Tracing the routes of Latin American cultural practices in London could perhaps start in the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre with around eight or nine shops, ranging from hair dressers to food shops, owned by Latin Americans, mainly Colombians. A short stroll around the first level of the Shopping Centre might be disconcerting for many, but welcoming for others. Once in the Shopping Centre you may be trapped by the sounds of music, the many accents of people who stop on their way at ‘La Bodeguita’ for lunch or a snack; by the smells of the food, incense and perfumes; and even more by the mixture of people wandering around the corridors on a Saturday morning. However, this might not be the starting point for others whose first contact with Latin America in London came from music, dance or food. If this is the case, then it might perhaps start at Cuba Libre in Islington, at Bar Rumba in Piccadilly Circus, El Rincon Quiteno in Holloway or in La Bodeguita in Elephant & Castle, where the sounds of Latin music are mixed with the flavours of Spanish, Cuban, Ecuatorian or Colombian food. Perhaps it started when learning how to dance ‘Sexy Salsa’ with Elder, ‘Energetic Salsa’ with Xiomara or, ‘Cuban Salsa’ with Nelson, ‘el cubanísimo’. This might
not be the case for many Latin Americans who are still recovering from long hours of hard work at Oxford Street during the non-shopping hours, or from cleaning houses in the middle class neighbourhoods of Camden, Chelsea or Notting Hill. If the concern is political or academic, then it perhaps starts at the Institute of Latin American Studies, at the Latin American House or at many other solidarity groups. For many ‘others’ ‘we’ can just be ‘bloody foreigners’ in London.

These examples might illustrate the variety of meanings and experiences of Latin America in London, but more significant is the fact that these experiences and representations of Latin London are marked by differentiated power relations. I am not simply presenting an argument about hybrid identities, but about how Latin American identities in London are constituted out of, and in relation to, different and ongoing power relations.

Today I will be focusing on how Latin Americans contribute to the changing character of London by transforming specific sites and in the process attributing specific Latin identities to these. The presentation will explain how Latin Americans have contributed to the on-going transformation of places in London by focusing on Elephant & Castle shopping centre. In this way Latin Americans are developing links and establishing new relationships with existing
places whilst also contributing to, and becoming part of London’s ethnoscape. Thinking about Latin American identities in London through the idea of diaspora provides a way of exploring the relationship between place and identity as a series of overlapping routes through the city and how these are marked by power relations.

**Latin Americans in London**

The arrival of Latin Americans in Britain as a large immigrant group started in the early 1970s, gradually increasing in numbers and becoming more visible towards the end of the 1980s. The experience of migration has not been the same for everyone. Large numbers of Latin Americans arrived in Britain as migrant workers, some came as political refugees, and others were escaping from political and civil unrest in their own countries.

According to estimates based on the 2001 census a total of 31,387 Latin Americans were registered as living in London, of these Colombians (9,035) and Brazilians (8,162) make up the largest groups, followed by Argentineans (2,557), Ecuadorians (2,301) and Chileans (2,054). There are also a smaller number of Venezuelans, Mexicans, Cubans, Peruvians, Uruguayans and Bolivians (McIlwaine, 2007). However, these figures are misleading as according to
unofficial estimates the number of Latin Americans in London could be as high as 700,000 to 1,000,000, if the figures were to include those people who have overstayed the expiry of their visas (McIlwaine, 2007). If these estimates are correct, then most of the Latin American population in London live without the proper documentation. Those who have overstayed their visas will have to negotiate their routes through London in quite distinct ways when compared with other immigrants who are legally settled in Britain.

The making of Latin identities in London

London has been described as a ‘world city’, a multicultural and a cosmopolitan city due to the variety of people, products and practices that are present. London’s Latin locations contribute to, and at the same time transcend conceptualizations of cultural diversity in the capital. Even though there is not a Latin American neighbourhood as such, a Latin presence can be detected in the numerous Latin themed bars, restaurants and shops across the capital and by long standing cultural events such as the Latin American carnival (Carnaval del Pueblo) in Burgess Park and the Latin American film festival (across various cinemas in London).

One of the many other ways in which ‘Latinness’ is signified in the capital is through salsa music clubs, as is demonstrated in my previous research (Román-Velázquez, 1996, 1999). But today, I will
focus on Latin American-owned shops at the Elephant and Castle shopping centre.

Mapping out the location of Latin American-owned shops in London is not as easy as it was at the beginning of the 1990s, when I first conducted research about Latin Americans in London (Román-Velázquez, 1999). During the 1990s most of the shops and restaurants established by Latin Americans were located south of the River Thames around the administrative boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark. Most of the retail activity was at the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre with ten shops owned by Latin Americans. Another twelve shops could be found further down and around the ring of roads surrounding a shopping centre near to Brixton, Vauxhall and Clapham Common underground stations. Elephant and Castle, Camberwell, Peckham and Borough could be identified as areas where a Latin American presence was most obvious. It was in these areas that a visible Latin American economic and cultural activity was initiated in shops, bars, clubs and restaurants. However, by the end of the 1990s, Latin Americans were also running shops, restaurants and music clubs in other areas of north and east London, such as Holloway, Stoke Newington, Manor House and Seven Sisters. The 2008 edition of Paginas Latinas, a commercial guide catering for Latin Americans in London, provides an indication of the increase in the Latin American presence in the
capital. Elephant and Castle, Newington Butts and surrounding areas in South London still had the greatest concentration of Latin American-owned shops; however Seven Sisters with Tiendas del Norte in Seven Sisters market has been emerging as another Latin American area, suggesting that in a period of about fifteen years (from 1992, when I first started doing research on Latin Americans in London to 2008) the distribution of Latin American-owned shops in the city has become more widespread and dispersed.

