



DOLORES INÉS CASILLAS

Adiós, El Cucuy

Immigration and laughter on the airwaves

[alarm clock ringing]

jarrriba, arriba, arriba, arrrriba compas!

“Wake up, uup, uuup, uuup, friends!”

[birds chirping]

¡Nos vamos al trabajo, por el billete!

“We’re off to work, for the dollar bill!”

[alarm clock ringing]

¡Por la remesa!

“To send it home!”

[cheers]

—El Cucuy de la Mañana, morning radio show host

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In September 2008, Los Angeles's Spanish-language radio station 97.9 FM (KLAX) bid farewell to its beloved morning host Renán Almendárez Coello, recognized to millions as El Cucuy de la Mañana ("The Morning Bogeyman"). His radio style was best described as political punditry meets pop psychology, coated over with adolescent locker-room banter and sprinkled with laugh tracks. El Cucuy left traces of his craft, a distinctive linguistic form of slapstick comedy accompanied by quirky sound effects. With 2,000 electronic sound effects available at the touch of a button, it was apparently difficult for El Cucuy not to be trigger-happy.² For over two decades, Los Angelenos tuned in to chuckle Monday through Friday. Each day the radio host would nudge millions of listeners out of bed, as early as 5:00 A.M., to send them off to their jobs, to earn the US dollar and then to promptly send it back home. Record-setting numbers of audiences found solace through humor listening to El Cucuy recount his legal, financial, and emotional sagas of living in the United States as an immigrant.

Nearly 37 percent of California's thirty-six million residents identify as Hispanic or Latino; Los Angeles County alone is "home" to almost five million.³ Business-savvy companies have made it increasingly easier for Latinos to claim more than one geographical home. Traditional place-bound ideas of home and homeland hold less relevance as immigrant communities faithfully take part economically and culturally in more than one nation.⁴ California's complicated, I-love-you-I-love-you-not history with Latino immigrants, namely those from Mexico and Central America, has produced an attentive Spanish-language listenership eager to tune in to radio programs that echo this relationship.

Over the air, El Cucuy openly credited hard work, frequent prayer, persistence, and his comedic wit as keys to his economic success. To many fans, his legal route from a visa-carrying Honduran immigrant to celebrity US citizen authenticated the idea that a conservative work ethic can eventually translate into the American Dream.⁵ Certainly, El Cucuy's melodramatic account of immigrant life was a proverbial narrative for Latino listeners accustomed to prime-time doses of telenovelas. Few, however, recognize that melodrama and comedy play similar roles for communities cast as supporting players in both televised and nontelevised realities.⁶ The late Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis, for instance, remarked that "devotees of both melodramas and comedies were not just seeking to 'dream' but to learn

skills, to lose inhibitions, to suffer and to be consoled in style, to painlessly envy the elites, [while] happily resigned to poverty, to laugh at stereotypes that ridiculed them, [and] to understand how they belonged to the nation."⁷

In the midst of greater disappointments with California's political and public attitudes toward immigrants, El Cucuy's radio broadcasts of his personal triumphs, woven within canned laughter, represented what Monsiváis would consider a proletarian sentiment. El Cucuy's overwhelmingly immigrant-based listenership made sense of their California experiences as pintores (painters), groundskeepers, "washe-ros" (car wash personnel), and nannies through merriment; giggling at the irony of living in a state with anti-immigrant public attitudes yet strong demands for immigrant labor.

Latin American and Latino communities revere their radio hosts and see them as community leaders and conveyers of communal public sentiments. Even the new generation of Los Angeles-based Cucuy successors share broadcasting personalities that emphasize manly heterosexual, confident on-air demeanors. Like that of most ethnic and non-English language media, Spanish-language radio programming focuses on immigration politics, including public attitudes toward immigrants, news from "homelands," and any developments concerning comprehensive immigration reform. Radio mediates the triangular and oftentimes contradictory reception that immigrants, Latinos in particular, receive from a guarded public and its government entities versus welcoming private, market interests.

