

Project ñ and *Latinidad* in the Digital Age: A Conversation with Latina Filmmaker Denise Soler Cox¹

By Megan Jeanette Myers

Project ñ (enye) – projectenye.com – has embraced an externally-imposed label of “modern-day social movement.” With a film, mini-docs, a podcast, blog, and strong presence on Twitter and other social media platforms such as Snapchat, the label is more than accurate. The multi-platform project or movement, though, is about much more than labeling. While the term “ñ” refers to Latinos/as who identify as first-generation American-born Latinos/as with at least one parent from a Spanish-speaking country, the pulse of Project ñ is not to force individuals to self-identify as ñ, but instead to connect people and communities, to heal a generation. Connection, or *conexión* in Spanish, is not spelled with an “ñ,” but it does have an accent mark – and these *tildes*, essential to the Spanish language, are not just being misused, but in some instances not being used at all. Twitter, for example, does not allow for the ñ character to be included in handles. If your last name is Peña, it is not possible for your name to be reproduced as your Twitter handle. This prompted Project ñ to start a Twitter campaign with the hashtag #WhereInTheWorldIsTheÑ.

The reality: ñ *is* there. It is the logo of the Instituto Cervantes in Spain and also is incorporated into the logo for CNN’s Spanish language broadcast. Along with the millions of Latinos/as in the United States who identify as ñ (whether or not they use this terminology to describe themselves), those who have an ñ in their first or last name, or those who speak Spanish and recognize *dona* is not the same thing as *doña*, the ñ has all but disappeared. Project ñ, then, is about restoring value to the ñ experience. With a focus on the telling and sharing of the broad spectrum of ñ experiences – often with more in common than not – the Project is just getting started. The following conversation with Project ñ’s co-founder, Denise Soler Cox, speaks to the origins of Project ñ, the difficulties surrounding self-identification, and the (ñ) stories yet to be told.

Interviewer: First, I think it would be helpful if you could just explain, in your words, what ñ means. I know it is a term you did not coin as it was first used in Miami in the sixties and seventies, but what drew you to the term?

Denise Soler Cox: A year before I heard the term officially I had this experience that is part of a re-enactment in the film. The way I describe it is feeling incredibly connected to my friends in Miami one night and I just wanted to bottle the feeling I had. I didn’t know what in the world was making me feel so connected, so I started looking around at everybody and thinking about what we were talking about. Then, I realized what we had in common: we were all the children of immigrant parents. The conversation was so rich and I wanted to be able to access that conversation for myself, but I also wanted to give it away. That night I felt that my personal narrative, one that I really believed was only my own, was also the narrative of these ten people at dinner. I had a profound realization that if it was all of their experience, then it must be that of an entire generation. If I was feeling so alone, I felt like I had the capacity to heal a generation of people. That night I made a decision to make a documentary; it took me seventeen years to actually do something about

¹ Interview conducted in-person in Ames, IA on October 13, 2016. Interview was transcribed from an original recording.

it. It wasn't until a year later that I realized this generation had a name. But, it's really an *experience*. I thought that if I could make a piece of media, knowing the power of media, I could connect a generation of people who feel isolated and disconnected.

MJM: Do you think that the ñ experience is synonymous with the Latino/a experience? Or, for you, is ñ a subset of what is generally described as Latin@ or Latinx?

DSC: It's a hard question for me to answer.

MJM: ...I think terminologies at any level are sometimes hard to talk about. The differentiation between Hispanic and Latino/a in the United States is not necessarily agreed upon by scholars or the general public. Moreover, when these umbrella identifiers also relate directly to an individual's self-identification within a group, it becomes even more complex.

DSC: There are between 54 and 56 million Latino/as in the United States right now. Ñ is a subset of that group: first generation Latino/as. A lot of people outside of this traditional ñ identification have gotten upset, and I don't want to leave anybody out. The entire project was founded on a feeling of *not* belonging. I also feel like if someone identifies with it (ñ) and they want to call themselves an ñ, then so be it. Ñ exists within the whole entirety of the description of Latino or Latina and it is a very acute experience that belongs to the first people that were American born. The second closest is the 1.5 generation. Many ñ's have told me: "Please just keep this for us." Also, the vernacular is problematic because technically the census calls us (ñ's) "second generation," but many others call us first generation. This is why we now say "first-generation American-born Latino/as," to keep it crystal clear. I want to keep the integrity of the experience intact. Ñ's are the ones straddling both worlds, one arm in one world and one in the other, but with all the expectations of both worlds. It's not quite the same if you're fifth or sixth or third generation. My daughters will not have the same struggles as me, even if I was not the co-founder of this project.

MJM: I think you are right. For me, when I think about the 1.5 generation I think immediately of the Cuban-American scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat who writes about that precise generation in *Life on the Hyphen* and *Next Year in Cuba*. He, for example, describes the group as CubaNO's and AmericaNO's, they are neither and they are both at the same time. I think you can theorize or reflect on the experiences of different generations in myriad ways, and there are always some commonalities but also important distinctions that make each generation unique.

