

The Process of Latinization on Tulsa, Oklahoma's Cultural Landscape

Jeffrey M. Widener

University of Oklahoma

Abstract

With the explosion in the Latino population across the U.S., particularly in the Southwest, over the past few decades, many cities have witnessed the process of Latinization—the impress of Latino attributes on the cultural landscape. Tulsa, Oklahoma is one of the “new” communities that has seen a significant increase in this populace and has seen a transformation on its cultural landscape as a result. In this article, I seek to answer the question of what factors, over the past few decades, have facilitated the process of Latinization on two specific areas of the city and on another area of the city that is obviously in transition. My research suggests that, although population numbers in a specific geographic area create a Latino comfort zone and impel this process, community and business leaders and supportive organizations strengthen and sustain the zone of comfort in Tulsa by giving Latinos additional important tools to survive in, prosper in, and Latinize this new place.

Keywords: *cultural landscape, Latinization, Oklahoma, Tulsa, urban.*

Introduction

In his 1998 article, “Hispanic Community Types and Assimilation in Mexico-America,” geographer Terrence Haverluk argued that there are three types of Hispanic communities—continuous, discontinuous, and new. A continuous Hispanic community is one that Hispanics first settled and continue to inhabit, such as El Paso, Texas. A discontinuous Hispanic community is one that Hispanics first settled but where another population later moved in and dominated the community, as whites did in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Haverluk defined a new Hispanic community as a place originally established by a non-Hispanic ethnic group that “only recently experienced Hispanic immigration”—like Tulsa, Oklahoma (Haverluk 1998, 467).

As geographer Karl Raitz suggested over a generation ago, “If geographers are to bring fresh answers to the questions of ethnic economic success, acculturation and assimilation, settlement location and stability, and cultural transfer, there must be more studies at the local or microscale” level (Raitz 1979, 94). This article is a microscale study on Tulsa, Oklahoma that describes what led to Tulsa's becoming a new Latino community. It explains that, as a

result of the recent growth of the Hispanic population in Tulsa, specific areas of the city are undergoing the process of Latinization—the impress of Latino attributes on the cultural landscape. The research presented here suggests that population increase is not the sole catalyst for this process. In particular, this study argues that influential leaders, social service organizations, and the resource center in the Martin East Regional Library have been instrumental in assuring Latinos have the tools they need to successfully establish themselves in the area. In turn, Latinos leave their impress on Tulsa’s cultural landscape. Archival data, including newspapers and oral histories, and interviews with Latino leaders and other citizens provided essential background information for understanding and expressing in this article the changes that Latinization has shaped on the Tulsa landscape. After interviewing these individuals and reviewing a variety of literature, I have decided to use Hispanic and Latino interchangeably throughout this paper.

This paper begins with an overview of the literature on cultural landscape elements of Latinization followed by a description of the Hispanic population in Tulsa. The next section describes the churches that have been not only physical landmarks of Latino settlements but also often the social and cultural cornerstones of their lives. This leads to a discussion of the ways certain groups and individuals in Tulsa began helping their fellow Latinos get jobs, buy homes, and operate businesses after their numbers increased so dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. The next two sections detail the process of Latinization on Tulsa’s cultural landscape. Finally, the conclusion suggests that, concomitant with increased population numbers, community and business leaders and supportive organizations are, indeed, another catalyst for the process of Latinization in Tulsa. They help Latinos in this new community develop and sustain the zone of comfort that is reflected in the landscape there.

The cultural landscape of Latinization

Since the 1920s, geographers have defined and redefined cultural landscape. For this essay, I am following Peirce F. Lewis’ argument that “all human landscape has cultural meaning” and Wilbur Zelinsky’s lead that America’s cultural landscapes are not dull or homogeneous features, that they are unique creations fused from diverse cultural traditions (Lewis 1979, 12; Zelinsky 1992). Commonly, according to Lewis (1979), changes in the cultural landscape divulge broader historic trends. For instance, Latinization in Tulsa mirrors the past few decades of major Hispanic population growth that has occurred there.

As a resource for beginning to understand and thus define Latinization, Amos Rapoport’s *The Meaning of the Built Environment* provided fruitful information. He argued that cultural landscapes consist of fixed feature elements, elements that are expensive or difficult to readily alter, and semi-fixed feature elements, elements that may be changed relatively easily and/or inexpensively (Rapoport 1982). Albert Benedict and Robert B. Kent investigated those con-

cepts further and found that, when a particular ethnic populace becomes the dominant population in a specific geographical area and utilizes a “set of shared semi-fixed feature elements, these combine to create a distinctive cultural landscape” (Benedict and Kent 2004, 187-88). Thus, it follows that, when Latinos become the main population group in a certain area, they establish a comfort zone where they make use of semi-fixed elements. And, when they use these features, changes take place and the Latinization of the landscape begins.

Cultural geographer Daniel D. Arreola has written about many specific aspects of Hispanic landscape dynamics, greatly adding to the literature about particular cultural landscape features of Latinization. In his 1984 publication, “Mexican-American Exterior Murals,” he argued that murals are social symbols that more often than not identify the history of a particular culture group. Similarly, in “Mexican-American Housescapes,” Arreola (1988) stated that exterior house paint colors in many U.S. *barrios* (neighborhoods) reflect Latin America’s Spanish colonial era. In 2004, Arreola edited *Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places*. The contributing authors of this text described various facets of Latinization in several places in the U.S.; the places were organized by Haverluk’s community types—continuous, discontinuous, and new. The new places are those not generally recognized as having Hispanic spaces.