True, the coupling of serious news topics with canned laughter and applause tracks may seem unusual. Yet for El Cucuy, humor and laughter worked together to expose the silliness behind immigrant-related legislation. In response to public opposition to issue California driver's licenses to undocumented or green card-carrying immigrants, for example, El Cucuy jokingly commented: "It's okay. They just want us to carpool [laugh track]. But we all pile in and do that anyway! [laugh track]." Clearly, the use of "they" and "us" were stand-ins for "non-Latinos" and "Latinos"—a way of rhetorically drawing a line in the sand. Listeners could laugh at California's eco-trendy car pool culture rather than who is and is not allowed behind the wheel. Serious news topics were seldom confronted with gravity; instead, they were handled with a playful resolve that left listeners with less distress. As opposed to anger, laughter as a response

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to injustices can suppress, trivialize, and “laugh off” the matter at hand.

Immigration politics and legal status have always been popular fodder on Spanish-language morning radio. California routinely engages in public debate about the place of immigrants in the future of the state (with no historical memory, apparently, of Latinos’ continuous presence in California since the mid-eighteenth century). Over the last fifteen years alone, Spanish-language media coverage has included heated debates over the denial of health care to undocumented populations (Proposition 187); the elimination of bilingual education in public schools (Proposition 209); efforts to curb prenatal care available to immigrant women (thanks to then-Governor Pete Wilson); and the granting of driver’s licenses to immigrants (a hot topic in California’s 2003 gubernatorial recall election). Many of these California anti-immigrant efforts were either replicated in some form in sister states or tackled on the national level. As the list indicates, women and children are not immune to legislative attacks, but immigrant men are more often than not painted as the malefactor, often appearing disproportionately on network news backdrops as suspicious groups of brown men.⁸ Thanks to national syndication, Latinos throughout the United States have long heard the rumblings of white xenophobia emanating from California’s radio channels.

El Cucuy himself often referenced humor, albeit a bit cliché, as a form of medicine for listeners. He insisted that through laughter, we heal and provide hope to each other as a community. Therapeutic or not, laughter and laugh track

built a sense of emotional solidarity and helped to politically mobilize Latino listeners around immigrant-based issues. Wrapped in humor, discussions of immigration became less about immigrants themselves and more about how California as a state wrestles with its social policies. El Cucuy’s trademark wit not only boomed over the airwaves of Los Angeles but it underscored the lucrative pairing of immigration and laughter for commercial Spanish-language morning radio.

According to Arbitron, the radio-ratings giant, between summer 1997 and spring 2002, El Cucuy hosted the number one morning commute show in gridlocked Los Angeles, regardless of language, for an impressive twenty-four consecutive radio surveys.⁹ His ratings trumped those of English-language radio darlings Rick Dees and his replacement Ryan Seacrest (both LA-based), as well as Howard Stern (New York City). Perhaps even more impressive, El Cucuy’s show on KSCA-FM, owned by then media mogul Hispanic Broadcasting Company, was the first commercial morning show on Spanish-language radio to become nationally syndicated, which gave it an opportunity to present Los Angeles and its immigration politics to a national listenership.

El Cucuy’s Latino listeners turned to his show for political updates on immigration reform, including immigration deadlines or public demonstrations, and news from their “home” countries. Both his morning and later afternoon show (aptly called *El Cucuy de la Tarde*) often aired on-location broadcasts of rallies for Latino-specific causes (unlike English-language radio, which usually finds mall



grand openings, parades, and similar events worthy of such coverage). Examples of El Cucuy's on-location broadcasts include a sixty-hour radiothon in downtown Los Angeles to benefit children in Guadalajara; a series of free diabetes screenings in Los Angeles's health clinics; and a two-week ten-city bus tour, dubbed "Votos por América," during which he stopped at mercado parking lots and promoted naturalization and voting. Listeners, with the help of Spanish-English interpreters, heard El Cucuy interview the likes of then-presidential hopefuls Barack Obama and New Mexico Governor Bill "Guillermo" Richardson (who needed no interpreter), as well as President Bill Clinton and the late Senator Ted Kennedy. El Cucuy's political clout and fame, off and on the airwaves, extended well beyond Los Angeles and California.

