to occupational and socioeconomic variety, these informants hail from nations as diverse as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Venezuela, El Salvador, and Peru. Though all are migrants, not all are immigrants; some were born in the United States. All the informants are connected to Spanish-speaking places, though not all speak Spanish. Since gender balance was also a goal in the selection of informants, eight women and six men are included here. Their ages range from eighteen to sixty-two. Of course, no one raconteur should be held up as the voice of any one of these groups, let alone the Latino voice. Rather, the range of experiences and perspectives in the following pages speaks to the uniqueness of each individual and complexity of the Latino community.<sup>21</sup> As anthropologist Kay Warren observes, "The collage of first-person accounts, rather than a voice-of-God expository style, leaves more of the work of analysis to the reader and makes the collection all the more powerful for those who have not

directly experienced” the ways migration, discrimination, and structural oppression fragment everyday life.<sup>22</sup>

The concern with diversity precluded random sampling. Robert Atkinson interviewed two English-speaking Latinos (John Connors and Laura Ochoa). I interviewed two couples I met through the Spanish service at Sacred Heart Catholic church (Ana Manza and Eliseo Brea, and Hernán and Marta) as well as Blanca Santiago and Adrian Bravo.<sup>23</sup> In an effort to avoid approaching Portland Latino/as merely as subjects, we invited Blanca Santiago to select and interview people. As a board member of Centro Latino Maine, Blanca had access to local leaders including members of the business community, but she also sought to interview people who lived on the margins of these social networks. In short, the guiding methodology for this study was network sampling, a process of arranging and developing interviews through personal connections.<sup>24</sup> The University of Southern Maine (USM) also facilitated these connections. For example, Robert Atkinson met Blanca Santiago through a course he was teaching at USM, and I came to know a number of Latino students (including Laura Ochoa) as the faculty advisor to the USM Latino-Hispanic Student Association.

In some ways, however, our methodology was not uniform. After meeting a number of times to devise and then fine-tune the project’s goals and methodology, Blanca Santiago, Robert Atkinson, and I realized that our interests in the project were informed by our disciplinary and professional backgrounds. To explore the stories of Latino/as and Latin American immigrants in Portland, we needed an interdisciplinary approach. As a result, though the interview questions remained constant, the interview process did not. In general, interviews followed a format in which interviewers asked interviewees open-ended questions about what brought them to Portland and their experiences there. Though the distinctions are minor, they are worth noting. Oral history methodology guided my interviews. By earning interviewees’ confidence and trust and conducting interviews in their native language, I sought to gain access to perspectives, insights, and empirical information unobtainable through traditional historical sources such as archival documents and newspapers.<sup>25</sup> In turn, Robert Atkinson employed his expertise in life stories whereby the interviewer guides the storyteller in recounting their lived experience.<sup>26</sup> Blanca Santiago approached her interviews from years of experience working with Latino/as with a particular focus on helping people articulate their needs and dreams.

Despite these differences and our role in selecting the questions and guiding the interviews, each of us was intent on allowing the people interviewed to



Sacred Heart Catholic Church where a Spanish language mass is offered each Sunday.

speak for themselves. But since “ethnographic and historical projects cannot be extricated from power-laden contexts,” this objective was inevitably elusive.<sup>27</sup> For example, our positions as USM professors (and the economic, political, and social benefits associated with that status) affected Robert Atkinson’s and my relationships with interviewees and thus the stories they told. Audience matters. At the same time, we should not underestimate the ability of informants to “negotiate the conditions under which communication takes place” and thereby direct, influence, and even control not only the information conveyed but also the topics addressed.<sup>28</sup> To ensure reciprocal text production, we asked interviewees to review the transcripts of their interviews and edit, delete, or expand on any aspect of them. In this sense, these Latino/as have framed their own histories. All but John Connors and Laura Ochoa were interviewed in Spanish. In the hopes of reaching a broad audience, the additional filter of English translations through which readers must sift became a necessity. Finally, while editing out the questions from the text eliminates the rapport and at times riposte between interviewer and interviewee, it also privileges the narrative flow of these accounts and thereby accentuates these Latino voices. So as not to obscure the process of negotiation that shaped these testimonies, we have included the interview questions in the appendix.

