
"Latinidad Is Cancelled"

Confronting an Anti-Black Construct

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In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Ben & Jerry's released a widely lauded statement—"We Must Dismantle White Supremacy: Silence Is NOT an Option"—avowing their commitment to anti-racism.¹ In it, the ice cream company categorically reaffirmed support for Black Lives Matter; named the following victims of racial violence: "Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Emmett Till, Martin Luther King, Jr.;" and called for policy changes aimed at achieving the nation's promise of justice for all.² Overall, it was an admirable gesture that stood in stark contrast to all the responses that fell short, especially those from museums and art institutions.³ Foregrounding the history of the United States, however, the statement exhibited a notable blind spot as a result of its ethnocentrism. "What happened to George Floyd in Minneapolis," it declared, "is the fruit borne of toxic seeds planted on the shores of our country in Jamestown in 1619, when the first enslaved men and women arrived on this continent."⁴ On the one hand, it should go without saying

that the United States is not a continent (and neither was it a country in 1619), and it is disappointing that the company's public relations team did not catch this error. On the other hand, and more importantly, African enslaved peoples were brought to the Americas over half a millennium ago, and their point of entry was the island of Hispaniola, in what is today the Dominican Republic.⁵ As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has noted, "Enslaved Africans worked and died in the Caribbean a century before the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia."⁶

It is estimated that the first enslaved peoples were present "as early as 1526 in the region that would become the United States."⁷ In the words of historian Michael Guasco, "To ignore what had been happening with relative frequency in the broader Atlantic world over the preceding 100 years or so understates the real brutality of the ongoing slave trade . . . and minimizes the significant African presence in the Atlantic world to that point. . . . People of African descent have been 'here' longer than the English colonies."⁸ Indeed, well before 1619 people of African descent living in the northern and northwestern regions of Hispaniola had been targeted in an episode known as the Devastations of Osorio or *devastaciones*, which followed a 1604 order by the Spanish crown to depopulate the region to stop people from

1. George Floyd (1973–2020) was an African American man who was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, in front of witnesses that included other police. The incident was captured on video and led to widespread protests and an unprecedented outpouring of support, including statements of solidarity from businesses, the nonprofit sector, educational institutions, and others.

2. Ben & Jerry's, "We Must Dismantle White Supremacy: Silence Is NOT an Option," June 2, 2020, accessed March 18, 2021, www.benjerry.com/about-us/media-center/dismantle-white-supremacy. Black Lives Matter, a social movement founded in 2013, advocates against white supremacy and state-sanctioned and vigilante violence inflicted on Black communities.

3. Among others, see Matt Stromberg, "Open Letter Criticizes Getty for Racial Bias and Insensitivity," *Hyperallergic*, July 17, 2020, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/577530/open-letter-criticizes-getty-for-racial-bias-and-insensitivity/>; Aaron Randle, "We Were Tired of Asking: Why Open Letters Have Become Many Activists' Tool of Choice for Exposing Racism at Museums," *Artnet News*, July 15, 2020, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museum-open-letters-activism-1894150>.

4. Ben & Jerry's, "We Must Dismantle."

5. António de Almeida Mendes, "The Foundations of the System: A Reassessment of the Slave Trade to the Spanish Americas in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, ed. David Eltis and David Richardson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 63. See also Silvio Torres-Saillant, "The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity," *Latin American Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (May 1998): 126.

6. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.04595>), 17.

7. Crystal Ponti, "America's History of Slavery Began Long before Jamestown," *History*, August 14, 2019, updated August 26, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619>.

8. Quoted in Ponti, "America's History of Slavery."

smuggling goods with agents of rival nations. According to José Buscaglia-Salgado, it was “the first major calculated genocide in the history of coloniality.” He posits that by 1606, “over twelve hundred people had been arrested and hundreds hanged, mostly blacks.”⁹ Not only is violence against Afro-descendant peoples woven into the very fabric of the Americas, so is amnesia.

The most significant challenge to white supremacy *ever* happened in Haiti in 1791, as a result of a revolution that Trouillot characterizes as “unthinkable” because it “challenged the ontological order of the West and the global order of colonialism.”¹⁰ Indeed, during an era when Afro-descendants were considered less than human, Haiti’s 1805 constitution radically declared: “All distinctions of color will by necessity disappear . . . ; *Haitians will henceforth be known by the generic denomination of blacks.*”¹¹ The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) had a profound impact on hemispheric relations and altered the course of history. The second country in the Western Hemisphere to obtain independence and, in the words of Frederick Douglass, “the only self-made Black republic in the world,”¹² it stoked racial fears in the United States and the colonial powers in the region to the degree that “Haiti became synonymous with slave insurrection and black barbarism.”¹³ The loss of its most prized colony led to France’s selling off its Louisiana territories—known in US history as the Louisiana Purchase—impacting Native Americans in the Southeast who would be displaced by the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Any serious effort to dismantle white supremacy must recognize these interconnected histories. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx pasts are not mutually exclusive, but the tendency to think of US history as enclosed by continental borders and of race as a black-white binary hinders a more nuanced understanding of the insidious dynamics of white supremacism.

As Walter Mignolo has observed, “the Americas exist today only as a consequence of European colonial expansion and the narrative of that expansion from the

9. José Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire: Race and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 93.

10. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 88, 89.

11. Article 14, quoted in Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 232. Emphasis mine.

12. Quoted in Brandon R. Byrd, *The Black Republic: African-Americans and the Fate of Haiti* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 5.

13. Byrd, *Black Republic*, 1

European perspective.”¹⁴ Siloing the United States from hemispheric history plays into the myth of (US) American Exceptionalism, replicating a noxious but ubiquitous ethnocentrism that disregards Black experiences that fall outside its borders. Reflecting on the conceptual separation between African American and African diaspora art enacted by both academia and the art world, Eddie Chambers noted that as a Black British scholar, “It was quite a surprise to realize that the default academic position in the United States was pretty much to see black America as somehow being, by and large, a self-referencing, somewhat quarantined entity, with little or no structural relationship with the lives and histories of other black people—not even those of the wider Americas.”¹⁵ This separation manifests itself not only between the United States and other African diaspora spaces but also between the Caribbean and “Latin America” and between “Latin America” and US Latinxs. Chambers observes that while Latin America and the Caribbean are both “relatively new additions to the canon of art history, [they] already tend to exist in fairly fixed terms that deny or overlook the complexities of race, ethnicity, and identity.”¹⁶ Recent remarks by Hazel V. Carby support these observations. “The black national narrative has come to dominate the popular and academic imagination in the US, mirroring the theory of American exceptionalism and separating the history of African Americans from the histories of the descendants of other survivors of the crossing.”¹⁷

Adopting a hemispheric perspective, this essay works to complicate ideas of race across the region. I begin by discussing how Latin America as a construct is Eurocentric to the degree that its conceptual boundaries perniciously exclude African diaspora spaces. Although rarely acknowledged, anti-Black racism is ubiquitous in Latin America and commonplace in Latinx communities, even in those with Afro-descendant roots. Black erasure, sadly, is built into the concept of *latinidad*. I then turn to understandings of whiteness across borders, contrasting perceptions of racial mixture in the United States and the

14. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Walden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), xi.

15. Eddie Chambers, “Reflections on African and African Diaspora Art,” *caa.reviews*, April 21, 2016, doi:10.3202/caa.reviews.2016.49.

16. Chambers, “Reflections,” n.p.

17. Hazel V. Carby, “The Limits of Caste,” *London Review of Books* 43, no. 2, January 21, 2021, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/no2/hazel-v-carby/the-limits-of-caste.

Hispanophone Americas. Lastly, I examine works by (Afro-)Latinx artists whose nuanced views on race demonstrate the potential of visual representation to provide insight into this complex topic beyond the black-white binary.

“LATINIDAD IS CANCELLED”

In his seminal book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot argues that the Haitian Revolution in history was subject to such a “powerful silencing” that it became a “non-event.”¹⁸ This omission is not only historical; it is also geographical. I have noted elsewhere that the region that is commonly recognized as Latin America conspicuously excludes Haiti from its conceptual imaginary.¹⁹ Its nomenclature arose as a result of France’s imperial ambitions: “the French government under Napoleon III was plotting to carve out a new empire in the region, and the notion of a ‘Latin’ essence linking French with Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking American countries had a great appeal as a way to naturalize such a project.”²⁰ It follows, as Mignolo convincingly argues, that “Haiti never clearly counted as part of ‘Latin’ America. ‘Latins’ were supposed to be not Black but White Creoles or, at most,” mixed-race peoples, who were “Europeans in mind.”²¹ Buscaglia-Salgado confirms that “the political geography of Latin America has tended to be limited to the demarcations of a mestizo world that excludes and silences the presence and contributions of Afro- and Asian descendants, *starting with the segregation of the Caribbean world from the rest of the continent.*”²² Indeed, as narrated by Chilean intellectual Miguel Rojas Mix in an exhaustive study on the origins of “Latin America,” in one of the earliest instances of the uses of the term, in 1864, Argentine historian Carlos Calvo

enumerated the countries of Latin America as Brazil and the independent Hispanophone republics.²³ Commenting on Rojas Mix’s volume, Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo makes note of “the anti-black consensus of most of the European and American sponsors of the idea of Latin America—with few exceptions. . . . *Latin meant not black.*”²⁴

In short, “Latin America” is a white supremacist construct. Coming into being in the period after the independence movements from Spain of the early nineteenth century, the region’s French-given namesake differentiated it not just from the motherland but also from Haiti, and later the United States.²⁵ Even though it is a purportedly geographic region, it does not actually exist on any map; rather, Latin America is a metageography that has been described as “not logically constituted.”²⁶ I would argue that it is constituted so as to exclude spaces where the majority populations are Black. That is why contiguous territories—Guyana and Venezuela, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Belize and Guatemala—occupy different conceptual regions.²⁷ Brazil and the Hispanophone islands of the Caribbean have significant populations of Afro-descendants and are regarded as being part of Latin America, a notion that many Brazilians dispute.²⁸

23. Enrique Rojas Mix, *Los cien nombres de América. Eso que descubrió Colón* (Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, 1991), 348.

24. Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 18. Emphasis mine.

25. Paulina L. Alberto and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, “‘Racial Democracy’ and Racial Inclusion: Hemispheric Histories,” in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 267.

26. Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*, 181. Lewis and Wigen define “metageography” as “the set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world” (ix).

