

Images of Latino Philadelphia: An Essay in Photographs

THE RECENT 2000 CENSUS confirmed that Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in Philadelphia, as they are in the nation at large. These numbers, however, tell only one part of the story. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, the diversity of the Latino population in Philadelphia increased dramatically. Now, the predominance of the some ninety-five thousand Puerto Ricans in the Philadelphia area is giving way rapidly to the growing presence of Mexicans, Dominicans, Colombians, Hondurans, Peruvians, and others. The reasons Latin Americans come to the United States are as varied as their countries of origin: some come for education, better economic opportunities, or improved health care; others wish to join family members or escape oppressive political regimes. All bring aspirations for a better life, mixed with a profound sense of connection to their original home.

These communities are formed in the context of an existing Puerto Rican community, which has worked over five decades to build the community institutions and culturally specific urban landscape of *el barrio*. As “displaced labor migrants,” in the words of historian Carmen Whalen, Puerto Ricans have addressed issues of poverty, discrimination, and education in their community, forming organizations and businesses that provide social services, promote community revitalization, fight discrimination, and engage in cultural preservation and bilingual advocacy.¹ Fighting poverty and blight in the barrio, they have transformed vacant lots and abandoned factories into community gardens, murals, marketplaces, schools, and affordable housing, changing the landscape of the city and inflecting neighborhoods with a Spanish accent.

Many of these community organizations and businesses serve a pan-Latino constituency, and new immigrants benefit from their existing services. Yet new immigrants also face challenges unique to their recent

¹ Carmen Teresa Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* (Philadelphia, 2001), 218–27.

arrival, immigration status, or national origin. Creative strategies of survival, success, and social connection help immigrants build and sustain lives and communities here. Informal networks support newcomers, and community gatherings are opportunities to reconstruct a feeling of “home.”

Although Latinos share a common language, their cultural practices and national identities vary widely. Many of the smaller or more recently formed Latino communities, such as the Peruvian community, have developed through networks of chain migration but are less rooted in the historically typical setting of an urban immigrant enclave. Dispersed geographically across the Greater Philadelphia area, they may feel a degree of cultural invisibility. While they socially and politically interact in a pan-Latino sphere, they also celebrate specific national holidays and maintain unique food, music, dance, and other expressive traditions. In this way “Latino Philadelphia” is experienced as deeply diverse and highly strategic.

These photographs, taken during 2003–2004 as part of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania’s Latino Philadelphia project, document the ways in which Latinos make their mark on the local cultural landscape and build communities here.

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

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The Puerto Rican Landscape

Over the past decades, the Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia has transformed the landscape of North Philadelphia, creating a physical and emotional imprint.



Photograph by Joseph Gonzales

Murals in North Philadelphia proclaim presence, pride, and politics. A grassroots mural in the art museum area, a historically Puerto Rican neighborhood that has now been gentrified, proclaims "*Aqui Me Quedo*" or "Here to Stay."



Photograph by Joseph Gonzales

More formal murals also address controversial subjects, such as *Paz Para Vieques*, which portrays Puerto Rican independence leader Pedro Albizu Campos.

Creating an image that is both of Philadelphia and of "the island," local Puerto Rican artist Michelle Ortiz painted a self-portrait entitled *Puerto Rican Woman* at Fifth and Dauphin.



Photograph by Joseph Gonzales

The *Bloque de Oro* or "Golden Block" at Fifth and Lehigh is the heart of the Puerto Rican community and home to many Puerto Rican-owned businesses, and cultural, economic, and social service organizations serving Latinos from all parts of Philadelphia.



Photograph by Tony Rocco



In the area surrounding the Golden Block, more informal businesses dot the landscape. Fruit and vegetable vendors are important in a neighborhood with few supermarkets, while a taste of home is provided by a vendor selling *pinchos*, or Puerto Rican-style kebabs.



Photographs by Tony Rocco

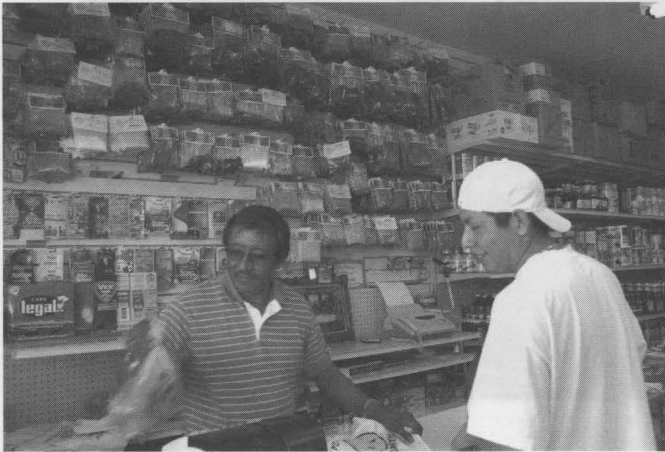


Photograph by Tony Rocco

A few blocks away from the North Fifth Street neighborhood, El Mercado is now a destination for Philadelphians of all backgrounds and from all parts of town. Begun as a farmers' market by the Norris Square Civic Association, a Puerto Rican community group, the market now features three restaurants, a bakery, a juice stand, and live music on Friday nights during the summer.

