

Uncovering Hidden Narratives: Hispanics in American Spaceflight

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“Uncovering Hidden Narratives: Hispanics in American Spaceflight” is a labor of love for my students. I teach at a Hispanic serving institution and the journey of hidden narratives began after a student asked if there had ever been a Mexican astronaut. Of course there have been and are currently astronauts of Hispanic background, but narratives and accessibility to historical documents and archives for researchers and students are few and far between. For future researchers, the study of Hispanic men and women both in and outside NASA will add a new and much needed layer to the broader history of spaceflight. José Jiménez” is the first unofficial Hispanic astronaut. The Mercury astronauts and Americans alike embraced Bill Dana’s late-night dim-witted character from Bolivia. First appearing on The Steve Allen show in 1959, Jiménez opened with his broken English tagline, “My name José Jiménez.” While interviewing José about his future flight into space, Allen pointed to Jiménez’s helmet and asked if it was a “crash helmet.” José replied, “Gee, I hope not.” Asking José what he planned to do in space, Jiménez explained, “I plan to cry a lot.” Early Cold War audiences found Jiménez humorous for two reasons. First, his buffoon antics played into xenophobic stereotypes of Hispanics as unintelligent and lazy. Second, José’s trepidation of his upcoming flight furthered this exaggerated persona by depicting Hispanics as technologically inept. The depiction of Jiménez reflected the parameters of American spaceflight—especially when it came to race and ethnicity—with male Anglos as the primary technological consumers while those with brown faces were relegated to non-participants and hidden narratives

The following paper addresses different “archival” methods to uncover hidden narratives of Dana and actual Hispanics within American spaceflight—specifically as the broader Chicano Civil Rights Movement intersected with the Space Race. Dana retired the Jiménez image in 1972 due to the efforts of the Mexican-American Anti-Defamation

Committee (MAADC) and the Involvement of Mexica-Americans in Gainful Endeavors (IMAGE). Completing research on Hispanic-Americans in spaceflight means leaving the confines of NASA Centers, NASM, and NARA to venture out to MAADC and IMAGE archives within the University of Texas, Online Archives of California, digital advertisements and print media archives (even Google's newspaper archive), records, music, television episodes, as well as do-it-yourself oral histories from MAADC and IMAGE members.

In terms of piecing together narratives of Hispanic-Americans employed in spaceflight, recording the oral histories of these individuals is urgent. The continued research and preservation into NASA's recruitment of "Spanish-Surnamed Students" in the 1970's, coupled with the "Sixteen-Point Program For Spanish-Surnamed Americans" is greatly needed. The future of archival research is also changing for historians. Current historians and students of history can use a whole host of new archival data, specifically in the age of the digital humanities. Social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook allows academics—and students—to be active participants with NASA employees. New technologies provide more opportunities for do-it-yourself oral histories that uncover hidden narratives of historical actors such as Franklin Chang-Diaz, Ellen Ochoa, or José Hernandez that may not be available in traditional archives.