27. Guyana, Haiti, and Belize are traditionally mapped as the Caribbean, whereas Venezuela and Guatemala are considered part of Latin America. The Dominican Republic occupies both spaces. For more on the mapping of the Caribbean, see Flores and Stephens, “Contemporary Art,” Flores, “Disturbing Categories,” and Tatiana Flores, “Inscribing into Consciousness: The Work of Caribbean Art,” in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, ed. Tatiana Flores and Michelle A. Stephens (Long Beach, CA: Museum of Latin American Art, 2017, distributed by Duke University Press), 29–45. For additional discussion on the challenges of mapping *latinidad*, see Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 13–23.

28. See Tenorio-Trillo, “The Question of Brazil: An Inevitable Note on Brazil’s Historical ‘Yes, but No Thanks’ to the Idea of Being Latin American,” chap. 3 in *Latin America*, 62–75; Leslie Bethell, “Brazil and ‘Latin America,’” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42, no. 3 (August 2010): 457–85. In the popular imagination, see Laura López, “Los brasileños no se reconocen como latinoamericanos,” *infobae*, May 17, 2019,

18. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 97, 98.

19. See Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens, “Contemporary Art of the Hispanophone Caribbean Islands in an Archipelagic Framework,” *Small Axe* 51 (November 2016): 80–84, and Tatiana Flores, “Disturbing Categories, Remapping Knowledge,” in *The Routledge Companion to African American Art History*, ed. Eddie Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2020), 134–45.

20. Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 181.

21. Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 86.

22. José F. Buscaglia-Salgado, “Race and the Constitutive Inequality of the Modern/Colonial Condition,” in *Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought: Historical and Institutional Trajectories*, ed. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Marisa Belausteguioitia (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 114. Emphasis mine.

Regardless, Black Latin Americans are sidelined in national and regional imaginaries.

The countries of Latin America have long seen themselves as European diaspora, although the region has been considered by the United States as inferior.²⁹ It is common for US Americans to view even Euro-descendant Latin Americans as people of color, and this slippage has worked to give the impression that the construct of Latin American Art is inherently diverse, even when it addresses the artistic production of artists who endorse a Europeanist canon and are considered white in their home countries. The topic of race has been taboo in Latin America, and to bring it up for discussion has been widely seen as imposing US values on other spaces where they do not belong—"brutal, ethnocentric intrusions," in the words of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant.³⁰

As I have noted elsewhere, the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, which intended to produce new scholarship on Latin American and Latinx art through a series of exhibitions, overlooked Black and Indigenous artists, as well as entire regions where these artists might live and work, such as the Andes and Central America.³¹ In her review of the *Radical Women*:

accessed March 18, 2021, www.infobae.com/americas/americas-latina/2019/05/17/los-brasilenos-no-se-reconocen-como-latinoamericanos/.

29. According to Lars Schoultz, "A belief in Latin American inferiority is the essential core of United States policy toward Latin America because it determines the precise steps the United States takes to protect its interest in the region," in Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), xv. See also José A. Cobas, Jorge Duany, and Joe R. Feagin, "Introduction: Racializing Latinos; Historical Background and Current Form," in *How the United States Racializes Latinos: White Hegemony and Its Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4–8.

30. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 1 (1999): 44. This point of view was echoed by former Museum of Modern Art curator Luis Pérez-Oramas when, referring to the 2018 MoMA retrospective on Tarsila do Amaral, he stated: "Racial tensions exist in Brazil, but the way the culture deals with it, the way the society deals with it is totally different than the way the Americans deal with it. That's why I am very careful to not racialize a reading of Tarsila because that would be unfair. That would be a colonial take on Tarsila do Amaral." Quoted in Sara Roffino, "Is Brazil's Most Famous Art Movement Built on Racial Inequality? A New Generation Argues 'Yes,'" *artnet news*, March 13, 2018, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/tarsila-part-ii-1238654>. For a rebuttal and discussion of the polemics incited by the Bourdieu and Wacquant article, see John D. French, "The Missteps of Anti-Imperialist Reasons: Bourdieu, Wacquant and Hanchard's *Orpheus and Power*," *Theory, Culture and Society* 17, no. 1 (2000): 107–28.

31. See Flores, "Disturbing Categories," 134–35 and Tatiana Flores and Harper Montgomery, "Radical Inclusion and Complex Connectivity: Towards Another Art History," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 2, no. 2 (2020): 74–76.

Latin American Art, 1960–1985 exhibition catalogue, for example, Ana María Reyes pointed out "the conspicuous absence of Afro-Latinx and Indigenous women artists."³² She also stated that the exhibition project "begs the questions . . . Where is Latin America?"³³ As acknowledged by Thomas Lindner, "Disguised as a mere geographical description, the term 'Latin America' carries a cultural and conceptual history that is riddled with conflicts, contradictions, and confusion."³⁴ Not only did most of the Getty-sponsored exhibitions accept the concept of "Latin America" as a cartographic given, many of them attempted to break with folkloric stereotypes of the region by showcasing it as a European diaspora space. In so doing—whether consciously or not—they bought into the logic of *latinidad* as described by Mignolo. Proposing that "Latin American" artists deserve to be included in the (European) canon, they "lifted up the population of European descent and erased the Indian and the Afro populations."³⁵

That "Latin America" is a colonialist construct has been cogently argued by Mignolo, who posits that "to excavate the 'idea of Latin America' is, really, to understand how the West was born and how the modern world order was founded."³⁶ Discussing the nineteenth-century independence movements in Mexico and South America that took place shortly after the end of the Haitian Revolution, he observes:

It was easier for Creoles of Spanish and Portuguese descent to be "recognized" as having a right to independence; but it was not so easy or clear, at the time, to accept that Black people could take their destiny into their own hands. It was expected that freedom for the Blacks and Mulattos/as, slaves and ex-slaves, would be "given" by the White man.³⁷

This is visualized in a nineteenth-century Venezuelan print, *Enactment of the Law of the Liberation of the Slaves* (fig. 1). The image shows José Gregorio Monagas along with a group of elegant statesmen granting a deed of

32. Ana María Reyes, review of *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2019): 133.

33. Reyes, review of *Radical Women*, 131.

34. Thomas Lindner, review of *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea* by Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *H-Soz-Kult*, August 5, 2018, accessed March 18, 2021, www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-26444.

35. Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 58.

36. Mignolo, xiii.

37. Mignolo, 56.

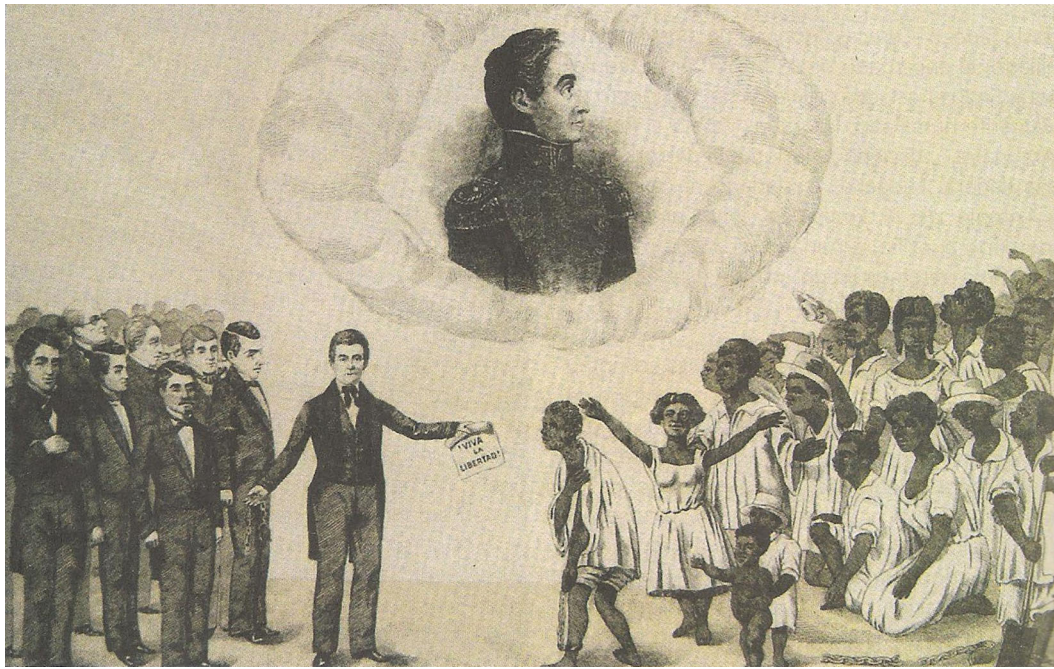


FIGURE 1. Unidentified Venezuelan artist, *Enactment of the Law of the Liberation of the Slaves*, c. 1854, print (artwork in the public domain)

emancipation to a group of grateful formerly enslaved people dressed in white with their chains strewn about under the specter of Simón Bolívar (1783–1830). Bolívar, known as *El Libertador* (The Liberator), led the independence movements against Spain and is credited with having liberated Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Indeed, as Mignolo points out, after having won their own independence, the “Latin American” Creoles turned around “to become the internal colonizers vis-à-vis the Indians and Blacks.”³⁸

Colombian painter Efraím Martínez commemorated the freeing of enslaved Africans in Colombia (1851) in an image that brings this point to life (fig. 2). *The Liberation of the Slaves* (1935) takes place in the town square of Popayán and includes seven figures: four Black men, an Indigenous woman, and two Creole men. Dressed in loin-cloths, the Afro-Colombian subjects celebrate their newfound freedom—two of them by holding up a Phrygian cap and a laurel wreath, the other two kneeling in gratitude before a Creole soldier who, while looking elsewhere, allows his right hand to be kissed by an elderly man while placing his left atop the other man’s shoulder. His



FIGURE 2. Efraím Martínez, *The Liberation of the Slaves*, 1935, painting (artwork in the public domain)

38. Mignolo, 86. See also Elena Oliva, “Detrás del anti-haitianismo se oculta la negrofobia: conversación con el intelectual Silvio Torres-Saillant en Santiago de Chile,” *Meridional: revista chilena de estudios latinoamericanos* 4 (April 2015): 208.

counterpart, dressed in an elegant black cape, puts his arm around a topless Indigenous maiden in a gesture that is simultaneously paternalistic and possessive.