### **Catalysts and Cycles of Latin American Immigration**

The voices in these pages are not emerging from a historical vacuum; on the contrary, they are building upon a Hispanic influence and connection in the city that dates back to at least the eighteenth century. The nineteenth-century West India trade, which made Portland a major Atlantic seaport, facilitated a close relationship between the Caribbean and southern Maine. As the focus of Portland’s commercial ties with Latin America, Cuba in particular left a lasting impression on the city. Cuban planters sent their children to study in southern Maine, some of whom settled in Portland and left their mark on the city’s landscape, architecture, economy, and identity. In turn, by recognizing themselves as international actors, many of Portland’s nineteenth-century residents helped to create a welcoming environment for Hispanics by learning Spanish and trying to establish a library for Spanish literature and newspapers. After the Civil War, southern ports displaced Portland’s position in the West India trade and the city’s connection to Latin America waned. Even though a few Cubans and other Latin Americans continued to emigrate to

Portland into the early twentieth century, the city became more insular and less cosmopolitan as the twentieth century progressed.<sup>29</sup>

As is evidenced by the West India trade, Latin American immigration to the United States often was the result of larger forces, particularly U.S. investment and policies in the region. Of course, international relations also affected immigration. By the 1940s, the domestic labor shift (into defense-related industries) and shortage caused by World War II was a catalyst for increased interactions between Mainers and Latin Americans. Though they predominantly went to farming communities not cities, Mexicans (as part of the ill-fated *Braceros* agreement between the United States and Mexico [1942–1964]) arrived in Maine in 1944 to fill a labor lacuna.<sup>30</sup>

At about the same time, the Puerto Rican government initiated Operation Bootstrap, an economic incentive program aimed at industrializing the economy by attracting foreign investment—the first *maquiladora* model. Yet, the focus on capital intensive industrialization only increased unemployment and poverty, the very scourges the operation was trying to mitigate. Since the Puerto Rican government was simultaneously encouraging emigration, by the late 1940s and 1950s, Puerto Ricans (who of course were U.S. citizens) were migrating north in search of jobs; over three million currently reside on the mainland, nearly 40 percent of the island's population. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 2,275 live in Maine.<sup>31</sup> As Blanca Santiago's testimony attests, Puerto Ricans' feelings and attitudes toward this program are complicated and conflicted. Even while she characterizes Operation Bootstrap as "a benevolent thing," Blanca describes the misery it caused her family. Since the government's economic policy and promotion of urban migration targeted females partly to control and discipline them but also to "modernize" Puerto Rico, women such as Blanca's mother were at the heart of this maelstrom. Portrayed as problematic on the island and largely left to their own devices once they arrived in the United States, the young women who migrated found few of the opportunities the government had promised.<sup>32</sup> As Blanca recalls her childhood, her mother's struggle becomes apparent. Yet in reflecting upon her past, Blanca highlights the role that such forces beyond her control had in allowing her to create a new life. Her oral history opens a window into Operation Bootstrap's complex legacy.

For other Latin American emigrants, the forces that pulled them to Portland originated in the United States. The flight of Dominicans provides an illustrative example. When the Marines occupied the Dominican Republic in 1965 to suppress a popular movement, capitalists from the United States soon followed with increased investments in the Dominican sugar industry.

Dominican emigration, almost 100 percent of which goes to the United States, increased almost thirteenfold immediately thereafter. Ironically, because foreign investment in export agriculture and manufacturing displaces small-scale enterprises (such as subsistence agriculture and textile production), the very measures commonly thought to deter emigration cause it. Dominicans did not necessarily resent this intervention, however. Partly because they seek to distance themselves from Haiti's history, fate, and people, many Dominicans are less critical than other Latin Americans of U.S. imperialism. In her interview, Ana Manza confides:

We feel good about our country's history with the United States because they have always supported us. And when there's any problem, they're always there . . . to establish peace, so there won't be war, so there won't be problems in one's country. . . . That's why the Dominican Republic remains so stable. You don't see that it's like Haiti . . . because the United States gives it lots of opportunities for a lot of people. For professionals, too, they come here, work a lot, and a lot of opportunities are given to everyone. So, thank God, there are good relations between the two.

