CHAPTER 8

British *Latinidad* as Social and Spatial Justice

On 1st April 2020, a livestream Facebook video playing London Latin music artists and promoting community conversation, with the hashtags #VivaLatinoUK #Stayhomeifyoucan, caught the attention of 1.9 thousand viewers. Special guests on the phone included Latinx community leaders, organisers and artists. Right from his living room, Carlos, a Colombian anchor, plays music, interacts with Facebook messages and interviews his guests for almost two hours. In this video, we learned how many Latin Americans in London have been diagnosed with Coronavirus—particularly those from the areas of Haringey (the Latin Village), Lambeth (Little Portugal) and Brent (Little Brazil). A trustee from *Su Mano Amiga* organisation and the owner of *El Botellón Latino* restaurant were amongst those on the list. Messages from several of London’s neighbourhoods add to the discussion about how challenging this unprecedented situation is for Latin Americans in the city, particularly for undocumented workers. These types of British Latinx digital diasporic spaces can bring together communities and inform them about where to look for crucial information and support in times of pandemic. Between salsa or vallenatos and Andean inspiring songs such as the song produced by *Lokandes*, Carlos interviews members of the Latinx community in the British capital. Within their diasporic transnationalism, Latin Americans in London embrace digital mediation as part of the recreation and promotion of hybrid practices of belongingness to both homeland

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and host society. These synergies become more evident in crucial circumstances such as natural disasters, emergencies or, as in this case, a health crisis.

*Narratives of Migration, Relocation and Belonging—Latin Americans in London* has provided a comprehensive perspective on the increasing Latinx presence in the British capital. By focusing on the development of distinctive Latin neighbourhoods, cultural activities and media presence in London, we traced Latin American diasporic identities and community construction. By highlighting these voices, we sought to examine and understand how Latin Americans merge hyperlocal spaces in translocal settings.

The book is about social and spatial inequalities around migratory experiences, workplace relationships, ethnic local media and urban spaces. In doing this, we hoped to challenge the geographical and media-centric focus currently dominating most urban communication research, whereby the relationship between places, identities and the media is mostly approached in terms of representation rather than politically charged lived experiences. We acknowledge the complex ways in which intersectionality is played out in people’s narratives of migration, everyday working practices, the media and urban environments, particularly so in response to asserting rights to the city in search of social and spatial justice.

The narratives we included in this book captured the trajectories, movement and resettlement of Latin Americans in the UK, and London in particular. We used the idea of routes, routines and roots to capture the sense of belongingness, or not, to a place. Within these narratives, we found expressions of solidarity, ambiguity and of tensions emerging in assertions about the right to belong, or not, to a place. These narratives included journeys of migration, social networks developed around work practices, the emergence of digital diasporic spaces and, finally, claims and rights to the city. The chapters mirror our geographical settings, academic perspectives and migratory experiences, to engage in a dialogue with scholars across different regions and disciplines. As such, this book is interdisciplinary in nature. Where relevant, we engaged in a dialogue with authors and debates emerging from long-standing research experiences in the United States. The multi-sited perspectives from which we draw upon were embedded with research material to develop a narrative that could be of use to others exploring similar experiences and themes elsewhere.
We provided an overview, though inconclusive, of the different voices and experiences emerging from London’s Latin American population. In this quest we drew from the extensive literature around transnationalism, super-diversity, identities, places and digital diasporas, to inform our discussion and analysis. We argued that globalisation processes and transnationalism are better understood from below, that is, the practices, transactions and social relations that make possible transnational movements and networks. The concept of ‘super-diversity’ was used to describe the ways in which transnational practices materialised and intensified in global cities such as London, leading to new forms of ‘super-austerity’ for low-paid migrant workers. We argued that this approach led to a renewed interest in localities, places and identities.

