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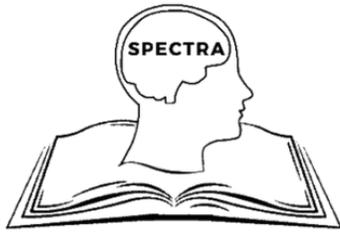
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## The “East Side” of Las Vegas: A Latinx Historical Framework

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### Abstract

Spanish heritage speakers in the United States are a reflection of everchanging linguistic and sociolinguistic pressures that result in myriad varieties across generations. This paper provides a preliminary historical framework to fill this gap of linguistic knowledge in the Spanish-speaking community of Las Vegas, Nevada. The goals were two-fold: (1) highlight the largest Spanish-speaking communities in Las Vegas and (2) explore the significance of the East Side in the history of the Latinx population of Las Vegas. Through the analysis of oral histories and historical works, the investigation highlights the Mexican, Salvadoran, and Cuban populations of Las Vegas and their connections to Sunrise Manor (Clark County, Nevada, USA), locally known as the “East Side,” where the majority of Spanish-speakers reside. This analysis reveals the “push” and “pull” factors that motivated the immigration patterns of these groups and highlights the significance of using oral history as a primary source to amplify the experiences of marginalized communities. The broader implications include using this research to inform teachers on the local heritage of the East Side and bring local history into the classroom. Future research may use this framework to investigate the linguistic diversity of the Latinx community on the East Side and explore other racial and heritage groups in the area.

**Keywords:** Latinx community, Las Vegas, East Side, Oral History

With the Latinx<sup>1</sup> community of Southern Nevada making up 30%<sup>2</sup> of the population, it may come as no surprise to know that Spanish is the language most spoken outside of English in the Las Vegas community ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a](#); [Pew Research Center, 2014a](#)). Take a trip to the “East Side” (refer to [Figure 1](#)) and one will be immersed by the Latinx community of Las Vegas and the Spanish

varieties that originate from all corners of Latin America. Listen more closely and one will hear the unique patterns between generations and how heritage speakers (speakers who have acquired a language in a non-traditional setting in the home and community) have developed their own language system.

Presently, the literature on Spanish-speakers in Las Vegas has yet to consider the linguistic

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, the Spanish-speaking community of Latin American descent will be referred to as the “Latinx” community. The term “Latinx” will be used to remain inclusive of all identities in the Las Vegas community that come from Latin American descent since this is the larger community that is being studied ([Rodríguez, 2017](#)).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that most of the statistics presented on the Latinx population is expected to be underestimated because of the general sentiments of distrust from immigrants and especially that of the undocumented community ([Simich & Wright, 2005, 2010](#)).

implications of the regional varieties that exist. To fill this gap of linguistic knowledge, a study of the migration patterns of Spanish-speaking people from Latin America in Las Vegas is necessary to acquire a historical and cultural understanding of how the current societal conventions came to be. Moreover, contrary to other studies, this investigation uses oral history as a primary source to support the findings of secondary historical and statistical sources. Recognizing the historical presence of the Spanish varieties within a city that is fundamentally a space of dialect contact will provide the context to identify the non-linguistic variables that are potentially motivating linguistic variation in Las Vegas as highlighted by Trudgill (1986, 2004) (see also Potowski, 2016; Mufwene, 2001; Zentella 1990).

The present paper seeks to provide the socio-historical framework of Las Vegas to consider the shifting linguistic pressures that have existed across the historical record. Using the oral histories collected through the Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada Oral History project (UNLV Oral History, 2018-ongoing) in addition to other historical literature, the immigration patterns of the Mexican, Cuban, and Salvadoran communities will be investigated. These groups have been selected because they are the largest Latinx groups in the valley (Pew Research Center, 2016; UNLV Oral History, 2018-ongoing). In addition, particular focus will be placed on the history of the East Side of Las Vegas in which the majority of the Latinx population resides (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Thus, the goals of the investigation were two-fold: (1) highlight the largest Spanish-speaking communities in Las Vegas and (2) explore the significance of the East Side in the history of the Latinx population of Las Vegas.

### **The Spanish-Speaking Community of Las Vegas**

The Spanish-speaking community of the Southwest region of the United States dates to the early expeditions of the Spanish along the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro and Camino Real de California during the mid-1500s (Penfield & Ornstein-Galicia, 1985). Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the Spanish-speaking community has spread across the country to become one of the fastest growing minority language communities in the country (Lipski, 2008).