When the United States responded to a drop in international sugar prices by investing in the Dominican Republic's nontraditional agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism industries in the 1980s, emigration boomed again. Today the United States is home to about 10 percent of the Dominican Republic's population. Though few came directly from the Dominican Republic to Portland, many local Dominicans first emigrated to the United States in response to U.S. intervention in their country and the changing conditions of global capitalism—both forces beyond their control.<sup>33</sup>

Patterns of U.S. intervention and investment impelling immigration were evident throughout Central America and the Caribbean. As anthropologist Saskia Sassen observes, the United States “receives 19.5% of all emigration from Central America, but 52% of emigration from El Salvador, the country with the greatest U.S. involvement in the region.”<sup>34</sup> Many Salvadorans who emigrated to the United States in the 1980s first worked on export-oriented coffee plantations in El Salvador. In fact, today so many Salvadorans are migrating to the United States (one out of every nine) that Hondurans are filling that tiny nation's labor shortage.<sup>35</sup> As one response to the drastic economic imbalance in the region, Salvadorans in the United States sent \$2.8 billion to their families in 2005, which accounted for 17 percent of the Gross

Domestic Product in a nation where nearly 50 percent of the population lived in poverty.<sup>36</sup>

Though not the only factor, the stark economic inequality between developing and developed nations propels Latin American emigration to the United States. Like Laura Ochoa, many of the people interviewed “were raised in a poor family,” and, like Adrian Bravo, they fled poverty. When viewed from extreme marginalization, the United States appears the land of plenty. The image of money being found in the streets “like leaves” that Lourdes Carpenter describes is common in the developing world. As anthropologist Roger Lancaster points out in his study of Nicaragua, “In a land of scarcity, the image of plenty is an absolute good in and of itself. . . . The glut of commodities on the developed side of the equation obliterates any system of reference, on the underdeveloped side, that might allow for an understanding of inequality, powerlessness, and relative poverty.”<sup>37</sup> This myopia helps to explain why even Latin Americans who enjoy relatively comfortable lives in their countries, such as Lourdes Carpenter and Iván Cantor, migrate to the United States. Lourdes’ transition from employing a servant in the Dominican Republic to cleaning a department store in the United States is emblematic of the disillusionment many Latin American immigrants experience in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Iván’s story typifies the experience of many Latin American immigrants who are struggling to build meaningful lives in marginal economic circumstances. He notes, “I’ve lived in Portland nearly eight years and instead of life getting better for me, it’s the opposite.”

Though economics is at the heart of immigration, U.S. foreign policy also looms over this phenomenon. Like Dominicans, many Central Americans emigrated to the United States in response to U.S. interventions. During the cold war, the United States often played out its preoccupation with communism in Central America, particularly Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. The civil wars that engulfed Central America during the 1970s and 1980s can be traced in part to U.S. military aid and intervention. The United States tended to derail popular movements and democratically elected governments. The intensity of violence, which at times reached genocidal proportions (as in the case of Guatemala in the early 1980s), displaced many Central Americans. Like other Salvadorans and Guatemalans in Portland, Hernán and Marta fled their country to escape war. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) U.S. complicity in these civil wars, less than 3 percent of the Guatemalans and Salvadorans who have applied for asylum in the United States have received it. These examples reflect a broader pattern of developed

nations' imperialist economic, political, and/or military interventions spurring emigration from the nations upon which they prey.<sup>39</sup>

