

DIVERSITY READING LIST PRESENTS:

MESTIZAJE, RACE, AND AESTHETICS IN LATIN AMERICA

A DRL READING GROUP BLUEPRINT BY ADRIANA CLAVEL-VÁZQUEZ

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LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE-HARD

INTRODUCTION

Philosophical work around race in 19th and 20th century Latin America goes hand in hand with theorizing about national identity in post-independence republics. Philosophers at the time were concerned with issues faced by emerging multiracial and multicultural states (e.g., Simón Bolívar, José Martí, Leopoldo Zea), and they often regarded racial and cultural mestizaje (mixing) as an ideal that could set the grounds for post-racial (and post-racist) democracies. Aesthetics played a central role in Latin American philosophy at the time since the expressive practices that emerge as a result of mestizaje are regarded as part of the very foundation of Latin American identities. Nevertheless, although mestizaje is postulated as the basis for post-racial societies, the notion needs to be problematized since it risks remaining part of a white supremacist project when whiteness continues to be regarded as that under which contributions by other racial groups should be subsumed.

The aim of this Blueprint is to examine issues that emerge from the notion of mestizaje in the context of aesthetic practices and debates around identity in Latin American philosophy. The readings and discussion are aimed at motivating questions such as:

- What is the role of the aesthetic in the formation of Latin American identities?
- Is taste racialized in Latin American philosophy as it is in the Western European tradition?
- Does Latin American philosophy inherit a white supremacist racial hierarchy? Does this racial hierarchy translate into an aesthetic hierarchy?
- How should cultural appropriation be understood in the context of cultural mestizaje?
- Is mestizaje problematic insofar as it risks erasing Black and Indigenous identities?
- What can these debates in Latin American philosophy contribute to contemporary discussions in aesthetics?

in the blueprint, its background and rationale.

CATEGORIES

- Latin American Philosophy of Race and Ethnicity
- Aesthetics and Race
- Racial Identity
- Race and Culture
- Aesthetics and Culture

AVAILABLE ONLINE AT:

<https://diversityreadinglist.org/blueprint/mestizaje>

1. QUIJANO, ANÍBAL. *COLONIALITY OF POWER AND EUROCENTRISM IN LATIN AMERICA*

2000, *International Sociology*, 15 (2): 215-232.

Difficulty: Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

The globalization of the world is, in the first place, the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and world capitalism as a Euro-centered colonial/modern world power. One of the foundations of that pattern of power was the social classification of the world population upon the base of the idea of race, a mental construct that expresses colonial experience and that pervades the most important dimensions of world power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. This article discusses some implications of that coloniality of power in Latin American history.

COMMENT:

The coloniality of power at the centre of Latin American societies as analysed by Quijano is key to understanding why a notion like mestizaje is problematic when building national identities in multicultural States. Quijano's notion of the coloniality of power helps explain why even when Latin American identities are purported to include Indigenous and Black culture, mestizaje often involves the "civilizing" force of European rationality. Quijano, therefore, helps in bringing forward the dangers of mestizophilia: the pseudo-integrative spirit of mestizaje into multiethnic, multicultural, multiracial society risks becoming a homogenization under whiteness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does racial hierarchy function in different Latin American contexts, according to Quijano?
 - a. How does whiteness function in different Latin American contexts?
2. How does racial hierarchy in Latin America compare to the Anglo-American context?
3. Might mestizaje be better understood not in a strict racial sense, as mere racial mixing, but in a cultural sense, as a transculturation characteristic of Latin American identities?
4. Would a cultural understanding of mestizaje avoid the risks of homogenization under whiteness?
5. Given Quijano's analysis of the coloniality of power, how might cultural appropriation look like in Latin American contexts?

2. VASCONCELOS, JOSÉ. *THE COSMIC RACE*

1997, Didier T. Jaén (trans.), Johns Hopkins University Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Prologue to the 1948 Edition', 'Mestizaje'.

