

# Using Queer of Color Theory to Analyze Latinidad

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## Abstract

Queer of Color Theory (QOCT) has emerged as a new field of study with the rise of LGBTQ+ visibility in the modern day political landscape. QOCT is an extended analysis of queer theory that explicitly and intentionally takes into account race, imperialism, and colonialism. Queer of color theory can be used to create or expand upon an already existing theory, and has roots in Black feminism. Using QOCT as a method of analysis, this essay discusses Black and Indigenous erasure within the Latinidad movement and seeks to examine those who have been systemically left out of Latinidad narratives. Further, this essay speaks to the works of feminist scholar and author Gloria Anzaldúa, hoping to both critique and build off of her ideas with regards to Latinidad and Mestizaje.

## Keywords

Latinidad, Mestizaje, mestizo, colonization, queer theory, queer of color theory

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## Author's Note

I originally wrote this piece as an essay for a class I took on queer of color theory. Much of my college career has been heavily influenced by feminist and gender studies, and it was in this class that I realized how passionate I was about engaging with and contributing to feminist and queer theory. I hope you enjoy.

## Queer of Color Theory: A Genealogy

Originally coined “queer of color critique” by Roderick A. Ferguson, queer of color theory emerged out of a growing cognizance that the current analyses of queerness within and outside of the academy necessitated an application of intersectional analysis (Ferguson, 2018). The history of queer and LGBTQ+ activism has systemically erased Black and brown queer people, the blood, sweat, and tears of whom the movement has been built upon.

Intersectionality was introduced into the academy in a 1989 volume of *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* by civil rights activist Kimberle Williams Crenshaw. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as a rejection of the idea that analyses of different oppressions, such as gender and race, are mutually exclusive (Crenshaw, 1989). Though intersectionality had entered the academy in the late eighties, the Combahee River Collective released “A Black Feminist Statement” in 1977, which foreshadowed the emergence of feminist and queer theories that rejected the whitewashing of movements intrinsically linked to the activism of poor Black and brown feminists and queers. Writing “we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” the Black feminist collective articulated a praxis in which intersecting identities and oppressions could be considered at once (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 210).

Just as the Combahee River Collective formed under distinct political conditions, queer of color critique emerged to accommodate the interaction of the political development and visibility of sexual, gender, and racial minorities within the United States with the rise of neoliberal policies and economic formations.

Ferguson distinguishes between “the great advances that queer studies made in analyses of literary, philosophical, and aesthetic formations” and expansion necessary to include more explicit analyses of race and political economy, highlighting different political measures of the 1990’s period of retrenchment that had lasting effects on the political landscape to come (Ferguson, 2018, p. 1). He details two measures passed by California voters in 1994: Proposition 184 and Proposition 187. The former further criminalized and increased the penalties for repeat offenses and subsequently sentenced Black and brown people to lives more heavily influenced or ruled by the malevolence of the prison industrial complex. Proposition 187, which made access to public health, social, and education services illegal for undocumented immigrants, directly impacted the lives of pregnant women, children, and those with health conditions unable to be properly treated without the help of health services. Two years later Proposition 209 passed, banning affirmative action in public hiring and education (Ferguson, 2018).

The consequences of these measures left undocumented immigrants with restricted access to social services, public education, and spheres of labor that might have increased their upward social mobility and removed them from the cheap labor market. The passing of these propositions was done overtly to protect the means in which the capitalist state could forcibly control social hierarchies and retain cheap laborers for the purpose of extending the reach of

oppressive institutions such as capitalism, imperialism, and the prison system. As Ferguson states, “queer of color critique emerged out of this national climate, one characterized by the increasing exclusion and criminalization of people of color within the United States” (Ferguson, 2018, p. 7).

Moving into the new millennium, when technology enabled a faster and more widespread diffusion of information and knowledge, the visibility of queer people and other racial and sexual minorities began to dramatically increase, as did the political fight for the right to exist freely. The burgeoning movement for LGBTQ+ rights that championed legal protections and marriage rights for queer people laid the groundwork for a nascent queer liberalism. The liberalism that dawned within the gay rights movement necessitated a queer theory that explicitly took into account the systemic erasure of racial minorities.

In his essay “Time for Rights? Loving, Gay Marriage, and the Limits of Legal Justice,” Chandan Reddy examines the ways in which the state positioned itself as *formerly* regressive via the decision to strike down Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which made interracial marriage a felony offense. Despite the court's original precedence that interracial marriage was a criminalizable offense, *Loving v. Virginia* postured the US government as a legitimator of civil rights, rather than as an inherently flawed institution that once denied the same rights it only now deemed admissible (Reddy, 2008). In a later publication titled *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State*, Reddy examines the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, attached to a 2010 defense bill, as a vehicle for neoliberal state violence and surveillance using the legal recognition of gay people as justification (Reddy, 2011). Both works seek to unearth the ways in which the United States government attempts to deny its role in the oppression of racial and sexual minorities, but more importantly how it seeks to revise history in favor of current capitalist and imperialist goals.