Based on these definitive ideas about Latinization, Tulsa is clearly an example of a new and newly-Latinized community. The majority of Latinized features in Tulsa are semi-fixed feature elements—aspects that can be changed facily, such as facade colors, yard décor, and signage. *Carnicerías*, Latino retail stores vending groceries, meat, and other popular and often-purchased items, are excellent examples of Hispanic businesses operating in buildings with non-Hispanic architecture (Oberle 2004, 2005, and 2006). *Carnicería* owners use “names, symbols, décor, and store layouts” to “invoke nostalgic images of Mexico,” proclaiming their Latinicity as they seek to attract customers (Oberle 2005, 4; Oberle 2006). *Carnicerías* are often anchors for other businesses because of their character as meeting places and, as geographer Alex Oberle found, “transnational conduits” where Hispanics can send remittances, purchase bus tickets to Mexico or other nations, and buy international calling cards specifically for their countries of origin (Oberle 2005, 3). Many *carnicería* owners allow patrons to post advertisements and other information pertinent to their fellow Latinos and their families (Oberle 2004, 2005, and 2006). Other visible features commonly perceived to denote Latino heritage are authentic restaurants, religious iconography, saguaro cacti, flags and the use of colors from flags, and Spanish language signs, menus and newspapers (Curtis 1980; Ferrero 2002; Benedict and Kent 2004; Miyares 2004; Montalvo and Estaville 2007).

Clearly, Latinization is a cultural process purposefully expressed on the landscape in various and colorful ways by Hispanics making a place for themselves. As Joel Kotkin wrote in the *Tulsa World*, “People still seek a sense of uniqueness, of home and history wherever they live. The new patterns of settle-

ment and technology may have changed the nature of place, but they have not eliminated our need for it” (Kotkin 1997). Benedict and Kent did note that other reasons, such as making political statements, may be the motivation for some semi-fixed cultural landscape feature changes; but they argued a Latinized landscape supports Latino identity and thus reinforces and enhances the comfort zone “regardless of its exact intent” (Benedict and Kent 2004, 205). The process of getting to that comfort zone in Tulsa began in the early 1900s.

Historical context for the new Latino landscape in Tulsa

Hispanics have established conspicuous *barrios* in Tulsa, first in the Kendall-Whittier District, better known to locals as midtown, and later in east Tulsa. An area in southwest Tulsa currently appears to be in a transition phase as well (Figure 1). Before 1900, very few Latinos resided in the state. As Tulsa developed and the mining and oil industries surged in nearby areas during the 1910s and 1920s, jobs attracted some Latino workers, particularly from Mexico (Table 1). They typically settled in midtown. Tulsa grew rapidly during the 1920s because of the abundance of jobs. When the Great Depression (1929-39) and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s reached Oklahoma, however, growth slowed; the 1930 decennial census showed only a small increase in Tulsa’s overall population. In 1940, Oklahoma’s Latino population sharply decreased from 7,394 in 1930 to 1,540 (U.S. Census 1930, 573; U.S. Census 1940, 813). During the Great Depression, Latinos, just like many of the Anglos in the state, searched for refuge elsewhere (Smith 1981a; Smith 2009b). Some Latinos returned to Mexico because state and federal officials stressed that companies employing Mexicans needed to “reduce drastically...or eliminate them” from their payrolls; and some moved to *barrios* in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, San Antonio, or elsewhere (Smith 1981b, 30; Smith 2009a; Smith 2010). When Latino migration increased in the U.S in the late 1950s and continued with a notable acceleration in the 1970s, a parallel pattern of growth occurred in Tulsa (Massey and Schnabel 1983; Smith 2009c; Smith 2010).

Growth stepped up again in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1990, the Latino population more than doubled; and, in 2000, their numbers nearly tripled (U.S. Census 1990, 38; U.S. Census 2000, 98). This record growth in Hispanic residents was because of the high numbers of entry-level jobs, of available and affordable houses, and of Hispanic relatives and friends already in the area (Nicklas and Palacios 2001; Smith 2010). In April 1999, journalists called Tulsa’s Latino community a “collage of cultures and histories:” grandsons and granddaughters of pioneer Mexican railroad workers, Cubans from the 1980s wave of migration, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans from the northeastern U.S., and South Americans (Figure 2) (Espinosa and Gillham 1999; Gillham 1999d). Additionally, newcomers had migrated from Texas, California, and Mexico (Nicklas and Palacios 2001). While some continued settling in midtown, others began moving into east Tulsa and southwest Tulsa. New Hispanic residents moved into areas where Mexican restaurants and other culturally distinct businesses had opened (Gillham 1999b).