Today, nearly 90% of the service-based economy of Southern Nevada found along “the Strip” of Las Vegas is predominantly run by members of the Latinx community with a reported 54% Latinx membership in the Culinary Workers Union Local 226 (2020). Furthermore, as the fifth-largest school district in the nation, the Clark County School District (2019) has reported 46.4% of their student population as “Hispanic/Latino” and 24.77% as being qualified or having participated in English Language Learner (ELL) Programs.

The history of the Latinx community in Las Vegas has been recorded minimally (Favela, 2019; Lipski, 2008; Mason, 2018). It wasn’t until 1980 with works such as *A Profile of Hispanics in Nevada: An Agenda for Action* by local historian Tom Rodriguez (2018), that this “invisible minority” began to make a mark in the historical record. To investigate the history of Spanish-speakers in Las Vegas, the studies conducted by Lipski (2008), the UNLV Oral History Research Center (2018- ongoing), and those collected by Simich and Wright (2005, 2010) have served as the foundational works for this historical framework of the Latinx community in Las Vegas.

*The Mexican Population of Las Vegas:* The first Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Las Vegas were of Mexican origin and can be traced back to the late 1800s with the rising mining and ranching industries during the end of the Mexican American War (Miranda, 2005; Tuman et al., 2021). By the beginning of the twentieth century, a series of migration waves began to surge starting with the Porfiriato era of the Mexican Revolution; followed by the Bracero Program during World War II; and after the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act from 1965, which increased the number of visas distributed to foreigners (Miranda, 2005). In his oral history, Sergio “Checko” Salgado (2019) talks about how his father came to Las Vegas from Juárez to find more job opportunities, and how his friends subsequently followed him to arrive in late 1950s.

As a result of the oil crisis of the 1980s, another wave of Mexican migration came with many searching for economic and occupational stability—one that the booming hospitality industry of Las Vegas could provide (Miranda, 2005, p. 58-59). This “push” factor was further exacerbated with the passing of the North

American Free Trade Agreement and other trade liberalization policies that stifled smaller local agricultural businesses in Mexico (Tuman et al., 2021). The evolving demographic of the community during this time period has also been referenced in other oral histories (Barron, 2019). As is the trend with many other Latinx immigrant groups, the economic attractiveness of the city with jobs in construction, landscaping, hospitality, and restaurants, in addition to the minimal requirements of education or English language mastery within these fields, have further “pulled” groups from Mexico and Central America to Las Vegas (Arriaza, 2005; Clayson, 2010; Lipski, 2008; Miranda, 2005; Monkman, 2010; Pratt, 2010; Tuman & Gearhart, 2010; Tuman et al., 2021; Wright & Moody, 2005).

Despite the ever-tightening grip over the regulation of the border in areas of California and Texas, the undocumented Mexican community has continued to grow since the late 1990s (Miranda, 2005). The prevalence of the Mexican community in Las Vegas is reflected in the Latinx Oral of Southern Nevada History Project with 57% of its’ narrators identifying as Mexican or Mexican-American (UNLV Oral History, 2018-ongoing). Furthermore, community events like the annual Life in Death Festival at the Winchester Cultural Center directed by Irma Varela, the success of local restaurants such as Lindo Michoacán founded by Javier Barajas, and the growing Cardenas market chains also reflect how the Mexican community has established its foundations in Las Vegas.

**The Salvadoran Community of Las Vegas:** Following the Mexican population, the second largest Latinx group of Las Vegas is the Salvadoran community (Pew Research Center, 2014a). Similar to the Mexican community, local businesses including the *Las Pupusas* restaurant chain and local *Pupuseria Cabañas* restaurant on the East Side show how they have become a part of the social fabric of Las Vegas. Unlike the Mexican migratory patterns, however, the arrival of the Salvadoran community was most recent and increased exponentially.