Identity is not just about representation, but about understanding the historical processes and material practices which ultimately contribute to the changing character of places. We urge a reconsideration of identity in terms of feelings of ambiguity and detachment, as invaluable for understanding the often unstable, uncertain and malleable sense of belongingness, or not, to places. As such, we argue that feelings of detachment, ambiguity and of not belonging are equally important for how we are to understand identity formation or the experience of identity.

The invisibility of migrants can affect their rights, protection, treatment, entitlement and recognition. Thus, in Chapter 3 we offer the closest overview of existing data to set the scene and provide an overall profile of the Latin American population in the UK. We found out that according to official data sets, the UK is the European country with the third largest Latin American population. The latest and most accurate data registers approximately 250,000 Latin Americans residing in the UK in 2013, of which 145,000 were in London (around 58% of the total). Brazilians and Colombians make up the largest group of Latin Americans in London, with a population of over 30,000 and 20,000, respectively. Colombians are the first Spanish-language speaking Latinx community in the British capital. This is followed by a significantly lower number of Ecuadoreans, Argentinians, Venezuelans, Mexicans, Peruvians, Chileans, Cubans and Bolivians, with little over or under two thousand each. An even smaller number is registered for those migrating from Uruguay, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Panamá, Honduras, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico. To these numbers, we must add those Latin Americans arriving from Europe, mainly Spain, Italy and Portugal, and with European citizenship. Despite their citizenship
status many Latin Americans in London have limited access to basic services due to language barriers, and many join low-paid and low-status sectors of the labour market (McIlwaine 2019). It became evident to us that this context of second and third migration processes from Southern European cities to Northern European cities was embedded in the narratives of those we interviewed during our long-term, multi-situated fieldwork in London.

Despite the relative visibility gained over the last 30 years, Latin Americans remain largely invisible in census data, thus remaining one of London’s ‘hidden communities’. We argued that the lack of data around these growing communities in the European scenario demonstrated political disinterest in considering these minorities within the European region. Community groups and campaigns such as the Latin American Recognition Campaign (LARC) and the Coalition of Latin Americans in the UK (CLAUUK) have placed great efforts in gaining recognition of Latin Americans as an ethnic group in local monitoring forms. To date, the London boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth, Islington and Hackney have officially recognised Latin Americans as an ethnic group. In our attempt to examine the origins, evolution and future of contemporary Latin American diasporas in London, we argue that the transnational context of social networks is important for understanding the practices upon which struggles for greater recognition, representation and claims to the city, are experienced.

In this context, we asked: What does it mean to belong to a place, to assert one’s right and claim to a place—particularly so in instances of multiple displacements embraced in first, secondary and tertiary migratory flows? Within this context of hyper-mobility, what are one’s cultural and citizenship rights? In trying to address these questions, and drawing on the research material we present in subsequent chapters, we argued that social and spatial inequalities embedded in structural systems, such as immigration legislation, work-related practices, media frameworks and planning policies, impact everyday experiences of migration.

Experience of migration intersects with everyday bordering practices, an increasingly hostile environment around migration discourses and policies, and an increasingly deregulated labour market. As we discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, feelings of belongingness, everyday routines and the idea of return, are very much embedded in structural and social inequalities. The extended interviews introduced in Chapter 4 present a contradictory, and at times, ambiguous, sense of belongingness, where
the idea of return, despite not being idealised, was longed for and was somehow a distant dream. We argued that feelings of belonging were at times contradictory and expressed in terms of solidarity, displacement, difference and detachment.

We also discovered that getting work and getting to work dominated the everyday routines of most of those we interviewed, and thus we dedicated Chapter 5 to capturing the narratives of migration around work. We discussed that social networks developed through the process of finding a job and in workplace relationships are mediated by solidarity and conflict. We argued that feelings of detachment and belongingness, or not, to London are mediated by low-paid and insecure employment and precarious living conditions, and to limited, or no, English language skills. This picture is compounded by the current political climate around the UK’s relationship with Europe (Brexit). Brexit increases anxieties around working and housing conditions, and challenges their relationship and sense of belongingness to the UK and in particular, London.