The other thing about ñ that is really striking to me relates to the use or non-use of the *tilde*, or more specifically *virgulilla*; how non Spanish-speakers do not realize the need to keep this grammatical accentuation. They don't recognize that Pena is not the same thing as Peña, or dona and doña... I hadn't thought about the fact Twitter does not allow for handles to include the ñ symbol until I read it on your website. This de-authorization or de-valuing of ñ is why you started the platform #WhereInTheWorldIsTheÑ. Did Twitter have an official response to this campaign?

DSC: No. That campaign had something like 23 million impressions on Twitter, where Project ñ is really prolific. Really, it was a domino effect and a lot of reporters got on board because they had no idea either. Zoë Saldana, for example, used to be Zoë Saldaña, but she dropped the ñ. I do not think that change started on Twitter, but I would love to know when she stopped using her

proper name. So many people that had ñ's in their name have reached out to us and said "Thank you very much." It's interesting that Twitter, a place where Latino/as traditionally over-index, would not give us the ñ. Would you take away an e, an l, or an o?

MJM: ...And you can read it as a metaphor for Latino/a populations in certain communities that are invisibilized at other levels, too.

DSC: Yes, that idea of not mattering. It responds to a culture in which my teachers, for example, said I am going to call you Denise So-lur instead of Denise So-ler. It was not ok thirty years ago and it is still not ok now, but it happens all the time.

MJM: I want to talk a little bit about the fr'ñ term as well. I love this! I, for example, identify as an ally, and I think this is what the fr'ñ term underscores. Is this something you came up with and what does it mean to you?

DSC: The original fr'ñ is my producing partner Henry Ansbacher. It came out of a conversation with a reporter when we were talking about what everyone else is if they are not ñ. This is a really interesting discussion, when people ask me, "What am I if I'm not an ñ?" It's been interesting in the sense that they look to me to "give" them something. I think this can be a possible commentary on the Latino/a community – that they seem to be waiting for someone to give them something versus creating something. This is another conversation.

MJM: It is also interesting when you think about the coining of the term Chicano/o, for example, in the sixties when the Mexican-American population popularized the term "Chicano/a" to take ownership of their own experience and reality. It is almost like there has been a shift from assertively claiming a label for yourself to instead asking, "What am I?" I wonder, too, if this is a result of an influx of multiethnic identifiers. Are there too many terms that it becomes confusing?

DSC: I think it is interesting to think about where this question is coming from. I also relate it to a Latino/o humility that sometimes does not serve us well. It is one of our best qualities as a culture, but to a fault. For me, when I found that name – ñ – I took it for myself. I was at Google about a year ago and we had not yet completed the film so we were just sharing some of our web content. At the end there was a woman that stood up with a thick Spanish accent and shared that she had been a follower of Project ñ until she found out that she was not included as an ñ. She told me, "I'm no longer following you, and I just wanted to let you know that." It was really interesting that she allowed that to happen, and it is a separate thing that she would decide to call me out publicly. She felt like she was a part of this experience but because I said that it was actually an *American* experience, she felt like I was taking that sense of belonging away from her. I did not make the name up; I'm empowering it. What I told her was that my whole childhood all I ever wanted was an accent, was to be from the homeland. I wanted the other people from there to claim me, to not take that experience from me. I told her: "You actually get to be the immigrant, and I'm the ñ." I asked if she had any kids and she said she had a daughter, so I explained to her that her daughter is an ñ; it is a distinctive experience.

As far as fr'ñ, it's the original ally. People that are not Latino/a, for example, that are deep allies – like my husband, my partner, some of my dear friends – that term is for them.

MJM: That term really resonates with me. I also like how you have described Project ñ as a modern day social movement. In your opinion have you reached this point? Or what would this “arrival” look like for you?

DSC: This is something that other people are calling us and it is a term that we have adopted. Five years ago this January, I pitched a film about sixteen million people. I did not pitch a movement, and I also did not pitch a film about me. And that’s what the movie is about, it’s about me. Slowly but surely people have said, “I want to be part of the movement.” We then began to ask ourselves, “What does that look like?” At first, I did not feel ready to be a leader of a movement, I didn’t know what the responsibility of that would be. I had to step into that role; whatever is needed and wanted is what I am going to provide. I am the default leader, and the default person to take responsibility for it. At the end of the day, this is my life’s work and I take responsibility for telling these stories and for holding the torch for this. I don’t know if we have gotten there or if movements ever arrive. One thing that will make an impact is when people embrace the term to describe their experience and adopt the vernacular. I think the experience for adults is one thing, we have to handle ourselves. Who really this project is for is our youth – high school, middle school, college. Kids that are contemplating who they are right now. With the distinction of ñ comes the connection. When I say “This is what I know ñ to be or let me tell you what I know,” what I find is that people will share their experiences in a way that is very authentic. I believe authentic sharing and a compassionate ear are some of the first steps to community and civic engagement. Without these steps, I am not sure we could ever get there.

