

WHO ARE LATINXS IN THE UNITED STATES?

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RACE AND LATINXS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Scholars have long observed that racial categories in the United States were constituted primarily through legal doctrines that codified racist ideologies, and that the resulting racial hierarchy was foundational to the establishment of the United States as a nation-state. Within this racial structure, whiteness—and the idea of innate differences between whites and nonwhites—was created in order to justify the enslavement of people of African descent, as well as the genocide of indigenous people and the theft of their lands (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Takaki 1993). This historical understanding of the origins of race and racial categories in the United States has led scholars of race to articulate two concepts that are core to understanding how race has operated in the United States since its inception: “the one-drop rule of hypodescent” and the “black/white binary” (Perea 1998), concepts that understand race to be primarily understood as a Black and white matter. Given these social and historical realities, how are we to understand the question of Latinxs and race?

While it is important to look beyond the Black/white binary, it is undeniable that Latinxs as a group exist within this racial framework, relating to Blackness as well as whiteness in important ways. At the same time, Latinxs are also embedded in a racial structure in relation to Asian Americans, native peoples, and other racialized groups such as Arab Americans. Given the way that race as a construct has changed over the years even as it has enduring ideologies of white supremacy, how do Latinxs fit into existing racial hierarchies, and how are they impacted by them? This chapter provides an overview of some of the key issues related to race and Latinxs including Latinx racialization, Latinx perceptions of race and their own racial identifications, and why race matters when it comes to Latinxs.

LATINXS AS ETHNICITY NOT RACE

Telles (2018) notes that since the 1970s, the U.S. Census has categorized Hispanics as an ethnic and not a racial group, describing a wide swath of people with backgrounds in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America. It was in 2000 that the U.S. Census introduced the term “Latino” to describe people of Latin American origin, and the approach of using two questions—one to ascertain whether the person’s background is ethnically Latinx and one to determine the person’s race (Allen et al. 2011). The logic of this approach is based on the idea that race and ethnicity are two distinct categories, and can be viewed as such for Latinxs. The distinction being that ethnicity is constructed based on shared cultural background including language, customs, and shared history among other things while race is a socially constructed category based on assumed group belonging tied to the social meaning given to physical appearance, particularly characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features. Moreover, sociologists have long agreed that “Race is a social construction, an idea we endow with meaning through daily

interactions. It has no biological basis...Race is also a historical construction, meaning that the idea of race was formulated at particular historical moments and places” (Golash-Boza 2018:4).

Understood within this framework—race and ethnicity as two distinct categories—there is logic to the idea that Latinxs are an ethnic and not a racial group. This is because Latinx people—as a result of the very systems that produced race as we know it in the Americas—colonialism and slavery—are diverse in terms of phenotype, physical characteristics that are observable and associated with race such as skin color, hair type, eye shape, etc. Because anti-Blackness is a feature of Latinx culture as well as white culture and US society, in general, Afro-Latinxs have historically been excluded from the notion of “what Latinxs look like” yet a large proportion of Latinx people are phenotypically Black though they may or may not identify as Black (Salas Pujols 2022). There are also phenotypically white and Asian Latinxs though Latinxs may or may not identify as white or Asian. The majority of Latinxs, however, are phenotypically Brown, reflecting the aspect of Latinx ancestry that is indigenous and/or mestizx. Indeed, there is the mainstream belief that to be Latinx is to be Brown—that this is “what Latinxs look like” and this mainstream belief is perpetuated in a number of discursive spaces including media and popular culture.

THE RACIALIZATION OF *LATINIDAD*

While the U.S. Census does not recognize Latinx as a racial designation, Telles writes:

the census does not capture the way Hispanics think about race; the census’s separate notions of race and ethnicity simply do not coincide with the lived experience/worldview of many Hispanics (Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007). Social science research has found that cognitively Hispanics consider Hispanic/Latino as both race and ethnicity and, racially, that Hispanic is a group separate and in addition to black, white, Asian, and American Indian (Hitlin et al. 2007). (2018:156)

Here, Telles points out that while the U.S. Census does not categorize Latinxs as a race, Latinxs think of themselves as an ethno-racial group—that is a group that is simultaneously a panethnic group¹ and a fifth racial group in the US racial structure.