As is the case with other Central American countries, particularly within the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), migration to the United States was driven by political turmoil (Call, 2021; Chuc, 2018; Wright & Moddy, 2005). The civil war of El Salvador [1972-1992] served as a major “push” factor for incoming migrants into the United States. Many came seeking not only economic stability, but also safety (Wright & Moody, 2005). Several oral histories describe the violence of El Salvador that ultimately led them to come to the United States as a teenager seeking asylum to escape forced military enlistment or seeking a new start after watching their lands be destroyed (Benitez, 2019; Martinez, 2020; Minero, 2018; Recinos, 2018). Immigrants like Nery Martinez (2018), describe the experience of being separated from his brothers who escaped persecution from the guerilla in the late 1980s. Little did he know that he would also be escaping violence from “*las Maras*”<sup>3</sup> (gangs) and meet them in Las Vegas years later. Maria Benitez’s (2018) brothers fled to the mountains and later to the United States to avoid being taken by the FMLN [*Frente Farabundo Marí para la Liberación Nacional* – Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front].

The loss of lives and increasing poverty rates that came from an earthquake in 2001, would motivate another wave of migration to the United States. This was also due to the increased number of Salvadorans eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) (Rindels & Gray, 2018). These continued patterns and stories of economic success after coming to the United States have cultivated a “culture of immigration,” in which coming to the United States has become a “rite of passage” for Salvadorans (Wright & Moody, 2005). The use of informal immigration networks has been seen across groups in Central America and Mexico (Tuman et al., 2021).

**The Cuban Population of Las Vegas:** Similar to the Mexican community, a series of waves driven by the political situation of the island led to the growth and success of the Cuban community to be the third largest

<sup>3</sup> Las Maras of El Salvador have been known to be one the most violent gangs in Latin America for the past 25 years. Their acts of violence have made the

country one of the most dangerous countries in the world with “62 registered deaths for every 100,000 inhabitants per day” (Vera, 2019).

Latinx community in Las Vegas ([Pew Research Center, 2014a](#))

The rise of Fidel Castro in the early 1960s was the first “push” factor for Cuban migrants. As a result of the nationalization of the casino industry, many were drawn to establish themselves and continue their business in Nevada ([Clayson, 2010](#)). Liliam Lujan-Hickey ([2018](#)) was a member of this migratory group and went to Miami in 1960 to “escape” the Castro regime with her parents. Coming to Las Vegas by train to Union Station in 1962, she would become one of the very first Latina leaders in the community ([Lujan-Hickey, 2018](#)). The growing Cuban population in Las Vegas ultimately led to the creation of *El Circulo Cubano*, a socio-cultural association created by Agustín Menéndez in 1970 ([Clayson, 2010](#)).

Next, the second wave of the Cuban emigration to Las Vegas was characterized by the working-class who found employment in the service industry ([Clayson, 2010](#)). Lujan-Hickey ([2018](#)) witnessed this growth up until the 1980s and even more so when she worked alongside Catholic Charities to aid the incoming “Marielitos”—the third massive wave of Cuban immigration to Las Vegas after the opening of Mariel harbor ([Clayson, 2010](#)).

Since then, the community has continued to grow and been known to congregate at St. Anne’s Catholic Church on the East Side ([Clayson, 2010](#)). *El Circulo Cubano* has evolved into the commercially and politically engaged Latin Chamber of Commerce representing all Latinx communities; nevertheless, it remains connected to its Cuban roots with local Cuban community members Otto Merida and Peter Guzman having served as the Presidents of the association. The trend of “chain migration” among the Cuban community resembles that of the Mexican and Salvadoran community in oral histories such as that of Mirtha Rojas ([2018](#)) who came to live with her brother in Miami and later moved on her own to Las Vegas with her daughter.

### The East Side of Las Vegas

Since the early days of Las Vegas, the East Side of Las Vegas (the unincorporated town of Sunrise Manor) has been notorious for its’ Latinx population. With 53.4% of its population identifying as Hispanic/Latino, the East Side is the town with largest

Latinx presence in the state of Nevada ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2010](#)). Walking along the streets one will soon find that it is possible to spend an entire day there without uttering a single word of English. Documented both historically through oral history ([Álvarez, 2020](#); [Lujan-Hickey, 2018](#); [Salgado, 2019](#); [Vargas, 2018](#)) historical literature ([Simich & Wright, 2005, 2010](#)), and demographically through public records ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2010](#); [Pew Research Center, 2014a, 2014b, 2016](#)), this area of the city offers an opportunity to explore the linguistic diversity that exists between heritage groups and linguistic generations.