As Mignolo defines it, *latinidad* is a construct created by “White Creole and Mestizo/a elites, in South America and the Spanish Caribbean islands, to create their own postcolonial identity.” The designation describes “an educated civil society in America that turned its face to France and its back to Spain and Portugal.”³⁹ Nuancing the term further, Michela Coletta argues that nineteenth-century European immigration to South America deeply shaped “conceptions of Latinity.”⁴⁰ Noting that the construct of Latin America “only entered the cultural discourse in the region from the late 1870s,” she posits that “the notion of Latinity seemed ultimately to work as a viable path towards modern civilization.”⁴¹ Discussing a treatise on the topic, the Paris-based Peruvian intellectual Francisco García Calderón’s 1912 volume *Les démocraties latines de l’Amérique*, Shawn McDaniel traces a definitive connection between *latinidad* and anti-Blackness in early regional discourse. He argues that García Calderón blames “Latin America’s ‘inferiority’ with respect to the United States and the world . . . [on] blackness.”⁴² According to McDaniel’s reading, Blackness is both a “‘degenerate’ element” and a force “so vital and invigorated that it corrupts and overpowers the [Latin] race that García Calderón frames as superior.”⁴³ The treatise was written to garner French support as a means to counter US imperialism. In appealing to France, its author “divorce[d] Latin America from the African diaspora in Haiti,”⁴⁴ repeatedly disparaging Haiti and claiming that it “demonstrate[d] by its revolutionary history the political incapacity of the negro race.”⁴⁵

Curiously, while the rejection of “Hispanic” as a moniker for the imagined communities on both sides of the

US/Mexico border is a constant, Mignolo’s and others’ characterization of *latinidad* collides with the term as it is adopted in US Latinx studies, where it typically “suggests . . . a Latin-American heritage identity that crosses boundary lines among specific national-origin groups, and implies a *panethnic* group.”⁴⁶ Indeed, definitions of *latinidad* and *Latino* typically take Hispanophone Latin America as a given.⁴⁷ Marta Caminero-Santangelo offers a detailed analysis of (US) *latinidad* and discusses other common features, such as the Spanish language and the experience of cultural syncretism, before arguing that “to the extent that ‘latinidad’ exists, it is largely a *product* of being in the US and of commonalities forged within that context,” and acknowledging that “it is never unproblematic.”⁴⁸ Indeed, even as Caminero-Santangelo recognizes the imperial origins of the term, she and many others reproduce “the assumption that ‘Latin America’ is a geographical entity where all these things ‘happened,’” as opposed to the white supremacist construct that it is.⁴⁹ The notion of “Latinity” in South America as argued by Coletta, however, “involved a complex endeavor to adapt European theories of civilization to Spanish American national realities.”⁵⁰

The Eurocentric origins of *Latin* are often not addressed in discourse originating in the United States, where “brownness” now has become “designative” of US *latinidad*.⁵¹ As characterized by Claudia Milian, who has authored one of the more spirited critiques of the construct, mainstream *latinidad* encompasses a “dual-directional model of identity and working signifiers [that] are ensnared in the logic of white and brown.”⁵² She points to accusations about “its tendency to homogenize peoples whose histories, language usage, and circumstances may differ significantly”⁵³ and posits that it offers “no analytic terms . . . for the theorizing of collective

39. Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 59. For a more detailed discussion of *latinité*, see Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America*, 41–61.

40. See Michela Coletta, *Decadent Modernity: Civilisation and ‘Latinidad’ in Spanish America, 1880–1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018). Coletta also demonstrates a link between *latinidad* and concepts of race, nation, and modernity: “The discourse of the Latin race will be shown to have functioned as a useful, yet conflicting, route into the modern world” (28).

41. Coletta, *Decadent Modernity*, 33.

42. Shawn McDaniel, “*Votre América: Blackness and Pan-Latinism in Les démocraties latines de l’Amérique*,” *Revista hispánica moderna* 68, no. 2 (2015): 130.

43. McDaniel, “*Votre América*,” 131.

44. McDaniel, 137.

45. García Calderón, quoted in McDaniel, 137.

46. Marta Caminero-Santangelo, “Latinidad,” in *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, ed. Suzanne Bost and Frances R. Aparicio (New York: Routledge, 2012), 13. Emphasis in original.

47. A notable text that problematizes the presumed boundaries of Latin America is Juana María Rodríguez, “Latino, Latina, Latin@,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed., ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 146–47.

48. Caminero-Santangelo, “Latinidad,” 21.

49. Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 67.

50. Coletta, *Civilization and “Latinidad”*, 54.

51. Claudia Milian, *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2013), 5.

52. Milian, *Latining America*, 15.

53. Myra Mendible, quoted in Milian, *Latining America*, 13.

Latino and Latina dissonances, variances, and disagreements.”⁵⁴ To counter and “offer a conceptual shift in multiple interwoven discourses and how these shape the subject,” she theorizes the term *Latinities*, defining these as “a ‘re-articulatable’ panethnic space where the subject is constituted in relation to blackness, brownness, and dark brownness but also in terms of language, ethnicity, nation, class, gender, sexuality, and race depending on the context.”⁵⁵ This compelling intellectual project is designed “to initiate a dialogue with writers, narratives, and experiences that have been previously ignored or written out of Latino/a studies: the southern, the black, the dark brown, the indigenous, and the Central American.”⁵⁶ Although Milian’s point of reference is the traditional Hispanophone map of “Latin America,” she proposes a new cartography for these “Latinities.”

The terms Latino, Latina, and Latinx are considered more progressive than Hispanic, even though they replicate similar colonialist constructs.⁵⁷ Latinx, the gender-neutral variant of Latino, has entered the lexicon but remains controversial.⁵⁸ For me, it is useful as an operative construct because I visualize the term *Latinx* as Latin X-ed out.⁵⁹ There is nonetheless a lot of confusion around terminology, and it is presumed—especially outside of the United States—that Latino includes or should “include people with a cultural background originating in all nations in the Americas whose primary language is derived

from Latin.”⁶⁰ Jorge Gracia, for one, defines *Latin American* as “refer[ring] to everything in the Americas that is not American (U.S.) or Canadian, even if strictly speaking it should include the French parts of Canada,” and also acknowledges that both “‘Latin American’ and ‘Latino/a’ often do exclude territories that were ‘French, Dutch, or English.’”⁶¹ Commenting on Latino/a literature as operating “in the linguistic twilight zone mapped by Spanish [and] English,” Ricardo Ortiz notes the lack of consideration of Haitian-American authors and the field’s tendency toward “exclusion from every linguistic zone other than those . . . whose ‘latinate’ bearings are explicitly and exclusively hispanophone.”⁶² He critiques scholars

set on identifying latinidad with hispanism . . . , thereby rehearsing the unwitting, automatic substitution (characteristic of almost every form of Latino Studies discourse) of “hispanic” with “latino,” which, while it always claims a preference for the latter term over the former, very often turns the latter into a mere substitutive renaming of the former. Spanish, and hispanism, in their simultaneously explicit and implicit ubiquity in conventional Latino Studies discourse, therefore haunt that discourse as a structural necessity, both historically and rhetorically, in paradoxical, contradictory ways, with which Latino Studies (as a critical practice) has yet to come to adequate terms.⁶³

Indeed, Ginetta Candelario argues that “Hispanicity,” much like “Latino,” “offers an alternative to blackness. Although ‘Hispanic’ is a racialized non-white category in the United States, it is also a non-black one.”⁶⁴

Scholars who have worked to establish and define the field of Latinx literature have noted that it challenges the

54. Milian, 12.

55. Milian, 15.

56. Milian, 8–9.

57. See Sophie Maríñez, “The Quisqueya Diaspora: The Emergence of Latina/o Literature from Hispaniola,” in *The Cambridge History of Latina/o American Literature*, ed. John Moran and Laura Lomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 561.

58. See John McWhorter, “Why Latinx Can’t Catch On,” *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2019, accessed March 18, 2021, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/why-latinx-cant-catch-on/603943/; Nicole Martinez, “A Lively Debate on the Value of the Term ‘Latinx,’” *Hyperallergic*, February 14, 2019, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/484278/a-lively-debate-on-the-value-of-the-term-latinx/>.

59. I borrow the term “operative construct” from Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “*Primeros Pasos*: First Steps toward an Operative Construct of Latino Art,” in *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, ed. E. Carmen Ramos (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2014, distributed by D. Giles), 13–31. Joshua Javier Guzmán makes a comparable point in the essay “*Latino*, the Word,” *English Language Notes* 56, no. 2 (October 2018): 143–45. Writing about the gender-neutral variant Latinx, he notes, “If *x* marks the spot, it marks here the political refusal to mean anything whatsoever. Instead, the nagging insistence of the *x* to collapse the universal into the particular is met with histories of dis-possession to only yield a resounding politics of negativity—there is no liberal incorporation here and no good feelings about finally being captured, represented” (144).

60. Maríñez, “Quisqueya Diaspora,” 561.

61. Jorge J. E. Gracia, “Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in Hispanic American and Latino/a Thought,” in *Forging People: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in Hispanic American and Latino/a Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2011), 8.

62. Ricardo Ortiz, “Edwidge Danticat’s *Latinidad*: The Farming of Bones and the Cultivation (of Fields) of Knowledge,” in *Aftermaths: Exile, Migration, and Diaspora Reconsidered*, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock and Peter Yoonsuk Paik (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 152. Countering this tendency, Tatiana Reinoza discusses the close relation between diasporic Dominican and Haitian artists in New York in “The Island within the Island: Remapping Dominican York,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 57, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 4–27.

63. Ortiz, “Edwidge Danticat’s *Latinidad*,” 169n5.

64. Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 12.

boundaries of traditional disciplines. Remarking that linguistic complexity is one of its distinguishing features, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel posits that in “destabilizing the connection between a mother tongue and a national or cultural identity, these texts question the epistemological paradigms of many of the language and literature departments, as well as some of the limits separating disciplines or programs, such as English, American Studies and Latin American Studies, among others.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Arlene Dávila acknowledges that “‘Latinx,’ ‘Latin American,’ and even ‘American’ art are not fixed, homogenous, or universally accepted terms.”⁶⁶ Although Latinx art has been emphatically promoted as part of the art of the United States to the degree that divisions have been established between it and “Latin American” art, Latinx communities challenge the traditional boundaries of “Latin America” by making it intrude into US territory.⁶⁷ Julio Ramos made this very point almost two decades ago, writing, “The hard frontiers and unequivocal topographic distinctions between North and South are also problematized by the interventions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Latino critics and students in the field, whose experience and work frequently lead us to question territorializing metaphors of roots, linguistic purity, and fixed origins.”⁶⁸ He goes on to note that

65. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, “Boricua (between) Borders: On the Possibility of Translating Bilingual Narratives,” in *None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era*, ed. Frances Negrón Muntaner (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 204.