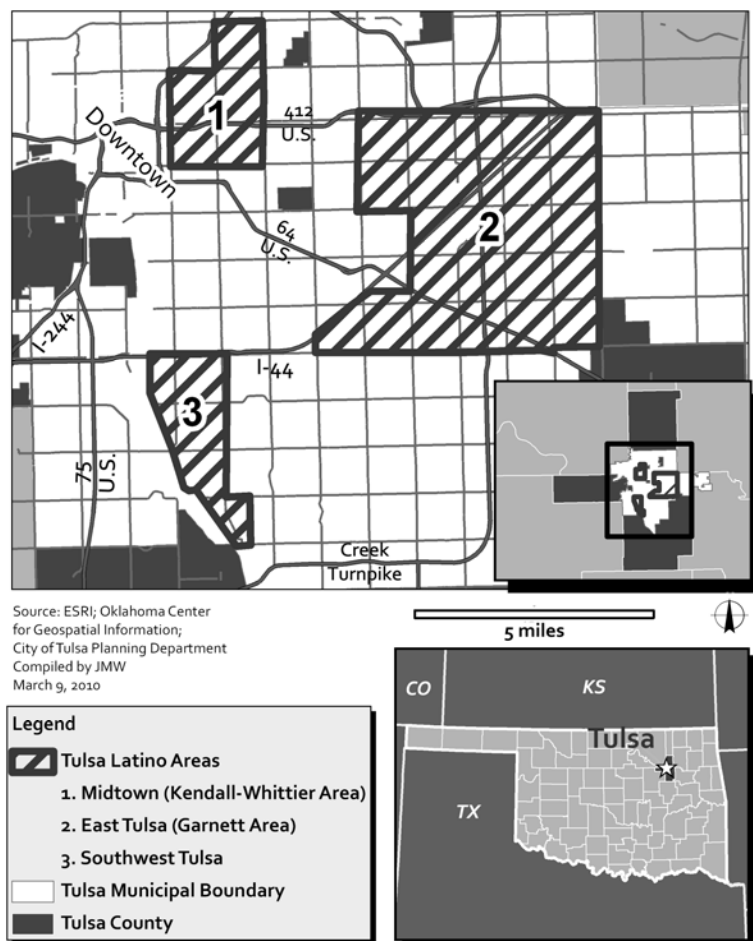


Figure 1. Tulsa has two distinct *barrios*, located in midtown and east Tulsa, and one that is emerging—in southwest Tulsa.

In the 1990s, Hispanics continued working hard in Tulsa. Many held the same types of jobs their ancestors had when they first came to the U.S.—arduous occupations with low wages; some of them, however, founded companies or learned skills allowing them to make higher salaries (Velarde-Charney 2009). During this decade, events, organizations, and businesses made the process of Latinization readily and increasingly apparent to Latinos and to non-Latinos in Tulsa; by the early 2000s the changes were dramatic. This culture group has modified Tulsa’s urban landscape, making these once Anglo spaces

Tulsa (City) Population			
Census	Total	Hispanic/Latino	% of Tulsa population
1900	1,390	no data	
1910	18,182	no data	
1920	72,075	168	0.20%
1930	141,258	294	0.20%
1940	142,157	no data	
1950	182,740	no data	
1960	261,685	no data	
1970	331,638	no data	
1980	360,919	4,322	1.19%
1990	367,302	9,564	2.60%
2000	393,049	28,111	7.15%
2010	385,613	55,085	14.28%

Table 1: Total Hispanic population of Tulsa.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1900, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1980a, 1980b, 1990, 2000, and 2010; Smith 2009a.

Latino places, just as they have in better-known Latino destinations like Los Angeles, New York City, and Miami. Indeed, Latinos are finding their niche, creating cultural landscapes, and in the process establishing their own traditions in Tulsa. Latinos continue to migrate to this new destination and the results of the 2010 U.S. Census overwhelmingly corroborate the perseverance of Tulsa's Hispanic population.

Latino churches in Tulsa

Latinos were major contributors to the work necessary for the industrialization and settlement of the U.S. and work drew Latinos to Tulsa (Smith 2010). They worked hard at arduous jobs with only their families and their churches to help them adapt in this new community. The social and service support they received from their churches was critical in helping them achieve a comfort zone. Churches were and continue to be important gathering places for Latinos.

Cecil Gomez, a Tulsa resident and author, recalled that Holy Family Cathedral in downtown Tulsa, the "mother church," tried to meet the needs of the Mexican families (Figure 3) (Gomez 2005, 211). Church officials did this by bringing in a Spanish-speaking priest and giving the Latinos their own place to worship at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. According to Tulsa Dio-

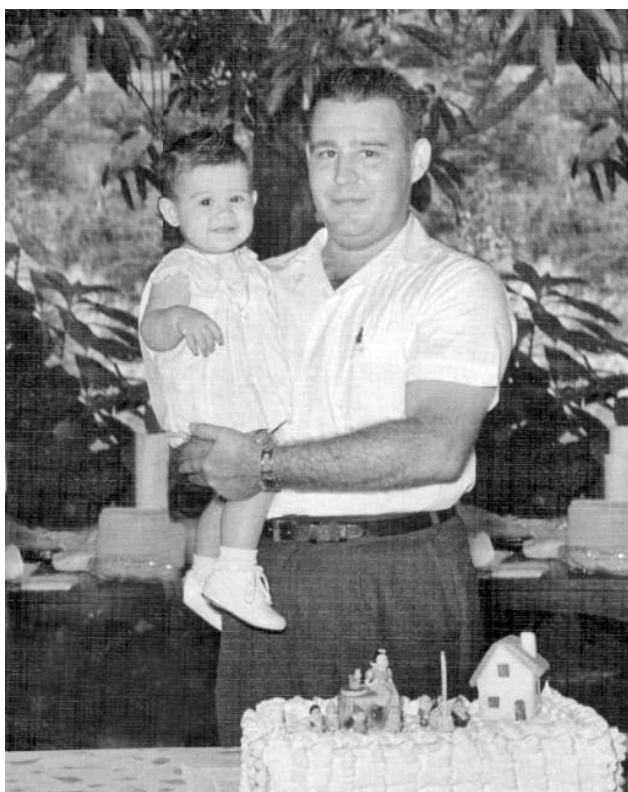


Figure 2. Gina Wozencraft was born in Cuba in 1963. She and her family fled the country in 1969 to escape Fidel Castro’s communist rule. Gina is pictured here with her father in Cuba on her first birthday in 1964. [Photo courtesy of Gina Wozencraft].