The reasons that Latinxs might think of themselves as simultaneously a panethnic group and a racial group are several. As stated earlier, Latinxs are diverse in their physical, phenotypical presentations because of the history of colonization and slavery, and because of both forced and consensual racial mixing in Latin America and in the United States. Thus, it is possible, and not at all uncommon, to have people of different phenotypical presentations within the same family. Flores-Gonzalez et al.’s study of race and Latino youth (2014) opens with a powerful anecdote of a Puerto Rican youth discussing the complexity of her racial identity in light of this context:

Well if you go by the government’s definition, [I would be defined] as White, but people don’t see me that way. They see that I’m Hispanic or Puerto Rican and then it’s, ‘Hello stereotypes.’” Pressed to state where she falls within the Black and White racial binary, she added, “Well, I consider myself neither one, I’m Hispanic.

¹ A panethnic group is a larger group composed of people from many specific ethnic groups such as Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Central Americans, and South Americans.

But the government considers me White, a White Hispanic because I'm light enough. My mom and sister would be Black, though."

The subject quoted in Flores-Gonzalez et al.'s research highlights the inadequacy of the US racial model still tethered strongly to the Black–white binary, particularly when it comes to Latinxs. The passage also highlights one of the reasons why the US racial model which still lends primacy to the Black–white binary fails to be adequate—because it breaks down even within nuclear families and does not match the lived racialized experiences of Latinxs.

Despite the complexity of Latinx racialization and the reality of the heterogeneity of Latinx phenotypes, Latinxs appear prominently in the US racial imaginary as Brown. Analyzing media discourse around the California antiimmigrant bill Proposition 187 in the 1990s, Santa Ana (2002) found that the dominant metaphors with which to describe Latinx, predominantly Mexican immigrants, alluded to immigration as an unstoppable “brown tide” as seen through “a sea of brown faces....” (p. 72) This discourse persisted well into the 21st century, particularly within the context of narratives and metaphors of immigration. Heuman and González (2018) analyze former US president Donald Trump’s rhetoric about immigration and the US–Mexico border, pointing out that the rhetoric he disseminated through speeches, the media, and Twitter, in particular, reinforces the idea that immigrants from Mexico and Central America coming through the US–Mexico border are a threat to white people and white supremacy, discourse echoing the fear of the “brown tide” found in 1990s rhetoric. In a now infamous political speech, Heuman and González argue that Trump conveys this sense of the fear of being “awash under a brown tide” perhaps, paradoxically, using discourse that does not explicitly use racial terms but nonetheless evokes racialized imagery that portrays Latinx immigrants in a sinister light when he said, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (p. 335). Thus, the racialization of Latinxs often occurs in the context of the politics of racist and nativist immigration which in the context of US history were always already racialized, associating Latinx racialized identities with criminality.

Reflecting on film and television representations of Latinxs also provides an opportunity to notice how Latinxs in the United States are racialized and gendered (Castañeda 2018; Golash-Boza 2013). Golash-Boza (2013) asserts that Latinxs “are both underrepresented and misrepresented in American media” (p. 110). Of note are the media stereotypes frequently used to represent Latinxs: “gangbanger, bandit, drug trafficker, police officer, janitor, gardner, and the Latin lover” for Latinx men and “hot-blooded women anxious for fulfillment or...maids anxious to please” (Golash-Boza 2013:111; Merskin 2007; Rodríguez 1997). Reading this list of stereotypes surely evokes vivid images that we can instantly recollect, perhaps replete with specific films, actors, or scenes. Moreover, the vast majority of the examples we might instantly recall, if not all of them, feature Latinx actors of a particular phenotype—constituting images that serve to reinforce the idea of a Latinx person racialized as Brown.

But if in the social, political, and cultural realms, Latinxs are perceived and represented as a racialized Brown, and if Latinxs themselves often identify as a racial group outside of the Black/white binary, what factors contribute to Latinx perceptions and understandings of race? And when forced to choose a racial designation for the U.S. Census or other institutional forms, what contributes to how Latinxs choose to identify themselves racially?

LATINX PERCEPTIONS ABOUT RACE

Racial identification is a process that occurs largely according to how the social world perceives our belonging to racial groups within a hierarchy, but individuals also make choices about how they identify racially. The variables that contribute to how Latinxs identify racially are numerous and complex in nature. Stokes-Brown (2012) provides a helpful synthesis of some of the many variables that contribute to how Latinx individuals perceive their race, thus contributing to their racial identification. Below is a list of some of the variables Stokes-Brown identifies:

- National origin
- History of their specific ethnic group in the United States
- Experience of discrimination (or perception of experience of discrimination)
- Skin color
- Age
- Gender
- Socioeconomic status
- Generational status
- Language

This lengthy list suggests the complexity of Latinx racial identifications and the many potential variables that impact racial identifications. Moreover, these variables exist for Latinxs in within structured racial and social hierarchies that may influence—either implicitly and explicitly—Latinx choices with regards to racial identification where to claim whiteness can sometimes be read as either an assertion of or an aspiration to racial privilege, and the claim to Blackness or “otherness” can sometimes be read as a recognition or experience of marginalization.

