

Who is Afro-Latin@?

Examining the Social Construction of Race and Négritude in Latin America and the Caribbean

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By the 1930s the *négritude* ideological movement, which fostered a pride and consciousness of African heritage, gained prominence and acceptance among black intellectuals in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. While embraced by many, some of African descent rejected the philosophy, despite evident historical and cultural markers. Such was the case of Rafael Trujillo, who had assumed power in the Dominican Republic in 1930. Trujillo, a dark-skinned Dominican whose grandmother was Haitian, used light-colored pancake make-up to appear whiter. He literally had his family history rewritten and “whitewashed,” once he took power of the island nation. Beyond efforts to alter his personal appearance and recast his own history, Trujillo also took extreme measures to erase blackness in Dominican society during his 31 years of dictatorial rule. On a national level, Trujillo promoted *blanqueamiento* (whitening), encouraging the immigration of single Europeans to the island and offering refuge to Jews during World War II because they were considered white—thus attempting to *mejorar la raza* or “improve [whiten] the race” of the Dominican Republic.¹

Citing a threat to national security, Trujillo’s most extreme measure was the massacre of over 20,000 Haitians and black Dominicans in 1937. Known as *Kout kouto a* (the knife blow) in Haiti and *El Corte* (the cutting) in the Dominican Republic because of the wide use of machetes, the slaughter was a direct order from Trujillo.² Trujillo’s *antihaitianismo* was rooted less in a fear of a Haitian-supported coup and more in his fear of blackness—a fear many whites and colonial powers held of Haiti ever since Toussaint L’Ouverture led a successful slave revolt against the French that emancipated blacks across the island

of Hispaniola and culminated in Haiti’s independence in 1804.³

Trujillo embodied the desire for European racial identification, which continues today as evidenced by efforts to deport hundreds of thousands of black, Dominican-born Haitians in the summer of 2015. Although the Dominican Republic has been called the “cradle of blackness in the Americas,” the rejection of *négritude* continues to manifest itself in contemporary Dominican society with practices such as hair straightening, avoiding the sun, skin bleaching, and the many racial terms that effectively temper and erase blackness.⁴

The rejection of *négritude* is not a phenomenon unique to the Dominican Republic, as many Latin American countries and their respective social and political institutions grapple with issues of race and racism.⁵ For example, in Mexico, African descended Mexicans are socially isolated and negatively depicted in mainstream media, while socio-politically, for the first time in the country’s history the Mexican government will allow those of African descent to identify as such on the country’s census in 2020.⁶

How and why is such an important part of the region’s multicultural and multiethnic heritage overlooked, minimized, or overtly rejected? How is *négritude* defined and constructed in Latin America and the Caribbean, and more importantly, how has it impacted identity in the Americas? The purpose of this article is to explore *négritude* in Latin America through the lens of social construction, race mixing, and racial stratification. We argue that this is an important foundation to understand Afro-Latinidad*—not only in Latin America and the Caribbean, but also in the United States—and discuss with students not just the historical context of this demographic group, but also

* In this article we use terms such as Afro-Latinidad in addition to using the symbol “@” (e.g., Afro-Latin@), which is a scholarly writing expression of gender inclusion, reflecting both Latinos (male) and Latinas (female) as a whole. The term “Latin@” may be pronounced as “Latino-Latina” or as “Latinao,” with the ending pronounced as in “now.”

the implications of black identity for Latin@s today (Latin@ is pronounced “Latinao” and rhymes with “now.”)

We also recognize that our article, like this special issue, is meant to situate black history into social studies curricula from a contemporary lens. Interrogating race and racism, in addition to offering stories of black agency from varied perspectives, is vital to the sustainability of a culturally diverse curriculum. Furthermore, students in the United States should know about this important part of the history of the Americas and reflect on how it impacts their own society.

The Construction of “Black” in Latin America

As a result of pre-Columbian African exploration and participation in large expeditions organized by explorers from the Iberian Peninsula, black presence in Latin America existed before the slave trade.⁷ However, the African diaspora in the Americas, which began around 1516, would exponentially multiply the black population when Spain began exporting milled sugar and enslaving Africans to work the plantations. Over the next 300 years, enslavement resulted in the displacement and dislocation of more than 10 million Africans throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, with almost 5 million going to Brazil. Left to the colonizing Europeans, from this point forward, Afro-Latin@ history, identity, and agency become problematized. Black history discourse cannot be understood without examining how race was, and continues to be, socially constructed. Race in Latin America and the Caribbean is complex and discussions of *mestizaje* (race mixing) as well as racial stratification are vital to understanding how *négritude* and Afro-Latin@ identity are defined.