ABSTRACT:

In this influential 1925 essay, presented here in Spanish and English, José Vasconcelos predicted the coming of a new age, the Aesthetic Era, in which joy, love, fantasy, and creativity would prevail over the rationalism he saw as dominating the present age. In this new age, marriages would no longer be dictated by necessity or convenience, but by love and beauty; ethnic obstacles, already in the process of being broken down, especially in Latin America, would disappear altogether, giving birth to a fully mixed race, a "cosmic race," in which all the better qualities of each race would persist by the natural selection of love.

COMMENT:

The main problem with Vasconcelos' mestizaje is that it is built on the coloniality of power. It postulates the white race as setting the bases for the union of all cultures insofar as it functions as a civilizing force. Mestizaje as Vasconcelos conceives it is thus not simply about racial integration but about the right kind of integration, namely, under the civilizing effects of whiteness. So, although the seeds for the aesthetic stage as postulated by Vasconcelos might be partly in Indigenous and Black peoples, the height of humanity's cultural progress can only be brought to fruition when non-white sensuality becomes true taste at the hand of the "clear mind of the white".

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How is taste racialized in Vasconcelos' ideal of mestizo culture?
2. Vasconcelos' mestizaje assumes racial essentialism. Can mestizaje avoid being construed on racial essentialism?
3. Can a reading of Vasconcelos' mestizaje as cultural integration avoid the issues?
4. How might Vasconcelos' understanding of mestizaje and race hinder, rather than promote, racial justice?
5. Vasconcelos partly aims at unifying Latin American identity. Is it unproblematic to talk about a Latin American culture characterized by mestizaje?

INDIGENISMO

3. VILORO, LUIS. *THE MAJOR MOMENTS OF INDIGENISMO IN MEXICO*

2017, In *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century: Essential Readings*, Carlos Alberto Sanchez and Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr. (eds.). Oxford University Press.

Difficulty: Easy-Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

The aim of Luis Villoro's seminal book on Indigenism was not to incorporate Mexico's indigenous population into the national culture, or offer an ethnographic account of indigenous peoples, or participate in indigenismo, an earlier state-sponsored effort to valorize Mexico's indigenous population with varying degrees of success. Instead, Villoro wants to understand the Indigenist's consciousness, particularly how the history of Mexican consciousness of the Indian resulted in the problematic twentieth-century movement of indigenismo. Villoro divides the history of Indigenism into three major momentos (moments), of which the second and third movement each have two etapas (stages). The "Conclusion," included here, is a summary of these moments, which demonstrate how the Spanish, criollo, and mestizo consciousness of the Indian have unfolded in a Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—a historical process of distancing, appropriating, and evaluating the indigenous element of Mexican culture and society.

COMMENT:

In this text, Villoro aims at understanding and problematizing Indigenismo, a movement in 20th century Latin America that advocated for the integration of Indigenous cultures. In its last pages, Villoro's analysis brings forward the main problem with many manifestations of Indigenismo: it is often less about addressing the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, and more about the construction of the mestizo identity, which, as discussed by Quijano, can only benefit a few. Villoro notes that in the process of Indigenismo, "the Indian is subjected, in his own reality, to a strange process. His Being plays and is transformed by its passing from one hand to another." In light of this, it seems unclear that mestizo culture can fulfil the promise of reconciliation and justice. The cultural programme that follows from Indigenismo, therefore, seems in many cases more like a programme built on cultural appropriation than revalorization.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The dialectical process described by Villoro centres the mestizo. What does this mean for Indigenous identities?
2. What role do aesthetic practices play in the presumed revalorization of Indigenous identities by Indigenismo?
 - a. What do Indigenista aesthetic practices look like?
3. Should integration be the aim of multicultural States?
4. Is integration consistent with anti-racist commitments that seek to achieve justice for Indigenous peoples?
5. If integration of Indigenous peoples cannot be done without marginalizing them, how can mestizos construct their identity? What alternatives are there?
6. Could an understanding of mestizo identity as being in-between rather than as including and overcoming Indigenous identities avoid the issues? Mexican existentialist Emilio Uranga, for example, uses the Nahuatl concept of *Nepantla* to designate the sense of being in-between characteristic of mestizo identities.