cese Historian James D. White, the original Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church was a plain wooden chapel established in 1928 for the Mexican coal miners in east midtown (White 2001). Gomez described the facility as “a small country church located away from mainstream downtown Tulsa...near the Tulsa coal mines” (Gomez 2005, 212). In 1937, Our Lady of Guadalupe closed because of declining attendance related to the shutdown of the coalmines in midtown. In the 1960s, construction on a new brick building began; the dedication celebration of the new chapel of Our Lady of Guadalupe occurred in May 1963 (Figure 4) (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007).

Plans for another church near this area—in the midtown/Kendall-Whittier area—began in 1926 (White 2001; Gillham 1999f). Although not fully completed until 1949 because of World War II, St. Francis Xavier began offering church services in its basement in 1937 (Figure 5) (White 2001). The church,



Figure 3. Holy Family Cathedral, the principal Catholic church in Tulsa, was one of the first institutions that tried to meet the needs of Tulsa's and northeast Oklahoma's Hispanic community. [Photo courtesy of the Tulsa City County Library and Tulsa Historical Society, Beryl Ford Collection/Rotary Club of Tulsa, circa 1916].

with its fixed feature element a Spanish-style bell tower, served as a reminder of home for many Latinos in the area then (Gillham 1999f). In the 1970s, the number of Anglo-Americans in the congregation decreased at St. Francis because of increased movement to suburban areas. By the 1980s, the Hispanic Catholics began demanding Mass there in their own language (White 2001). In 1991, the then primarily Anglo-American and black parish of St. Francis Xavier Church united with the mostly Spanish parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church that had been built right behind St. Francis; currently the church is known as St. Francis Xavier with a shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe (Gillham 1999f).

At first, the new church was supported by about 250 Anglo members and 400 or more Latino members. Although some Anglos did abandon the church



Figure 4. Church officials constructed Our Lady of Guadalupe behind St. Francis Xavier in 1963 to accommodate the Hispanic population in midtown. Photo by author, August 2009.



Figure 5. Saint Francis Xavier Catholic Church with its Spanish-style bell tower in the midtown/Kendall-Whittier area of Tulsa is one of Tulsa's largest churches. Notice the miniature market in the bottom left-hand corner. **Photo by author, August 2009.**

after the merger, many stayed, according to a reporter for the *Tulsa World*, because “they have said too many prayers, watched too many baptisms, and attended too many weddings just to walk away.” Initially, the two groups worshipped separately—in the same building but at different times. At first, they had an integrated parish council but it did not work effectively. When they set up two separate parish councils, “a few signs of acceptance and cooperation began to bud” as the needs of each group were better met (Gillham 1999f).

By 1999, the midtown *barrio* of Tulsa was thirty-five percent Hispanic. According to St. Francis Xavier’s priest that year, around 2,000 Hispanic families attended the church while the Anglo and black attendees decreased to around 150. Then, priests conducted three Spanish Masses and one English-language Mass on weekends. Furthermore, several Anglo members decided they wanted to learn Spanish (Gillham 1999f). Today, the priests celebrate seven Masses in Spanish and still only one Mass in English (Sherman 2010).

The population changes in east Tulsa are clearly reflected in the “new,” to borrow Haverluk’s typing, parish of St. Thomas More Catholic Church. Parishioners attended the first Mass there in 1975; at the time there were no Spanish-language Masses. Fifteen years later, parish dynamics began to change and the church responded to those changes. In the early 1990s, the priest began celebrating a Spanish Mass once a month; that became once a week in September 1994. Presently there are five Spanish-language Masses each week (St. Thomas More 2011).

In January 2010, a writer for the *Tulsa World* called the growth of Hispanic Catholics over the decade in Tulsa “explosive,” based on the findings of a church attendance report conducted by the newspaper (Sherman 2010). Three of the top ten churches in Tulsa in 2000 were Catholic. None of those Catholic parishes, however, appeared on the newspaper’s 2010 list. The two Catholic churches in Tulsa’s top ten in 2010 were the predominantly Hispanic parishes of St. Thomas More in east Tulsa and St. Francis Xavier in midtown Tulsa (Sherman 2010).

Hispanic Leaders in Tulsa

Hispanic Catholic churches were more than just gathering places for Latinos; these institutions provide valuable charitable services, especially with problems that arise from the language barrier. Also over the years, however, Latinos have relied on various leaders for guidance and on various local support organizations to help ease social and cultural problems. These influential community members are a vital component of facilitating a Latinized comfort zone in Tulsa. For example, in 1975, Reverend Victor Orta, a *Tejano* (Texan of Mexican ancestry), came to Tulsa to start a Baptist church. Orta, not really wanting to move away from Texas, felt in his heart that Latinos in Tulsa deserved an option other than Catholicism. Even though his first impression was that “Tulsa was not open to foreign-looking people,” he instantly fell in love with “America’s most beautiful city” and stayed to make his home there (Orta 2006).