Blanqueamiento and Mestizaje

Blanqueamiento, or the process of whitening, can be used in both a social and biological sense as a policy or practice that attempts to “improve the race.”⁸ Socially, individuals can become “more

white” through education, professional standing, wealth, and social status. Through *mestizaje* (race mixing or miscegenation), people with African or indigenous features can intermarry with Europeans or lighter-skinned people, resulting in children with more European-looking phenotypes.

In Mexico, educator and politician José Vasconcelos was central in helping to build a national identity that embraced *mestizaje*. With his 1925 publication of *La Raza Cósmica*, Vasconcelos envisioned an all-encompassing Latin American human race that placed *mestizaje* in a shared Latin American historical context.⁹ The phenomenon of race mixing was embraced throughout Latin America due in part to self-juxtaposition to the United States. Despite their own systematic racist practices, Latin Americans universally viewed twentieth-century society in the United States with disdain.¹⁰ Racism, particularly against African Americans, in the United States was much more overt, as images and stories of beatings, lynchings, racial terrorism, and “separate but equal” laws that divided American institutions between black and white became a stain through which the United States was viewed globally. *Mestizaje* allowed Latin American countries to comparatively claim moral superiority through their alleged progressive, nationalistic embrace of a multiracial society.

Social Construction and Racial Stratification in Latin America

On the surface, *mestizaje* may symbolize racial unity in Latin America, yet racial inequities nonetheless exist and disproportionately affect Afro-Latin@s as well as indigenous groups. Anthropologist Peter Wade noted, “*mestizaje* is about processes of transformation (of people, of communities, of nations) in which things (‘blood,’ appearance, culture) change in the direction of inclusion, yet other things (racialised hierarchies) remain the same and point towards exclusion.”¹¹ Some scholars argue that *mestizaje* in Latin America was, in effect,

a divorce from blackness.¹² From this perspective then, *mestizaje* functioned as a racial veil and Afro-Latin@s, especially those with darker skin or other African features, have often found themselves excluded from the “cosmic race.”

To understand the social construction—how understandings of a particular phenomenon or idea are created and applied by society—of race and blackness in Latin America, it is important to consider how racial identification and ascription occurs. Racial stratification is the systematic ranking or ordering of people in Latin America. Unlike the United States, where race is both binary and fixed, race in Latin America is a much more fluid concept. For example, the identification of someone as black in the United States is both static and stable as it is noted on an infant’s birth records and reflected in school records. In contrast, the identification of someone as black or *negro* in Latin America is not as immutable, with a person’s racial classification impacted by self-identification, marriage, professional status, and other variables.

Skin tone or complexion color has contributed to racial stratification, as have hair texture and facial features. These complex classification systems exist with dozens of terms and attendant social strata. It is through this form of racial stratification that Afro-Latin@s, especially those with observable African characteristics, are assigned lesser worth or value than those with more European-looking features.¹³ Racial stratification, like *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* in Latin America, has also muddled the concept of *négritude* as it is more than phenotype and appearance, but also a social assignment without static boundaries.

Casta Paintings in Colonial Latin America

Historically, racial stratification in Latin America can be viewed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *casta* paintings (see Figure 1 on p. 41). *Casta* paintings were created to ease anxiety over the

breakdown of socio-racial hierarchy, with the goal of convincing Spanish elites through documentation in paintings that colonies operated in an orderly manner, and reinforced European dominance. In colonial Latin America, the premier professions, coveted luxury items, and highest educational attainment were accessible only to those with “pure” Spanish blood.¹⁴ Recognizing that the purity of Spanish blood was threatened by racial mixing in the New World, there was a need for Spanish rulers and whites to emphasize *la limpieza de sangre* (literally, the cleaning of blood).¹⁵ Beyond racial purity, *mestizaje* also threatened colonial power relations by making it possible for groups of lower social status, especially those of African heritage, to gain access to education, wealth, and professional standing among other things.¹⁶

Casta paintings typically consisted of 12 to 16 family groupings placed in hierarchical order, usually from “pure” white to black and Indian, with skin color, hair texture, facial features, clothing,

and setting used to stratify groups into rigid taxonomies. The illustrations were usually displayed in public spaces such as museums, universities, and government offices. In Spain, visitors viewed casta paintings in the Natural History Museum in Madrid where several were on display.¹⁷

Students today can analyze these primary sources and determine how race was socially constructed in Latin America (see Lesson Plan on p. 41). Students can consider how skin complexion, eye color, hair texture, and other physical features were connected to social phenomena such as economic wealth, social status, political power, and livelihood. This stratification was used to socially construct race, and subsequently *négritude*, in Latin America.