4. TARICA, ESTELLE. *THE INNER LIFE OF MESTIZO NATIONALISM*

2008, University of Minnesota Press.

Difficulty: Easy-Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 4, 'Rosario Castellanos at the Edge of Entanglement', pp. 137-182.

ABSTRACT:

Tarica examines Rosario Castellanos' Indigenism in her literary work, particularly in her fictional autobiography *Balún Canán* (The Nine Guardians). Tarica argues that the novel is an examination of the interaction of Castellanos' mestiza and female identities, and that it concludes with the constitution of an "utterly lonely figure". Nevertheless, Tarica argues that the inclusion of other protagonists, such as the protagonist's Mayan nanny, allow for Castellanos to examine the coloniality of power and the appropriation of indigenous identities. According to Tarica, this allows Castellanos to present the protagonist not as a heroine, but as an antiheroine that offers an "absolutely partial version of national events", and who manages to affirm herself only in "a place of solitary wandering: Uranga's Nepantla as in-betweenness.

COMMENT:

Rosario Castellanos' examination of mestiza identity as being in-between proves an interesting test to the criticisms of Indigenismo suggested by Villoro. It reveals a complex relation between the mestiza protagonist and the Indigenous cause. Castellanos also offers an opportunity to think about mestizaje from a feminist perspective. When it comes to mestiza, rather than mestizo, consciousness, we find a double displacement. She is out of place insofar as she finds herself in between European and Indigenous cultures. But she is also out of place because, as a woman, she cannot fully be a citizen of the mestizo nation and neither can she go back to an Indigenous culture to which she doesn't belong.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Castellanos' Indigenismo fit within the dialectical process identified by Villoro?
2. What characterises the in-betweenness of mestizas in Castellanos' Indigenismo?
3. Does the emphasis on solitude in Tarica's analysis of Castellano's protagonist avoid the problems of certain versions of Indigenismo?
4. What can this analysis illuminate about the situation of mestizas, and women more generally, in the coloniality of power?
5. What can this analysis illuminate about the situation of Indigenous women in particular in Latin American societies?

5. MARIÁTEGUI, JOSÉ CARLOS. *SEVEN INTERPRETATIVE ESSAYS ON PERUVIAN REALITY*

1971, Marjory Urquidi (ed.). University of Texas Press.

Difficulty: Easy-Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 7, 'Literature on Trial': *Testimony of a witness* pp. 182-186, *The literature of the colony* pp. 187-190, *The survival of colonialism* pp. 190-195, *Melgar* pp. 213-215, *Abelardo Gamarra* pp. 215-217, *César Vallejo* pp. 250-258, *Contemporary literary currents – Indigenismo* pp. 268-283, *Provisional balance sheet* pp. 286-287.

ABSTRACT:

In this essay, Mariátegui offers an analysis of Peruvian literary practices and a criticism of some of its central figures. He argues that what has been construed as a “national literature” erases the contributions of Indigenous cultures to Peruvian identity, and, in doing so, it partly contributes to the marginalization of Indigenous Peruvians.

COMMENT:

Mariátegui’s criticism of the Latin American literary canon is interesting because he brings forward the way in which Eurocentric mestizaje has shaped the aesthetic practices that are regarded as constitutive of Latin American identity. Much like Adrian Piper’s criticism of critical hegemony in the arts, Mariátegui argues that the Latin American literary canon is built on “Hispanism, colonialism, and social privilege” that is passed as a neutral academic spirit. Mariátegui shows, therefore, how even in mestizaje taste remains racialized.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In what sense are aesthetics and politics interlinked in Mariátegui’s criticism of literature?
2. What is his criticism of critical hegemony behind the Latin American literary canon?
3. How might the process of formation of Peruvian literature relate to Villoro’s description of the three moments of Indigenismo in Mexico?
4. How is the white-Eurocentric mestizaje reflected in the different periods of Peruvian literature identified by Mariátegui?
5. In what sense does César Vallejo embody “genuine Americanism”, according to Mariátegui?
6. How does Mariátegui understand Indigenismo?
7. How might Quijano’s coloniality of power explain Mariátegui’s anti-Black attitudes?