El Cucuy's show also provided an arena where men were not scorned for speaking Spanish, being undocumented, or being brown-collar workers.¹⁰ For many immigrants, their point of entry into the US workforce begins in what Lisa Catanzarite terms brown-collar occupations—as construction workers, house painters, waiter's assistants, and other



El Cucuy at the SEIU's Justice for Janitors rally, 2008.

temporary service-level positions. Immigrant men disproportionately account for 40 to 71 percent of the workforce in this sector.¹¹ Most Latino immigrants, particularly non-citizens, are limited to public sector roles without agency, and workplaces with little opportunity for class mobility. For Latinos increasingly isolated from the larger American body politic, the immigrant-minded channels of Spanish-language media are a familiar place to retreat.

For those seeking refuge within Spanish-language radio, listeners are met with a host of seemingly bizarre and rare studio sound effects and laugh tracks—seldom heard since the days of early radio—that proliferate throughout morning broadcasts. El Cucuy's unique blend of morning talk radio capitalized on these "sonic wallpapers" or canned sounds to acoustically mark time and space. For instance, the sound of birds chirping conveys early morning, whereas an owl hooting conjures up the midnight hour. Ever since the time of early silent film, music has been used to guide viewers through the narrative and to emotionally position them for dramatic effects (think *Jaws*). The early development of the laugh track—used in the 1920s in phonographs and later radio—was intended to make people listening at home feel as if they were not laughing alone because, it seems, we laugh more heartily with others around us. Jacob Smith, writing about the introduction of the early phonograph, explains that listening to laughter eased audience anxieties about this new technological device.¹² Throughout Smith's insightful history of recorded laughter, the object of such laughter—who is laughed at—was usually the voice of a woman, an African American, a member of the working class, or another disenfranchised figure. It was easy to find humor in someone socially distant from the self.

Laughter can carry explicit meaning depending, for instance, on the speaker, listener, political moment, and punch line. Sigmund Freud, known less for his work on humor, argued in *Wit and Its Relationship to the Unconscious* that sympathy, fear, and even pain are emotions that often convert into laughter.¹³ In a similar vein, Henri Bergson's classic 1911 text, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, insists that laughter acts as a "social gesture," a shared response to tragedy through comedy.¹⁴ Social psychologists remind us that the act of laughing *with* serves as a form of agreement, whereas to laugh *at* signals hostility.¹⁵ In *Sudden Glory*, Barry Sanders offers an historical account of laughter and argues that since the nineteenth century,

laughter has become a way of altering the social perceptions of audiences.¹⁶ Jay Leno's comedic jabs at immigrants, as argued by Otto Santa Ana, made it easier for his non-Latino audiences to distance themselves from Mexican immigrants and the cause of immigration reform.¹⁷

In turn, communities of color use humor as critique, according to Carl Gutiérrez-Jones,¹⁸ to cope with a history of trauma, such as colonization, and its contemporary consequences, such as institutionalized racism. The plethora of jokes about white people performed by George López and Chris Rock, to name just two comedians of color, can provide a brief suspension of society's racial hierarchy, a collective ha-ha-ha at the powerful majority. El Cucuy-styled humor also nodded toward hierarchies based on legal and gender status. Listeners laughed—often on cue—at white men (gringos) as well as Latina women. Doing so may have alleviated, if only momentarily, the strain of immigration, in which Latino workers find themselves in menial jobs and rejected by larger (white) communities.

El Cucuy's 1999 compact disc of skits featured track after track of El Cucuy humor, but lacking the overt political references of his live radio shows. Here, for \$9.99, fans forgot they were immigrants in a foreign land. They could declare themselves as anti-girly-men. Riddled with laugh tracks, canned claps, and numerous sound props, the CD poked fun at women, imbeciles, professionals (doctors, teachers), and gringos in the track titled "Gringo en Luna de Miel" (Gringo on his Honeymoon). It exemplified how women, even silent women, can be transformed into a punch line. In the track, El Cucuy narrates that a gringo and a mexicana marry and decide to spend their honeymoon in Cancún, where international hotels litter beautiful local beaches.



Listeners hear birds squawking, waves crashing, low conversational hum, and the clatter of dishes and silverware. El Cucuy acts as narrator, hotel manager, husband/gringo, and wife/mexicana by adopting a different vocal style for each character.

