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## Echando Raíces:<sup>1</sup> Latin American Settlement In Memphis

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### Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the rapid and recent growth of the Latin American population in Tennessee, especially in Shelby County and its major city, Memphis, and discusses the key characteristics of this population, including country of origin, gender ratio, age, educational background, settlement patterns, language ability, and home ownership. Most Latin Americans in Tennessee, Shelby County, and Memphis are from Mexico. The paper highlights the extensive participation of Mexican and Latin American workers in the labor force and their sizable impact on the region's economy. It also considers their capacity to adapt to the local circumstances and integrate into the larger Memphis community. The demographic, social, and economic profile of Latin Americans analyzed in this paper is based on 2000 Census data, city and county schools' data, Memphis and Shelby County Vital Statistics Records, and survey research conducted by the Center for Research on Women at the University of Memphis.<sup>2</sup>

### Latin American Population Growth in Tennessee, Shelby County and Memphis

In the 1980s, the Latin American population in the state of Tennessee was relatively small. By the end of the decade, there were 32,741 Hispanics in Tennessee, or 0.7 per cent of the total state population (U.S. Census Bureau 1990). The largest number of Latin Americans was concentrated in Middle Tennessee. One in three lived in the Nashville-Davidson County Metropolitan Statistical Area, in the counties bordering this area, or in Montgomery County—the site of a military installation. According to the 1990 Census, ninety percent of all Hispanics in Tennessee were U.S. citizens. More than two of every five reported Mexico as their country of origin. Relatively few Latinos lived in the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area<sup>3</sup> during this period. The 1990 U.S. Census counted 8,116 Hispanics in the metro area, mostly Mexican-Americans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans who had arrived from Houston and Dallas or from abroad (Johnson et al. 1999; Greenbaum 1998). The majority of these Hispanics (7,091) were residents of Memphis-Shelby County.

In the mid-1990s several counties throughout the state reported a significant increase in the Latino population. Besides Nashville-Davidson, the



metropolitan areas of Memphis, Clarksville, and Chattanooga also received considerable immigration. In these different regions of the state, the new Latino immigrants found employment in agriculture, the construction industry, and the service and distribution sectors. In 2000, the state of Tennessee ranked sixth in the nation among states with the fastest-growing immigrant populations. Most of these new immigrants were of Latin American origin. The 2000 Census recorded 123,838 Latinos in Tennessee or 2.2 percent of the total population in the state (see Table 1). Also, some 3 percent of the total number of children under the age of 18 was of Latin American descent (Kids Count 2001).

**Table 1**  
**Latino population in Tennessee by Type as a Percent of the Total Population, 2000**

TN Population Total	Latinos Total	Latinos % of Total	Mexicans	Puerto Ricans	Cubans	Other Latinos
5,590,283	123,838	2.2 %	77,372	10,303	3,695	32,488

Source: 2000 U.S. Census (<http://www.census.gov>).

The 2000 Census found several more thousand Latinos (a total of 27,520) in the Memphis metro area than its demographers had anticipated. The majority (23,364) were living in Shelby County, a remarkable 265 percent population increase during the decade (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Latino Population and its Share of the Total Population in Memphis and Nashville Metropolitan Statistical Areas, 1980-2000**

	1980		1990		2000	
	Population Total	Latino Percent	Population Total	Latino Percent	Population Total	Latino Percent
Memphis MSA	938,777	8.754 (1%)	1,007,306	7.546 (1%)	1,135,614	27.520 (2%)
Nashville MSA	850,505	5.500 (1%)	985,026	7.250 (1%)	1,231,311	40.139 (3%)
						45.4%

Source: Adapted from Suro and Singer, 2002, pp. 13 and 15.