In addition to starting a church, in 1979 he initiated the Greater Tulsa Hispanic Affairs Commission to help the Latino population in Tulsa. This commission watched for and thwarted barriers to employment, housing, and health services and unfair treatment from law enforcement. The most important goal of the organization, however, was to portray a correct image of and create an awareness of Latinos in Tulsa.

The majority of Tulsans in the 1970s, according to Orta, had the image of a Latino as a “*Tejano* leaning on a cactus with a *sombrero* over his head and a bottle of *tequila* in his hand” (Orta 2006). To combat this image, leaders like Orta encouraged the first Latino celebration in downtown Tulsa in 1979. The gala had the backing of city officials—former mayor James Inhofe (1978–1984) even spoke at the event—but there were no funds to support the gala. As a result, the community came together and raised enough money to bring in a dance group from Guadalajara and a *mariachi* band. With “*estamos aquí y vamos a vivir*”—“we are here and we are going to live”—as the aphorism of the event, Tulsa’s Latino population made themselves known in the community. The Greater Tulsa Hispanic Affairs Commission continues promoting Latino culture around Tulsa, particularly in schools (Orta 2006).

Another influential leader is Yolanda Velarde-Charney, a second generation Mexican-American, who moved to Owasso (a suburb fifteen miles northeast of Tulsa) over fifty years ago. She said that when she arrived one of the main cultural connections for the Mexican community was the *El Rancho Grande* restaurant. After raising her family, Velarde-Charney became the Director of Community Relations for the Jewish Federation in Tulsa in 1975 (Velarde-Charney 2009). She stated she soon began meeting other people who worried about the needs of the rising Hispanic population, and in 1985 Aurora Ramirez Helton talked Velarde-Charney into joining the Greater Tulsa Hispanic Affairs Commission (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007; Velarde-Charney 2009). In 1990, Velarde-Charney left that group and with Dr. Julio Cuadra, Dr. Luis Reinoso, and Margarita Bloese and created the Hispanic American Foundation (Velarde-Charney 2009). This organization raises funds for cultural programs and scholarships for Latino students to attend college (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007; Velarde-Charney 2009). During the late 1990s, Velarde-Charney aided Reinoso and Ben Windham in creating a resource center in the Martin East Regional Library in east Tulsa that would promote and assist lifelong learning for Hispanics in Tulsa. They received a three-year grant and were able to create a “favorable environment for the Latino and Spanish-speaking community” by providing books, pamphlets, literacy classes, and job and residency courses in Spanish (Velarde-Charney 2009). Currently retired but still an active voice in the Latino community, Velarde-Charney clearly saw a need and came forward to work with others to provide support in a variety of ways.

The Trevinos have also made an impact as leaders for Tulsa’s Latinos, particularly in regards to media and culture preservation. Margarita Trevino moved from Chihuahua, Mexico, to Tulsa in the 1980s. Margarita stated that

she found that the biggest barrier was language; when she began applying for college, she avowed that the counselor at the high school actually told her to go to Tulsa Community College instead of the University of Tulsa (TU) because of her language skills. Margarita, however, went to TU, received her degree, and met her husband Francisco Trevino (Trevino and Trevino 2006).

Like his wife, Francisco had also struggled with language. When he moved to Tulsa in 1978, he did not know any English. He learned English by listening to the Beatles, Kiss, and the Rolling Stones. Francisco stated that, at the time, he knew only a few other Mexicans in town and that most of his friends were Black, Indian, or Anglo. When he was twenty years old, he moved back to Mexico for six months; when he returned to Tulsa, he began mingling with the Hispanic community and met Margarita when he was volunteering at a Spanish immersion class (Trevino and Trevino 2006).

Together, the Trevinos became more active in the Tulsa Latino community, lending a hand and strengthening the comfort zone by organizing and participating in community activities that helped preserve Latino culture. Margarita participated in a dance group—National Association of Folkloric Dance—from 1994 to 2000. Francisco joined the Tulsa Mariachi band. Both the dance group and the band helped spread Hispanic culture through the city and helped unite this new Hispanic community (Trevino and Trevino 2006).

As an active member in the Latino community, Francisco made other connections. During his days with the band, he met David Zapata, the owner of Zapata Media Group—a company that aired a two-hours-long Spanish radio show and published the newspaper *Hispano de Tulsa*. At the time, these were the only mainstream media dedicated specifically to Tulsa Hispanics. In 1995, Zapata had to leave his business and offered Francisco the radio program or the newspaper. Francisco decided to keep the newspaper. Behind Margarita's back, he bought "a box of stuff" that contained everything he needed to keep *Hispano de Tulsa* going (Trevino and Trevino 2006). For five years, Margarita had nothing to do with the newspaper—until Francisco also began running the Clear Channel radio station, the first twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week Spanish broadcasting station, which was a huge plus for Tulsa's Latinos. Margarita pitched in and today the Trevinos' newspaper is still successful, is published in both Spanish and English, and has a webpage that contains listings for Spanish-owned businesses or establishments that cater to the Latino population (Trevino and Trevino 2006; *Paginas Hispanas* 2011).