Narrador: [risas] Un gringo y una mexicana se casan y van a pasar luna de miel . . . ¡aaah Cancún! [sonido de campanitas]. Ya en Cancún el sol, la arena, el mar, el ambiente, Cozumel, los hoteles. Se quedan en una suite nupcial ahí preciosa. ¡Se avientan dos o tres días sin salir ni a comer! Como al tercer día bajan al lobby para comer algo y cuando están sentados ahí en lobby el gerente del hotel los ve, se aproxima al gringo y le dice.

Gerente del hotel: [en inglés con acento] "Excuse me Mr. Smith."

Gringo: [en inglés] "Yeah, I am John Smith."

Gerente del hotel: "Oh, [risita] Mr. Smith me da muchísimo gusto de veras saludarle, soy el gerente del hotel y para mí es un placer de veras atenderlo personalmente [líquido siendo servido, platos, cubiertos y murmulos] darle la bienvenida porque usted escogió el mejor hotel para venir a pasar su luna de miel acá a Cancún. ¿Cómo le han tratado Mr. Smith? ¿Cómo se le ha tratado aquí en el hotel?"

Gringo: [despacio en inglés con acento exagerado] ¡Oh, de maravilla, excelente y a la mañana me aviento a la terraza, al medio día me tiro a la terraza, en la tarde me aviento a la terraza y en la noche me tiro a la terraza!

Narrador: Ella se voltea y le dice . . .

Mexicana: "¡Me llamo Te-re-sa imbécil! [Risas].

*

Narrador: [laughter] A gringo and a mexicana get married and spend their honeymoon in Cancún! [magic wand sound effect]. There in Cancún with the sun, sand, and beach, the ambiance, Cozumel, the hotels [birds chirping]. They stay in a beautiful suite for newlyweds and spend two or three days without leaving the room, even to eat! After the third day, they descend to the hotel lobby for a meal. The hotel manager sees them and approaches the gringo and asks:

Hotel Manager: [in an accented English] Excuse me, Mr. Smith?

Gringo: Yeah, I am John Smith.

Hotel Manager: [in English] Oh hello, [giggles] Mr. Smith, [in Spanish] I am very happy to meet you. I'm the hotel manager; it's a pleasure to personally serve you. [water pouring, sound of dishes, conversational hum]. I wanted to thank you for choosing to spend your honeymoon at the best hotel in Cancún. How is everything, Mr. Smith? How has the hotel treated you?

Gringo: [slowly in an exaggerated Spanish accent] Oh marvelous. Excellent. In the morning, I throw myself on the terraza. In the afternoon, I throw myself on the terraza. In the evening, I throw myself on the terraza. And at night, I throw myself on the terraza.

Narrator: The wife turns around and replies . . .

Mexicana: My name is Te-re-sa, you idiot. [laugh track]

This track unveiled basic tensions around masculinity that exist between white US men (gringos) and men of color (mexicanos). El Cucuy's use of laugh tracks directed listeners to laugh at specific moments. The laugh track, according to Paddy Scannell, serves to "legitimate what the host says (however problematic it may be)" as well as to cue the shift "from a private to a public conversation."¹⁹ Although the host-caller conversation may convey a sense of intimacy, the laugh track will inevitably remind listeners that the private conversation—seemingly voyeuristic—is actually a public form of entertainment. Elizabeth Holt notes that "shared laughter is often associated with topic termination";²⁰ in a sense, he who laughs last has the final word.

Over the airwaves, the voice of a radio host becomes the only physical trait available to listeners. One's accent, tone, volume, and word choice are used to pinpoint a speaker's gender, race, socioeconomic status, and even his or her level of education. Put simply, our voices say a lot about our social location, our individual bodies, and often our sense of identity. El Cucuy addressed his Mexican and Central American listenership by weaving together his native Honduran accent and LA-based Mexican slang; and public relations photos confirmed listeners' audio impressions of him as someone of working-class background. His indigenous facial features, dark complexion, short stature,



mullet-inspired hairstyle, and tendency to pose in tight, bicep-hugging shirts while donning a large gold crucifix, all signified a background familiar to the large share of working-class Latinos of indigenous ancestry. In addition, El Cucuy's role as spokesperson for Poderes Naturales—a line of vitamins that promises to cure impotency, clear up rashes, foster weight loss, and banish depression—exposed his preference for curanderas and spiritual-based healing. In all these ways, he represented a working-class image often associated with the back of restaurants or the front of Home Depot, while his vocal and photogenic charisma produced a mainstream visibility for working-class Mexican and Central American men.