6. HOOKER, JULIET. *INDIGENOUS INCLUSION/BLACK EXCLUSION: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND MULTICULTURAL CITIZENSHIP IN LATIN AMERICA*

2005, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 37(2): 285-310.

Difficulty: Easy-Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

This article analyses the causes of the disparity in collective rights gained by indigenous and Afro-Latin groups in recent rounds of multicultural citizenship reform in Latin America. Instead of attributing the greater success of indians in winning collective rights to differences in population size, higher levels of indigenous group identity or higher levels of organisation of the indigenous movement, it is argued that the main cause of the disparity is the fact that collective rights are adjudicated on the basis of possessing a distinct group identity defined in cultural or ethnic terms. Indians are generally better positioned than most Afro-Latinos to claim ethnic group identities separate from the national culture and have therefore been more successful in winning collective rights. It is suggested that one of the potentially negative consequences of basing group rights on the assertion of cultural difference is that it might lead indigenous groups and Afro-Latinos to privilege issues of cultural recognition over questions of racial discrimination as bases for political mobilisation in the era of multicultural politics.

COMMENT:

Given unjust social conditions faced by Afro-Latin communities in Latin America, it is important to examine the erasure of Afro-Latin identities from narratives about the constitution of mestizo national identities. While Indigenous identities are appropriated as partly constitutive of mestizo identity, Afro-Latin cultures are often regarded by mestizos as that which is Other. This results not only in the exoticization of Afro-Latinidad, but in the lack of available resources to acknowledge and address racial discrimination faced by Afro-Latin groups in many Latin American countries. Moreover, while Latin American cultures are often regarded as the result of Spanish and Indigenous mixing, it hasn't been until recently that the African diaspora has been acknowledged as the third root of Latin American aesthetic practices.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can Quijano's coloniality of power help explain the lack of recognition of Afro-Latin communities as distinct cultural groups?
2. What role does the lack of recognition of Black aesthetics in Latin America play in this erasure?
3. If Latin American aesthetic practices have recognizable roots in the African diaspora, what has driven the difference in the role Blackness and Indigenous identities play in the constitution of mestizo identity?
4. How does the lack of recognition of Black aesthetics in Latin America contribute to the invisibility of Afro-Latin communities both in Latin American countries and in Latinx communities in the U.S.?
5. Given the cultural diversity of the African diaspora, how should we interpret this call for recognition of distinct Afro-Latin groups? Should it be interpreted as a call for recognizing a pan-Afro-Latin identity, similar to some understandings of mestizo identity (like Vasconcelos')?

ABSTRACT:

Carter examines the anti-Black sentiment in Latin American culture and pays particular attention to how, even in *negrista* poetry aimed at contributing to the fight against oppression of Black people, Black women are used as a symbol of sensuality and primitiveness. The paper argues that when Black women feature in poetry in the figure of *la mulata*, they are associated with nature and portrayed as inherently evil, sensual and primitive. Moreover, while representations of Black men evolved to focus on their inner consciousness, rather than on their physical attributes, and to combat oppressive imagery and symbolism, *la mulata* continued being used as a satire aimed at inviting Afro-Latin communities to take positive steps towards improving their social conditions. They were used to advance a criticism for how the anti-Black sentiment at the heart of popular conceptions of *mestizaje* ends up being internalized by members of Afro-Latin communities, so that Black women are represented as renouncing Blackness and engaging in a “whitening” process.