Local historian and anthropologist Brian “Paco” Álvarez ([2020](#)), a native Las Vegan of Argentine roots, has borne witness to the growth of the Latinx community on the East Side since the eighties. He believes that the population will only continue to expand and the growth of ethnic communities on the East Side and other areas of North Las Vegas appear to support this trend of migration. The community resources available to these communities in Spanish through local advertisements, media, and markets has allowed for these communities to continue speaking their first language and interact with others from regions who carry similar and dissimilar dialects and idiomatic expressions. These interactions have resulted in the preservation and disappearance of certain Latin American dialects within these speech communities and across linguistic generations. The historic prevalence of the Mexican population within the Las Vegas community and the on-going migration patterns of the Mexican community raises the question as to the extent of influence that Mexican Spanish has had on the speech community of heritage speakers in Las Vegas ([Lipski, 2008](#)). Preliminary research on the Spanish from the East Side of Las Vegas has shown how heritage speakers of Mexican descent have greater use of the innovative *estar* [to be] (use of *estar* in contexts where *ser* [to be] is typically used) than those of non-Mexican and mixed-Mexican (only one parent is of Mexican descent) ([Martinez, 2021](#)).

Stories like that of Isaac Barron ([2019](#)), Mayor Pro Tempore in the City of North Las Vegas, reflect the variation that exists between linguistic generations. During his time as an English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher at Rancho High School, he realized he spoke “an antiquated form of Spanish” and found

himself learning from his students on how the meaning of certain terms had shifted (Barron, 2019). It wasn't until he had a deeper grasp of the language that he was able to learn what it “meant to be Mexican” in Las Vegas (Barron, 2019). Gabriel Garcia (2019), who grew up on the East Side also shows how the linguistic diversity of the area extended within the working class speaking “construction Spanish” as a student in Las Vegas High School. These stories reveal how each Latin American community and linguistic generation has a specific variety or group of varieties that subsequently play a role in dialectal formation within a region (Lipski, 2008). The East Side is a place where generations collide and along with them—the Spanish varieties of the community.

### Conclusions

Although grouped under the umbrella terms of Hispanic, Latino/a, Latin@, or Latinx, to name a few, the people who identify with these categories each bring a unique history and linguistic variety. The Latinx population of Las Vegas is projected to continue to grow as result of the immigration networks that draw family members and friends from Latin America (Hardcastle, 2018). This is a trend that has been witnessed both statistically (Hardcastle, 2018, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2014a, 2014b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 2018a, 2018b) and historically (Lipski, 2008; Simich & Wright, 2005, 2010; UNLV, 2018-ongoing). As cultural diversity increases, so does the linguistic diversity of a region both intergenerationally and geographically.

Studies and reports have discussed the diversity of the Latinx community and growth of the Mexican population in Las Vegas (Simich & Wright, 2005, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b); however, no research has supported statistical and secondary historical sources with oral histories as a primary source. This paper provides a preliminary socio-historical context of the Spanish-speaking community of Las Vegas through the analysis of the oral histories from the Latinx Voices Oral History Project (2018-ongoing) and other historical records. The goals were two-fold: (1) highlight the largest Spanish-speaking communities in Las Vegas and (2) explore the significance of the East Side in the history of the Latinx population of Las Vegas.

By highlighting the migratory patterns of the three most dominant heritage groups: Mexican, Salvadoran, and Cuban, it reveals the socio-political “pushes” and socio-economical “pulls” that bring folks to Las Vegas. These “push” and “pull” variables have created a culture of chain migration within each of these groups; suggesting that the population is only expected to increase. Moreover, using the oral histories to investigate the demographical significance of the East Side of Las Vegas suggests that outside of being the “hub” of the immigrant community, it is an area that has and will continue to be a region that will influence the Spanish varieties spoken in Southern Nevada. The historical presence of the Mexican community, in particular, suggests that it is the community that will most influence the linguistic evolution of Spanish varieties in the area. From this framework, it is evident that the diversity of the community brings forth the need to consider the existing and developing Spanish varieties on the East Side.

The historical and cultural analysis provided by this investigation brings forth the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Latinx community of Southern Nevada. Through the use of oral history, it provides another lens to amplify the presence and influence of these groups in the region and support existing historical and demographic records. Finally, it fulfills the need to study “the roots of the bilingualism and multilingualism that exist” within a geographical area for the future study of language contact and dialectology (Chelliah, 2013, p. 55).