In the tradition of many Latino radio hosts, El Piolín ("Tweety Bird," El Cucuy's LA-based rival at KSCA 101.9 FM) conveys leadership and shows great empathy for his immigrant listeners. Like El Cucuy, El Piolín also wears his legal status as a badge, with repeated references to his own arrival in the United States from Mexico in the trunk of a car. His border crossing experience was even photographically staged for promotional purposes. In the photo, El Piolín emerges from the trunk wearing a pin striped work shirt with his name on it. The palm trees in the background and the sliver of blue from the license plate inform viewers that (yet another) working-class immigrant has arrived in sunny southern California.

El Cucuy clearly symbolized a contemporary transnational image: an immigrant who navigated two borders and who dutifully sent money to Central America and Mexico while also channeling fundraising energies toward local US



El Piolín

Latino causes. These gestures resemble goodwill trips or campaign stops, both indicative of El Cucuy's personality as part politician and part goodwill ambassador. KLAX's advertising sound bite capitalized on this relationship and highlighted El Cucuy's iconic status among Latinos with the phrase "El Cucuy es raza" (El Cucuy is one of us).

Advertisements for El Cucuy's radio show featured his face, which graced bumper stickers and billboards on the busiest highway intersections in the nation. El Cucuy's voice coupled with well-funded, photo promotional campaigns may have perplexed English language speakers unfamiliar with him or simply reminded Californians that nearly half of Los Angelenos are Latino. As a Central American radio host in an English-language field in a top radio market, his presence over the airways was significant, particularly to the growing Central American population in Los Angeles. If, as Josh Kun proposes in *Audiotopia: Music and Race in America*, "listening is a form of confrontation" where identities are "made self-aware,"²¹ then Spanish-language radio listeners were proudly flaunting their working-class and migrant sensibilities.

El Cucuy performed a Latin American style of humor, recognized as *picardía* and *albureo*, to Spanish-dominant audiences accustomed to hearing English in the United States. He relied on his linguistic craftiness and popular vernaculars to deliver *chistes pelados* or uncouth jokes. Based on wordplays and phrases with a *doble sentido* (sexual double entendre), this style of humor also policed who could and could not listen in. *Picardía* forces listeners to pay close attention to the subtleties of word choice in order to get the joke, a joke that is often at the expense of women and gay men. The riddle-like nature of this humor favors Spanish-language pronunciations and thereby favors the Spanish-dominant or bilingual speaker. Listeners, for example, may not "get" a joke on the topic of divorce and the aftermath of splitting possessions if they do not know that the verb *dividir* (to divide) doubles as the media acronym *DVD*. In fact, El Cucuy often spoke with a confident swagger about his limited English skills. He remarked in an interview with *The New Yorker* in response to a question regarding his English proficiency, "Yo oprimo el número dos/I press number two."²² His lighthearted approach to answering questions

regarding his English shrugged off widely held English-only attitudes. Even hyper-anglicized pronunciations of Spanish words—say, moochoze for muchos—were often mocked and used as the punch line, suggesting that both English and English-dominant speakers’ attempts at Spanish were valid targets. According to Manuel Peña, picardía customarily involves a male storyteller who mocks others using classed, gendered, and oftentimes sexual and vulgar insinuations.²³ As a radio host, El Cucuy represented just such an authoritative male raconteur.

Aside from El Cucuy’s radio persona, the El Cucuy Foundation served as a platform for public ribbon-cutting ceremonies highlighting El Cucuy’s donations to community causes and provided another microphone for his vocal advocacy for immigration struggles. El Cucuy often made humanitarian trips to Mexico and Central America in addition to raising money and awareness of the health and legal plight of Latinos in the United States. A small town in Honduras went so far as to rename itself in honor of its fellow Honduran, though the residents opted for his legal name, Renán Almendárez Coello, rather than El Cucuy. After raising \$1.7 million for Salvadoran communities devastated by earthquakes and a hurricane, El Cucuy traveled to that country to rebuild several townships; two were rechristened as “Comunidad Renán Almendárez El Cucuy de la Mañana.”²⁴

Sure enough, like many celebrities, El Cucuy had his fair share of controversy both off and on the air. His show’s self-promotional style and crude humor began to exasperate listeners. Limiting the rotation of music to a handful of Mexican regional songs per hour, El Cucuy featured live conversations with callers, lengthy self-promotional jingles, and comedy skits. His inventory of sounds included but was certainly not limited to horns, buzzers, water dripping, pages flipping, stadium cheers, heavy sighs, toilets flushing, and zippers zipping (or unzipping). There were also high-pitched vocal enactments—performed by El Cucuy himself—of women and gay characters. He often counseled female callers on their troubled relationships with male partners, their checkered pasts, or feuds with family members, all the while liberally inserting sound effects.