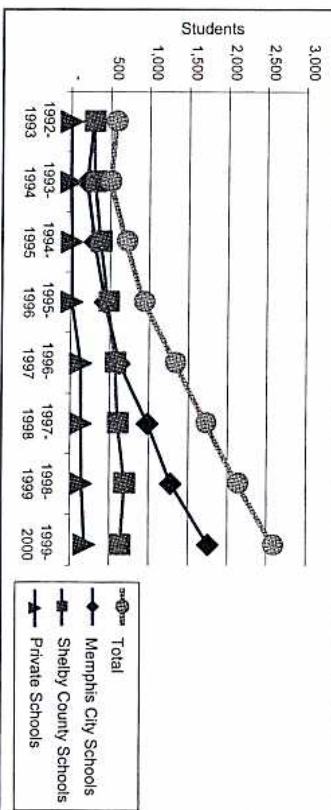
The Memphis and Shelby County Vital Records Office suggested that the number of Latino residents in Shelby County could be far greater than the number counted by the Census due to the likelihood of under-reporting of Latinos in the 2000 Census. Researchers at the University of Memphis estimated that the actual Latino population in Shelby County could amount to almost double the Census count, a finding that supports what local officials and community activists have often claimed. These calculations (rang-

ing from 31,000 to 47,000) were based on methods commonly used by demographers to estimate population growth between decennial censuses. They considered internal migration rates, birth data, and school enrollment of Latino children (see Burrell et al. 2001 for a discussion of the methodology and the results).

In 1993, the Memphis and Shelby County Health Department began recording the births to resident Hispanic mothers. From a trend perspective, during the period 1995-2000, resident Hispanic births increased from 189 in 1995 to 615 in 2000, or approximately 225 percent. During the same period, resident births to mothers who listed their place of birth as Mexico increased from 95 in 1995 to 441 in 2000, or approximately 364 percent—a trend that continued in 2001. (Memphis and Shelby County Vital Statistics 2000, 2001).

In 2000, Memphis and Shelby County public schools enrolled 2,366 Latino students, up from 572 in 1993. A partial count of Latino students in private schools in the same year increased this number to 2,851 (see Figure 1). The public elementary school with the highest concentration of Latin American students in Memphis-Shelby was more than 20 percent Latino. A public high school in the same neighborhood was nine percent Latino (Wolfe 2002). As reported by the Memphis City Schools English as Second Language Program (Perry 2003:18), the number of Spanish-speaking students in need of English as second language classes has doubled since 1997—from 682 in 1997 to 2,290 in 2002.

**Figure 1**  
**Enrollment Trends of Latino Students in Public and Private Schools in Memphis-Shelby, 1993-2000.**



Source: Adapted from Burrell et al., 2001, p. 17.

Prior to the recent growth in the Latino population, long-term Tennessee residents had little interaction with Spanish-speaking immigrants. Local leaders and public officials are facing new issues with respect to immigrant integration and provision of health care services, English as



second language classes, and translation and interpretation support. Without question, immigrant integration is a process that occurs gradually over time. Understanding the characteristics of the Latin American population will help to identify their needs and contributions to the local community.

### Profile of the Latin American Population

In 2000, about half of all Latinos in Memphis-Shelby<sup>4</sup> (12,408 or 53 percent) were foreign-born. One-third of these immigrants arrived in Memphis-Shelby after 1995. The majority (10,161 or 81 percent) were not citizens at the time of the decennial census. Mexico is by far the most common country of origin mentioned by Latin American immigrants. Some 69 percent of all Latin Americans in Shelby County are Mexicans. Even more Mexicans (72 percent) have settled within the city limits (see Table 3).

Latin Americans in Memphis-Shelby are predominantly male; most of

**Table 3**  
Hispanic/Latino Population by Country of Origin in Memphis, Shelby County and Tennessee, 2000.

	City of Memphis	% Total	Shelby County	% Total	Tennessee	% Total
Total Population	650,100	100%	897,472	100%	5,689,283	100%
Hispanic/Latino of any race)	19,317	2.9%	23,364	2.6%	123,838	2.2%
Total Hispanic Population	14,087	100%	16,19	100%	77,372	100%
Mexican	742	72.9%	1,215	69.3%	10,303	62.5%
Puerto Rican	521	3.8%	733	5.2%	3,695	8.3%
Cuban		2.7%		3.1%		2.9%
Other Hispanic/Latino	3,967	20.5%	5,225	22.4%	32,468	26.2%