Latinxs That Identify as White

The 2020 census showed a significant decline in the number of Latinxs who identify as white from about 53% in 2010 to about 20% in 2020 (Pastor and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2021). In their *Los Angeles Times* editorial “Why did so few Latinos identify themselves as white in the 2020 census?,” Pastor and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2021) theorize that, in part, this decline in Latinxs identifying as white may be related to growing racial consciousness, as signified by the creation of the nomenclature “BIPOC” (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and as emblemized by the widespread historic protests in the summer of 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.

However, of those Latinxs who do identify as white, Frank et al. identify a variety of reasons why this might be including: “Repositioning into the White racial category may be occurring among contemporary Latino groups in a way similar to ethnic European groups in the past” (2010:381). That is, some Latinxs may view their situation as analogous to that of European immigrant groups such as Italian Americans who were previously not included as white but in time came to be thought of as such. Frank et al. note that “the

non-White phenotypic appearance of many Latino immigrants raises some doubts that this process of racial boundary shifting will occur again” (Alba 2005:381).

What are some variables that might contribute to Latinxs identifying as white? Lighter skin color and reporting fewer experiences of discrimination are likely to contribute to Latinxs identifying as white (Frank et al. 2010; Stokes-Brown 2012). As stated earlier, Cubans are more likely than Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, or Dominicans to identify as white, and this is likely because they have more political and economic power than these other groups, as well as historically having government support for their pursuit of citizenship (Frank et al. 2010; Stokes-Brown 2012). Older Latinxs and Latinxs of higher socioeconomic status are also more likely to identify as white.

Latinxs Who Identify as Afro-Latinxs

A 2022 Pew Research Center article reporting the results of a 2020 study notes that approximately 130 million people of African descent live in Latin America, about one quarter of the region’s total population (Barrera 2022). Latin America’s colonial history shaped this demographic reality given that during the colonial era 15 times more enslaved people of African descent were taken to Latin America and Caribbean than to the United States. Given the large Latin American Afro descendant population, it is not surprising that the size of the Afro-Latinx population in the United States is sizable where Afro-Latinx is defined as “Latin@s of visible or self-defined African descent” (Jiménez Román and Flores 2010:4 as cited in Salas Pujols 2022). In 2020, there were approximately 6 million Afro-Latinx adults in the United States, about 12% of the Latinx population according to the Pew Research Center. Interestingly, the 2020 U.S. Census shows 1.2 million people identify as both Hispanic and Black, a significantly lower number. Barrera (2022) notes that a significant number of individuals who identified as Afro-Latinx in the 2020 Pew Research Center study do not identify as Hispanic. Thus, the significantly lower number of individuals who identify as both Hispanic and Black could be attributed to this discrepancy.

A discussion of the racial identities of Afro-Latinxs provides us with the opportunity to think in complex terms about Latinx racial identities, but also to understand that Blackness as a category also is complex, and those who may identify as Black are also a culturally heterogeneous group. Salas Pujols’s discussion of a study of the identities of young Afro-Latina girls in the New York metro area begins with a description of a note posted during a discussion among youth. The note reads: “we don’t know what afro-latino is because schools only teach that there is only black, white or latinos. They don’t teach where they intersect. There are different types of Black, culturally (caribbean, african)” (2022:594). The note reveals the youth participants’ understanding of the cultural heterogeneity of those who identify as Black, but also begins to suggest what Bierly refers to as the “double marginalization” of Afro-Latinxs—their frequent exclusion from both Black and Latinxs categories. Explaining this phenomenon, Bierly writes, “The Black community often distances themselves from Afro-Latinos due to cultural and linguistic differences that denaturalizes their black identity. In turn, the Latino community often denaturalizes the Latino identity of Afro-Latinos for being too black (Bucholtz 2005)” (Bierly 2020). This experience of “double marginalization,” as well as the racism they may experience as a result of anti-Blackness and the erasure they may encounter when they are not recognized or represented broadly by media, institutions, etc. as Latinx, may strongly

contribute to Afro-Latinxs experience of and relationship to the broader Latinx community and their identification or lack of identification with it.