Just as Latin American immigrant groups have remained almost invisible in the context of non-European immigration in the UK, Latinx media have gone unnoticed in most ethnic media mappings. In trying to understand the role of Latinx ethnic media in diasporic transnational contexts, we embarked on a project of mapping Latinx media circuits and their contribution to the debates of what it means to belong. We posed some questions to further incite the conversation on the possibilities and challenges of British Latinx Media in London: Why are Latino media established in the British Capital? Why have some projects been able to remain active whilst others had a short life? Why are these communication spaces important for the Latino communities in London? Why have these media remained largely invisible to mainstream media producers, policymakers and even academic researchers? How can we better understand their recent history, current struggles and future challenges? This first mapping demonstrated that comparative analysis can help clarify the sometimes-conflicting strategies being established by diasporic communities in host countries, where interactions aimed at preserving heritage and traditions coexist with those that generate negotiated space, and others that strengthen resistance. Whilst we have not fully captured, in this book, an in-depth analysis of ethnic media practices in Spanish, Portuguese or Spanglish, we provided the closest attempt to mapping their history and current trends. We seek to advance our understanding of these dynamics in further investigations.
The formation of Latin American transnational audiences has been recognised by cultural industries rather than by local, regional and international governments. Ethnocentric approaches tend to analyse media and cultural consumption exclusively as they relate to the migrant condition. We argued that it becomes indispensable to incorporate positions of class and structural stratification when examining these sociocultural dynamics. Latin American groups are heterogeneous, and they settle in host societies that draw from a rich hybrid cultural baggage (Retis 2019). It is the dialogue with the host society that promotes understanding between cultures, not the creation of social hierarchies of interaction. Little can be done to make progress in this area if paternalistic or frightened perspectives remain unchanged in immigration studies (Retis 2011). For British Latinx communities, complex and hybrid subjectivities and identities encompass multiple and multilevel positions of Latinidad. Racial and ethnic categories form a continuum where geographical origins intersect with migratory processes in dialogue with dominant understandings of ethnicity in Europe, and in the UK. As we have seen in multiple observations and interviews, these pan-ethnic labels, as it occurs in the United States, are both contested and embraced in the diasporic media landscape.

Social and spatial inequalities embedded in the planning system are also experienced in tangible ways in London’s urban spaces, and this is discussed at length in Chapter 7. Latin American business clusters mirror those locations where the largest concentration of Latin American groups exist in London: Lambeth, Southwark, Haringey and Brent. Business clusters and an enterprising culture emerged in these areas and this trend continues to this day. Though, as we discussed in Chapter 7, these business clusters are at risk of disappearing due to intense regeneration projects that lead to processes of gentrification which threatens, not just the sustainability and future of existing communities, but all traces of place-identity and spaces of reunion, congregation and conviviality for those Latinx and other migrant and ethnic groups who feel at home. Increased visibility in urban spaces and the struggle to remain in place have also increased their capacity to negotiate and gain recognition of their plight and contribution to London’s urban spaces, economies and culture.

The material used in this book can be a source for comparative work, but we are also mindful that it will become archival material and a historical source. For this reason, and aware of the transient and ephemerality
of digital diasporic media practices, we included a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, survey of different Latinx media practices and events in London, and various maps of London’s Latin neighbourhoods.

8.1 **On British Latinidad**

As we explore connections between Latinx groups in London and back to the Latin American region, we try to contribute to the idea that many peoples’ transnational networks of exchange and participation are grounded upon some perception of common identity. Our research demonstrates how identities of numerous individuals and groups of people are negotiated within social worlds that span more than one place across the Atlantic.

In our attempt to work in tandem, though considering the specificities of the London context, we drew on the concept of *Latinidad* which captures the experiences of Latinx migration in the United States, and we used this material to map out what we call *British Latinidad*. We also relied on the concept of Latin urbanisms to inform our reflections about urban form and practices in London’s Latin *barrios* to resist gentrification.

