Latinx
The New Force in American Politics and Culture

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After several years of debate about America’s progress on its racial question, the election of Donald Trump has brought white supremacy into the mainstream. Replacing coded dog whistles with an authoritarian bullhorn, he has openly declared undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants to be violent threats to the American people and, indirectly, to the integrity of American identity. While Trumpian white supremacy still features anti-black racism at its core, as well as a large dose of Islamophobia, its intensified scapegoating of the undocumented has disrupted the black-white binary that has anchored race discourse throughout American history. Latinx, neither just black or white and eternally considered outsiders despite our 500-year presence in this hemisphere, are poised to signal a crucial turn in this debate.

Conversations about race in the United States have always been plagued by the unresolved trauma of Europe’s colonization of the Americas and the resulting legacy of slavery. The United States, along with most of the Western world, has long roiled in an identity crisis stemming from the unfinished business of race and the slow decentering of the white, male, Western subject. Could
America's identity begin to include people of color, women, and LGBT people?

With the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, two contradictory narratives emerged: one of a post-racial society in which racism was "withering away" with the emergence of elites of color, and the other arguing that white supremacy and overt racism had been obscured by what sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls "racialized social systems." The latter narrative pointed to a structural racism evident in racist micro-aggressions and in "dog whistle politics," a set of coded signals transmitted to America's eroding white majority assuring them that they were still in charge. Trump's emergence signaled the crash and burn of post-racial ideology, while at the same time foregrounding new racial scapegoats and blurring the neat boundaries of black-white opposition.

Latinx is a book about a growing group of Americans who are injecting a different idea about race into the American race debate. It will attempt to demonstrate that Anglo- and Latin America are two versions of the idea of "America," with two very different articulations about race. In Anglo-America, race is considered through a binary in which white and black are strictly defined opposites. In Latin America, while the racial binary still resonates, it is complicated by a tangled caste system that openly acknowledges several categories of mixed-race people and different ideas about how to assimilate them.

I don't intend to argue for the superiority of one of these ideologies or forms of social organization—they're both seriously flawed and represent competing traditions of Western modernism. But I believe that the Latinx view of race, inherited from nation-building ideologies that lionized race-mixing in Latin America, poses narratives that challenge and resist Anglo-American paradigms. While these ideologies have not ended racism and in some ways have even reinforced it in Latin America, they have the potential to explode binary contradictions. The convergence of Anglo- and Latin American ideas about race may point the way towards more nuanced ideologies, and possibly significant social change.

By titling this book Latinx, I'm attempting, like the mostly young folks that are embracing this label, to engage with several threads of thinking about identity and naming, recognizing and evaluating the potential of such a label's elasticity and ability to evade categorization. I'm drawing attention to the Latinx people as one of the primary destabilizers of American—and by extension, Western—identity. Often erased from America's founding narrative, Latinx—in all our previous guises—have always been present as a crucial counter-narrative, a people that live in a world of many worlds, possessing an identity of multiple identities.

What's in a Name?

The advent of the term Latinx is the most recent iteration of a naming debate grounded in the politics of race and ethnicity. For several decades the term Latino was the progressive choice over Hispanic; according to G. Cristina Mora's Making Hispanics, the latter was pressed into service by the Nixon administration in the 1970s, an apolitical attempt at an antidote to the "unrest" created by increasing activism in Latinx communities inspired by the African American civil rights movement. As he did with African Americans, Nixon promoted Hispanic entrepreneurship by appointing a Mexican American as the head of the Small Business Administration. Hispanic became a "pan-ethnic" category whose development was fostered by data researchers such as the Census Bureau, political "entrepreneurs" of both liberal and conservative stripes, and media marketers, who ultimately created the vast Spanish-language media.

Hispanic overtly identified Latinx with Spanish cultural, racial, and ethnic origins. Yet Latino carried with it the notion that Latin American migrants to the United States were not merely hyphenated Europeans, but products of the mixed-race societies and cultures south of the border who freely acknowledged that they were
not “white.” It has over the years become more widely accepted among liberals, while Hispanic still carries a strong weight among conservatives—including many who are Latinx.