COMMENT:

Carter’s discussion of Afro-Latin women offers a good opportunity to reflect on what an intersectional approach to race in Latin American needs to involve. As evidenced by the analysis of Rosario Castellanos’ *Balún Canán*, *mestizas* in Latin American societies face a double displacement: first as being in-between cultures, and second, as not quite part of the *mestizo* nation. In addition to this condition of *mestiza* womanhood, Afro-Latin women face another dimension of displacement. They are part of *mestizo* nations, but, as Black, they are not fully recognised as such; they are part of *mestizo* nations, but, as women, they are not fully recognised as such; they are part of Afro-Latin communities, but, as women, they are not fully recognised as such.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In what sense do we find in *negrista* poetry anti-Black attitudes? How have they evolved?
2. Does the representation of Afro-Latin women involve racist attitudes directed specifically at Black women? Has this representation evolved in Latin American poetry?
3. Contrast representations of Indigenous peoples in *Indigenismo* with representations of Afro-Latin communities in *mestizo* identity. What is the difference?
4. *Mestizo* identity is characterised as displaced insofar as it emerges in between Spanish and Indigenous cultures. Is Afro-Latin identity also characteristically displaced in the same way?
5. Isn’t there a tension between Hooker’s claim that Afro-Latin communities are not recognised as distinct cultural groups, and the exoticization of Afro-Latin communities in/through art as examined by Carter? How can these claims be consistent?

8. OLLIZ BOYD, ANTONIO. *THE LATIN AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: ETHNOGENESIS IN CONTEXT*

2010, Cambria Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Essay 1, 'Aesthetic Blackness in the Creative Literature of the Latin/Hispanic Reality'.

ABSTRACT:

Olliz Boyd's essay examines Blackness in the Latin American literary practices with the aim of showing its centrality to Latin American cultures. He argues that the African heritage of Latin America has been erased as a result of Eurocentric mestizaje. Olliz Boyd first examines this erased heritage in the understanding of race in Latin America and its peculiar processes of racialization, before moving on to centring the analysis on aesthetic practices and literature in particular. Olliz Boyd's essay examines the erasure of Afro-Latinidad from a perspective that differs from Hooks' analysis of the erasure of self-identified Afro-Latin communities. He argues that mestizos in general have mixed-race roots that include not just European and Indigenous ancestry, but African as well. The erasure of Afro-Latinidad is, thus, more radical as it involves the negation of an Afro-Latin reality at the heart of mestizaje.

COMMENT:

Olliz Boyd's work brings forward the third root of Latin America: the relevance of the African diaspora for the constitution of Latin American identities. An adequate understanding of the complexity of race in Latin America involves not just understanding the erasure of Afro-Latin communities, but the erasure of the contributions of African cultures to mestizo culture. It might be that the latter erasure partly explains the former.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How might we analyse the erasure of Latin America's third root in light of the coloniality of power?
2. How do issues related to the African diaspora in Latin America relate to issues that emerge from Indigenismo?
3. How can mestizo culture acknowledge its African heritage without engaging in appropriation that contributes to the marginalization of Afro-Latin communities?
4. Could Vasconcelos' cosmic race be rehabilitated to counteract a notion of mestizaje that leaves out the contributions of the African diaspora to analyse mestizo identity merely in light of Spanish and Indigenous cultures?
5. How does the notion of mestizaje look like once Afro-Latin cultures are acknowledged?
 - a. Should we speak of mestizo consciousness as being in-between three different identities?
 - b. What would that mean for Afro-Latin identities?

9. PITTS, ANDREA J.. *TOWARD AN AESTHETICS OF RACE: BRIDGING THE WRITINGS OF GLORIA ANZALDÚA AND JOSÉ VASCONCELOS*

2014, *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, 5 (1): 80-100

Difficulty: Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the relationship between the aesthetic frameworks of José Vasconcelos and Gloria Anzaldúa. Contemporary readers of Anzaldúa have described her work as developing an “aesthetics of the shadow,” wherein the Aztec conception of *Nepantlism*—i.e. to be “torn between ways”—provides a potential avenue to transform traditional associations between darkness and evil, and lightness and good. On this reading, Anzaldúa offers a revaluation of darkness and shadows to build strategies for resistance and coalitional politics for communities of color in the U.S. To those familiar with the work of Vasconcelos, Anzaldúa’s aesthetics appears to contrast sharply with his conceptions of aesthetic monism and *mestizaje*. I propose, however, that if we read both authors as supplementing one another’s work, we can see that their theoretical points of contrast and similarity help frame contemporary philosophical discussions of racial perception.