Sky-high ratings, which equate to profits, may have “voiced over” much of what El Cucuy said over the airwaves. Radio ratings—indicative of the total number of listeners tuned in—predict a station’s advertising dollars. In theory,



the higher a station’s ratings, the more likely stations can sell dial time to corporate sponsors. El Cucuy’s record-breaking success included taking his afternoon radio show in 2003 (then at KSCA) from number twenty-four to number one in the ratings, a lucrative feat, given that Los Angeles represents the number one or number two radio market in the United States. He was able to attract such high-powered sponsors as Rite-Aid Pharmacies, Toyota, Disneyland, Office Depot, McDonald’s, Western Union (of course), and the English-learning DVD set “Inglés Sin Barreras.”²⁵

In the end, El Cucuy’s on-air antics—on three major radio networks, Hispanic Broadcasting Company, now Univisión, and later with rival Spanish Broadcasting Systems—began to raise the eyebrows of radio executives. By some accounts, his exit from KLAX in 2008—like his departure five years earlier from Univisión’s KSCA—was not entirely amicable. In 2004 Univisión, after acquiring El Cucuy in a merger with Hispanic Broadcasting Company, despite riding the coattails of his number-one status, released a terse

This solemn pledge did little to restrain El Cucuy's antics . . .

statement: "After assessing the content of Renar's recent shows, we determined that his inappropriate on-air behavior left us with no choice but to end our affiliation with him."²⁶ A few days earlier, El Cucuy dramatically stormed off the air and made public a dispute he was having over the management's treatment of his on-air sidekicks, particularly what they were being paid. Many read Univisión's choice of the term "inappropriate" as code for talk about erections, lurid descriptions of female bodies, homophobic statements, and the like on the morning program. Months later, Univisión and Spanish Broadcasting Systems (by then, El Cucuy's new corporate boss at KLAX) made a public commitment to monitor the behavior of their hosts in compliance with Federal Communications Commission (FCC) standards of decency. This solemn pledge did little to restrain El Cucuy's antics, which by reaping top ratings helped raise the national profile of Spanish Broadcasting Systems. (Because the FCC employs only two bilingual speakers to supervise over 700 Spanish-language radio stations, the agency welcomes corporate radio when it agrees to take the role of "Big Brother.")²⁷

By 2008, El Cucuy was trailing in the radio ratings he had once dominated, while El Piolín ascended to the throne as "el rey de Los Angeles." El Cucuy's departure shortly thereafter was announced over the air and via press release. After five years at KLAX, El Cucuy shared with his listeners his decision to build a radio network by focusing on a radio station he co-owned in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and attend to his budding television aspirations. Given the slide in his show's ratings, El Cucuy's early exit before his contract expired did not surprise either radio executives or listeners.²⁸

While El Cucuy may have captured the zeitgeist of California's immigrant-minded radio, his off-the-air legal troubles might have tarnished his professional image. In 2007, El Cucuy was charged and later acquitted of domestic violence and for making criminal threats toward police officers during a New Year's Day dispute in his Northridge, California residence.²⁹ It was a disappointment to many of

his listeners who have heard him routinely denounce violence against women on his radio shows.

Today, El Cucuy hosts a two-hour weekly television variety show called "Azte Pa' Cá" (C'mon, get closer) on Azteca América, one of Univisión's competitors, as well as a morning radio show on 95.9 FM (KKNS) out of Albuquerque. His recent migration from California to New Mexico has stunted his broadcasting reach. No longer employed by a major radio network with national syndication, El Cucuy has a much smaller audience; the listenership for his new morning stint is limited to the greater Albuquerque metropolitan area. (And yes, his sound effects and laugh tracks accompanied him to New Mexico.)