66. Arlene Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 3.

67. See, especially, E. Carmen Ramos, ed., *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2014, distributed by D. Giles); Mari Carmen Ramírez, Héctor Olea, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, eds., *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (Houston: International Center for the Arts of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, distributed by Yale University Press, 2012). For a critique, see Tatiana Flores, “Enmarcando el arte latinoamericano en la actualidad,” in *IV Encuentro de investigaciones emergentes: la institucionalización de la práctica artística* (Bogotá: Instituto Distrital de las Artes, 2017), 99–120. For a perspective from visual artists, see Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Nationalism and Latinos, North and South: A Dialogue,” in Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), 159–68.

68. “Las fronteras duras y las distinciones topográficas tajantes entre norte y sur son también problematizadas por las intervenciones de críticos y alumnos chicanos, puertorriqueños y latinos en el campo, cuya experiencia y trabajo frecuentemente llevan a cuestionar las metáforas territorializantes de la raíz, de la pureza lingüística u orígenes fijos” in Julio Ramos, “Genealogías de la moral latinoamericanista: el cuerpo y la deuda de Flora Tristán,” in *Nuevas perspectivas desde/sobre América Latina: el desafío de los estudios culturales*, ed. Mabel Moraña (Mexico City: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana; Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2000), 192. Author’s translation.

“migrations from the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America produce new capitals of Spanish speakers like Los Angeles or New York, enormous translocal enclaves of Latin American people precariously situated at the very heart of the empire. If we are to speak about territorialities and roots, it is suitable to ask oneself *where* today is the location of that Latin America frequently hypostatized—and reified at the same time—by the discourse of origins, pure languages, and fixed or continuous legacies.”⁶⁹

The visual artist Pedro Lasch similarly questions the assumed borders of Latin America in his ongoing series *LATINO/A AMERICA*, begun in 2003 (fig. 3). In this irreverent revisioning of Joaquín Torres-García’s 1943 *Inverted America* drawing, which imagines South America reoriented to face north, Lasch maintains the standard direction but identifies North America with the heading “LATINO/A” and South America as simply “AMERICA.” Both labels are a provocation: to conceive of Anglo-Saxon America as “Latino/a” is to deny essentializing constructs on both sides of the US-Mexico border; to refer only to the southern part of the continent as “America” is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that the term applies to the land masses across the entire hemisphere and is not the exclusive property of the United States. As Thomas Holloway has stated, or, rather, understated, the “apparent appropriation by one nation of a label that traditionally refers to the Western Hemisphere has been a recurring source of puzzlement and occasional resentment among Latin Americans.”⁷⁰

In his book-length meditation on the concept of Latin America, Tenorio-Trillo grudgingly embraces the term as “a malleable vessel ready to be filled with interesting, important, more-than-national histories.”⁷¹ Like him and Ramos, I have previously proposed thinking of Latin America as a space with fluid borders that includes the Caribbean and populations living in the United States.⁷²

69. “las migraciones del Caribe, México y América Central producen nuevas capitales de habla hispana como Los Angeles o Nueva York, inmensos enclaves translocales de gente latina ubicada precariamente en el corazón mismo del imperio. Si de territorialidades y raíces se trata, conviene entonces preguntarse *dónde* radica hoy la localidad de esa América Latina frecuentemente hipostasiada—y reificada a la vez—por los discursos de los orígenes, las lenguas puras y los legados fijos o continuos,” in Ramos, “Genealogías,” 192.

70. Thomas H. Holloway, introduction to *A Companion to Latin American History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 7.

71. Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America*, 33.

72. See Elena Shtromberg and C. Ondine Chavoya, “Lessons from Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA,” *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2019): 86, 89.



FIGURE 3. Pedro Lasch, *LATINO/A AMERICA* from the *LATINO/A AMERICA* series (2003–), 2006, mural, variable dimensions. Queens Museum of Art (photograph provided by the artist)

I remain keenly aware, however, that Caribbean and US Latinx people neither identify with nor wish to be part of this imagined community, and who can blame them.⁷³ If scholars and the public at large understood Latin America not as a cartographically bounded area of Spanish speakers south of the US-Mexico border but as the anti-Black construct that it is, would they continue to embrace the term *latinidad* and its cognate *Latino*? Indeed, in recent

times, the concept of *latinidad* has productively come under attack, especially from Afro-Latinx activists.⁷⁴

Alan Pelaez Lopez, an Afro-Indigenous formerly undocumented poet, artist, and public intellectual born in Oaxaca, Mexico, and currently based in Oakland, California, coined the hashtag #latinidadiscancelled in 2018, visualizing it through a graphic posted on Instagram

73. A debate around this issue played out in the Haitian American community with the publication of Ayanna Legros, “Why I as a Haitian Woman Identify as Afro-Latina and My Sisters Should, Too,” *Fierce*, June 5, 2018, <https://fierce.wearemitu.com/identities/why-i-haitian-woman-identify-as-afro-latina-and-my-sisters-should-too/> (no longer active). Cited in Janel Martinez, “Afro-Latinx Identity: How Haiti Exists within the Definition,” *HipLatina*, November 24, 2018, accessed January 17, 2021. See also Nathalie Cerin, “I am not Latina. I am Haitian.” *Woy Magazine*, June 19, 2018, <http://woymagazine.com/2018/06/19/not-afro-latino-haitian/>; Fabián Chávez, “Black History Month: Reflecting on the Anti-Black History of Excluding Haiti from Latinidad,” *Latino Rebels*, February 28, 2019, accessed March 19, 2021, www.latinorebels.com/2019/02/28/haitiantiblackness/.

74. See, for example, Dash Harris, “No, I’m Not a Proud Latina,” *Refinery 29*, September 29, 2020, accessed December 21, 2020, www.refinery29.com/en-us/latinx-identity-black-history-personal-essay; Janel Martinez, “When It Comes to Latinidad, Who Is Included and Who Isn’t?” *Remezcla*, July 30, 2019, accessed August 15, 2020, <https://remezcla.com/features/culture/when-it-comes-to-latinidad-who-is-included-and-who-isnt/>; Miguel Salazar, “The Problem with Latinidad,” *The Nation*, September 16, 2019, accessed August 15, 2020, www.thenation.com/article/archive/hispanic-heritage-month-latinidad/; and Lorgia Garcia-Peña, “Dismantling Anti-Blackness Together,” June 8, 2020, accessed August 15, 2020, *NACLA*, <https://nacla.org/news/2020/06/09/dismantling-anti-blackness-together>. On social media, the conversation is lively and growing. See Urayoán Noel, “The Queer Migrant Poem of #Latinx Instagram,” *New Literary History* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 2019): 531–57.



Latinidad is Cancelled

FIGURE 4. Alan Pelaez Lopez, *Latinidad Is Cancelled*, 2018, Instagram

(fig. 4). Attesting to the sense of alienation from and frustration with the term many people felt, the post and hashtag quickly went viral. Speaking from the experience of being Black, Indigenous, and undocumented, Pelaez described their motivations for having created the piece. It stemmed from their tendency to self-identify as undocumented rather than Latin American because, in their words, “the language that I had for my diasporic experience never felt like it belonged to the discourse of the Latin American experience.”⁷⁵ They refer to US Latinxs as “Latin Americans” and do not embrace the term *Latinx*. According to the artist, Latinx-identified people would “question [Pelaez’s] blackness and also be suspicious of [their] indigeneity,” thinking the artist was “claiming it for show or for clout.” Pelaez eventually came to see these attitudes as “rooted in the ideology of *mestizaje*, particularly the ideology of *latinidad*.” Their declaration “Latinidad Is Cancelled” was not only a statement but also functioned as a “digital performance art piece” that sought to find out how “people would respond to the post.” The public’s reaction was of confusion along with accusations of sowing divisions and “further minoritizing” an already minoritized community.

75. Alan Pelaez Lopez in conversation with author, April 28, 2020, as part of the Latinx Artists Lecture Series, Department of Latino and Caribbean Studies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. I am grateful to Shantee Rosado for introducing me to the work of Pelaez Lopez.

For Pelaez, these reactions confirmed that those who embraced *latinidad* as a “political commitment” were “not invested in an undoing of anti-Blackness . . . [or] in a recognition of Indigeneity . . . in Latin America . . . or in acknowledging the different Asian diasporas in Latin America.”⁷⁶

The artist followed up “Latinidad is Cancelled” with a graphic four days later that urged, “Betray Latinidad” (fig. 5). In a tweet that accompanied the graphic, Pelaez wrote, “Betrayal as an act of resistance to Latinidad that continuously betrays Black and Indigenous people in what is now referred to as the Americas and the Caribbean.”⁷⁷ Discussing the work, they remarked, “betrayal can be one of the most generative things colonized people can do, because to betray a concept that was given to us in the Global North means to re-center the Global South. . . . A betrayal of Latinidad is a remapping of the Global South as a place of incredible knowledge that the Global North is willingly silencing.”⁷⁸ These comments resonate with Norma Alarcón’s reading of Malintzin, the Indigenous Mexican woman who was the translator and consort of conqueror Hernán Cortés and is villainized in popular culture as a traitor to her people. In Alarcón’s words, “Malintzin the translator is perceived as speaking for herself and not the community. . . . In such a setting, to speak or translate in one’s behalf rather the perceived group interests and values is tantamount to betrayal.”⁷⁹

In Pelaez’s case, the “perceived group interests” of Latinidad are at odds with their own values. As they put it in an April 2020 conversation with the author, “Latinidad as a form of unity is weaponized to let things slide, and by ‘things,’ I am particularly referring to homophobia, transphobia, anti-Blackness, and Indigenous erasure. . . . People should not be canceled. Concepts, frameworks, and epistemological understandings should be critiqued and canceled.” Another graphic defined the neologism *Latinxing* as “the act of using United Statesian multiculturalism to perpetuate settlement and anti-blackness in what is now know[n] as Latin America and the Caribbean.”⁸⁰ Pelaez

76. Pelaez, Latinx Artists Lecture Series, April 28, 2020, was the source of all the quotations in this paragraph.

77. Alan Pelaez Lopez (@migrantscribble), Twitter, November 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/MigrantScribble/status/1060580972138123264>.

78. Pelaez, April 28, 2020.

79. Norma Alarcón, “Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” *Cultural Critique* 13 (Autumn 1989): 63.

80. Alan Pelaez Lopez (@migrantscribble), Twitter, November 10, 2018, <https://twitter.com/MigrantScribble/status/106133628684018>



Alán ACAB
@MigrantScribble

Betrayal as an act of resistance to a Latinidad that continuously betrays Black and Indigenous people in what is now referred to as the Americas and the Caribbean.



