Poetics xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

Sounds of disadvantage: Musical taste and the origins of ethnic difference

Kyla Thomas

Center for Economic and Social Research, University of Southern California, 635 Downey Way, Los Angeles, CA, 90089-3332, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 December 2015
Received in revised form 3 October 2016
Accepted 10 October 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Culture
Immigrants
Musical taste
Assimilation
Mexican americans

ABSTRACT

According to Weber, shared cultural differences are fundamental to the formation and identification of ethnic groups. Yet, the origins and trajectory of these differences are rarely interrogated by sociologists of culture. Where do ethnic differences in culture come from and why do some persist while others fade? To address these questions, I bring into focus an ethnic group whose cultural distinctiveness is hotly debated in the U.S. but rarely examined by sociologists of culture: Mexican immigrants and their U.S.-born descendants. Using data from the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts and the Mexican American Study Project II, I measure differences in musical preference between Mexican-origin and non-Hispanic black and white Americans, and I test four key mechanisms to account for the ethnic differences I observe: nativity, socioeconomic status, ethnic concentration, and ethnic discrimination. I find that Mexican Americans exhibit a wide array of differences in taste that diminish but still persist after the first generation. While some of these differences are tied to experiences of ethnic isolation and discrimination, the majority are attributable to differences in socioeconomic status. This distinguishes the case of Mexican Americans from that of U.S. blacks, for whom racial disadvantage far outweighs socioeconomic difference in accounting for differences in taste. Genre status also plays a key role in determining where ethnic differences in taste persist and where they fade.

1. Introduction

In 2004, Toombs County, Georgia, made national news when it was reported that students at a local high school had planned three separate proms—one for white students, one for black students, and one for Hispanic students. It was the first time the high school, faced with a growing population of Mexicans and Central Americans, had sponsored a Hispanic prom. Sixteen year-old Yuri Flores, a student on the Hispanic prom committee, insisted the motivation was taste: "We wanted a Hispanic prom cause it's a different taste in music...That's why we wanted it more than anything else" (Cannady, 2004). For both students and administrators, preferences for music not only reflected the ethnic divide among students, they were the dividing line themselves.

Such cultural divides, real or perceived, can significantly impact the bonds and boundaries between groups, studies show (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987; Lizardo, 2006). As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) write, cultural tastes build "bridges" as well as "fences." They are used by societies to identify and include those who "belong" and to identify and *exclude* those who do not (Ollivier & Fridman, 2001). Traditionally, sociologists of culture have examined the cultural differences that reflect and

E-mail address: kylathom@usc.edu (K. Thomas).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.10.002
0304-422X/

reproduce class-, race-, and gender-based cleavages. Yet, as countries around the globe continue to be transformed by immigrant flows, ethnicity has emerged as a highly politicized cultural dividing line as well.

Today, some migration scholars and critics contend that ethnic differences in culture are impeding the assimilation of immigrants (Peach & Glebe, 1995). In France, Germany, and Great Britain, for example, many point to differences in religious preference as the main culprit in the blocked assimilation of Europe largest' immigrant population: Muslims (Zolberg & Woon, 1999). Likewise, in the United States, Hispanic immigrants and their native-born descendants are often attributed a distinctive set of cultural values and customs deemed incompatible with mainstream U.S. culture (Bell 2014; Huntington 2004a, 2004b; Zolberg & Woon, 1999). Mexican Americans,[1] in particular, are often singled out for being "slow to fit in" (Schulte, 2008).

According to Weber (1968), these cultural differences are fundamental to the formation and identification of ethnic groups. Yet, the origins and trajectory of such differencesare rarely interrogated by sociologists of culture. How large the culture gap truly is between ethnic groups and why some differences persist while others fade are questions that receive little empirical attention, particularly in the United States, where the preoccupation is often with questions related to race. And so, this paper brings into focus an ethnic group whose cultural distinctiveness is hotly debated in the U.S. but rarely examined by sociologists of culture: Mexican immigrants and their U.S.-born descendants.