Latinxs Who Identify as “Indigenous” or “Native American”

The 2014 National Survey of Latinos found that 1-in-4 or 25% of Latinxs consider themselves “indigenous or Native American, such as Maya, Nahua, Taino, Quiche, Aymara or Quechua, among others” (Parker et al. 2015). But only 2% of respondents in the same survey selected “indigenous or Native American” in response to the survey’s standard race question. Thus, while many Latinxs recognize indigeneity as either a part or the whole of **their identity**, it is not often claimed by Latinxs as a racial identity. Nonetheless, because of the **history of colonialism** and the enduring colonial state that exists for indigenous people, indigeneity has been racialized both in Latin America and in the United States where to be called “**Indio**” is considered a pejorative term and where stereotypical representations of indigenous people as illiterate, unintelligent, and backward abound in popular media (Golash-Boza 2013; Tumbaga 2020).

In addition to the presence of indigenous and indigenous identified Latinx people in the United States by virtue of history and ancestry, **there is now** a sizable population of indigenous immigrants and their families from Latin America in the United States by virtue of recent migrations. While **causes of migration** such as poverty, natural disasters, and human rights violations affect nonindigenous migrants from Latin America as well, these factors tend to **impact indigenous people** more harshly (Kladzyk et al. 2021) and result in large **numbers of indigenous people** being forced to flee their homes in Mexico and Central America and immigrate to the United States. Importantly, indigenous people from Mexico and Central America often do not identify as Latinx and consider **this categorization** by the US government to be a misrepresentation, an erasure, and, **indeed**, what Janet Martinez, the founder of the organization CIELO (Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo) calls “statistical genocide” (Hernández-Cañuelas 2021; Hinojosa 2022).

Latinxs Who Identify as “Asian”

As groups distinct from **one another**, Asian Americans and Latinxs have faced some challenges in common including **racism**, immigration restrictions, and labor exploitation, and have worked and struggled **alongside each other** in a relationship involving “acrimony, ambivalence, and tension as well as **fellowship and bonding**” (Kang and Torres-Saillant 2016:550). A significant and **growing number** of scholars have written about the relationships between these two panethnic **groups and the connections** between them both in the United States and transnationally (Guevarra 2012; López 2013; Ocampo 2016), and Latin American countries such as Mexico, Peru, Cuba, and Brazil are recognized as having substantial numbers of people of Asian **descent**. It is not surprising, then, that Latinx communities in the United States also include a **number of people** from Asian and Latinx ancestry. The 2020 U.S. Census results noted that an estimated 3% of Asian Americans in the United States identify as Asian Latinx or Asian Hispanic, and that of those who identified as both Asian American and Latinx, 35% were of Filipinx heritage (unidosus.org 2021). Filipinx Americans share some important cultural characteristics in common with Latinxs as a result of the shared history of Spanish colonization in the Philippines and the Americas (Guevarra 2012; Ocampo 2016), yet they are not technically included in the category of Latinx because their heritage is not Latin American despite the commonality of the Spanish colonial experience.

Latinxs That Identify as “Some Other Race”

The 2020 U.S. Census yielded a high number of respondents who identify as “Hispanic or Latino” (the U.S. Census Bureau’s language) in terms of ethnicity marking “Some other race” to describe their race—42% or approximately 4 in 10 of the United States’ reported 62.1 million Latinxs or Hispanics (Wang 2021). This phenomenon of choosing “Some other race” on the U.S. Census could be understood to be a probable result of many Latinx people not feeling adequately represented in any of the 4 racial categories listed on the U.S. Census: white, Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and American Indian, the precise situation that led to the creation of the category “Some other race” in 2004. Telles notes that, indeed, this racial categorization system is anachronistic and does not match either many Latinx people’s senses of their own racial identity, the perceptions of Latinxs by non-Latinxs, or contemporary practices of classifications of race by institutions (e.g., the practice of law enforcement describing Latinx suspects’ race as “Hispanic”) (2018).