Still, as Latino became the preferred choice of those who wanted to identify as multiracial, gender politics quickly emerged in the politics of labeling. Spanish is a Romance language in which all nouns are assigned a gendered identity (ordinary objects such as shoes, automobiles, and computers, for example, are male or female); therefore the Latino population necessarily consists of Latinos (male) and Latinas (female). As racial identity began intersecting with gender and sexual preference, Latino became Latino/a, then Latina/o to move “o” out of the privileged position. After the universalization of digital communication, it briefly became Latin@ among Latino/a student unions and nonprofit organizations and in academic articles and books (Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader, published in 2012, became Contemporary Latin@ Media Production in 2015).

For all of Latinx’s space-age quirkiness, the term has a technocratic emptiness to it that can make it hard to warm up to. It feels like a mathematician’s null set, and many are unsure of how to pronounce it. But even amid ongoing debate around the term on campuses and in the media, the growing movement to embrace Latinx highlights how it dispenses with the problem of prioritizing male or female by negating that binary. The real power of the term and its true meaning, however, erupts with its final syllable. After years of Latin lovers, Latin looks, Latin music, and Latin America, the word describes something that is not as much Latin—a word originally coined by the French to brand non-English- and Dutch-speaking colonies with a different flavor—as it is an alternative America, the unexpected X factor in America’s race debate.

**Who or What Are Latinx, and What Is the Nature of Our Doing?** Latinx intends to describe the in-between space in which Latinx live, which allows us to cross racial boundaries more easily and construct identities, or self-images, that include a wide variety of racial, national, and even gender-based identifications. Rather than simply creating a new shade of person somewhere between black and white, this in-between space has the potential to reveal the blackness and indigenousness often erased in Latin America by mixed-race utopian ideologies, but kept alive through oscillating tendencies toward tolerance and repression. Many premodern roots and traditions remained intact while others, fragmenting by Spanish colonialism, always threatened to reemerge, and new hybrid identities, like the syncretic religions of the Afro-Caribbean, took hold.

While mixed-race culture in Latin America evolved with the help of Catholic doctrine, Spanish law, and twentieth-century nation-building ideologies, the development of racial identity in the United States has been significantly different. Because of the United States’ unique racial ideology of hypodescent—one drop of black blood makes you black—with no official recognition of “mixed-ness” in state ideology, media, or “common sense” discourse, the hybrid and mestizaje elements of American culture remain obscured. Yet the widespread creation in the United States of hybrid and hyphenated identities such as Nuyorican, Chicano, Dominican-York, Tejano, and Miami Cuban has created space for excluded identities to assert themselves.

For Latinx in the United States, this relatively new process of creating hybrid identities dates back to the end of the Mexican-American War and the absorption of the Southwest territories in 1848. While the hegemony of the black-white racial binary has effectively rendered a true understanding of the Latinx experience unintelligible in the standard narrative of American history, the pattern of racial discrimination has had the paradoxical effect of encouraging a stronger assertion of African and indigenous identities. This became particularly clear in the 1970s when Puerto Ricans in New York formed the Young Lords, a militant political group modeled on the Black Panthers, and Chicanos of California and the Southwest organized...
around an indigenous identity connected to an imaginary homeland called Aztlan.

In a nation built on profit extracted from slavery, the legacy of Jim Crow, the exploitation of imported Asian workers, and guest worker bracero arrangements with migrant Mexican labor, Latinx can play a pivotal role in uncovering the uncomfortable truths of America's dark past as well as the fallacy of "non-racist" societies prevalent in the countries from which our parents emigrated. While the one-drop rule was metaphorically reversed in Latin America, allowing a majority to believe that we were white, this whiteness has not transferred smoothly to the States, revealing not only US racism but also aspects of racial identity formation that had been papered over in the home countries. The messy conversation about racial identity, multiracial identification, passing, and potential inter-ethnic alliances has already begun.