Finally in 1990, Congress acknowledged the crisis and granted Salvadorans "Temporary Protected Status," which provided an eighteen-month stay from deportation for refugees who registered with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Though Guatemalans never received deportation protection, an American Baptist Church class-action suit filed on their (and Salvadorans') behalf in 1985 gained them work authorization while their political-asylum cases were being reexamined. Remarkably, the cases of thousands who applied for asylum in 1991 have yet to be decided. Hernán and Marta are among the Salvadorans and Guatemalans in Portland whose asylum cases are still pending.<sup>40</sup>

Considering the historical forces behind their emigration, it is surprising that the Latin American immigrants in this book are not more critical of U.S. policy. Of course, for those seeking to earn residency or citizenship, criticizing their host country could be risky. But perhaps the very nature of living in the empire dampens criticism by making residents feel complicit.

In contrast to the hard-fought battles on behalf of Central Americans to gain asylum in the United States, after 1959 Cubans generally were welcomed with open arms. Ever since the United States rejected Fidel Castro's overtures of rapprochement, Washington has considered Cuba a communist threat to stability in the region. At one point, this dramatic shift in U.S.-Cuban relations renewed Portland's connections with Cubans. When President Jimmy Carter criticized Fidel Castro for refusing to allow asylum seekers to leave Cuba, Castro authorized the Mariel Boatlift in September 1980, which initiated a mass exodus of more than 125,000 Cubans to the United States; about one hundred of them arrived in Maine. Since some of the refugees were allegedly prison and mental hospital inmates, widespread panic and violence broke out where they landed. Cubans arrived in Maine amidst newspaper and television reports describing knife fights and riots in Florida. Consequently, in stark contrast to the welcome mat extended to their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century counterparts, these émigrés were so vilified that the Portland Refugee Resettlement Program had trouble finding sponsors for them. In response, the program opened a house on Danforth Street to provide temporary shelter and social services to refugees. More than half of Portland's Cuban refugees quickly emigrated south in search of warmer climates and Spanish-speaking populations. Those who stayed found work and in some cases married women from Portland, but racism continued to plague them.<sup>41</sup>

### Portland as a Latino Place

While Latin American emigration to the United States increased after World War II, during the 1990s the national Latino population grew by nearly 60 percent. At first glance the meager 0.2 percent growth in Maine's Latino population during the 1990s appears to belie this trend. But according to the U.S. census, the Hispanic population in Portland nearly tripled between 1980 and 2000 from 355 to 974. And according to local leaders, these numbers were low.<sup>42</sup> Anecdotal evidence affirms this trend: Latino/as in this volume remark that the Hispanic population has increased significantly in the last ten to fifteen years. By meeting the demand for Latin American goods and services, Latino businesses have created the infrastructure of a Latin American community in Portland. Latino entrepreneurs of restaurants, grocery shops, and gas stations, civic leaders working for state agencies, notary publics, native Spanish speakers teaching in public schools, spiritual leaders, and musicians comprise an economic and social network that creates a welcoming environment not only for Latino/as but for other ethnic groups as well.

In turn, a nascent interest in Latin America continues to grow among non-Latino Portlanders. They enjoy Latin American music at local venues, pursue trade opportunities in Mexico, sell Latin American textiles in their stores, and study in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Guatemala, Argentina, Chile. Maine's financial relationship with Latin America has grown considerably in the last decade. From 1996 to 2002, Maine exports to Latin America and the Caribbean increased 51 percent from \$62 million to \$93 million.<sup>43</sup> Frequent trade delegations such as the one Governor John Baldacci led to Cuba in December 2005 bespeak a growing interest among Maine entrepreneurs in Latin American markets. Some Portland businesses rely on Latin America products for their success. Expanding economic, political, and personal relations are strengthening Portland's ties to the rest of the hemisphere.