In an analysis of the emergence of queer liberalism, David Eng identifies the fight for rights as a divergence from the decades old radical critique of marriage and family. Whereas many gays, lesbians, and trans people of second half of the twentieth century demanded the examination and abolition of such institutions, the movement for LGBTQ+ rights instead fought for admission to these normative conventions (Eng, 2010).

Where Eng contextualizes this fight for rights as revisionist within the U.S. sphere, reasoning that it further marginalizes those who are not invested in whiteness, consumerism, or the nuclear family, Hiram Perez presents a white queer politic ingrained within the Anglo-American tourism industry in his essay “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It Too!”. He presents a conception of the “exotic erotic” that enables white queer people to ignore transnational struggles and exploit a mobility that is often granted based on whiteness. This mobility guarantees privacy “not collectively experienced by all sexual minorities” and operates in tandem with US global consumerism and imperialism. (Perez, 2005, p. 177).

Queer of color critique is used to bring to light the functions that race, capitalism, and imperialism serve within a movement that is whitewashed and fashioned specifically for a mobile group of queer people that have access to privilege denied to many racial minorities. Queer of color theory enables an analysis that, rather than erasing intersections of oppression, seeks to include as many interlocking mechanisms as are in play. In the following sections I will apply queer of color theory to an analysis of identity politics and its function within Latinidad.

### **Solidarity Across Differences: Rejecting Identity Politics**

When the Combahee River Collective released “A Black Feminist Statement” in 1977, they outlined their praxis and introduced a concept known today as identity politics. They declared: “We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 212). The Black women that comprised the collective acknowledged a system of interlocking oppressions that any given person may face, describing intersectionality more than a decade before its first interpellation in the academy by naming “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” as dynamics to analyze (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 210). In writing their statement, the Collective alluded to a social hierarchy they believed themselves to be at the bottom of, and subsequently formed a praxis of working directly out of their identities. They believed that: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of our oppression,” articulating a bottom-up form of feminism (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 215).

Though I do not disagree that liberation of all will come only with the liberation of the most vulnerable, I want to expand upon the Collective’s thinking. The intersections of our personal identities create infinite possibilities for the oppressions we experience, and yet those identities cannot possibly encompass all the oppressions that exist in the world.

In arguing that queer of color theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of social and political identities, I want to give credence to the notion that “the equation linking identity and behavior to power is not as linear as some [...] would have us believe” (Cohen, 1997, p. 455). I want to ask that when we choose to build our praxis based solely on our own identity, and not those we are in solidarity with, what can be accomplished more than an individual plight for justice? Who are we excluding when we fight for “I” and not “we?”

In her renowned essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” Cathay J. Cohen radically contends that “the process of movement-building be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (Cohen, 1997, p. 458). In the following section, I will talk about how this concept, as articulated by Cohen, can be used to analyze Latinidad and Mestizaje.

## Latinidad and Mestizaje

Mestizaje, the noun derived from the adjective mestizo, refers to the racial/ethnic classification of a person who has mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. The word mestizo was used by the Spanish empire to distinguish mixed-race individuals within a caste system, however the term mestizaje did not come into use until the twentieth century when scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa sought to understand their ancestry and its relation to colonialism, as well as gender, sexuality, class, and race. Latinidad is a concept that attempts to define cultural practices and attributes shared by Latin Americans alike.

Though Latinidad attempts not to reduce Latino individuals to a single monolith, many activists, theorists, and scholars of Black or Indigenous and Latino ancestry feel that the term falls short in its aims, erasing the significance of race in understanding Black and Indigenous geographies and failing to adequately contextualize U.S. imperialism. Amanda Alcántara, a Dominican journalist states “What happens when you subscribe to the idea of a single Latinidad narrative is you create monolith—culturally and politically—of an entire continent when every single country and every single community has their own history” (Salazar, 2019). Similarly, Alan Peleaz Lopez, a Zapotec artist, writer, and cultural critic, is unsure that there *should* be a common Latinx identity, offering:

This identity is rooted in land and geography when it should be rooted in understanding settler colonialism in the Americas. I would be invested in a political Latinidad that first and foremost fought for indigenous sovereignty and black liberation. If it doesn't do that, I don't see the purpose. (Salazar, 2019)

