

Hey chico! The Latin identity in major league baseball.

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## Hey Chico! The Latin Identity in Major League Baseball

Samuel O. Regalado

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Hey Chico!

The Latin Identity in Major League Baseball

Felipe Alou had no real, hands-on knowledge of the United States nor of the culture of its people. Like so many others who had ventured there, most of what he knew had been translated through friends, some of whom had visited the great colossus to the north. Alou knew that the United States had played a considerable role in the history of his own country, the Dominican Republic. And while some aspects of American foreign policy had served his country well, generally speaking there existed a feeling among Dominicans that American aims were generally opportunistic, aggressive, and hostile and that its representatives were condescending.

But a glamour also shrouded America. The enormity of opportunity found there—opportunity earned through hard work and perseverance—seemed infinite. Little wonder that in spring 1956, Alou felt torn between excitement and apprehension upon his arrival from Hiana, his home in the Dominican Republic, to the Giants' spring training facility, then in Melbourne, Florida.

"It was a unique sensation to realize that I was in a land I had heard so much about but which held not a single known friend," he recalled. Analogous to Alou's experience, historian Oscar Handlin, in his 1951 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Uprooted*, spoke of nineteenth-century immigrants in the same vein: "Loneliness had... the painful depth of isolation. The man who once had been surrounded with individual beings was [in America] cast adrift in a life empty of all personal things."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, within the North American milieu, the individual's identity was greatly tempered.

In the Dominican Republic, Alou had been someone. There he was a coveted baseball player and a track star bound for the Olympics. But in the United States, his identity was virtually nonexistent to those beyond his world. As a tonic to his plight, Alou triggered his national spirit to fuel the precious identity needed in his quest for direction in the America.

National identity meant everything to those who came to the United States [End Page 16] long before Alou's arrival, particularly those emotionally torn between the present and the past. Apart from the popular perception that people who immigrated into America longed to set up residence here, arrival was usually accompanied with a begrudging defiance of change. "They pushed me into America," wrote a young Jewish newcomer in 1881—"they" being the forces of oppression found in his homeland.<sup>2</sup> To the immigrant of that era, a journey to America often meant despair. One such observer recalled that "a person gone to America was exactly like a person dead.... The whole community turned out, and marched in slow time to the station, and wept loudly and copiously."<sup>3</sup>

The separation from home, heritage, and familiar values enhanced the insecurities. "Indeed, today's evils, by their nearness, are far more oppressive than yesterday's which, after all, were somehow survived," Handlin wrote of an immigrant's longing for the Old World. "Yesterday, by its distance, acquires a happy glow."<sup>4</sup> By their very nature, heritage and tradition also provided identity. One's heritage was the one thing that made sense to newcomers. It was their badge of honor. Never mind that famine, persecution, economic plight, or class struggle was their ticket to America. National identity was the one constant in their lives; it was not negotiable. Little wonder that a figure such as Mike Sullivan, who in 1850 came to America as a member of the potato famine herd, was, according to historian Michael T. Isenberg, "militantly Irish."<sup>5</sup> And that his son, John Lawrence, upon fighting his way to national fame in the late nineteenth century, became a lightning rod for the Irish ethnics, who boldly displayed the shamrock alongside Old Glory at each bout.

But not all nineteenth-century newcomers felt as "militant" about their national identity as did the earlier arrivals. Toward the...

## Hey Chico!

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SAMUEL O. REGALADO

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