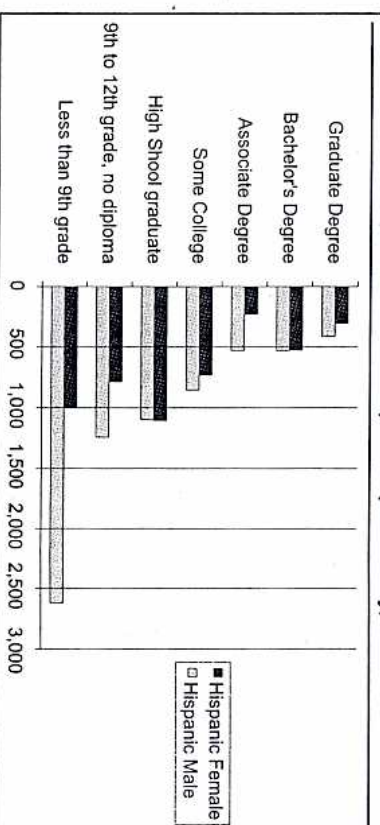
Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File 1, 100 Percent Data, Hispanic or Latino by Specific Origin; adapted from Mendoza, 2002, p. 3.

men are young; the median age for Latino males is 26. Some 39 percent (101) of Latin Americans are female, and most of them are also young; median age is 24. One-third of these females are children and adolescents younger than 18 years of age. Most women are married (75 percent) and live in large family households with their spouse present. In addition to nuclear family, large family households may include grandparents, other relatives, and friends who are boarders or roommates. Almost half (48 percent) of all Latin American family households in Memphis-Shelby include non-relatives. Many of these families live in crowded housing conditions—with occupancy of more than three people per room.

Near half of all married-couple families have children under 18 living at home. In Memphis-Shelby, according to the 2000 Census, 2.8 percent of all children under 18 are Hispanic or Latino, compared to 0.8 percent in 1990. At the local level (and national level as well), children of immigrants are significantly more likely to have two parents at home than are children of native-born Americans.

More than one-third of Latin American men have less than a 9th grade education. Most of the women, however, have completed high school or have college education (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
Educational Attainment by Gender, Hispanic / Latinos (25 Years and Older) in Memphis-Shelby, 2000.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3, Adapted from: Mendoza, 2002, p. 5

In Memphis-Shelby, recent immigrants from Latin America and Mexico have sought to settle in neighborhoods where other co-nationals are already established; 65 census tracts (out of 218) had 100 or more Latinos and account for almost 80 percent of the total Latino population in the county. Table 4 below shows the population, number of households, and persons per households by race and ethnicity in the 65 tracts of our study area. These 65 tracts are also the tracts where the majority of Latinos speak Spanish at home.

In Memphis-Shelby, 73 percent of all Latinos older than five speak Spanish at home. Many of these households (63 percent) are "linguistically isolated households"—defined as those in which no person 14 or older either speaks English as a first language or speaks English "very well." This proportion of linguistic isolation is high compared to the situation in the Nashville metro area and nationwide (Loispeich et al. 2003). Conversely, 23 percent of Latinos in Memphis-Shelby speak only English.

Language ability and homeownership are good indicators of immigrants' integration into the larger community over time. The analysis of homeownership in the 65 census tracts with one hundred or more Latin



**Table 4**  
Total Population, Number of Households, and Persons per Household by Race and Ethnicity in 65 Census Tracts, Shelby County, 2000.

	Population Total	White	Black	Latino	Other*
Population %	364,337 100%	190,165 52%	141,808 39%	18,133 5%	14,231 4%
Households %	137,511 100%	82,271 60%	48,309 35%	4,366 3%	2,575 2%
Persons Per Household	2.65	2.31	2.94	4.16	5.53

Note: The results account for 65 of the 218 census tracts in the county. These 65 tracts had 100 or more Latino residents, representing almost 80 percent of the total Latino American population countywide.

\* "Other" includes non-white, non-black, and non-Latino residents in those tracts.

Source: U.S. Census 2000. Tabulated by Sonya Schenk, Regional Economic Development Center, The University of Memphis; adapted from Mendoza, 2002, p. 4.

American residents shows that 26 percent of Latinos in those tracts are homeowners. In 2000, the average value of their homes was \$87,706. The average value of homes owned by African American householders in those same tracts was \$79,465. At the county level, including all householders in all census tracts, the value of homes owned by Latin Americans (\$98,633) ranks in the middle, between the value of homes owned by whites (\$148,862) and those owned by African Americans (\$70,795).