Both El Cucuy and El Piolín are quite frank about their legal journeys to US citizenship and reassure listeners that despite having a US passport, they are no less patriotic toward Mexico or Central America. For instance, El Piolín chronicled his steps towards US citizenship on his morning show and directed listeners in twenty-two different cities to workshops, sponsored by churches and community organizations, which were designed to prepare Latinos for US citizenship by offering lessons in English and American history.³⁰ Listeners also participated in on-air call-in contests in which they answered sample questions from the US citizenship exam; correct responses were rewarded with cash prizes of up to \$300.³¹ In 2008, a photo of El Piolín in suit and tie, with his right hand over his heart as he recited the Pledge of Allegiance, also made the publicity rounds for KSCA. Together that photo and the staged one documenting his illegal arrival in the United States are a record of his trajectory to legal status. He was hardly alone, because Immigration and Customs Enforcement (formerly known as the INS) reported a significant increase in the number of applications for US citizenship in 2007, even with a 69 percent hike in fees.³²

Listeners also participated in on-air call-in contests in which they answered sample questions from the US citizenship exam.

Despite El Cucuy's departure from the Los Angeles airwaves, the topic of immigration and the on-air crafting of "home" commands Spanish-language morning programming. The handoff from El Cucuy to El Piolín represents a turn away from an older generation of immigrant listeners for whom references to "home" meant places like Zacatecas, Sinaloa, Michoacán, and San Salvador. El Piolín's public allegiance to both Mexico and the United States speaks to the post-9/11 reality for many immigrants, where increased border enforcement, both legislatively and physically, has made returns to their native country much more difficult. Both El Piolín and up-and-coming LA radio host Juan Razo, aka Don Cheto (KBUE), engage a younger cohort of listeners who also make themselves at home in the United States. "Home" here stands for Boyle Heights, the San Fernando Valley, East Los Angeles, and pre-gentrified Echo Park. Given their exceptionally high ratings, these morning hosts have effectively lured what trade industries refer to as the coveted eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old "hurban" (Hispanic urban) radio listener by following the now tried-and-true format of laughter and discussion of serious matters of immigration.

Romanticized visions of the Mexico left behind comprise most of the material for one of Piolín's toughest rivals, thirty-year-old Juan Razo's popular morning show on KBUE. Razo poses in character as sixty-three-year-old Don Cheto, a fictional Mexican immigrant from the rural hillsides of Michoacán. The honorific title "don" reflects the Latino custom of addressing elders respectfully. Don Cheto's rising status in morning radio relies on humor that pokes fun at generational and cultural chasms between immigrant and second-generation Latinos. His listeners are reminded of their grandfathers or uncles as he humorously laments the changes in women's roles since the days of his own (fictional) youth.³³ These images of Mexico unfairly pit the United States as a haven for gender equality against a Mexico envisioned as conservative or "old school" in its gender expectations. Recent listening studies confirm that Spanish-dominant Latino men listen to Spanish-language radio more than their female counterparts.³⁴ To be sure, these Spanish-language radio hosts offer a complicated portrayal of gender, in which the discussions are much less progressive than are those of immigration.³⁵ In essence, these radio hosts rely on the verbal manhandling of women, gays, and men of different colors (but namely

el gringo) in order to wield a masculinized form of listening to Latino audiences who are often positioned through feminized and disenfranchised framings. It is painfully clear that these radio hosts can exercise a form of political resistance while reinforcing traditional values, a no-no for progressive politics.

Certainly, the growth and popularity of Spanish-language radio has challenged age-old national discussions about the political (in)activity of Latinos. During the 2008 elections, Spanish-language radio hosts frequently ran phone interviews with state and national candidates. Both El Piolín and El Cucuy, for instance, consistently asked—live and over the air—point-blank questions concerning immigration reform while reminding each candidate of what seemed to be an inherent work ethic among all Latinos. El Piolín also went so far as to hold an on-air election, in which listeners unable to vote legally were invited to cast their primary "ballot" via telephone. Election "results" (Hillary Clinton won) were then ceremoniously announced over the air on Super Martes (Super Tuesday).