MJM: Is the idea behind the social multi-media platform and the push to share peoples’ stories in mini-doc form simply to get the stories out there so people can find their own connection to the Project and decide what resonates with them?

DSC: Exactly, and then start to share their own stories. I was recently in Grand Rapids, MI and there was a Chilean father and, I think, a Chicana mother and they came up to me after seeing the documentary and shared that they had a daughter and how they felt guilty after watching the film. They wanted to thank me. They realized they were treating their daughter in ways the film describes. When they call their daughter and that relationship is healed they are going to apologize to her. When I was in college my Mom and I were still figuring out our relationship. The gift of having a set of Latino parents – who are never wrong – say “We are sorry”, “How do you feel?”, “How did you feel when we said that?”...I’m a big believer in the fact that one relationship changed changes the world. What is the daughter going to do with this? How is she going to express it at school or as a woman in the world achieving her dreams? I know what I am like not feeling support and how I feel when I am, I am two different people. Connection really is everything. It’s important for Latinos/as to feel like they matter to themselves, to their community, to their parents and siblings.

MJM: Let’s return to the idea of a linguistic divide. While some ñ’s feel straddled between two languages, not all Latinos/as speak Spanish; I think the mini-docs on the Project ñ website continue to reference this experience. People say they feel excluded from both communities but one of the main reasons for feeling excluded from the Latino community is due to a lack of fluency in Spanish. It seems this theme continued to reappear in the mini docs and the film as a source of isolation.

DSC: It is alive and well. About 1,000 people have seen the movie so far and in both bigger groups and smaller groups what I have found is that heritage speakers never say this...but the ñ's and generations beyond – I don't care how good their Spanish is – they never think it is good enough. There is so much layered behind that conversation and I talk about this in the film.

MJM: It seems like the narrative of Project ñ is rooted in this linguistic, cultural, social (and the list continues) hyphenation that can come to define the Latino/a or more specifically the ñ experience.

DSC: And giving it a name is important...at first I was taking some heat about introducing another label. Instead, I am empowering it because it makes people feel like they are connected to something. Honestly, I have not met an ñ that didn't appreciate knowing what their experience was called. I have no hate against any other identifier, I think it is about whatever makes you feel good.

MJM: So now you are in Ames, IA visiting Iowa State University to screen your film and last week you were in Grand Rapids, MI. When you are traveling and sharing the film and project, do you seek out individuals' stories anywhere? Where do the stories of the ñ's in the mini docs on the website begin? Are you trying to breach a geographical or, more specifically, regional diversification of the ñ experience?

DSC: Yeah. I find that people pour out their stories. It seems to me that once I explain what ñ is, I can take part in the sharing of this conversation. Now all I really have to do is show the trailer and people get it. The film is like a punch in the gut, then people really get it. The "ñ experience," what I will be sharing tonight, really makes the experience clear; if you don't get it you don't have a pulse. It's for Latinos/as and for anybody else, it's for human beings. It is my favorite thing to talk about since that night with my friends 20 years ago. I talked about it and talked about it for 17 years and what is cool now is sharing this through the film.

Your question about if I wanted to represent the regional conversation...I did not even know there was a regional conversation until I started meeting people from all the different regions. When I moved from New York to Miami and then Denver that is when I realized that there was a common denominator ñ experience but there was also a regional narrative. Conversations about immigration, for example, are still more or less private in Denver and it is fascinating how modified the conversation is, but in Miami it is way more advanced. The conversations are also different for political and economic reasons. I think when Latino/as have power politically and economically this conversation is way more mature. I have interviewed 90 something people in Miami and it is a very few number of people who have not cried during that interview; it taps into some raw emotions. Even in a place like Miami where there is a real context to be Latino/a, the ñ experience is so very much alive and well. I want to keep telling stories. No Latinos/as ever ask me this, but others have asked me if I am afraid that we will ever run out of stories. I always laugh, I say that if I retired I would still have a lifetime of stories. I want to do this for as long as possible.

MJM: So what is the vision for the future? What does Project ñ look like moving forward?

DSC: Right now we are touring all over the country with the short, and we are doing that until next year. We are simultaneously shooting the feature-length version of the same film. Think of

an extended dance-mix version of your favorite song. My partner has made 26 movies and he says he has never made a movie where anyone said it was too short, so we are making the longer version. We are also actively looking for an underwriter or a sponsor to keep underwriting all of the web content that we create because that is where we are building our profile. We are just getting started and there are so many people to talk to. I like talking to celebrities, and I have only talked to a few, but it is fascinating when you are just talking to the person making lattes. It's the person that you would least expect has gone through something – those are the stories that I want to tell.

MJM: I'm looking forward to hearing more stories and for more stories to be told. Thank you so much for your time, Denise.