12:13 PM · Nov 8, 2018 · Twitter Web App

FIGURE 5. Alan Pelaez Lopez, *Betray Latinidad*, 2018, screenshot with commentary by the artist (@migrantscribble), Twitter

delved into their rejection of the term *Latinx* in an earlier essay, “The X in Latinx Is a Wound, Not a Trend.” While, as mentioned above, for me the *X* cancels the word *Latin*, for them, the *X* is “a scar that exposes four wounds signified by each corner of the ‘X’: settlement, anti-Blackness, femicides, and inarticulation.”⁸¹ The essay ends with a crucial question: “if you are using ‘Latinx,’ I encourage you to ask yourself at the end of every day: ‘what have I done to show up for Black, Indigenous, women and femmes of the Latin American diaspora today?’ And second, ‘why?’”⁸²

8928. The graphic was prefaced with the commentary: “LATINIDAD IS CANCELLED, SO PLZ STOP LATINXING.”

81. For further discussion, see Noel, “Queer Migrant Poetics,” 537–45.

82. Alan Pelaez Lopez, “The X in Latinx Is a Wound, Not a Trend,” *Color Bloq*, n.d. (after July 2016), special issue X, edited by Rubén, Queer Xicano Chisme, www.colorbloq.org/the-x-in-latinx-is-a-wound-not-a-trend.

TODOS SOMOS MESTIZOS

Even before the recent mainstream attention to Black Lives Matter, discourse had begun to add nuance to concepts of US *latinidad* beyond the assumption of brownness described by Claudia Milian and others. Discussions about white *latinidad*, many of which play out on social media, call attention to white privilege, racism, and colorism in Latinx communities and the Hispanophone Americas.⁸³ A notable recent essay shared on Instagram by Colombian-French-American screenwriter Priscila García-Jacquier reads, “In my white mestiza skin, I must acknowledge the ways I perpetuate an erasure of Indigenous communities that need accomplices, today. Simultaneously, I must reconcile that the very white of my skin is a product of an internalized self-hatred so deep, so ancestral, I will never be done unlearning.”⁸⁴ Alluding to the common axiom of *mejorar la raza* (“improving the race”), widely used among Latinxs and Latin Americans to encourage “marrying up,” she concludes, “If I ever want to find the love in the *lovestory* that caused my existence, I must first take responsibility for all sides of the war inside of me. If not, I will perpetuate the same violence that sought my birth to be this one. And that is a grief I simply cannot carry.”⁸⁵ García-Jacquier’s statement makes reference to important topics that this section will unpack: racial mixture as a defining characteristic of *latinidad* on both sides of the border, the prevalence of colorism as a matter so ubiquitous that it barely even warrants mentioning, and the differing perceptions of whiteness across the Western Hemisphere.

In the Americas, the terms *Hispanic* and *Latin American* both presuppose a European colonial identity. Although *Hispanic* has been widely seen as problematic, I have shown in the previous section that Latin American and its derivations are no better; indeed, for me, they are worse because their connotations of white supremacy go unrecognized. *Hispanic* is considered objectionable in part because it foregrounds European ancestry, concealing Indigenous and African roots. Furthermore, as Ana Ramos-Zaya and Nicholas de Genova argue, the “unitary and homogenizing *Hispanic* label” was used by the US government “to undermine the specific demands of

83. See @REMEZCLA, “Dear Latinos: Yes, you can be racist,” video, August 18, 2017, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://twitter.com/REMEZCLA/status/898571170454183936>.

84. @priscilagarciajacquier, Instagram, August 12, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDwmQ-djK6y/> (no longer active).

85. @priscilagarciajacquier, August 12, 2020. Emphasis in original.

Chicanos and Puerto Ricans.”⁸⁶ It also created “an unprecedented opportunity for the numerically small but remarkably influential community of Cuban exiles (who were predominantly from elite or professional middle-class backgrounds, racially white identified, politically conservative) to use their newfound ‘Hispanic’ identity as a platform.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, in the United States, “*Hispanic* carries connotations of racial purity.”⁸⁸ As Paula Moya explains, despite “the undeniable fact that the Iberian peninsula is and has been a racially diverse place . . . , racists in the southwest (and elsewhere) have long exploited the ideology of *hispanidad* in order to distance themselves from their darker-skinned brethren.”⁸⁹ Presumably, Latino became a preferred term because it forged a closer connection to Latin America.⁹⁰ Recognizing the linguistic commonalities between these terms, Holloway characterizes “Latina/o” as “an invented term of convenience—a neologism built on a neologism.”⁹¹ Attesting to the confusion generated by the nomenclature, Moya goes on to state, “When I refer to Latina/os, I am *not* referring to people living in Latin America or Spain.”⁹²

I, on the other hand, grew up in a Spanish-speaking household in the United States where “Latinos” was shorthand for “Latinoamericanos” and included diaspora communities as well as people living in the Hispanophone Americas. Rubén Blades’s classic song *Plástico* (1978) calls out to “Latinos” in Panama, Puerto Rico, and other Spanish-speaking countries; it is worth noting that *Siembra*, the album where the song appeared, was released by Fania Records, a legendary New York–based label cofounded by Dominican-born musician Johnny Pacheco, so US Latinos are implied. In the same vein, Gente de Zona’s *La Gozadera* (2015) describes the world joining the Latino party (“El mundo se está sumando, a la fiesta de los latinos”), which brings together, among others, Brazil, Paraguay, and

Miami. Indeed, Miami has been described as “the capital of Latin America.”⁹³

In *Plástico*, Blades sings about people “working toward a united Latin America . . . who are proud of their heritage and of being *Latino*, of a united race, dreamt of by Bolívar.”⁹⁴ The sentiments voiced in this and other songs like *Siembra* from the same album refer to a progressive reading of Latin America as a project of liberation and a site of a future utopia.⁹⁵ The use of the term *Latino/a/x* in the United States carries similar connotations of a community with shared roots working toward social justice. The idea of a “united race,” however, obscures the fact that both constructs, US Latinx and Latin American, “exclude much of the historical experiences and linguistic traditions of the African, Asian, and indigenous populations of the American continent.”⁹⁶ This “race” that Blades sings about is central to conceptions of *latinidad* on both sides of the border. It is the mixed-race identity borne of miscegenation but known by the more benign name of *mestizaje*.

Mestizo, a term that first appeared in the Spanish language in 1275, derives from the Latin word *mixticius* (mixed).⁹⁷ *Mestizo* began to be commonly used during the colonial era to refer to a racial category of the *castas* or caste system to describe the offspring of Spaniards and Indigenous women, and it continues to be understood as a Native-European mixture in Mexico, parts of Central America, the Andes, and among Latinxs with roots in these regions.⁹⁸ In other Latinx and “Latin American” communities, it connotes racial mixture more broadly. For Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea, “ethnic and

86. Nicholas De Genova and Ana Ramos-Zayas, “Latino Racial Formations in the United States: An Introduction,” *Journal of American Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (2003): 4.

87. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, “Latino Racial Formations,” 4.

88. Paula Moya, “Why I Am Not Hispanic: An Argument with Jorge Gracia,” *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 1 (Spring 2001): 103.

89. Moya, “Why I Am Not Hispanic,” 103.

90. See De Genova and Ramos-Zaya, “Latino Racial Formations,” 6.

91. Holloway, *Companion to Latin American History*, 8.

92. Moya, “Why I Am Not Hispanic,” 102–3.

93. See Cathy Booth, “Miami: The Capital of Latin America,” *TIME*, June 24, 2001, accessed August 15, 2020, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,162806,00.html>.

94. “Que trabajan por una Latinoamérica unida . . . / Orgullosa de su herencia y de ser latino / De una raza unida, la que Bolívar soñó,” Rubén Blades, “Plástico,” www.letras.com/ruben-blades/417302/. Author’s translation.

95. See Eduardo Mendieta, “Philosophy of Liberation,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/liberation/>. For a skeptical view, see Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America*, 34–40.

96. Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re) Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 166.

97. Wikipedia, s.v. “Mestizo,” last modified February 27, 2021, 18:54 UTC, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mestizo>.

98. I delve more deeply into the topic of *mestizaje* in my essay “Art, Revolution, and Indigenous Subjects,” in *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, ed. Carlos Salomón (New York: Routledge, 2017), 115–29.

racial mixing” was “the central point of his understanding of Latin America,” and *mestizaje* was “the key to nationality, and . . . the solution to the problem of national unity that had preoccupied political thinkers in Latin America.”⁹⁹ *Mestizaje* is also foregrounded in US Latinx thought. Summarizing the position of philosopher Jorge Gracia, Iván Jaksic writes, “Hispanics/Latinos constitute an ethnic group that is functioning, identifiable, and distinguishable in context from other ethnic groups,” and “the Hispanic/Latino ethnos . . . is best understood in familial-historical terms and its origin is to be found in a historical period marked by encounter between Iberians and Amerindians that begins in 1492 and the subsequent process of cultural and population mixing (*mestizaje*).”¹⁰⁰

It is notable that there is no mention of Afro-descendants here. Correcting this common misperception, Buscaglia-Salgado points out in his study of “mulattoes” (mixed-raced offspring of African and Europeans) and *mulataje* that “the mulatto world also has its origins in the Iberian contact zone. In fact, the practices and realities of *mestizaje* in the New World were so far predated by the more ancient practice of *mulataje* in the Old World that when [Claudio] Esteva-Fabregat refers to the Spaniard as a ‘Euro-mestizo’ he should really be speaking of a Euro-mulatto instead.”¹⁰¹ Buscaglia-Salgado does acknowledge that “the mestizo came to stand for all hybridity, describing in essence the process of production of one who came to be the child of empire, the modern colonial subject.”¹⁰²

As has been widely argued and amply demonstrated, *mestizaje* is a project that promotes the erasure of cultural differences in the service of the formation of a group identity. Peruvian critic Antonio Cornejo Polar described it as the “the most powerful and widespread conceptual device with which Latin America has interpreted itself,” providing a “conciliating synthesis” and a “legitimizing

reason for the Latin American condition.”¹⁰³ He posited that *mestizaje* works to “imagine the nation as a more or less harmonious and coherent whole . . . even against the painful evidence of profound disintegrations.”¹⁰⁴ Juan E. De Castro points out its Eurocentric character, noting that under “the discourse of *mestizaje*, the reality of racial and cultural heterogeneity is reconciled with the unitary conceptualization of the nation that reproduces the European formula for nationality.”¹⁰⁵ Taking issue with the oversimplification or celebration of *mestizaje* by Latinx intellectuals, including Gracia and Gloria Anzaldúa, Juliet Hooker affirms that in Latin America, “ideologies of *mestizaje* . . . were utilized by conservative elites to simultaneously defend the region’s standing in light of scientific racism, legitimize their rule over racially diverse populations, and obscure the reality of racism in their countries.”¹⁰⁶ Among Latinx scholars, Josefina Saldaña-Portillo has voiced a forceful critique of how *mestizaje* as a Mexican state policy and in Chicanx cultural production contributes to the silencing of present-day Indigenous peoples. In the essay “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán?,” she urged Chicanxs to “recognize that when we appropriate the tropes of *mestizaje* and indigenismo, we are necessarily operating within the logic of representation to which these tropes belong,” chiding Anzaldúa for “deploy[ing *mestizaje*] to produce a biological tie with pre-Aztec Indians rather than a political tie with contemporary U.S. Native Americans or Mexican Indians.”¹⁰⁷ These points resonate with the observation made in the

103. Antonio Cornejo Polar, “*Mestizaje*, Transculturation, Heterogeneity,” in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 116.