Indeed, in an interview, G. Cristina Mora, a sociologist, asserts that this large number of people who identified as “Some other race” in the most recent U.S. Census is a “red flag that’s been around for a very long time...[because] If we’re not represented in data, we’re never going to have a true sense of racial justice” (Wang 2021). This is because social scientists and policymakers rely on data that use racial categories in order to learn about everything from racial disparities in wealth to health outcomes to educational attainment and to identify where and how racial inequities persist.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF LATINX RACIALIZATION OR WHY RACE STILL MATTERS

Fully a third of Latinxs in the United States identified as being of more than one race in the United States, up from just 6% in 2010, resulting in Latinxs being “now more than twice as likely to identify as multiracial than as white.” Commenting on this phenomenon, sociologist Tomás Jimenez remarked, “We are in a weird time demographically... There’s more choice about our individual identities and how we present them than there ever has been. We can presume far less about who somebody is based on the boxes they check compared to previous periods” (Tavernise and Gebeloff 2021). Given that we are living in this “weird time demographically,” and given that we know that the racial categories that currently exist were developed to maintain a social hierarchy (Golash-Boza 2013), and moreover, given that we know that racial purity is a myth and that the categories that exist are flawed and do not adequately represent Latinx identities and experiences, should we advocate to get rid of racial categories all together?

While we must acknowledge the deeply flawed nature of racial categories and race as it exists in the United States, we must also acknowledge that there continue to be profound racial inequities. Quantifying racial inequities is of critical importance if we are to continue to work to challenge, reduce, and perhaps, in some difficult to imagine future, eliminate those racial inequities. As Mora and Rodriguez explain

“Racial statistics...make visible the systems of domination and punishment that affect communities of color...Indeed, black and Latino classifications help to provide evidence of how these communities suffer from limited access to quality education, grapple with mass incarceration and racial profiling, and remain under-represented in major centers of power, from the academy to elected office.” (2017:43)

Mora and Rodriguez’s explanation focuses on issues related to education, policing, and representation in a variety of social sectors. Beyond this, social scientific data also substantiate persistent racial wealth gaps (Bhutta et al. 2020); disproportionate immigration enforcement actions against Black and Brown men (Golash-Boza 2018); the continued existence of race based hate crimes against Latinxs and other BIPOC people (Perry 2003); and continued barriers to reproductive justice for Latinas and other BIPOC people (Kaplan 2022; Zavella 2016), to name but a few of the pressing societal areas where we see the brutal consequences of systemic and structural racism. Given these realities, we are, unfortunately, not in a position to end race and racial categories, as limited and limiting as they may be. As long as race continues to be a central organizing feature of life in the United States, and as long as race contributes to shaping our experiences, opportunities, and social realities, we need to continue to document it as a salient aspect of social life. Nonetheless, as this chapter demonstrates, there is a need to continue to critically analyze the way racial categories are defined and constructed, and ultimately, to change the categories, so that Latinx racial identities, as Latinx people experience them, can be more precisely and consistently captured in the existing language of race in the United States.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2003. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Golash-Boza, Tanya Maria. 2013. *Race and Racisms: A Critical Approach*. 2nd ed. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813553269>.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed. Routledge.

Roth, Wendy D. 2012. *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804782531>.

MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES

- “A Family Conversation on Race and Latinidad” (Latino USA podcast): <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/a-family-conversation-on-race-and-latinidad/id79681317?i=1000525579284>
- “Latinidad and the American Racial Hierarchy” (Modern Racism podcast): <https://www.audible.com/pd/Modern-Racism-Podcast-ep-7-Latinidad-and-the-American-Racial-Hierarchy-Podcast/B0966L971R>
- “Ain’t I a Latina?” website: <http://aintilatina.com/>
- “Ain’t I a Latina Founder Janel Martinez on Creating Space as a Black Latinex” (Latina to Latina podcast): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhMZGNfHORl>
- “What Does it Mean to be Latino? The ‘Light-Skinned Privilege’ Edition” (Code Switch Podcast): <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/21/1008735322/what-does-it-mean-to-be-latin-o-the-light-skinned-privilege-edition>
- “We Are Here: Mapping Indigenous Migrant Languages” (Latino USA podcast): <https://www.wnyc.org/story/we-are-here-mapping-indigenous-migrant-languages/>

- “Dear Latinx, Let’s Check Our Privilege” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddGpgInLQxo&t=2s>
- “A Conversation with Latinos on Race” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLLCHbCgJbM>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on your own racial identity. Have you ever found it difficult to know how to identify your race on an official form? Has your thinking about your own racial identity shifted as a result of what you learned by reading this chapter?
2. What is your earliest memory of recognizing racial differences? Where and how did you learn about race as a child?
3. Are Latinxs an ethnic group, a racial group, or both? How would you now answer this question using what you learned in this chapter?

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