### Labor Force Participation and Economic Impact

In the same 65-census tract study area, Latin Americans have the highest labor force participation among residents 16 and over. In 2000, 80 percent of all Latino men older than 16 were in the labor force. Latin American women, however, had the lowest labor force participation rate in those same tracts—55 percent women were in the labor force. Table 5, below, shows the labor force participation by gender, race, and ethnicity in the 65 census tracts with one hundred or more Latino residents. The average hours worked per week does not vary significantly by gender and national origin. Latino men and women who are employed usually work 35 or more hours per week.

In 1999, the median earnings for Latin American men who worked full-time year round in Shelby County was \$22,291. The median earnings for women was \$21,164. The median household income for Latin American householders in 1999 was \$36,319. Nonetheless, the average income for Latino households was \$52,509. This latter figure accounts for all Latino households in Memphis-Shelby—including those that earn less than \$10,000 and the ones that earn more than \$100,000—and points to the

**Table 5**  
Labor Force Participation by Gender, Race and Ethnicity (Population 16 and over) in a Study Area of 65 Census Tracts Memphis-Shelby, 2000.

Population 16 Years and Over in the Labor Force					
	Total	White	Black	Hispanic or Latino	Other*
Total %	287,934 69%	155,836 68%	109,313 70%	12,677 71%	10,108 70%
Male %	136,599 75%	74,295 78%	49,025 70%	8,105 80%	5,174 81%
Female %	151,335 63%	81,541 59%	60,288 70%	4,572 55%	4,934 59%

\* "Other" includes non-white, non-black, and non-Hispanic residents in the 65-census tract study area.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000. Tabulated by Sonya Schenk, Economic Development Center, The University of Memphis.

presence of a burgeoning Latino middle class with prospects for future growth, a development that mirrors national trends (Bean et al. 2001).

Latinos' high rate of labor force participation is partly explained by their own reasons for migrating to the region. The main reasons they give for settling in Memphis-Shelby are job opportunities and reunification with family members. Research demonstrates that social networks—such as having a parent or sibling already settled in town or knowing other Latinos in the area prior to arrival—influence immigrants' opportunities for employment, occupational mobility, and better wages. However, two difficult barriers still prevent many Latin Americans, particularly women, from sustained participation in the labor market: inadequate availability of dependent care and undocumented status (Mehta et al. 2002).

Employers across the spectrum of the Memphis economy—from warehouses to nursing homes—have sought to hire the new workers who entered the secondary labor market during the 1990s. However, there is little available information on the characteristics of this workforce because most standardized national employment data under-represent the insertion of Latin Americans in local labor markets. For example, in 1997, EEO1 data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission counted only 2,189 Latino workers in Memphis. To address the lack of information on the Latino workforce, researchers at the Center for Research on Women at the University of Memphis, in partnership with The Work Place, Inc. administered a survey to 174 employers in Memphis-Shelby in 2001 (for a descriptive analysis of the survey, see Mendoza, Smith, Yu et al. 2001; a more contextual analysis can be found in Ciscel, Smith and Mendoza 2003). The employers reported about their hourly workers only—Latinos



managerial or professional positions within the same companies were not included in the results.

Among the 174 Memphis employers surveyed, 77 had already hired 2 Latino nonprofessional hourly workers. Transportation and instruction companies in this sample had the highest number of Latin American workers per firm. Distribution companies employed more Latin Americans than any other sector. Medical and Professional firms had the west proportion of Latin Americans in their labor force.