104. Cornejo Polar, “*Mestizaje*, Transculturation, Heterogeneity,” 117.

105. Juan E. De Castro, *Mestizo Nations: Culture, Race, and Conformity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 9.

106. Juliet Hooker, “Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American *Mestizaje*, and Latino Political Thought on Race,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2, no. 2 (April 2014): 189. On the strategic use of *mestizaje* in Chicanx discourse, see Jessie D. Turner, “Reconsidering the Relationship between New *Mestizaje* and New Multiraciality as Mixed Race Identity Models,” *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 133–37.

107. Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing *Mestizaje*, Indianismo, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón,” in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, ed. Ileana Rodríguez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 413, 415. In later work, Saldaña refers to Chicanx celebration of *mestizaje* as “an impulse to mourn and thereby restore a lost relationship to a way of being ‘indigenous’ . . . that was rendered impossible under U.S. racial regimes.” See María Eugenia Cotera and María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, “Indigenous but Not Indian? Chicana/os and the Politics of Indigeneity,” in *The World of Indigenous North America*, ed. Robert Warrior (New York: Routledge, 2015), 563.

99. Gracia, “Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality,” 25.

100. Iván Jaksic, introduction to *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity: Jorge J. E. Gracia and His Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 12.

101. Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire*, 79. The reference is to Claudio Esteva-Fabregat, *Mestizaje in Ibero-America*, trans. John Wheat (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995). The etymology of *mulatto* is debated. It could refer to the Arabic term *muwallad* (the offspring of an Arab and a foreigner) or the word *mula* (mule), an animal that is a cross-breed (Buscaglia-Salgado, 79).

102. Buscaglia-Salgado, 66. According to Wikipedia, *mestizo* was first used in Spanish by 1275 and in English in 1582. Wikipedia, s.v. “Mestizo,” last modified February 27, 2021, 18:54 UTC, accessed May 7, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mestizo>.

introduction to the recent edited volume *Latinx Environmentalisms* that “Latinxs share an uneasy relationship with settler colonialism as both perpetrators of colonial violence and objects of settler-colonial dispossession.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Salgado-Buscaglia coined the phrase *mestizos conquistadores* to refer to “the children of the Christian conquerors,” describing them as “the first colonial subjects of modernity and the ideal of the subject of coloniality insofar as they became the primary agents of conquest.”¹⁰⁹

Mestizaje in Latin American political discourse has clear eugenicist implications. As characterized by Peter Wade in his study of race in Colombia, “The mestizo was idealized as a bi-ethnic or tri-ethnic origin, but the image held up was always at the lighter end of the mestizo spectrum. The future would bring, almost magically, a whitening of the population through race mixture, and this could be helped along more realistically by attracting European immigrants and keeping out blacks.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, *mestizaje* went hand in hand with immigration policies promoting *blanqueamiento* (whitening), known as *branqueamento* in Brazil.¹¹¹ Eventually, the hope became that “more race mixture” would yield “the eventual erasure of blackness and indianness from the nation.”¹¹² As De Castro notes, however, except for Argentina, “the number of immigrants fell short of the expectations of the elites, and the hopes for a massive miscegenation of white immigrants with blacks, Amerindians, mestizos, and mulattoes did not materialize.” He continues, “it became necessary to fashion a new response to the problems of race and nation. By the first decades of the twentieth century, Latin American intellectuals began to propose that *mestizaje* be viewed not as a flaw to be corrected by immigration, but as a characteristic that would define the nation as such.”¹¹³

Latin American *mestizaje* is premised on the idea that race is not fixed, given that racial whitening (also known as *mejorar la raza*) is possible. Although racial

mixture has a long history in the Iberian world, as a state policy *mestizaje* arose in Latin America as a response to the “scientific” racism of the nineteenth century, which, “through its pessimistic evaluation of the consequences of miscegenation and its belief in the inferiority of nonwhite races, condemned the Latin American nations to occupy permanently subordinate positions in relation to Europe and the United States.”¹¹⁴ A period view by Louis Agassiz says it all:

Let any one who doubts the evil of this mixture of races, and is inclined, from a mistaken philanthropy to break down all barriers between them, come to Brazil. He cannot deny the deterioration consequent upon the amalgamation of races more widespread here than in any other country in the world, and which is rapidly effacing the best qualities of the white man, the Negro, and the Indian, leaving a mongrel nondescript type, deficient in physical and mental energy.¹¹⁵

The governing elites bought into the discourse insofar as it concerned the “lowly” African and Indigenous people, whom they saw as an impediment to progress and blamed for the region’s “backwardness.” These attitudes justified “their exploitation of the darker-skinned, and supposedly inferior, Indian, black, and mixed-race masses.”¹¹⁶ They also saw themselves as white and resented the view that they were not equal to their peers in the United States and Europe.¹¹⁷ This status as second-class citizens had haunted them from the colonial era, where the American-born creoles were afforded a lesser status than the Spanish-born. Insisting that race could be improved and that whiteness could be attained, they bought into *mestizaje* full force.

As aptly observed by Christina A. Sue and Tanya Golash-Boza, “In Latin America . . . race is largely conceptualized on a color continuum,”¹¹⁸ an idea effectively visualized by artist Juana Valdés in *Redbone Colored China Rags* (2017) (fig. 6), which shows a line of similar ceramic objects resembling rags in a gradation of colors

108. Sarah D. Wald, David J. Vázquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, and Sarah Jaquette Ray, “Introduction: Why Latinx Environmentalisms,” in *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 7.

109. Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire*, 65.

110. Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 11.

111. See Tanya Katerí Hernández, *Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19–72.

112. Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture*, 11.

113. De Castro, *Mestizo Nations*, 18.

114. De Castro, 17.

115. Quoted in De Castro, 16.

116. De Castro, 16.

117. See Ernesto Bassi, “The ‘Franklins of Colombia’: Immigration Schemes and Hemispheric Solidarity in the Making of a Civilised Colombian Nation,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 50 (November 2017): 673–701.

118. Christina A. Sue and Tanya Golash-Boza, “Blackness in *Mestizo* America: The Cases of Mexico and Peru,” *Latino(a) Research Review* 7, nos. 1–2 (2008–9): 50.



FIGURE 6. Juana Valdés, *Redbone Colored China Rags*, 2017, ceramic, bone china fired to 1234 °C. Spinello Projects, Miami (photo by Diana Larrea, courtesy of the artist)

evoking skin tones, ranging from lightest to deepest. In the United States, by contrast, there is the well-known black-white binary with its infamous “one-drop rule,” enacted during the era of slavery and continuing well into the twentieth century, stipulating that anyone with African ancestry, however remote, is considered Black. Although these attitudes might suggest that miscegenation is anathema, the US American position toward Indigenous Americans has been starkly different. As opposed to the “expansive” understanding of Black, “Native Americanness¹⁰ is *subtractive*.”¹¹⁹ The disappearance of the Native was sought at all costs because “the goal of settler colonialism is to diminish claims to land over generations (or sooner, if possible).”¹²⁰ As a result,

Native American is a racialization that portrays contemporary Indigenous generations to be less authentic, less Indigenous than every prior generation in order to ultimately phase out Indigenous claims to land and usher in settler claims to property. This is primarily done through blood quantum registries and policies, which were forced on Indigenous nations

119. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 12.

120. Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” 12.

and communities and, in some cases, have overshadowed former ways of determining tribal membership.¹²¹

As in Latin America, “Native Americans are constructed to become fewer in number and *less* Native;” the difference in the United States is that they “never [become] exactly white, over time.”¹²²

Comparing perceptions of race in Latin America and the United States, the fundamental question posed is “why did Latin America not have black movements . . . [or] the racial ‘pride’ that could spur such movements?”¹²³ The common explanation is that state ideologies around racial mixing have served as a mechanism through which to deny the existence of racism. Wade explicates the process by which *mestizaje* played a double role, portraying itself as progressive and democratic while also justifying discrimination:

Compromise resulted in the coexistence of two variants on the nationalist theme: on the one hand, the democratic inclusive ideology of *todos somos*

121. Tuck and Yang, 12.

122. Tuck and Yang, 12.

123. Alberto and Hoffnung-Garskof, “‘Racial Democracy’ and Racial Inclusion,” 285.

mestizos—everyone is mestizo, and herein lies the particularity of Latin American identity; on the other hand, the discriminatory ideology that points out that some are lighter mestizos than others, prefers the whiter to the darker, and sees the consolidation of nationality in a process of whitening. In both variants, actual blacks and Indians are disadvantaged.¹²⁴

A study by Mónica Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka on anti-Black racism in Mexico finds that *mestizaje* works to “conceal racial privilege and exclusion under the banner of racial mixing and multicultural recognition.”¹²⁵ This is common throughout the region—striving to differentiate the Hispanophone countries’ supposedly progressive policies from the overt racism of the United States, *mestizaje* served to quash race-based movements as unpatriotic or, in the case of contemporary Cuba, counterrevolutionary. According to Alexandre Da Costa,

Post-racial ideologies operate through racialized forms of power while simultaneously claiming the non-significance of race. They generate fraught understandings of belonging and inclusion that elide racial difference and structural racism in ways that allow the re-articulation rather than the transformation of racial inequalities within national and global developments. Moreover, when deployed as a strategy of power, post-racial ideologies continually seek to depoliticize race, racism, and difference in ways that demobilize anti-racist politics, substantive cultural recognition, and material redistribution.¹²⁶

In Brazil—where close to five million enslaved Africans arrived via the Middle Passage and which was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery (in 1888)—the myth of “racial democracy” was introduced by Gilberto Freyre in 1933 in the volume *Casa-Grande e senzala*, known in English as *The Masters and the Slaves*. He argued, as summarized by Emilia Viotti da Costa, that “[b]ecause Brazilian blacks enjoyed social mobility and opportunities for cultural expression, they did not develop a consciousness of being black as their American

124. Wade, *Blackness and Racial Mixture*, 11.

125. Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka, “We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans’: Privilege, Nationalism, and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico,” *Critical Sociology* 42, nos. 4–5 (2016): 516.

