

LA ENCRUCIJADA: LATINA CONSCIOUSNESS, ACADEMIA, AND IMPOSED IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Latinx identity is complicated and shaped by a history of colonization and neo-colonialism. Living in the U.S., this history is sometimes lost to non-Latinx people. Expectations of what it means to be “Latinx” are created and imposed on to Latinx people living in the U.S. As someone who grew up on La Frontera, I have my own idea of what my identity as a Latina, specifically a Mexican American, is. Having moved away from the border to the Midwest, into an academic context, other peoples’ interpretations of my identity as a Latina are constantly shifting and being reshaped. This shifting and reshaping simultaneously casts me as Latina, but not Latina enough to be “legitimate.” Using Gloria Anzaldua’s “Borderlands/La Frontera,” I examine what it means to be a Latina, but not a Latina, at home, and far away in hostile spaces. Using the concept of “La Encrucijada/The Crossroads,” I examine how interpretations of my identity shape my place in academic spaces (Anzaldua 1987: 80).

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Racial construction, or “race-making,” has the potential for complicated discussions (Omi and Winant 2015, 105). Defining race is a means of categorizing people into groups based on things like culture, class, and religion that provides people with an outline for how to interact with members of different races (Omi and Winant 2015, 105-109). Race-making has a base in history, geography, politics, as well as more personified categories, such as ethnicity and class (Omi and Winant 105). Race in the U.S. has usually been thought of and defined in relation to legal definitions of Blackness (Lopez 2006). While these laws establish a firm Black American identity, they also show the complicated process of creating race and racial identity (Lopez 2006, 84). Groups of people who do not fit into a “Black” or “white” racial binary disrupt the basis for American identity (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Latinidad falls into this category of racial disruption. In the Black and white racial binary, it becomes hard to untangle the results of hundreds of years of colonization that have resulted in a collapsed Latinx identity (Gomez 2020). This Black and white racial binary boils Latinx identity down to “mestizaje- the racial mixture across Spanish, African, and Indigenous ancestors” (69). This collapsed Latinx identity is portrayed as indigenous yet Spanish speaking, central American, immigrant, and definitively not American (Casarez 2022, Chavez 2013).

The American construction of a Latinx identity does little to acknowledge the U.S.’s own place in carving this definition (Gomez 2020). The creation of the Monroe Doctrine led to U.S. intervention and presence in Latin America, which resulted in the destabilization of several countries from the mid-1800s and onwards (Tombs 2003). In the U.S., the Mexican-American war and the idea of American expansion west led to the ceasing of parts of northern Mexico to the U.S., which displaced a large and varied Mexican population (Rathbun 2001). This displacement allowed white settlers to colonize the western territories that formerly belonged to Mexico. White settlers began to construct Mexicans and Mexican descendants in the west as foreign competition, while also questioning the validity of any Mexican claim to land in the area (Chavez 2013, Cummings 2003). These historical moments that have led to the construction of Latinidad through an American lens have resulted in a foreign Latinx identity oppositional to the white portrayals of Americanness (Casarez 2022, Chavez 2013, Cummings 2003). In contrast to this, the construction of Latinidad in areas with high concentrations of Latinx people, such as the border, allows for a more flexible interpretation of identity that recognizes the history of border areas, but still pulls on the American construction of Latinidad (Anzaldúa 1987, Chavez 2013). Latinidad in these places is constructed through visible signs, such as accent and hair texture, that non-Latinx individuals have little to no knowledge of (Sowards 2021).

When it comes to my own construction of identity as a Latina, I pull from both the signifiers that Latinx individuals use, as well as the collapsed Latinidad constructed by white Americans. I grew up on the U.S./Mexico border with a white American dad, and a Mexican mom of obvious indigenous descent who had recently migrated to the U.S. My mom’s more recent move to the states, her lack of fluency in English, her work as a domestic helper, and her obvious indigeneity resulted in a relational construction of my identity. I was white, until my mom came into the

picture. Because I had a white dad, I was whiter than my Mexican American friends, until they met my mom. My mom's noticeably non-American identity resulted in a Mexican identity for myself that was more validated than the ones my friends held. Of course, this validation was due to anti-indigenous biases held in Mexican American identity. This, like the construction of Latinidad, is due to a collapsed Latinx identity.

These relational signifiers of Latinx identity do not transfer into a midwestern, academic context. I chose to continue my academic path in the Midwest, where Latinx identity holds firmly with the American construction of Latinidad. In the Midwest academic context, I'm not brown enough or foreign enough to be considered Latina, and my research interests do not reflect a Latinx identity. Whiteness gets imposed on me in ways that it did not at home. Outside of this academic context, I am interpreted as foreign. I am not white, I am not Black, I am "other". It is only in the academic space that I am not Latina enough. I am only a Latina when the space calls for it. In times of department and university recruitment, I am Latina. When it comes to questions of diversity, I become Latina.

The oppositional construction and imposition of a white identity on to me creates a crossroads of sorts. Gloria Anzaldua writes about the crossroads (La Encrucijada) that mestizas face, stating:

Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings (Anzaldua 1987, 80).

My identity is not one dimensional. It is the result of historical forces that continue to shape it over time. The perceptions of my identity are not indicative of my experiences as a Latina. The imposition of whiteness on to my identity does not negate any racism I've experienced outside the academic sphere. Just because I am white in an academic context does not mean I've never been told to "go back to my country" or that people like me "belong in service jobs because we can't do anything else." While it may not always be physically obvious, my identity as a Latina is still my identity, even when questioned. There are parts of Latinidad that I always carry with me, such as my bilingual and bicultural perspectives (Bernal 2001). These parts of my identity provide me with an understanding of the world that allows me to question definitions in place that are treated as fact, something that I am truly grateful for.

CONTRIBUTOR:

Maralyn Doering is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology, University of Cincinnati. Her research interests include border issues, racial construction, contraception and Latiné reproductive health. Her current work focuses on physician authority and accountability in medical care.

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