The wages paid to Latino workers varied widely across these industries. The Retail, Restaurants and Hotels sector paid the minimum reported wage (\$7.07/hour), as well as the lowest average wage (\$7.07/hour). Protective, Household and Other Services firms paid an average of \$7.16/hour. Instruction and Transportation companies reported the highest average wages (\$10.61/hour and \$11.19/hour respectively). Across the entire sample, Latin American workers received an average wage of \$9.43/hour. In industries, Latin American workers receive wages than tend toward the lower end but are within the typical range for other similarly skilled workers. In manufacturing occupations, many Latin American hourly workers are employed as general laborers or production workers—including assemblers, packers, and material handlers. Latinos were also concentrated in unskilled and semi-skilled positions in the service sector. Most Latino workers in Protective, Household and Other Services were employed as janitors, janitors, general laborers, or laundry workers. Within Retail, Restaurants, and Hotels, Latin Americans were hired as dishwashers, cooks, servers, sales clerks, and maids. In Medical and Professional Services, Latin Americans were spread across a variety of occupations, including janitors, medical technicians, and nurses' aides.

The job titles for Latin American hourly workers reported by employers in the Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate sector were bank teller and clerk, including accounting clerk. The most common job title for Latin Americans in Transportation companies was truck driver. Most of these workers were long-haul truckers paid by the mile; however, they clearly fit within the survey focus on nonprofessional, non-salaried workers.

When extrapolated to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, these findings underscore the magnitude of Latino employment in the Memphis workforce. For example, over one-fourth of the city's construction workforce may be composed of Latin American men. Also, the estimated Latino labor force in trade, warehousing or wholesale trade is large because Memphis is home for FedEx Corporation. The convenience of having FedEx trucks at warehouse for pick-up and immediate delivery to the airport hub enticed

many corporations to relocate their packing plants in the industrial parks of Memphis and northern Mississippi.

Taken as a whole, the research findings indicate a pattern of extensive Latino employment in the secondary labor market of Memphis. High labor demand during the 1990s made it relatively easy for native Memphians to find employment, and drew immigrants to the city. From 1995 to 1999, the number of jobs in Memphis grew by 54,700 (from 531,600 to 586,300), while the number of workers in the labor force grew by only 35,100. During the second half of the decade, the heart of the Memphis economy—logistics or transportation and distribution sectors—expanded rapidly, as more and more corporations decided to make this city the center for their distribution systems. As a consequence, semi-skilled jobs in construction, warehousing and manufacturing became difficult to fill, and employers experienced successive years of labor shortages. Because these jobs did not require strong English-language skills, companies moved quickly to employ Latin American workers.

Many of the jobs filled by Latino workers offer flexible and unregulated employment, especially in construction and warehousing. Flexible working conditions are characterized by (a) part-time labor, increasingly supplied through temporary staffing agencies or independent contracting, (b) flexible schedule in which time, day and place of work are stipulated on a short-term basis, and (c) a general lack of benefits (Cisnel, Smith and Mendoza 2003:335). Latin American and Mexican workers find themselves in these jobs in part because English language skills are not essential to perform the tasks and also because the immigrants' social networks permit them to adapt to irregular and less secure working conditions. For the immigrants and for the other workers who work alongside them, flexible employment arrangements mean chaotic schedules, last-minute childcare arrangements, disrupted families, and unpredictable paychecks. With the support provided by friends and relatives, the immigrant workers are able to participate in an increasingly deregulated labor market (Martin 1999).

Mexican and other Latin American workers not only respond to the demand for flexible labor, they also help to create a pool of available workers. Once established, ethnic networks serve as sources of information exchange, contacts, and further assistance that contribute to a self-sustaining immigration flow (Palloni et al. 2001). Although many arrive without the advantages of post-secondary education and training, and with limited economic resources, they make up for it in social capital, which is the "know-how" necessary to make a living and even start a business. Many Mexican immigrants in Memphis also find employment in the emerging ethnic economy—small business that, without being marginal to the larger



local economy, would not exist except for the ethnic community (Cátanzarite and Aguilera 2002).

Given their extensive labor force participation, it is no surprise that Latin American workers have had a major impact on the region's economy. David Ciscel estimated that Latino workers in the Memphis area had a total economic impact of \$1,020,000,000 and generated 35,972 jobs in 2000 (Mendoza, Ciscel and Smith 2001). This impact was made up of the work Latin American workers did in the local economy and the jobs they created through their consumer expenditures in local businesses. Although most Latin American workers earn below \$23,000 per year, they have an unusual characteristic for low-wage workers: they tend to have very high savings rates. Ciscel estimated that the typical Latino worker saves almost 30 percent of his/her income. Immigrant workers in Memphis send a portion of the savings to family members in the country of origin, and also invest in homes and durable goods.