The Elephant and Castle shopping centre was one of the first in Britain when it opened in 1965. Apart from its location: ‘Marooned by hurtling traffic on a life-threatening system of roundabouts in Southwark, south London’ (Hall, 1992: 18), and in one of the areas of highest unemployment, the Centre was also strongly affected by the economic recession at the end of the 1980s. Almost all the shops were closing or ceasing operations. By 1991, for example, there were hardly any shops open on the first floor of the Centre (Hall, 1992). A year later Latin Americans started opening shops on the first level of the shopping centre. La Fogata opened in June 1992, followed by Inara Travels whose manager tried to encourage other Latin Americans to do likewise. By 1994 there were ten shops owned by Latin Americans including food shops, fritter stalls, a travel agency, a jeweller, an employment agency, a hairdresser and a tailor’s shop. Fifteen years on the presence of Latin Americans
was still strong, with small snack places filtering to the outside of the shopping centre.

The economic situation was an important element stimulating the movement of Latin Americans into the shopping centre, and low rent was one of the most attractive features. Elephant and Castle showed the signs of a deprived inner-city shopping area that was frequented by low-income groups and that had been aesthetically neglected. Hence, Latin Americans started investing in a place when there was no guarantee of economic success, running businesses in areas that were in decline and which had been vacated at the end of the 1980s boom. This is an indication of how Latin Americans were located in an economically marginal position within the city, but also of how the economic decline provided possibilities for those who otherwise would not have the economic capital for investment. With land value in zone one increasing and given its proximity to central London and its strategic location for commerce and businesses, plans were in place for the redevelopment of Elephant and Castle. These plans include the demolition of the shopping centre in 2010 to provide new green spaces for recreation, play areas for children, a new open market as well as a new retail space. These plans raise a number of questions about the position and influence of Latin Americans within the new development plans. Latin Americans are represented in the committee meetings and have been offered financial compensation for their loss once the shopping centre is
demolished. At the time of writing this article, it is unclear whether the Latin American shops will have a place in the newly developed retail space or open market.

The shops at Elephant and Castle shopping centre were constructed with the illusion of being outdoors. Manufactured of wood, these shops were in a row in the middle of the corridor (previously the floor space of the centre) as if they were a row of shops in a little street. Towards the end of the 1990s the external appearance of the colourful row of shops was replaced with modular white metal structures, but the internal decoration and layout of the shops remained more or less unchanged. These shops are organized and decorated so as to resemble many of the little shops you could find in some rural areas or inner-country towns in many countries of Latin America. For example, ‘La Tienda’ (as it is commonly known, or ‘Agencia los colorados su tienda Latina’) sell products that are not otherwise available in the UK, like for example the banana leaves to wrap the ‘tamales’, the flour for the ‘arepas’ or ‘empanadas’, ‘frijoles’ and boxes or ready mix desserts from Latin America, along with Latin American newspapers, magazines and handicrafts.

There is also a music shop (‘Sabor Latino’) that includes a large collection of CDs from Latin American artists as well as selling
greeting cards in Spanish. These shops are not only making products available; the selection of products and the way in which these are displayed also constitute an important part of the way in which the identity of the shops is communicated to passersby. A further way in which these shops are mediating representations of a particular Latin American identity is through decoration. In the case of La Bodeguita, various Colombian icons were hung over the wall including photographs of the Andes region, of popular ‘barrios’ and handicrafts of the ‘chiva’, a bus that travels around the rural areas of Colombia with fruits and people’s luggage on top. Alongside the food and the icons, Latin music is also constantly played.

Elephant and Castle shopping centre has become an information centre providing leaflets and newspapers, legal advice, currency exchange centres, services for cheap phone calls, inter flora services to Latin American countries and services for sending money and parcels to Latin America. For Latin Americans living in London, the Elephant and Castle was not just a shopping centre to buy food, products from their home countries or gain information, but also a meeting point. During the week many people pass by to have their lunch or snack at the Centre or perhaps to solve a problem or just to have a chat.
Economically these shops are also important because they provide employment and income for many Latin Americans in London. Elephant and Castle shopping centre has also become a social meeting point and in this sense Latin Americans are not only participating in the economy of the shopping centre, but transforming it and in the process creating and communicating a particular Latin cultural identity. The entrepreneurs, their customers, colleagues and friends have participated in the transformation of the shopping centre by constructing places with a particular Latin identity.

The social experience of Elephant and Castle shopping centre is different for those Londoners or commuters who use it merely as a transit route, to visit a supermarket or to make a train connection. In this respect Latin Americans are establishing new social relationships across these places as an active part of creating and negotiating routes through the city. In this process Latin Americans are delineating new spatial boundaries in these places and establishing a new relationship with them.

**Final remarks**

The Elephant and Castle shopping centre provided an example of a location where Latin Americans began positioning in London to illustrate the particular ways that places have been given specific
cultural identities. The shopping centre is not just mediating representations of Latin America; it is actively being transformed and used as a meeting place and point of contact for social interaction and the sharing of information. Through the process of transforming places and using these for different social practices Latin Americans have created different routes through London.

There is not a unified or homogenous Latin identity in London, what I presented here today is only one of the visible ways in which a Latin American presence can be detected in London. What I want to highlight from this example is that the Latin American identities in London should be understood in relation to how different groups have come to occupy different positions and how certain cultural practices are positioned in terms of particular power relations throughout the city. My intention is not to raise issues about authenticity, but to highlight that despite the possibilities that cities provide for ‘contact zones’ and new hybrid identities, diasporic cultural practices often remain divided and separated.