During the intense population growth of the 1990s, leaders and organizations stepped up to meet the demands. Pastor Victor Orta, by then the director of Parkview Baptist Multi-Ethnic Center, helped set up twenty-four Hispanic ministries in northeastern Oklahoma. In addition, Tulsa's American Red Cross chapter started up a Spanish-speaking response team, the local YWCA began offering English classes and first-aid training, and the local health department hired interpreters. Francisco Trevino continued to stress the importance of learning English, encouraging parents to make sure their children are bilingual

and emphasizing that his family members speak Spanish when they are at home but use English when they are away from home (Gleason 2009). Churches continued to be a primary source for social services, such as providing information on laws and jobs, English lessons, and medical assistance (Gillham 1999c). These aid organizations, their leaders, and the increasing Latino population fueled the process of Latinization both socially and culturally on Tulsa's landscape.

Latinization of Tulsa's landscape

The most noticeable effects on Tulsa's cultural landscape were the establishment of many Latino restaurants with conspicuous semi-fixed feature elements. Furthermore, the men and women who started these businesses were also leaders in this new community; their stories are important and representative of their perseverance and success. As a result of these hard-to-miss new enterprises and entrepreneurs, Tulsans grew increasingly cognizant of the fact that Latinos lived and worked in their city and that the process of Latinization was in full swing.

Tulsa's first successful Latino-owned restaurant *El Rancho Grande* opened in 1950 near Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in midtown and remains a Tulsa favorite among Latinos and non-Latinos (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007). At the age of fourteen, Guadalupe Almendares married Francisco Rodriguez, a Frisco Railroad worker, in Tulsa. Guadalupe, who became known as Ruby Rodriguez, had left school after the second grade. Of her grandmother, Christine Rodriguez wrote, "The Mexicans living here in the 1920s faced hard times because of their nationality. Ruby encountered many hardships living in Tulsa—especially during the war, the depression and the race riot—but she overcame them all" (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007, 33). In 1950, Ruby opened the restaurant and operated it for thirty-five years (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007, 32) (Figure 6). Ruby's granddaughter also noted that Ruby stayed involved in three churches—Holy Family (the "mother church"), and St. Francis Xavier and Our Lady of Guadalupe in midtown (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007, 33).

Another Latino-owned restaurant, *Casa Monterrey*, opened in the late 1960s in southwest Tulsa. The owner's parents, Mike and Fermina Puente, crossed into the U.S in the 1920s, paying a 25-cents fee at the border. They made their way to Hickory Coal Mine Camp located in east midtown and lived in a tent until they were able to find a house. Linda Cervantes, granddaughter of Mike Puente, wrote that in the early 1920s he built a tamale cart to sell homemade tamales made from original recipes from Mexico (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007). They later moved to the Paul Adamson Mining Camp and continued to sell their food items around Tulsa. She stated that the Puentes were the first Latinos to sell Mexican food in Tulsa and that they planted the dream of owning a restaurant "deep into the hearts of their daughters" (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007, 43).



Figure 6. *El Rancho Grande* restaurant is likely the oldest Mexican restaurant in Tulsa. The bistro is not only an important artifact for the Hispanic community there, but the establishment is also a popular landmark on Tulsa’s portion of “America’s highway”—Route 66. Photo by author, August 2009.

In March 1968, their daughter Sarah Cervantes opened *Casa Monterrey*. Linda Cervantes said that, although her mother had no knowledge of how to manage a restaurant, she was resolute and figured out how to make her business successful as she went. The restaurant soon became known for having the best Mexican food in town and “old time Mexican entertainment” (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007, 46). Katie Ryan, who lives twenty-five miles west of Tulsa, used to go there often and remembered the excellent Tex-Mex and traditional Mexican dishes the restaurant served (Ryan 2009).

A noted material feature of the restaurant that was a conspicuous Latinization element was a wall mural, added in 1978, of Monterrey painted by Robin Polhamus; the mural contained pictures of some of the customers and workers (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007; Claiborne and Claiborne 2009; Ryan 2009; Widener 2009). Ms. Cervantes said that the muralist made several trips to Mexico to get the painting just right, thus illustrating and reinforcing the ties to her culture group (*¡Latinos Presentes!* 2007). After almost two decades of fulfilling Sarah’s dream, the restaurant closed in 1987 (Ryan 2009).

Tulsa's Hispanics have celebrated their culture and shaped the surrounding landscape in other interesting and noticeable ways. For example, Mexican families could stay in touch in the 1990s via the "makeshift shuttle service" run by Noe Rodriguez called the Mexican Bus. The bus usually left on Fridays from a Hispanic club in east Tulsa and delivered keepsakes and riders to locations over 900 miles away in Mexico. For \$30-\$50, a Latino could ride one-way or send a package to Mexico. According to *Hispano de Tulsa* publisher Francisco Trevino, this was one of the reasons why University of Tulsa shirts and Tulsa Drillers hats were seen in various regions of Mexico in the 1990s (Gillham 1999e).

Another example is Tulsa's annual Hispanic festival, dating to 1979, that is now held in conjunction with Hispanic Heritage Month, officially designated by the state in 1991 as September 15 to October 15 (Figure 7) (Smith 2009a). Canceled in 1997 because of the lack of a sponsor, the Trevino family, definitive leaders in the Hispanic community, revived the festival the following year in order to "highlight the area's Latino culture while offering familiarity to the crush of new Hispanics moving to Tulsa County" (Espinosa 1998; Gillham 1998; Trevino and Trevino 2006). At the time, Tulsa Mayor Susan Savage (1992-2002) commented that the Hispanic culture is of great value to "the fabric of life in Tulsa" (Espinosa 1998). In January 1999, Clear Channel Communications, the country's biggest Spanish-language programming broadcaster, gave its corporate sponsorship to the Tulsa Hispanic festival and the annual *Cinco de Mayo* celebration, promising to heavily broadcast the events, provide monetary support, and work hard to attract other culture groups to attend the festival (Gillham 1999a).