126. Quoted in Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar, “We Are Not Racists,” 517.

counterparts did.”¹²⁷ Buying into the ideology of *mestizaje*, Freyre “expressed the conviction that blacks were rapidly disappearing in Brazil and merging into the white group.”¹²⁸ A powerful critique of “racial democracy” was leveled by Afro-Brazilian activist and scholar Abdias do Nascimento, who “described Brazil as a colonized nation and portrayed racial democracy as an ideology expressly aimed at ‘denying blacks the possibility of self-definition by removing any means of racial identification.’”¹²⁹

Today, the number of Afro-descendant people living in “Latin America” is estimated at 130 million. A study of Afro-Latinxs by the Pew Research Center pointed out that “about 15 times as many African slaves were taken to Spanish and Portuguese colonies than to the U.S.”¹³⁰ Peru alone received one hundred thousand enslaved Africans, yet as told by Sue and Golash-Boza, after independence, “elites focused on integrating the indigenous population, with regard to blacks, the primary goal was elimination.”¹³¹ A similar erasure of Blackness has been described by Erika Edwards in Argentina.¹³² Just as “blacks were imagined out of the nation in Peru” and Argentina so they have been erased in conceptions of *latinidad* across borders. Most regrettably, this erasure is often perpetuated by Afro-descendant Latinxs and Latin Americans themselves. Studies have shown that Latinxs “demonstrat[e] a strong preference for Whiteness and an aversion towards a Black identity.”¹³³ Indeed, even though

127. Emilia Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 234.

128. Viotti da Costa, *Brazilian Empire*, 234.

129. Alberto and Hoffnung-Garskof, “‘Racial Democracy’ and Racial Inclusion,” 286. The authors attribute the quote by Nascimento to his 1977 manifesto “‘Racial Democracy’: Myth or Reality?,” presented at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Cultures in Lagos, Nigeria.

130. Gustavo López and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Afro-Latino: A Deeply Rooted Identity among U.S. Hispanics,” Pew Research Center – Fact Tank, March 1, 2016, accessed August 20, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/01/afro-latino-a-deeply-rooted-identity-among-u-s-hispanics/, citing data by the Slave Voyages project, www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates.

131. Sue and Golash-Boza, “Blackness in Mestizo America,” 35.

132. See Erika Denise Edwards, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2020).

133. William A. Darity, Jr., Jason Dietrich, and Darrick Hamilton, “Bleach in the Rainbow: Latin Ethnicity and Preference for Whiteness,” *Transforming Anthropology* 13, no. 2 (2005): 103. The situation is comparable in the Hispanophone Americas, where, according to Sue and Golash-Boza, “ancestry does not determine racial identity” (“Blackness in Mestizo America,” 38).

mestizaje is so integral to the construction of *latinidad* as broadly understood, another Pew Research Center study revealed that only one-third of Latinxs identified as mixed race; most identified as white or Hispanic.¹³⁴ Joe Feagin and José Cobas propose that the reason for this identification is a “home-country reality”—“they are simply identifying themselves as their families have for generations.”¹³⁵ During another galvanizing moment of racial violence—the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a Latinx, for the murder of African-American Trayvon Martin—Leticia Alvarado wrote a powerful editorial urging people “to speak about the overvaluation of whiteness within the Latino community, over and against blackness.”¹³⁶ A similar sentiment was voiced by Diana-Lugo Martinez commenting on the Latinx community during the Trump presidency: “The oppressors’ mission is to divide and conquer—dissuade unity with the promise of prosperity through whiteness and white supremacy.”¹³⁷ As Alvarado lamented, however, “Zimmerman has shown us the cost of Hispanic alliance with white supremacy: a black body.”¹³⁸

As much as there is a self-perception of whiteness among Latinxs, they are often made keenly aware of not being accepted as white by mainstream Anglo culture. Recent immigrants who are white-identifying are surprised to find themselves racialized upon entering the United States. Feagin and Cobas have found discrimination against Latinxs is prevalent and “that higher levels of education and socioeconomic status do not protect [them] from racism,” although Latinos with less money and education are treated worse.¹³⁹ Multiple studies show that despite their citizenship status or presence over

multiple generations, Latinxs are regarded as foreigners in the United States. While some point out that European immigrants were not always considered white and that a process of assimilation will eventually lead at least lighter-skinned Latinxs to become “honorary whites” by US standards, Feagin and Cobas “maintain that all Latinos are racialized as a distinctive nonwhite group that is not going anywhere.”¹⁴⁰ The success of Donald Trump among Latinx voters and, notably, Afro-Cuban Americans, in the 2020 election led Cristina Beltrán to put forth the idea of “multiracial whiteness,” which she defines as follows:

Rooted in America’s ugly history of white supremacy, indigenous dispossession and anti-blackness, multiracial whiteness is an ideology invested in the unequal distribution of land, wealth, power and privilege—a form of hierarchy in which the standing of one section of the population is premised on the debasement of others. Multiracial whiteness reflects an understanding of whiteness as a political color and not simply a racial identity—a discriminatory worldview in which feelings of freedom and belonging are produced through the persecution and dehumanization of others.¹⁴¹

Recent developments and social media discourse notwithstanding, in the context of the white United States, the idea of a white Latinx is a contradiction in terms.

Many Eurodescendant or mestizo Latin Americans or Latinxs have roots in the Iberian Peninsula, and both Spain and Portugal were countries that were known for interracial unions well before 1492. As alleged by Freyre in *The Masters and the Slaves*, “No other colonizing people in modern times has equaled the Portuguese in their readiness to mix with others. ‘Mixibility,’ in a word was the quality that allowed the Portuguese to compensate for their small population.”¹⁴² In her illuminating book on

134. Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Mestizo’ and ‘Mulatto’: Mixed-Race Identities among U.S. Hispanics,” Pew Research Center – Fact-Tank, July 10, 2015, accessed May 11, 2021, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/10/mestizo-and-mulatto-mixed-race-identities-unique-to-hispanics/.

135. Joe R. Feagin and José A. Cobas, *Latinos Facing Racism: Discrimination, Resistance, and Endurance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 100.

136. Leticia Alvarado, “Zimmerman, Whiteness, and Latinos,” ABC News, July 18, 2013, https://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/News/zimmerman-trial-latinos-overvaluation-whiteness/story?id=19701774.

137. Diana Lugo-Martinez, “What Does Addressing Anti-Blackness in the Latinx Community Look Like in the Age of Trump?” National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, *Medium*, August 21, 2017, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://medium.com/@NLIHRH/what-does-addressing-anti-blackness-in-the-latinx-community-look-like-in-the-age-of-trump-c47cc2a33c35>.

138. Alvarado, “Zimmerman, Whiteness, and Latinos.”

139. Cited by Rogelio Sáenz and Karen Manges Douglas, “A Call for the Racialization of Immigration Studies: On the Transition of Ethnic

Immigrants to Racialized Immigrants,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 174.

140. Wendy Roth, review of *Latinos Facing Racism: Discrimination, Resistance and Endurance* by Joe R. Feagin and José A. Cobas, *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 3 (November 2014): 961.

141. Cristina Beltrán, “To Understand Trump’s Support, We Must Think in Terms of Multiracial Whiteness,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/01/15/understand-trumps-support-we-must-think-terms-multiracial-whiteness/.

142. Gilberto Freyre, “Mestizo Pride,” in *Problems in Modern Latin American History: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. John Charles Chasteen and James A. Wood, rev. ed. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2004), 185.

how negative perceptions of Spain informed the construction of whiteness in the United States, María DeGuzmán “argues that Anglo-American identity was constituted through alter ego/*imago* imperial conflict with, and later totemic appropriation of Spain as ‘Other.’”¹⁴³ Her book convincingly establishes that in the U.S. imaginary, Hispanics have never been and will never be white. To quote a vivid passage:

Rather than a celebration of ethnic and cultural fusion, Anglo-American imperial discourse took the Moors, Gypsies, and Jews that the Spanish Empire had endeavored to expel from the Iberian Peninsula and Native Americans and Africans whom the Spaniards in the Americas had enslaved and used as labor, including sexual, and inscribed them under the skin of or transformed them into physical marks on the imagined body of the Spaniard. Far from reflecting mixture (as if there were such a thing as purity!) as an ongoing process among world populations, this representational practice projected Anglo-Americans’ own fears and fantasies about miscegenation as national and, moreover, imperial degeneration onto the Spanish Empire.¹⁴⁴

Not only did the United States keep alive the Hispanophobic Black Legend—the maligning of Spain as a barbaric, fanatically religious, brutal, and degenerate backwater that was promoted by Northern European adversaries during the heyday of the age of exploration—it also “appropriated the name ‘America’ from Spain.” Before that, DeGuzmán explains, “what ‘America’ denoted was not the United States but South America.”¹⁴⁵ The burgeoning US American empire co-opted Columbus as forebearer, forging the myth through the “foundational fictions” of Washington Irving and others, that Anglos presided over a “foundational moment of civilization in the New World.”¹⁴⁶ As argued by Buscaglia-Salgado, this “civilization . . . came into being

143. María DeGuzmán, *Spain’s Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxxiii.

144. DeGuzmán, *Spain’s Long Shadow*, xxviii.

145. DeGuzmán, xix.

146. Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire*, 8. He refers to Washington Irving’s bestselling biographical romance *Life of Columbus* (1828), which depicts Columbus as “model of that glorious if difficult plan of bringing order to the dissolute rabble of Spanish America” (10). “Foundational fictions” refers to the classic study by Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

without any major degree of ‘racial mixing’ or corruption of the ‘white race’ through miscegenation,” thereby claiming “hemispheric dominance over the bastard children of the Spanish Empire in all their dubious racial provenance and moral degeneration.”¹⁴⁷