Yet the possibility looms of a shift in the United States towards what some have called a tri-racial system of whites, blacks, and an unnamed in-between category, presumably for those of mixed-race or not-quite-white identities, in which, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, increasing numbers of non-European people will be granted honorary white status. One of the challenges of observing the Trump era will be to monitor how the extension of class privileges to non-whites that began in neoliberal Obama-world may actually continue, despite the seemingly overt white supremacist rhetoric embodied by Trump. The fact that as many as 29 percent of Latinx voted for Trump indicates that these privileges may be extended to people of color who accept the language of xenophobia and intolerance as a path to the restoration of American "greatness."

**What Is Race for Latinx?**

There is a long and unresolved argument about what race is, what racism is, and when and where it started. Historians have traced anti-black racism to antiquity, although it has not always been used to justify slavery. Regardless of when and how the idea of race began, it seems to be the product of a distrust and/or condemnation based on distance, whether in religious beliefs, physical location, or phenotypical appearance. Some historians and religious scholars believe that the biblical story of Ham—the son of Noah banished to reign over Africa because he laughed at his father's nakedness—was revived in the nineteenth century and sparked the ill-conceived "race science" that defined five racial categories. Foucault, on the other hand, argued that racist thinking emerged from the civil wars of the medieval era among the nobility and was merely translated in the formation of the European state. And the decolonial school, particularly followers of Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, proposed that the Spanish Catholic re-conquest of Iberia after almost 800 years of gradually receding Islamic occupation transformed religious differences into ones based on "race."

As the twenty-first century unfolds in America, we are still grappling with racial division, which the election of Trump appears to have made even more explicit. Trumpian authoritarianism shuns difference and promotes intolerance to protect white supremacy and "make America great again." But despite Latinx being "racialized" or branded as "non-white," it's not clear how they fit into the new authoritarianism. Through centuries of racial mixing, Latinx in some senses constitute our own race, albeit one that includes Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, and Mediterranean Europeans; Northern and sub-Saharan Africans; Muslims and Jews; Semites from the Middle East; Asians from East Asia; and their descendants called Native Americans.

The word that is often used to denote that Latinx are a "collective" race, itself a mixture of races, is raça: Spanish for race. This use of raça became popular in the early twentieth century to describe mixed-race society in Mexico, largely driven by the publication of an essay by postrevolutionary Mexican minister of culture José Vasconcelos. Titled *La Raça Cósmica*, or "The Cosmic Race," the essay argued that
Latin America's mixed-race societies augured a kind of racial transcendence that would end racial categorization and liberate humanity. Vasconcelos's treatise formalized a social process of race-mixing called mestizaje, a system of social ranking based on permutations of sexual unions (sometimes coerced, sometimes allowed by the relaxing of laws against intermarriage) between Spaniards, indigenous people, members of the African diaspora, and Asian migrants.

Vasconcelos's cosmic raza, which grew into an ideology that had parallel versions in several other Latin American countries — was the twentieth-century reimagining of a centuries-old, inherently racist caste system through which a peculiar and somewhat tainted brand of Spanish whiteness devalued, diminished, and erased the presence and importance of indigenous Americans and those of African descent. Membership in la raza was ostensibly open to everyone, but was ultimately a mechanism for gradual whitening over generations. African and indigenous presence in politics, culture, and sports was embraced, but only to the extent that it prioritized universalized national identities and minimized cultural particularities.

As Latinx became a part of the fabric of Anglo-America through both the absorption of the Southwest territories in the mid-nineteenth century and gradual migration from the Caribbean and South America in the early twentieth, raza became part of local vocabularies. While not entirely universal among Latinx — some preferred Hispano, others Latino — raza began to be primarily used in the United States by Mexican immigrants. Faced with racism in their new country, they used the term to unite different Latin American national identities into one progressive force and collective "brown" identity, one that would give voice to marginalized people of color erased by mestizaje.