### Broader Implication and Future Directions

As highlighted by Tuman et al. (2021), research focused on the Latinx community of Las Vegas is minimal. Even less, is that which allows members of the community to be active participants in writing their own history. This research takes a step in amplifying the lived experiences of the community instead of focusing on demographical data. It adds to the conversations regarding the need for representation and community-based scholarship and highlights projects such as the Latinx Voices Oral History Project, which reveal the fallacy of placing groups under a single ethnic category.

Moreover, considering the demographic significance of the community on the East Side, this study will prove significant to educators in the Clark County School District. An awareness of local history allows teachers to have a deeper understanding of their student demographic and their family history. It also provides an awareness of the cultural and linguistic barriers that exist for Latinx communities. Further steps can be taken to bring this local history into the classrooms which has shown to increase student engagement and enthusiasm ([Gorley, 2013](#)).

The diversity of the community highlighted in this framework also brings forth the need to consider the Spanish varieties that exist in Las Vegas. An awareness of the historical presence of a certain heritage groups, allows one to recognize the weight their linguistic varieties have in influencing the language spoken in the area. Although other reports have further discussed the diversity of the Latinx community and growth of the Mexican population in Las Vegas ([Simich & Wright, 2005, 2010](#); [U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b](#)), no investigation has explored the linguistic implications it has on the Spanish speaking population. The rising Spanish monolingual community provides a unique opportunity to test the effect of linguistic and extralinguistic factors in motivating language change within this dialect contact community—a phenomena Mufwene ([2001](#)) refers to as “language evolution.”

Furthermore, by exploring the language spoken by heritage speakers (speakers who learn a non-dominant language in the home and their community) will express the cultural and linguistic impact that the Mexican community has made on their Spanish speech development living on the “East Side”—an area that can be classified as what Potowski ([2016](#)) referred to as “type 1 dialect contact area”<sup>4</sup>. My own experience acquiring many of the linguistic varieties of the Mexican population is reflective of the expected outcomes in this dialect contact situation. By comparing their speech to the Spanish spoken by native speakers from Mexico, one will be able to see how the

community has developed their own distinct speech community and reflect the sociological significance of the community to motivate language evolution. A sociolinguistic investigation of this nature will highlight the sociolinguistic characteristics of Spanish heritage speakers from the East Side and considers the extent of influence Mexican Spanish patterns have on heritage speakers in this dialect contact area ([Lipski, 2008](#); [Trudgill, 1986](#)); notwithstanding, it is also worth considering the historical and increased presence of the Salvadoran, and Cuban communities and how their varieties have influenced the development of the Spanish language spoken by heritage speakers.

Future research may also investigate the divides that have existed in the East Side. Given the racial tensions seen in “race fights” at Rancho High School ([Barron, 2019](#)) and secularization within the Latinx community of the East Side ([Vargas, 2018](#)), these shifts may have influenced the way younger generations speak given the racial divides that also exist. Ashley Vargas ([2018](#)), local poet known as “Ms. Aye Vee”, described an apparent “racial divide” between them and the Caucasian and African American populations of the area. Exploring the history of these tensions on the East Side as well as those that may occur between other heritage groups such as the Guatemalan ([Tuman & Gearhart, 2010](#)), Chilean ([Arriaza, 2005](#)), Colombian ([Pratt, 2010](#)), or Argentine ([Monkman, 2010](#)) communities can expand on the history of the Latinx community in Las Vegas.

The implications of this diverse community are of great importance with recent reports arguing that the state of Nevada is a portrait of the demographic image that will soon be reflected by the entire United States ([Milligan, 2017](#)). Given the historic and demographic significance of the Latinx community on the East Side of Las Vegas, this study provides a path to engage with local history and provide a space for the community itself to share it through oral history.

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the younger speaker A is exposed to dialect B, the greater the likelihood that speaker A will acquire dialect B. ([Potowski, 2016, p. 6-7](#))

<sup>4</sup> In a Type 1 situation, speakers of dialect A move to a community where dialect B is spoken and acquire the characteristics of dialect B. The greater the “degree of interaction” with speakers of dialect B and

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Appendix A: Figure 1. Map of Las Vegas Valley



Note. Map of Las Vegas Valley highlighting Sunrise Manor (“East Side”). From Downtown Vegas Alliance, 2020. In the public domain.