Spanish-language radio hosts have a rich history of using the airways to rally their Latino listenership.³⁶ Famed radio host Pedro J. Gonzalez, also based out of Los Angeles, used his popular radio show to criticize the illegal repatriations of Mexicans during the 1930s. Recognized as the first Spanish-language radio broadcaster in the United States, Gonzalez was seen by law enforcements as dangerously rousing a Mexican-based listenership in his early morning broadcasts, in which he argued that Mexicans had become scapegoats for the economic woes of the Great Depression. Officials tried unsuccessfully to revoke his broadcasting license.³⁷ Later framed for a crime he did not commit, Gonzalez was imprisoned for six years, after which he was repatriated to Mexico.

Decades later, driven by strikingly similar sentiments, Spanish-language radio hosts made their political role

It is painfully clear that these radio hosts can exercise a form of political resistance while reinforcing traditional values . . .

apparent in the spring of 2006, galvanizing record-breaking pro-immigrant rallies across the nation.³⁸ These mass mobilizations, organized by grassroots organizations and widely promoted over the airwaves, served as powerful responses to a series of disconcerting anti-immigrant legislative moves. The primary culprit—HR 4437—would, among other draconian actions, have made it illegal for charitable and religious organizations across the nation to assist undocumented immigrants and their family members, even those with US citizenship. According to Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, “Radio, unlike TV, focuses on how to effectively speak to the common man and woman and thus has been able to generate a great deal of enthusiasm. . . . Many of the disc jockeys are themselves immigrants and can relate to the struggle that their listeners face and motivate them to be active.”³⁹

Aside from the more formal mentions of immigration during electoral seasons, the fictional linguistic banter that occupies these morning shows between Latinos and gringos, Latinos and Latinas, and/or immigrants and second-generation Latinos also communicates the more nuanced pains associated with immigration and acculturation; such antics are still loudly heard on morning radio. Laughing with El Cucuy helped immigrant listeners cope with newfound roles and strange realities while making sense of their experiences. His reign over the airwaves reminds media historians and immigrant rights activists that despite what many thought of his personality, radio hosts undeniably have a unique political clout in which the microphone doubles as a bullhorn.

In many ways, we have El Cucuy to thank for the titanic gains made by Spanish-language radio within the competitive landscape of radio. Certainly, his broadcasting legacy and his advocacy on behalf of immigrant communities are impressive. We may have said adiós to El Cucuy and many Cucuy-ish pranks, but the morning genre he cultivated is alive and well and still chuckling.

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Notes

- ¹ There is a practice of italicizing non-English words or phrases when presented within English-language text. I have chosen not to signal to the reader when Spanish is written since, in my opinion, it tends to support US-based class, racial, and linguistic hierarchies, particularly in regards to Spanish. I unashamedly privilege the bilingual reader. For insightful discussions of language politics, I recommend Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” in *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1997), 207–243; Frances R. Aparicio, “Whose Spanish? Whose Language? Whose Power?: Testifying to Differential Bilingualism” in *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures* 12 (1998): 5–25; and Bonnie Urciuoli, *Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class* (Colorado, BO: Westview Press, 1998), 15–40.
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- ³ US Census Bureau, “State and County Quick Facts, 2009,” accessed 1 August 2010: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06037.html>.
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- 5 That melodramatic sentiment was echoed even in print. The reputable HarperCollins Publishers, under its Rayo imprint, published two editions in 2002 and 2003 of his autobiography *El Cucuy en la cumbre de la pobreza* (El Cucuy at the Peak of Poverty). Readers have to chew through seven chapters detailing El Cucuy's personal trials before his serendipitous arrival in Hollywood (chapter 8), radio fame (chapter 9), and his non-radio feats, such as books, CD compilations, and sponsorships (chapter 10). Lacking a shred of modesty, El Cucuy writes on page xi, in the introduction to the second edition, that for many his book serves as "una inspiración de su lucha diaria por la supervivencia en un país lejano y para muchos, la confirmación de que los sueños sí se pueden ser realidad como los de El Cucuy de la Mañana . . . o mejor, como los de El Cucuy de la América" (an inspiration for their daily struggle for survival in a foreign land, and for many, as confirmation that dreams do come true, just as did those of El Cucuy de la Mañana . . . or better said, those of El Cucuy de la América).
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