COMMENT:

In this paper, Pitts does two things that are relevant for the aims of this blueprint. First, she understands Anzaldúa to be in dialogue with, and as a continuation of, the Latin American philosophical tradition. In this sense, rather than seeing Latinx feminism as emerging simply from an opposition to the Anglo-American intellectual tradition, she sees it as inheriting and furthering a rich Latin American philosophical tradition that, although problematic at times, has plenty to offer to contemporary philosophical thought, and which has been unfortunately ignored for too long. Second, she brings forward the role that aesthetics plays in theorizing about race and mestizo identities in Latin America, and in the constitution of social identities, as well as the centrality of aesthetics in the Latin American philosophical tradition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. By displacing Vasconcelos’ ideal of *mestizaje* from the Latin American context that is constituted by the coloniality of power, and by using it to analyse the situation of Latinx populations in USA, can Anzaldúa overcome the criticisms faced by Vasconcelos’ cosmic race?
2. Can Anzaldúa’s *nueva mestiza* preserve a distinction between mestizo, Indigenous, and Afro Latin identities? Should it?
3. How does Anzaldúa’s intersectional analysis of *mestiza* culture relate to Castellanos’ protagonist who is doubly displaced?
4. Given that Anzaldúa’s *nueva mestiza* is not only in-between in the sense of not being Indigenous, nor Black, nor white, but in the sense of being Mexican-American, should we identify in the *nueva mestiza* a third displacement?
5. Given the different dimensions of displacement of *mestizas* in the U.S. context and in the Latin American context, should we treat them as a different kind of mestizo consciousness?
6. What can they illuminate about each other?

2007, Duke University Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 1, 'Spirit, Glyphs', pp. 17-49.

ABSTRACT:

This book examines the work of Chicana artists, feminist Mexican-Americans who aim at interrogating their identity through art. In this chapter, Pérez examines what she regards as “the general intellectual vindication of Indigenous epistemologies that characterized much of the thought and art of the Chicana/o movement”. She argues that, in opposition to the male Chicano perspective that characterized the early movement, Chicana artists embrace their Indigeness in a way that aims not simply at antagonizing Eurocentric culture, but that aims at “a genuinely more decolonizing struggle at the epistemological level”. The chapter focuses on writers Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Ana Castillo, and Sandra Cisneros, and on artists Frances Salomé España, Yreina Cervántez, and Esther Hernández.

COMMENT:

Pérez’s analysis is interesting for the aims of the blueprint for three reasons. First, it is interesting to see the role she grants to spirituality in the fight for social justice, particularly when it comes to gender, race, and ethnicity in the U.S. Second, it is interesting to see whether the emphasis on the connection between aesthetic practices and spirituality might help avoid mestiza aesthetics falling into appropriative practices. Finally, it is important to analyse mestiza culture in the U.S. to see whether it might offer any lessons for mestizo cultures in Latin America.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How might the Chicana/o movement’s emphasis on mestizaje contribute to the invisibility of Afro-Latinxs in the U.S.?
2. Chicana artists and writers posit mestiza consciousness in opposition to a dominant culture: white Americans. This might be helpful when examining Latinx identities in the U.S. But how can their analysis translate to Latin American societies in which mestizaje was partly conceived (either implicitly or explicitly) as being at the service of whiteness and as helping sustain the coloniality of power?
3. Can Chicana’s nueva mestiza help rehabilitate mestizaje in a way that serves Indigenous and Afro-Latin communities?
4. Why does Pérez place special attention to the spiritual dimension of the work by Chicana writers and artists?
5. Does this emphasis on spirituality risk appropriating Indigenous cultures by non-Indigenous Mexican-Americans?
 - a. How can it avoid falling trap to the excesses of Indigenismo?