There's an irony here that can only be explained by viewing the migration of Latinx to the United States as a kind of dialectical process, in which one view about race collides with another and creates something new. The same mestizaje ideology that worked to sublimate indigenous and African identity in Latin America became a resource for Latinx to claim racial difference as their identity in the black-white race binary of the United States. This is central to the Latinx factor, and explains why raza matters in America. It also explains why the choice by the National Council of La Raza to change their name in 2017 to UnidosUS — fearing that Latinx would be marginalized by the Trump version of white supremacy — was a panic attempt to blunt the racial awareness of the label raza.

Although raza has been primarily used by Mexican Americans, who make up about 62 percent of all US Latinx, other Latinx groups have drawn on variations of the term to identify themselves, particularly when confronted by the binary choice of black or white. The word at once carries the legacy of the Spanish idea of race and how it was transferred to the New World, but it has a kind of pliancy that makes it a recognizable concept among Latinx. I use it here mainly to make the structure and inherent fiction of America's race narrative visible.

The Language of Latinx: Where I'm Writing From

As I undertake the task of writing about why raza matters, my first challenge is to find the proper language to describe it. As America finds itself in the throes of unending racial conflict and tries to untangle both the meaning of race and the systemic inequality produced by it, the object of inquiry often seems to slip away, harder to grasp by any measure of interpretation by the sciences or humanities. Now recognized as a social construction and not a matter of biology — despite DNA analyses becoming increasingly popular with the Ancestry.com crowd — the slipperiness of race becomes more evident even as overt racist feelings, attitudes, and, increasingly, violence grow.

I also want to avoid the perception that by saying, "Raza matters," I'm making some kind of rejoinder to "Black lives matter." Nothing could be further from the truth. The best place for raza to find
meaning is within the "collective black" of the United States and the developed world. This notion of "collective black," developed by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva to highlight the common racial and social class interests of African Americans and other racialized groups, is reminiscent of the "black" label devised in England to unify Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities, expressing that even though they were not culturally, ethnically, or physically the same, they were seen and treated similarly by the dominant culture. That's why, throughout the course of this book, I argue for the importance of Latinx and African Americans forming alliances, rather than competing through contesting testimonies of marginalization. Latinx share a variant of the double consciousness of African Americans that Du Bois famously evoked, their experience distinguished more by historical and geographical differences than racial ones.

By the same token, the history of black, Native, and Asian American people in the United States has also been marked by mixture, and in many ways the imposition of the binary lens prevents them from having insight into this aspect of their identity formation. While the oppressive weight of racism based on phenotypical perception is undoubtedly the dominant narrative, the history of the Americas is unavoidably hybrid, in the daily lives as well as the cultural legacies of blacks, Natives, and Asian Americans. Foregrounding the mixed-race reality of Latinx may, ultimately, have a liberating effect on groups that don't always view themselves that way.

My raza-speak flows from my location, or where I'm writing from. My starting point is a place of radical exteriority, playing the tried-and-true outsider game of counter-discourse. My experience is that of a racialized person living in a US mega-city, who has a somewhat ambiguous phenotypical appearance, who in daily life speaks a mixture of two European languages that themselves are mixtures of many world languages, who embraces the collective black urban space of my upbringing in New York, and who holds within me memories of Africanness and indigenousness that I'm constantly bringing to light, even as medieval and Greco-Roman cultural politics ebb and flow in the background.

I could begin with a story, like Cornel West does in his book *Race Matters*, about the bitter memory of feeling at the top of my game in New York City, only to be reminded of how I can never escape my racial identity by cab drivers in Midtown Manhattan who turn down my hails as if I were an ambassador from a leper colony. What if I were to say that at various points in time, depending on where I was hailing the cab, what I was wearing, and how the sunlight was hitting my skin, the chances of the cab stopping for me hovered between 40 and 60 percent. What if I were to say that I feel, in a society ruled by a binary perception of race, that I am judged more by my performance than by my appearance, even though the latter might still be enough to classify me as "other."