Afro-Latin@ Identity Today

Race mixing, *blanqueamiento*, and racial hierarchies in Latin America resulted in a complex understanding and expression of ethnoracial identity, especially for Afro-

Latin@s. Approximately 150 million people of African descent are estimated to live in present-day Latin America and the Caribbean, although that statistic is a rough estimate as a result of decades of “black erasure.”¹⁸ Furthermore, there are over 100 words and color categories in the region that function as references to *négritude*, each with its own association to racial stratification, thus making it harder to quantify the true presence of blacks in Latin America (see the *Black in Latin America* reference on p. 40 in the list of teacher and student resources).

Latin American Countries

Race terminology is also evident in the census data of various countries (see Table 1). For example, Dawn Duke notes that the majority of Dominicans prefer the term “indio” as their racial classification, a term that reflects the Taíno, an indigenous group that has been extinct since the sixteenth century.¹⁹ Dominicans’ preference in recognizing their ethnoracial heritage as “indio” is evident within their population percentages in which two statistics are reported for those who identify as having African heritage. Approximately 24 percent of Dominicans use the terms *negro*, *mulato*, or *Afro-Dominicano* to indicate their African descent. Yet this number grows exponentially to 89 percent when the term *indio* is factored into the self-reported identification of Dominicans with African heritage. Similarly, only about 3.5 percent of people in Venezuela identify as *negro*, *mulato*, or *Afro-Venezolano*, terms that clearly indicate African heritage. However, when the less-stigmatized choice of *moreno* (dark-skinned) is offered and included, the percentage of Venezuelans who make up the category increases to 53.4 percent.

Afro-Latin@ Agency

Afro-Latin@ presence in Latin America has existed for centuries, but has gone unacknowledged and uncelebrated until recently, aided by the UN declaration proclaiming 2015–2026 the International Decade for People of

Table 1. Population (in 1,000s) and Percentage of Latinos of African Descent in Selected American Countries

Countries	Afro-descendant Population	Percentage
Brazil	97,083	50.9%
Colombia	4,274	10.3%
Costa Rica	334	7.8%
Cuba	3,885	34.8
Dominican Republic	A) 2,267 ¹ B) 8,046	A) 24% B) 89%
Ecuador	1,043	7.2%
Mexico	2,366	2.1%
Panama	313	9.1%
Peru	411	1.5%
Uruguay	255	7.8%
Venezuela	A) 953 ² B) 14,534	3.5% 53.4%

SOURCE: Edward Telles, *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 26.

Notes

1. Population and percentage for estimate A includes those who only identify as *negro*, *mulato*, or *Afro-Dominicano*; estimate B also includes those who identify as *indio* in addition to *negro*, *mulato*, or *Afro-Dominicano*.
2. Estimate A includes persons who identified as *negro*, *mulato*, or *Afro-Venezolano*; estimate B includes the aforementioned categories in addition to those who identified as *moreno*.

African Descent. The erasure of ethnoracial identity is still prevalent in discourse about race in Latin America, although multicultural narratives are gaining more popularity. Due in large part to a movement of scholars, grassroots organizations, and civil rights groups in Latin America, Afro-Latin@s are moving from the shadows of *mestizaje*.²⁰ Afro-Latin@ and indigenous groups in countries such as Colombia, Brazil, and Peru have been at the forefront of ensuring socially just laws, human rights, and civil policies. Agency from all arenas—social, political, and economic—will be necessary in achieving full recognition of Afro-Latin@ heritage in Latin America. 🌍