First, I ask, to what extent do the cultural preferences of Mexican immigrants and their native-born descendants differ from those of the U.S. native majority, non-Hispanic whites? Second, do their differences diminish across generations? Third, how do we explain the differences that persist? And fourth, how do these differences compare to the cultural differences we observe on the basis of race?

To address these questions, I draw on a cultural measure well established in the sociology of culture but rarely applied to the immigrant case: musical taste. Historically, studies of musical taste have focused on the musical preferences of native majorities, often "controlling" away ethnicity to identify the socioeconomic reasons why certain members of the native majority display certain patterns of taste. In this paper, however, ethnicity takes center stage as I engage in a comparative analysis of the musical preferences of Mexican immigrants, native-born Mexican Americans, native-born, non-Hispanic whites, and native-born, non-Hispanic blacks. Using data from the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) and the Mexican American Study Project (MASP) II, I measure differences in musical preference between these groups and I test four key mechanisms from the migration literature to explain the ethnic differences I observe: nativity, socioeconomic status, ethnic concentration, and perceived discrimination.

Findings from these analyses contribute, empirically, to our understanding of Mexican American assimilation in the U.S. and the origins of ethnic cultural difference. They also make three theoretical contributions to the sociological literature on taste. First, they establish ethnicity as a significant determinant of cultural difference in the U.S. but one still overshadowed by socioeconomic status and race. Second, they identify genre status as a key moderator of the differences in taste that ethnic groups display. Third, they highlight important variation in the relationship between status and musical taste across racial and ethnic groups.

2. Musical taste and ethnicity

While cultural differences may not dictate ethnic boundaries, they can reinforce and preserve ethnic boundaries by making them appear more "natural or self-evident" (Barth, 1969; Wimmer, 2008). According to Telles and Ortiz (2008), "the extent to which such cultural markers [of ethnicity] persist over generations may signify the extent to which ethnic groups remain viable" (p.185). When the cultural differences that delineate ethnic boundaries erode, this process is commonly referred to as cultural assimilation. Both classic and revised theories of assimilation in the U.S. predict assimilation into the "mainstream" with each new generation[2] (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gordon, 1964; Warner & Srole, 1945). In the case of this study, I conceptualize assimilation as the decline of cultural difference with each new generation.

In the sociology of culture, musical tastes have been well established as symbolic resources individuals draw on to negotiate and express their social positioning, or assimilation, in a society. (Weber, 1958). Taste "classifies," as Bourdieu (1984) once wrote—it marks identity and social status—and some have argued that "nothing more infallibly classifies" than taste in music (Bourdieu, 1984; Peterson, 1980, 2005). Beyond social class—the original preoccupation of the literature on taste—researchers now link distinctive patterns of musical taste to racial identities (Carter, 2003; DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990), gender identities (Christin, 2010; Dumais, 2002), and racial attitudes (Bryson, 1996, 1997). Less well examined or theorized, however, are the patterns of musical taste that distinguish immigrant ethnic groups, particularly in the U.S.

[1] Throughout this paper, I use the term "Mexican American" to refer to native-born U.S. residents of Mexican descent; I use the term "Mexican immigrant" to refer to first-generation U.S. residents of Mexican origin; and I use the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably, though I recognize that the use of these terms to describe Mexican Americans is widely debated (Mora, 2014).

[2] These theories, however, differ in their definition of what constitutes the mainstream. While classic assimilation theory assumes that the mainstream is white, theorists of mainstream assimilation offer a revised definition of the mainstream as heterogeneous and constantly in flux (Alba & Nee, 2003; Alba, Kasinitz, & Waters, 2011). It is unclear, however, how one would measure such a mainstream. For the purposes of this analysis, I define the mainstream as the native majority group—non-Hispanic whites—and I conceptualize assimilation into the mainstream as the decline in cultural difference with non-Hispanic whites. However, I acknowledge that this working definition of the mainstream is up for debate in the literature.

Please cite this article in press as: K. Thomas, Sounds of disadvantage: Musical taste and the origins of ethnic difference, Poetics (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.10.002