Fostering Community

The increasingly diverse Latino population in Philadelphia finds a variety of ways to maintain contact and foster community. Though social service organizations, churches, and clubs often provide organized outlets, businesses and parks can also become "community centers."



Photograph by Tony Rocco

shops and restaurants, *tiendas* like Variedades Veracruzana have become gathering places for members of the community.

The Mexican population in Philadelphia is growing rapidly and has gravitated towards South Philadelphia. With an ever increasing number of

Juntos, a grassroots social service group, has opened a Mexican community center, La Casa de los Soles, in South Philadelphia and organizes activities such as this trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Photograph by Joseph Gonzales

Community centers can endure through the years and through changes in the community. The Cuban Community Center in Olney was founded in the 1960s by refugees fleeing Fidel Castro's regime and is still active today.

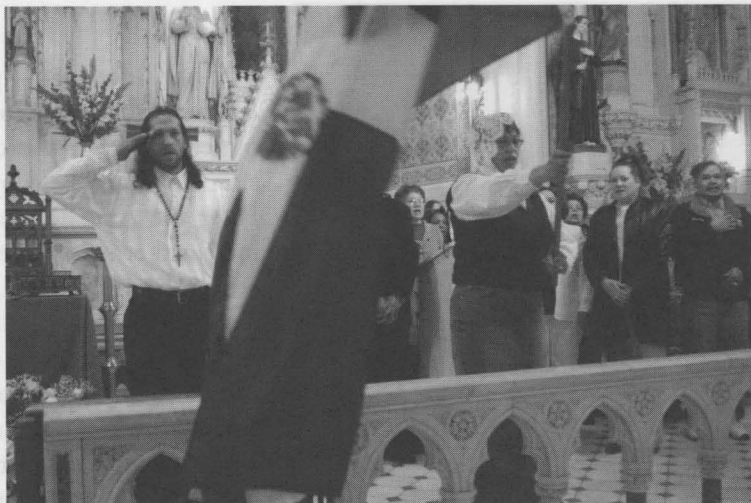


Photograph by Tony Rocco

For members of smaller communities, such as these Honduran and Salvadoran men, informal activities like soccer games provide an important community building outlet.



Photograph by Tony Rocco



Photograph by Tony Rocco

Religion, national pride, and community intertwine as Dominicans observe their country's independence day with a special Mass at St. Boniface's Church in Norris Square.



The tradition of the *alfombra*, brought to Incarnation Church by Guatemalan parishioners, has been embraced by this pan-Latino in Olney. An intricate, multicolored sawdust carpet created by hand, the *alfombra* adorns the aisle of the church during Christmas and Easter.

Photograph by Jeremy Sparig



The idea of “pan-Latino” had a more formal outlet at a special procession and Mass held by St. Peter the Apostle Church in Northern Liberties in celebration of Latin America. Latinos carried banners representing their countries and wore traditional dress, creating a community event that was both diverse and united.



Photographs by Tony Rocco

A Growing Community: Peruvians

Though the Peruvian population in Philadelphia numbers only about five hundred, the community is carving out a distinct and organized niche in Philadelphia—in both the Latino and non-Latino worlds.



Photograph by Tony Rocco

"Chain migration" has been instrumental in the growth of the Peruvian community. The first members of this local family, seen here celebrating a baptism at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Point Breeze, arrived in the 1960s. Over the years, more and more members of the family emigrated, forming a cornerstone in the growing Peruvian community.

Though members of the family retain close ties to Peru, they have also embraced traditional American holidays like Thanksgiving.



Photograph by Tony Rocco



Photograph by Tony Rocco

Asociación Nacional Peruanoamericana (ANPA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering cultural awareness both within and about the Peruvian community. This ANPA meeting was held in the home of Dora Viacava, the president of the group.



Photograph by Joseph Gonzales

Events like ANPA's annual banquet provide both an occasion for socializing and celebration and an opportunity to instill cultural traditions and values in young Peruvian Americans, such as this folk dancer.

Peruvian businesses, such as Sol Del Peru Restaurant, have found homes in multiethnic neighborhoods like Upper Darby, and are a destination for Peruvians from all over the city.



Photograph by Joseph Gonzales

For events such as this Peruvian national team soccer game at the Meadowlands, Peruvians in Philadelphia often travel to New Jersey, where one of the largest Peruvian communities in the United States is centered around Paterson.



*Photograph
by Joseph
Gonzales*

The presence of Peruvian artists in Philadelphia has impacted the larger Latino community and increased Peruvian visibility. Taller Puertorriqueño, a Latino cultural and educational center, holds an annual Feria del Barrio, at which stilt dancers from a local Peruvian-led company, Naylamp Street and Puppet Theatre, are now an annual fixture.

Grupo Yuyachkani, a theatre troupe from Lima, performed at Julia de Burgos Bilingual Elementary School in Kensington while on a U.S. tour.



Photograph by Tony Rocco



Photograph by Tony Rocco