## Conclusion

Now that Latin American and Mexican communities are established in Memphis-Shelby, new immigrants—who are family members and friends of established residents—continue to arrive and settle in the area. For example, 64 percent of 587 Latin Americans interviewed by Miranda et al. in 2003 arrived in Memphis after 2000. Also, 77 percent of these recent immigrants said that they intend to remain in the city. Latin American and Mexican immigrants have responded creatively to the social and economic conditions in the region by transforming them into real opportunities for themselves and their families.

Nonetheless, a large number of Latin American households in Memphis-Shelby are linguistically isolated (households in which no adult speaks English very well). They tend to be poorer and in greater need of social services. Low-income immigrant families could benefit from work-force development services, adult education, English as Second Language classes, and translation and interpretation services, particularly in health care clinics and in public schools. Many services are already in place but much more is needed. Second language acquisition and integration into a receiving society are indeed complex processes that require a considerable amount of time and personal effort. The larger community may find certain immunity resources—housing, schools, and social services—strained for a while, but with a growing immigrant population also comes expansion in the local workforce, an enlarged tax base, and larger bilingual markets for goods and services (Capps et al. 2004). As Mexican interviewees say, they are already "*echando raíces*" (establishing roots) in Memphis and working towards a better future for their children and their extended families.

## Notes

1. Establishing Roots.
2. In this paper I use the terms "Latin American," "Latino," and "Hispanic" interchangeably to refer to individuals of Latin American origin who were born in the U.S. as well as those who come from Mexico, Central and South America. When I want to refer to the latter group only (those born outside of the U.S.), I will use the terms immigrant or foreign-born. One should keep in mind that the majority Latin Americans in Memphis and Shelby County are Mexican.
3. In 2000, the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area included Shelby, Tipton and Fayette Counties in Tennessee, De Soto County in Mississippi, and Crittenden County in Arkansas. In 2003, Tunica (Mississippi) and Marshall (Arkansas) Counties were added to this metropolitan area.
4. "Memphis-Shelby" refers to the city and county areas.



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## **Latin American Immigrants, Religion, and the Politics of Urban Space in Atlanta**

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### **Introduction**

Over the past 2 ½ decades, hundreds of thousands of men and a growing number of women from Mexico and Central America have migrated to Atlanta, Georgia to find work in the region's thriving construction and service industries. Most of the early migrants were young Mexican men who came as temporary laborers from the north of Mexico and from the declining construction industry in Texas. Over the last fifteen years, they have been joined by migrants from other parts of Mexico and Central America, primarily Guatemala and El Salvador. At the same time, an increasing number of women, spouses, and children have joined male workers to form or reunite families, resulting in a greater Latin American presence in schools, churches, and neighborhoods of the Atlanta area. For the first time in U.S. history, the Southeast has become a major destination for foreign-born workers. Drawn by its construction, landscaping and service jobs, and by the nearby carpet and poultry-processing plants, more than 250,000 Latin American immigrants now reside in the Atlanta metropolitan region. According to the U.S. Census, Atlanta has experienced the most rapid Hispanic growth rate of all major metropolitan areas in the country. The population grew from 26,000 in 1980 to 108,000 in 1990 to 250,000 in the year 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Mexicans make up 60-70 percent of this population, while Central Americans comprise the next largest group; most of these migrants work as laborers in the construction, landscaping, and service industries and in nearby poultry processing plants. A growing number of South Americans (Peruvians, Colombians, and Venezuelans) have migrated to Atlanta and they tend to come from a higher socio-economic level than Mexicans and Central Americans.<sup>2</sup> Many of these immigrants are undocumented; a recent report sponsored by the Urban Institute estimates that about 40 percent of all immigrants in the state of Georgia are undocumented.<sup>3</sup>

The local context of late 20th century Atlanta has presented distinct constraints and opportunities to Mexican and Central American migrants seeking to live and work there. Drawing on the work of cultural geographers and theorists, I want to pay particular attention to the spatial aspects of migrants' experiences in this large southern metropolis. Henri Lefebvre, one of the first to develop a critical theory of space, holds that throughout