In one of her most renowned works, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa examines the concept of mestizaje and the Chicano/Latino experience through a lens that accommodates the function of borders and seeks to understand them not only as physical divides, but socio-cultural terrains as well. She sought to define borderlands as geographical and social areas susceptible to hybridity and the mixing of U.S. and Latin American culture (Anzaldúa, 1987). In an interview with Anzaldúa on the re-imagining of borders, she states:

I started using the terms "the new mestiza y el nuevo mestizaje" to describe a people of a mixed race in order to articulate the Chicana/Latina experience of living in the United States as a colonized people today. Had I been writing as a person from Ecuador or the Caribbean, or as a person from Canada, or of a different time period, my sense of mestizaje might be different. (Hernández & Anzaldúa, 1995, p. 9)

Anzaldúa articulates an understanding that geographical location can affect the “sense of mestizaje” one may feel, citing the Caribbean as a locale that likely experiences mestizaje differently. What is missed in this acknowledgement is the fact that many people from the Caribbean, from countries such as Haiti and the Dominican Republic, affected by the slave trade prior to the first colonial settlement in the North Americas, have systemically been left out of Latinidad narratives, and feel that their erasure is central to the understanding of mestizaje, a

social concept which stemmed from the caste system implemented by the Spanish Empire to uphold racial supremacy. Tatiana Flores, a professor of Latino and Caribbean studies at Rutgers University, investigates this notion in her essay “Latinidad is Cancelled.” Flores foregrounds her essay with a discussion of the existence of enslaved peoples in the Americas close to a century before Jamestown was settled, noting the Dominican Republic, formerly referred to as Hispaniola, as the entry point. In the region of Hispaniola, an event known as *devastaciones* or the Devastations of Osorio took place, and is recognized as the first genocide of colonialism, targeting and killing twelve-hundred people, most of whom were Black. Flores goes on to talk about the 1791 Haitian Revolution as the “the most significant challenge to white supremacy ever” (Flores, 2021, pp. 58-59). The Haitian Revolution resulted in the establishment of a sovereign and independent nation founded and governed by formerly enslaved peoples.

Writing that “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,” Flores rejects the notion that Latinidad can be understood without the explicit understanding and acknowledgement of African histories and genealogies within the Americas (Flores, 2021, p. 59). Later she compares the term “Latino” to its counterpart “Hispanic,” and denies that any attempt Latino makes to distance itself from a colonial identity succeeds:

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. (Flores, 2021, p. 68)

Anzaldúa's work on *mestizaje* has its fair share of critique, as Flores is not the only person to comment on Latinidad as exclusionary. Miriam Jiménez Román, an Afro-Latino scholar, critiques Anzaldúa's work as a reification of racial hierarchies and inequalities (2017). Alan Pelaez Lopez's work speaks to this as well:

Those who can identify with Hispanic or Latinx are those who benefit from power because of language, race and religion. Latinidad offers them a whole community, and then they become the ones at the top of it because they speak proper Spanish and they know their culture and they come from a Christian or Catholic background, whereas people who are practitioners of *curanderismo* or Santería, who speak a bastard Spanish, who speak indigenous languages, or who come from other colonies in the Americas are erased from that identity. (Salazar, 2019)

The erasure that Latinidad enables exemplifies the necessity of an integrated analysis that extensively examines the powers of colonialism, racism, and imperialism. Though a queer woman of color, Anzaldúa and her work can benefit from an extended queer of color analysis that considers the political and social ramifications of the exclusion of African and Indigenous peoples from analyses of Latinidad and *mestizaje*. In an effort not to discount or discard her work

entirely, I want to instead revisit her analysis of identity in “To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana,” in which Anzaldúa writes:

Adjectives are a way of constraining and controlling. The more adjectives you have the tighter the box...Identity is not a bunch of little cubbyholes stuffed respectively with intellect, race, sex, class, vocation, gender. Identity flows between, over, aspects of a person. Identity is a river—a process. (Anzaldua, 2009, pp. 164-166)

In noting this quote, I seek to understand Latinidad as a point of fluid relation, rather than as a distinct identity to build movements upon. In this regard, queer of color theory can be used as an entry point to active resistance and liberation. Latino people are not a monolith, and the movement that seeks to fight for Latin American inclusion and civil rights often erases those who exist at the farthest margins, namely Black and Indigenous people.

I believe that when we separate the cause from the identity, our praxis can reach and include more who exist outside the margins of normativity. When we seek to overcome a common oppressor, the importance of identity does not disappear but rather is rewritten as merely a way to relate to one another, and not used as the foundation of existence for a cultural or social group based on white supremacist classifications. When we are able to expand our thinking to include Black and Indigenous geologies in our understanding of the development of Latin America and Latinidad, we can better unearth the nefarious ways in which oppressive institutions use identity to commodify, to separate, and to divide us into boxes that we spend our lives trying to fit in, rather than break out of entirely.

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