By 1999, the changes were noticeable enough to compel a *Tulsa World* reporter to comment on the decade's Latino growth rate by stating, "History's longest, most intense migration of Latin Americans has been washing across the Midwest in silent waves since 1990. A phenomenon previously affecting states bordering Mexico, in Tulsa it has meant that never before have so many Latinos started businesses, attended school, bought homes, and in some cases, sought citizenship" (Gillham 1999b). Anglos may have been slow sometimes to notice the changes because, according to the same reporter, Latinos "keep to themselves, working and trying to make a new home in a strange and sometimes unfriendly land" (Gillham 1999b). Latinization in Tulsa, however, was ongoing.

Three major developments occurred during 1999 that clearly recognized it: a *Tulsa World* series dedicated to Latinos in Tulsa, the inception of the Greater Tulsa Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and the opening of the Hispanic Resource Center. The April 1999 series in the *Tulsa World* documented several aspects of Hispanic life in Tulsa: the ongoing surge of Latino migration, local agencies that assist Latino residents, specific Latino families and businesses, illegal immigrants, and important churches. The Tulsa Hispanic Chamber was Oklahoma's first Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, while at the time the state



Figure 7. Tulsa's Festival Hispano has served as a community gathering event since 1979. Photo by author, September 2008.

of Texas had twenty-seven. The Chamber's initial goals were to have 300-400 members from the Tulsa area and northeastern Oklahoma by the end of its first year of operation and to start plans for a permanent facility (Gillham 1999g). According to the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce, in 1999 there were 260 Hispanic-owned businesses that collectively generated \$171.6 million in revenue within the Tulsa metropolitan area, an increase of twenty-five percent since 1995 (Gillham 1999g; Gillham 1999d). In 2006, the Greater Tulsa Hispanic Chamber of Commerce graduated the second class from its eight-month-long Small Business Academy (Cauthron 2006). The Hispanic Resource Center, located in the Martin East Regional Library, held its grand opening in October

1999 with activities including a talk by a representative from the Census Bureau about the importance of the 2000 census, free immunizations, a seminar on buying and selling a home, a bilingual story time conducted by a class of Spanish III students from a local high school, Spanish-language prenatal care classes, and an address about immigration by author Roberto Suro. Librarian Christy Chilton called the center a “bridge between cultures;” this was exactly what Velarde-Charney wanted as she assisted in establishing the resource center (Million 1999; Velarde-Charney 2009). The center had 1,400 books in Spanish when it opened and hoped to have 8,000 within a year (Espinosa 1999; Randle 1999; “Journalist to Discuss Immigration” 1999). By 2009, the center had 16,775 Spanish items (Martínez 2009).

Latinos and Latinization in Tulsa in the twenty-first century

In 2007, Tulsa resident Gary Rutledge, a political science professor at Rogers State University, commented on the cultural landscape changes occurring in this new Latino destination, “It’s happened so quickly and our neighborhoods have changed so rapidly.” He said that near where he lived in east Tulsa “the broad avenues are now peppered with signs in Spanish and malls catering to Latino shoppers—offering everything from soccer wear and *piñatas* to check cashing services and Latin pop music” and that “that whole part of the city has become a miniature Juarez or Tijuana” (Huus 2007). His words perfectly described what happened when a group of Latinos shared a set of easily modified semi-fixed elements and then created a distinct cultural landscape.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, a block-large shopping center, *Plaza Santa Cecilia*, previously an old bowling alley and strip mall, became an agglomeration of Latino-based businesses, including *panaderías*, *carnicerías*, and *tortillerías*. In addition to the Spanish names, other characteristics of Latinization are also visible. Some of the stores have Latino-influenced murals painted on their windows and walls; they also have business advertisements and schedules of buses that run to various south Texas and Mexican cities in the windows (Figure 8). Across the street (to the east), *Supermercados Morelos*, a large Hispanic grocery store, opened. Painted bright yellow, the grocery store stands out and has a banner advertising the *Salidas a Mexico* bus service. In addition, a large flea market spans both the north and south sides of the street on Admiral in east Tulsa. Since the mid-1990s, the once-Anglo stores have become Latino retail outlets.

A good example of one of the newer small restaurants in east Tulsa with Latinized features is *Papusas [sic] y Tienda*, opened in 2000 by El Salvadoran Delmy Cruz, one of about 200 El Salvadorans in Tulsa; *pupusas* are the national dish of her country (Cherry 2009). Her family members help her and the majority of her customers are Central Americans and Mexicans. According to a writer for the *Tulsa World*:

Cruz also sells Central American videos, CDs, souvenirs and food items (creams, soft drinks, plantains) out of her nine-table restaurant located in a strip



Figure 8. Murals are another vivid sign of Latinization. Generally, they display a scene from a specific place relevant to the owner or they depict some type of historic event. Photo by author, August 2009.

center on the southeast side of Admiral Boulevard and Sheridan Road. Flags from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and a wall hanging featuring a street scene in El Salvador are the main decorations (Cherry 2009).