Originally the home of Wabanaki peoples, Portland has a rich history of immigration. Throughout the colonial period, European residents were mainly English with a few Scots and Scots-Irish. By the nineteenth century, Irish, Italians, Scandinavians, Armenians, Canadians (including Blacks), Greeks, Poles, Eastern European Jews, Afro-Caribbeans, Cape Verdeans, and Latin Americans had settled in the city. More recently, as a federal refugee center, this city of about 60,000 people is also home to immigrants from countries as diverse as Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Bosnia.<sup>44</sup> The oral histories of Latin Americans in Portland shed light on the plight and contributions of a small yet influential group of immigrants. Despite the



The Center for Cultural Exchange. Before it closed its doors in 2007, the center offered Spanish language programming such as dances and music.

presence of a handful of professionals, most Latino/as and Latin American immigrants in Portland contribute long, arduous hours of manual labor for low wages. Depending on the job, much of Maine's Hispanic population earns an average of \$8.00–\$12.00 an hour. For those from the Caribbean and coastal areas of Latin America, Portland's relationship to the sea and pen-



**Adrian Bravo Chavez in front of the Hacienda Pancho Villa Mexican Restaurant and Cantina (South Portland).**

chant for seafood have eased their transitions; for some, it is their source of livelihood. Many work in local seafood processing plants cracking sea urchins and peeling shrimp as Ana Manza once did. Others like Eliseo Brea, Hernán, and Marta work in factories, restaurants, and cleaning companies; some are domestic servants.<sup>45</sup>

Upon arriving in the United States, immigrants begin the difficult process of remaking themselves. Lourdes Carpenter's story of going from being a professional in the Dominican Republic to cleaning Macy's department store in South Portland and then through an arduous process of becoming certified as a beautician (while outperforming "almost all the Americans") and opening her own business is emblematic of this struggle. Yet many others who share her diligence and even fortuitous connections have been less fortunate. Iván Cantor, for example, went from a comfortable lifestyle in Venezuela and Colombia to living at the YMCA and becoming a client at a Portland area social services center. Like Adrian Bravo and Laura Ochoa, many Latin American immigrants seek to improve their lives through education.<sup>46</sup> Because of language and other barriers, many immigrants, such as Eliseo Brea, are underemployed and face perceptions that they are ignorant, even though they are highly educated. Coming from a world of "journalists,

intellectuals, professors, teachers, cultural circles, museums” in Peru, Victoria Chicón admits, “The biggest challenge I’ve had [living in Portland] is achieving my own status.” Adapting to their new home and nation requires altering expectations and self-perceptions. Through volunteering in various organizations, pursuing her film career, teaching Spanish, and learning English, Victoria proudly exclaims, “I made myself.” Despite their absence in the historiography of Maine and their obscurity in Portland, Latin Americans have been and continue to be an important part of the city’s economic, political, social, and cultural fabric.

### **Transforming Perceptions of Community**

By highlighting the flow of people, the perspectives of Latino/as and Latin American immigrants help us to reconceptualize who and what is American. One of the common threads woven through the testimonies in this volume is a complex understanding of community that both incorporates and defies geographic, cultural, linguistic, national, and ethnic boundaries. Portland Latino/as and Latin American immigrants are building a pan-Latino community that is neither exclusive nor limited to Southern Maine. Nor is it united or universal. Some choose not to engage in the Latino community (a few feel marginalized by it); others are unaware of its existence. In their interpenetrating lives, most Latino/as and Latin American immigrants return to their native countries to visit family and friends; some like Ana Manza and Eliseo Brea, and Hernán and Marta plan to retire there. As one journalist noted of returning Salvadorans: “So frequent are their trips that many are as involved in the life of their native towns as they are in their adopted communities.”<sup>47</sup> The fluidity of Latin American immigrants’ lives points to the multidirectional character of migration. Even those who do not return to Latin America frequently or at all “live their lives in a transnational cognitive space” wherein they imagine, plan, and strategize based on transnational possibilities.<sup>48</sup> For instance, whether or not Ana and Eliseo, and Hernán and Marta retire in their natal countries, envisioning themselves doing so influences their decisions and actions.

Perceptions of community among Latino/as and Latin American immigrants extend beyond their national and ethnic identities to other areas of the world. In Portland, Latino/as have established relations and alliances with their non-Latino neighbors. As such, their imagined communities—national, Latino, immigrant, Portland, United States—are overlapping and