I recall an incident when two Latinx policemen stopped me at West 125th Street and Broadway, just around the corner from the campus of Columbia University, where I am a lecturer, and insisted that I was carrying a knife and that I show it to them immediately. I'd come to campus to get a couple of books out of the library, and because I wasn't teaching that day I was wearing a backward baseball cap, worn-out jeans, and a long-sleeved T-shirt, attire that made me either look "ghetto" or resemble a criminal suspect which, for these policemen, who were employing the controversial stop-and-frisk approach of postmodern urban policing, justified my questioning. They looked at me with insistent eyes, convinced that I was carrying a weapon and that this was going to be a long afternoon, evening, and perhaps several days for me, ostensibly sitting in a local precinct waiting to be processed.

Consider the ambivalence that passed between us in this charade. Although I come from a working-class background, could not be considered a "white" Latinx by mere appearance, and have at times actively chosen to identify as black, at least for political or cultural reasons, I've avoided street fights and petty crime for the most part,
have never carried a weapon, and live a rather pedestrian life built around teaching, writing, and attending cultural events.

The policemen, on the other hand, were signaled by my unkempt appearance and perhaps a furtive movement of my hand toward a keychain holder protruding from my right front pocket, a plastic Puerto Rican flag in the shape of an island. They were operating in the context of 125th Street; in Morningside Heights, a neighborhood on the gentrified West Side of Manhattan, the street is a racial and class dividing line of sorts, a border zone to be patrolled. Both Latinx with complexions similar to mine, they no doubt categorized me as “black,” as they probably wouldn’t have stopped me if they thought I was “white.” At the same time, they were probably involved in complex internal negotiations about their own “whiteness” and “blackness.”

Did they recognize me as someone from their own racialized upbringing, or did they identify as white and see me as a threat? In enacting the colonial narrative of racial identity, were they both feeling “black” and “white” simultaneously? They looked blankly at my university ID, reluctantly questioned me for a few more minutes, then decided I was not who they were looking for and did not pose a threat. It was difficult to tell whether their lack of emotion indicated frustration at the waste of time or indifference as they went through the motions with another faceless suspect. It was a Fanon en español moment, and whatever black or white masks we were wearing had dissolved into an uncertainty of racial identity, despite the fact that the reason for the stop was racially charged.

The Stories of Latinx Past, Present, and Future

Latinx begins with Chapter 1, “The Spanish Triangle,” describing the partial origins of our constantly changing identity in Spain, which struggled to reconstitute itself as a universal Christian nation after a nomadic branch of Islam encountered the post-Roman fragments of Iberia. Despite centuries of convivencia, or a tenuous “living together” arrangement between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, exclusion based on religion shifted to one based on race. This ultimately became the root of the modern conception of race, as Spain’s racial politics allowed for genocide, slavery, indoctrination, and acculturation. The unique model of race and class hierarchy formed in Latin America remains influential to this day through centuries of strife, miscegenation, and race-based trial and error.

The saga continues with Chapter 2, “Mestizaje vs. the Hypo-American Dream,” which describes how mestizaje, in ideology and practice, became the cultural legacy that accompanied Latinx on their migration north to the United States, characterizing racial mixedness both as a path towards whiteness and as a source of strength, the basis of a Latin American exceptionalism. A precursor to the forces of globalization waxing poetic on “hybridity,” Latin America’s view of race seems to represent the borderless future. But despite being an ideology of the powerful that preserves white supremacy, mestizaje differs from globalized notions of hybridity because it represents an “organic” form of cultural mixing achieved through centuries of interracial procreation and intra-societal cultural negotiation. Mestizaje itself is built on the stories of everyday people, narratives in transition, as Afro-Latinx and pro-indigenous movements continue to grow in Latin America and push back against the white supremacy inherent in it.

This chapter next examines how mixed-race realities have been obscured in culture and ideology during the gestation of the United States, a necessary part of establishing the black-white racial binary. Rather than arising simply from the opposition between Anglo Protestantism and Latin American Catholicism, the imposition of the binary through hypodescent was designed to maintain slavery as a driver of capital accumulation. The tension between the black-white binary and mixed-race realities produced a marginal space that spurred the creation of new hybrid identities for Latinx in the United States.