Midtown has *Las Americas*, a large grocery store, similar to the one in east Tulsa, that purveys Hispanic-oriented food (Figure 9). In addition, many Hispanic-operated auto body shops line the street in the old industrial area. Bright colors and multicolored place names painted on the facades mark these Latinos places. For instance, the facades of *Los Huaches* Paint and Body and *El Leon Mecanico y Electrico en General* are bright blue and yellow. A few Latino car lots, like *El Chanillo* Motors, have also established in this area to meet the demands of the growing population.

Hispanics residing in the midtown/Kendall-Whittier area enjoy a view of downtown Tulsa and the bell tower at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church. *El Rancho Grande*, with its decades-old recipes and glowing neon sign, attracts locals and tourists alike with its location on Route 66 and its propinquity to downtown. Other Latino-influenced restaurants, like the Acapulco Mexican Restaurant, the brightly painted Tacos *Don Francisco*, Tacos *San Pedro*, and Blazin' Peppers, are also in the area.



Figure 9. *Las Americas* is the principal grocery store for Hispanics in midtown Tulsa. The parking lot is also often the business site for two taco trucks (not shown here). Photo by author, August 2009.



Figure 10. *Taqueria mi Oficina* is often parked adjacent to a remittance shop in east Tulsa. Photo by author, August 2009.

A smaller business that is now a common feature of Tulsa's cultural landscape is the taco truck. A taco trailer sits in the parking lot of *Las Americas* grocery in midtown. Parked in east Tulsa adjacent to *Perez's Abarrotes* (general store and remittance shop) is *Taqueria Mi Oficina* (Figure 10). In July 2009, Sarah Hart described the role of the taco trucks in her community for the *Tulsa World*:

I live in east Tulsa, a culturally diverse part of our city, full of different sights and sounds than you would find at, say, Woodland Hills Mall. I drive past these... trucks... every day, trailer trucks with picnic tables out front. Spanish names. People lined up three-deep for food, people sitting outside under picnic umbrellas, eating happily (Hart 2009).

She took some fellow *Tulsa World* employees to visit three taco trucks; they visited *Los Unicos* and *Tacos Fiesta Mexicana* in midtown and *Super Taqueria* in east Tulsa. The owner of *Super Taqueria*, who also owns the Tulsa restaurant *El Refugio Azteca*, told them he had been there four years. Hart reported, "This food isn't fast. It's all cooked to order, so you wait a bit. But it's worth it." The consensus was that they tasted "some of the best Mexican food in town." Hart also included a note stressing that the taco trucks go through regular inspections by the Oklahoma Health Department and that they "aren't frequent violators of the rules" (Hart 2009).

Tulsa's businesses are transforming on the interior also in order to appeal to Hispanic consumers. Many products on the shelves of Tulsa's grocery stores display instructions in both English and Spanish. The Wal-Mart Supercenter in east Tulsa started carrying more Hispanic spices, foods, and other staples. Instead of Pringles on the end caps of that Wal-Mart's shelves, *veladoras* (Spanish religious candles) fill the spaces. Denny Widener, a vendor for Hispanic-food manufacturer Mission Foods, explained that since 2000 the "growth of the Latino population in this area has been astronomical" and noted that, within only a few hours of delivering and restocking the aforementioned Wal-Mart store, his shelves are empty. He added, "When I first started this route, I got by with stocking my shelves once a day, even on weekends. Two or three years ago, however, I began to have to replenish my shelves twice a day on Sundays. It is almost to the point that I might have to go out twice on Fridays and Saturdays." Widener further declared that, during 2009, he expanded into selling his products directly to the growing market of smaller Hispanic-owned businesses (Widener 2009).

Tenancy statistics have also changed in apartment complexes in these areas and some of the residents have Latinized décor outside, such as flags draped over their balconies. In October 2009, the property manager of Observation Point Apartments in east Tulsa reported that about seventy-five percent of the residents were Latino (Barnard 2009). The complex even hired a Latino security officer in an effort to deter crime and make residents more comfortable about reporting a crime. In recognition of these changes, the city's police department is making a concerted effort to reach out to Hispanics by studying

crime statistics, meeting with community leaders for reciprocal learning experiences, and encouraging some residents to enroll in the Citizens' Police Academy. Combined, these transformations taking place in Tulsa indicate the beginnings of an inveterate change (Barnard 2009).

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, Tulsa's cultural landscape has changed in tandem with the ethnicity of its population; but, as I have shown, there is another catalyst for the process of Latinization—community leaders and support organizations that help this burgeoning and new population sustain a comfort zone. Without their efforts, Tulsans would likely still have the mentality that Victor Orta encountered when he arrived in the city in the 1970s. Moreover, if these support organizations did not exist in Tulsa, Latinization would certainly not be as dynamic as it is in 2011—particularly after passage of Oklahoma House Bill 1804 in 2007, the state's strict illegal immigration bill that spread a "blanket of fear over the Tulsa Latino community" (Wozencraft 2009).

Jobs and family members already in the region have attracted and continue to attract Hispanics to established comfort zones in the Tulsa area. Another area of Tulsa is also showing signs of Latinization; southwest Tulsa, an area home to more African-Americans and Anglos than Hispanics, has Latinized features such as *Mayamercado Carnicería Taquería* and a *discoteca* (Figure 12) (Claiborne and Claiborne 2009). According to the 2010 census, 55,085—fourteen percent—of Tulsa's 385,613 residents are Hispanic (U.S. Census 2010). Today, one cannot help but notice the vivid Latinized cultural landscapes in midtown, east Tulsa, and the transitioning southwest Tulsa area and harbor the expectation that more Latinizing changes are on the way.

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