Both the United States’ disdain for racial mixing and its imperial ambitions affected perceptions of race across the hemisphere. Given the pressure from their northern neighbor, newly independent Latin American countries in the nineteenth century could not recognize Haiti even if they had wanted to. Nowhere was this felt more acutely than in the Dominican Republic, where “mixed-raced categories . . . emerged as part of a strategy of communicating to U.S. imperial officials in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that, while most Dominicans were not ‘white’ in the way that the U.S. government described it (which at the time could also exclude Spaniards, for instance), they were also not ‘black’ in the way that the Haitian constitution of 1805 proclaimed the country to be.”¹⁴⁸ This essential but rarely acknowledged aspect of *mestizaje* is confessed to by Priscila García-Jacquier, whose narrative began this section: “we also perpetuated aspects of our colonizers in order to survive.”¹⁴⁹

BEYOND THE BINARY: VISUALIZING RACIAL COMPLEXITY

If racial mixture is a constitutive aspect of *latinidad* across the hemisphere, it follows that it should be a central concern in Latinx art. Because discussions of identity are less prevalent in Latin America than a century ago and the topic of race continues to be swept under the carpet, artwork engaging with the topic has been less visible, especially internationally. Given that US Latinxs are a minority population whose demographics are in constant flux, matters of identity cannot help but be central in cultural production. The country’s black-white binary, along with Latinxs’ ambiguous constitution as “brown” in the national imaginary, however, have eclipsed more nuanced investigations of race in visual representation. While an exhaustive treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to recognize artists whose work on racial mixture forges new directions,

147. Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire*, 8.

148. Dixa Ramírez, *Colonial Phantoms: Belonging and Refusal in the Dominican Americas, from the 19th Century to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 12.

149. @priscilagarciacjacquier, Instagram, August 12, 2020.



FIGURE 7. Elia Alba, *If I Were A . . .*, 2003, photocopy transfers on cotton fabric, 54 x 42 x 3 in. (137.2 x 106.7 x 7.6 cm). Collection of El Museo del Barrio, New York, acquired through PROARTISTA: Sustaining the Work of Living Contemporary Artists, a fund from the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Trust, and a donation from the artist (photograph provided by the artist)

especially in reframing the African diaspora experience in relation to *latinidad* and to the art of the United States. By way of conclusion, I will address the work of three Afro-Latinx artists—Elia Alba, Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, and Juana Valdés—whose work on skin, code-switching, and ancestry exemplifies the power of visual representation to illuminate the complexities of hemispheric constructions of race.

New York–born Dominican American artist Elia Alba has addressed the conceptual ramifications of representation as pertaining to, among others, appearance versus interiority, invisibility or hypervisibility, reproduction, and masquerade. She is well known for the practice of transferring photographs of people onto fabric to create masks and bodysuits. These objects take on the role of skin, becoming stand-alone sculptures in some cases and featured in photographs or videos in others. They cause the viewer to reflect on identity and the assumptions that we project onto people due to their physical appearance. In the photographic series *Pixies* (2008), bikini-clad girls with tanned brown skin, each wearing a mask of the face of the same aging white woman, stand on a beach. The

juxtaposition suggests mutual desire—of youth, of whiteness—while also interrogating stereotypes of gender and the tropics. *If I Were A . . .* (2003) is a powerful visualization of racial mixing (fig. 7). It consists of three suits of naked female bodies, which are based on manipulated photographs of the artist herself. The first suit is composed of pale skin, the second suggests a Black body, and the third is an uncanny mixture of both—a grotesque collage of unblended colors corresponding to different body parts. The suits intimate a progression that parallels racist stereotypes, from an ideal white body to a plump and sexualized Black body to an unnatural crossbreed. While the white body is well proportioned, the artist distorts the others by enlarging the pubic area of both to appear repulsive and giving the Black body multiple navels. Alba is effective at putting the viewer in the role of voyeur and curiosity seeker. Through the process of close looking in the effort to make sense of the piece, we become complicit in the racist gaze.

Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, a Nuyorican performance artist who also works in two- and three-dimensional media, inhabits different identities to probe how



FIGURE 8. Wanda Raimundi Ortiz appearing as Chuleta alongside SkittLeZ Ortiz as Cessa LaPrincessa, video still of *Cessa and Chuleta Talk Gringo Lingo*, 2019, YouTube video, 2:58 min, <https://youtu.be/U4MHNegp9tw>.

a mixed-race Afro-descendant Latina navigates and is received across social settings. Her signature character Chuleta is a brash New Yorker from the Bronx who speaks her mind, exposing bias, hypocrisy, and absurdity in our society, particularly in relation to the art world. A self-proclaimed art enthusiast, she hosted a video series titled *Ask Chuleta* to explicate contemporary art to her community. One of the most iconic episodes is *The Hustle* (2012), where she relates the contemporary art world to a hustle, using Andy Warhol as her example.¹⁵⁰ She concludes, “I ain’t mad at it,” given that she would make \$50,000 off of her doodles if she could. As Raimundi-Ortiz’s career took a turn with her joining the faculty in studio art at the University of Central Florida, Chuleta began to adapt to new circumstances. In her most recent appearance in the video *Cessa & Chuleta Talk Gringo Lingo* (2019), she joins her friend Cessa at a diner in the hopes of meeting her new idol US representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (fig. 8).¹⁵¹ Foregoing her signature doobie wrap—where her hair is combed around her head

and fastened with bobbie pins so as to straighten it—and sporting a sleek hair style, Chuleta is dressed in “business chic” attire and fashionable sneakers. Chiding Cessa for not dressing up, she explains that she has needed to learn to “speak like a gringa” in order to survive at her job, and boasts that she “can turn any phrase into gringo lingo.” To prove her point, she engages in a hilarious verbal parry with Cessa, where her friend throws out complicated expressions in urban jargon and Chuleta translates them into white-speak. Here, Raimundi-Ortiz demonstrates strategies for “passing” that extend beyond physical appearance.

In a much more dramatic and sobering intervention, the artist embraces her Black identity in the 2017 performance *Pietà* (fig. 9).¹⁵² In the guise of a queen with a regal purple dress, a velvet jacket, and a large flat-topped crown, surrounded by a gospel choir, Raimundi-Ortiz sits on a pedestal and embraces thirty-three audience participants for three minutes and thirty-three seconds each. Propelled by her experience of being mother to a Black son, the piece provides a space for collective grieving for the

150. Wanda Raimundi Ortiz, *Ask Chuleta #17: The Hustle*, 2012, 3:36 min, YouTube video, https://youtu.be/OK_JzJo6VJE.

151. Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz and SkittLeZ Ortiz, *Cessa and Chuleta Talk Gringo Lingo*, YouTube, September 20, 2019, <https://youtu.be/U4MHNegp9tw>.

152. The performance took place at the National Portrait Gallery on May 6, 2017. An edited recording is available on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/YNUFyXuVEB4>.



FIGURE 9. Wanda Raimundi Ortiz, *Pietà* (holding Jeffreen Hayes), May 2017, performance. Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (photograph provided by the artist)

African-American community in response to the multiple acts of violence they have had to endure. The number commemorates the age of Jesus at the time of the Crucifixion, while the piece's title makes reference to his mother Mary's grief.

Cuban American Juana Valdés's work has probed the global trade of *objets d'art* as a metaphor for the movement of human bodies across the world's oceans during centuries of European colonial expansion and imperialism. Her 2019 installation *Terrestrial Bodies* (fig. 10), featured at Miami Dade College's Cuban Legacy Gallery in Miami, visualizes a collection of objects through the results of her mother Zoraida Valdés's DNA test, obtained through 23andMe. Departing from the data provided by the genetic testing service, the piece is structured as a time line that wraps around a rectangular gallery, labels beginning in 1660 with African Hunter-Gatherer and continuing through Senegambian and Guinean; Vietnamese; Chinese; Coastal West African; Indonesian, Thai, Khmer and Myanmar; Broadly European; East African; and Congolese, before ending with Nigerian in 1900. A thin wooden shelf, atop which are placed precious objects that broadly relate to the headings above, is positioned to follow the time line. The pieces include figurines, vases, tea sets, coffrets, and small statues that speak to expanding markets, social mobility, and class

aspirations. Almost each grouping contains statuettes that evoke stereotyped identities connected to the geographic descriptors. Bodies, busts, and plates are presented as having the same aesthetic, monetary, and cultural value. The ancestors are reduced to pretty things to showcase on a mantle, obscuring not only the conditions in which they would have lived and died but also the distances traveled and trajectories traversed. Cyanotype maps, placed in between some of the shelves and one on the floor, hint at the global movement of people and things, but in such an oblique manner as to lead the viewer astray. In two instances, the geographic references are almost all erased; in another print, the undersides of cups and saucers take the place of ships sailing across a crowded ocean. These surfaces have markings akin to stamps, denoting their places of origin. Right-side up, however, the objects themselves carry a host of completely unrelated connotations, signaling wealth, status, and worldly aspirations. The artist implies that just as the objects evoke associations, so do people, through their appearance, gender, and pigmentation. Their complex, variegated histories remain hidden from view, especially in a society that only knows black and white.

Racial attitudes in Latin America and the United States have been deeply entrenched for so long that it is difficult to imagine a collective transformation of



FIGURE 10. Juana Valdés, installation view of *Terrestrial Bodies*, October 24, 2019–June 16, 2020. Cuban Legacy Gallery, Miami Dade College Special Collections, Freedom Tower, Miami (photograph by Zachary Balber, courtesy of the artist)

consciousness. Perhaps the renewed impetus for Black Lives Matter will be short-lived, or perhaps it will lead to structural and lasting change as many hope. What is clear is that the frameworks that contain history and structure knowledge are insufficient to help us grapple with the complexities of our contemporary condition in the Western Hemisphere. Visual artists like Elia Alba, Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, and Juana Valdés have spent their entire careers calling attention to these. More recently, public intellectuals and creatives like Alan Pelaez Lopez, Priscila García-Jacquier, and many others are making the point at a fever pitch. Anti-Blackness is unacceptable, and if *latinidad* cannot embrace a platform of antiracism and speak out against sexism, gendered violence, homophobia,

transphobia, family separation, migrant criminalization, white supremacy, Indigenous invisibility, geographic segregation, and cultural erasure—in short, if it cannot decolonize—it deserves to be canceled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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