In the United States, *Latinidad* invokes renewed forms of self-identification and self-definition through migratory flows that are not dependent on a colonial past, but on unequal relations of power and, at times, highly controversial external policies that shape the relationship between the United States and Latin Americans states. The Latina/o Critical Communication Theory framework proposes an effort to move away from the fragmented examinations of Latinas/os as racialised subjects centring the analysis in: (1) centralising the Latino experience, (2) deploying decolonising methodological approaches, (3) acknowledging and addressing the racism faced by the Latina/o community, (4) resisting literacy-colour-blind language/rhetoric towards Latinas/os and (5) promoting a social justice dimension (Anguiano and Castañeda 2014).

Whilst the progression of LatCrit communication studies seeks to speak to the material, verbal, visual and discursive experiences of Latinx in a globalised world, *Latinidad* is positioned as a key analytical category that can help us examine the Latinisation of cityscapes, as well as the political meanings of the global phenomena of Latinisation (Lao-Montés 2001). In the United States, it has been implemented to analyse how notions of citizenship, belonging and entitlement are directly intertwined and predicated on dominant nationalist categories. And those categories conflate
race, culture and language with nationality, establishing the hierarchies against which cultural and linguistic differences are evaluated (Dávila 2000). In her analysis of US Latino media, Dávila (2000) identifies them as the primary promoter of *Latinidad* as an ‘ethnoscape’, a diasporic community transcending the United States and Latin American nation states.

In the British context, we propose that *Latinidad* invokes new forms of belongingness beyond and against old colonial powers. *Latinidad* captures what Román-Velázquez (1996, 1999) referred to as Latinness, however the contemporary context is heightened with additional layers. We are witnessing a tension between a sense of *British Latinidad* that self-defines against European heritage, and that which invokes its European heritage via the concept or auto-proclamation of an Ibero-American identity. The tension here is political and strategic. Asserting a Latin American identity appeals to a post-colonial sense of self-definition against the backdrop and legacies of a colonial past that defined, yet oppressed, the region. *Latinidad* in this context becomes a political statement of a post-colonial sense of belongingness and of self-definition, and as such it invokes the diversity of Latin America as an ideological and political project. So, the campaign for a Latin American category in the national census and local monitoring forms is a political project of recognition, whilst the Ibero-American definition and campaign for recognition is a strategic positioning that invokes a colonial past and heritage to gain recognition in numbers rather than as a specific group with particular needs, circumstances and histories in a migratory context.

Thus, we argue that *British Latinidad* includes in a rather fraught way, this tension between the Latin American and Ibero-American assertions for self-definition and forms of identification. *British Latinidad* is heterogeneous, invokes a complex and contested sense of shared histories and is fraught with political and strategic tensions. Britain’s current political-economical context under Brexit and its changing relationship with Europe might strengthen such political attempts at self-definition. Just as Latin Americans embarked on re-routing meeting zones through migration and mobility—*British Latinidad* is about amalgamating histories, memories, experiences and new forms of belonging. As we have examined throughout this book, this first attempt to map the origins and development of *British Latinidad* seeks to bring to light, not only to the meta-research of studies about Latin American immigrants in London,
but to contribute to future analysis on the evolving nature of these heterogeneous communities in the super-diverse city of London.

As we finish writing this manuscript, we are facing two relevant conjunctures which will have an impact on London and more so on its migrant and ethnic population. In January 2020, the UK began the process of withdrawal from the European Union. This brings uncertainty into what Britain’s new immigration system will look like as tightened restrictions on migrant workers could hurt key industries such as construction, hospitality and service sectors. Almost immediately, the global pandemic of Coronavirus spread to the UK, with London reporting the highest number of confirmed cases in England. Consequences of this unprecedented situation will affect not only Latinx communities’ health, but also family budgets as the UK is listed amongst the economies risking a record slump. But as we embrace these challenges, we are also certain that Latin Americans in London are resilient and ‘here to stay’.

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