Notes

1. Allan Metz, “Why Sosúa? Trujillo’s Motives for Jewish Refugee Settlement in Dominican Republic,” *Contemporary Jewry* 11, (1990): 3-28
2. Richard Lee Turtus, “A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002): 613
3. David Howard, *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001): 29
4. Ginetta Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears* (London: Duke University Press, 2007); Kimberly Eison Simmons, “Navigating the Racial Terrain: Blackness and Mixedness in the United States and the Dominican Republic,” in *Ruth Simms Hamilton African Diaspora: Afro-Descendants, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas*, eds. Bernd Reiter and Kimberly Eison Simmons (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012): 68; Silvio Torres-Saillant, “The Dominican Republic,” in *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today*, ed. Minority Rights Group (London: Minority Rights Publications, 1995): 110.
5. Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 93.
6. Bobby Vaughn and Ben Vinson III, “Memín Penguín, Changing Racial Debates, and Transnational Blackness,” *Race and Its Others* (2008), www.hemisphericinstitute.org/eng/publications/emisferica/5.2/en52_vaughn_vinson.html; Randal C. Archibold, “Negro? Prieto? Moreno? A Question of Identity for Black Mexicans,” *The New York Times* (October 25, 2014).
7. Peter H. Wood, “The Earliest Africans in North America,” in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, eds. Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 19–26.
8. Jean Muteba Rahier, “Body Politics in Black and White: Señoras, Mujeres. Blanqueamiento and Miss Esmeraldas 1997-1998, Ecuador,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 11 (1999): 103–120; Mark Q. Sawyer and Tianna S. Paschel, “‘We Didn’t Cross the Color Line, The Color Line Crossed Us’: Blackness and Immigration in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the United States,” *Du Bois Review* 4, no. 2 (2007): 303–315.
9. Marilyn Grace Miller, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2004).
10. Edward Telles, *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 18–19.
11. Wade, 93.
12. Faye V. Harrison, “The Persistent Power of ‘Race’ in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, (1995): 55; Telles, 21.
13. Telles, 11.
14. Sally Stanhope, “Bring *Casta* Paintings into the Classroom,” *World History Bulletin* 28, (2012): 40.
15. Alison Fraunhar, “Marquillas Cigarreras Cuban: Nation and Desire in the Nineteenth Century,” *Hispanic Research Journal* 9, no. 5 (1998): 463.
16. Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).
17. Susan Deans-Smith, “Creating the Colonial Subject: *continued on page 42*

Resources for Teacher and Student Enrichment

Print

Andrews, George Reid. *Afro-Latin America 1800–2000*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Davis, Darien J. (ed). *Beyond Slavery: the Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

Dzidzienya, Anani and Suzanne Oboler (eds.). *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*. New York: Palgrave, 2005.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., *Black in Latin America*. New York: NYU Press, 2011.

Klein, Herbert S. and Ben Vinson. *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Oxford University Press. 1988.

Landers, Jane G. and Barry M. Robinson (eds.). *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*. Albuquerque, N.Mex.: University of New Mexico Press, 2006.

Minority Rights Group (eds.). *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today*. London: Minority Rights Publications, 1995.

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Whitten, Norman E. and Arlene Torres (eds.). *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Media

PBS. *Black in Latin America*.
www.pbs.org/wnet/black-in-latin-america.

Mezcla Media Market. *Negrta*.
<https://negritadocumentary.wordpress.com>

Harris, Dash. *Negro*.
<http://negrodocumentary.com/>

Internet

Latin American Studies. *The African Heritage in Latin America*.
www.latinamericanstudies.org/afro-latinamericans.htm

Latin Post. “The Black-Brown Divide: Conversations on Race and Blackness in Latin America and the U.S.” www.latinpost.com/articles/25267/20141106/the-black-brown-divide-race-and-blackness-in-latin-america-and-the-u-s.htm

The Miami Herald. “A Rising Voice: Afro-Latin Americans.”
<http://media.miamiherald.com/multimedia/news/afrolatin/index.html>.

Proyecto Afrolatin@ (The Afro-Latin@ Project)
<http://afrolatinoproject.org>

LESSON PLAN **Négritude** in Latin America

Description: The purpose of this lesson plan is to introduce students to the history of Afro-Latin@s and the social construction of race and *négritude* in Latin America through the examination of *casta* paintings. Students are also afforded the opportunity to conduct research on present-day Afro-Latin@ presence and identity in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Estimated Time: 3 days

Intended Grades and Courses: Grades 6–12 world history, world cultures, global studies, or human geography courses.

Learning Objectives:

Students will:

- analyze *casta* paintings and use evidence from their analysis to infer how race was socially constructed in colonial Latin America;
- conduct research and share findings on efforts and movements to identify Afro-Latin@ presence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Focus Questions: What are *casta* paintings and how do they reflect the social construction of race in colonial Latin America? What is the state of Afro-Latinidad in contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean?

Materials Needed:

- *Casta* painting (Figure 1), ideally projected in color on a screen
- Student journals, writing instruments
- Access to research and scholarly sources
- Materials (print or digital) for creation of presentation

Procedures:

Day One

Connections to prior knowledge

- In a “quick-write” activity, ask students to respond to the prompt: How do we identify racial groups in the U.S.—how many races are there and what are they called?
- Engage students in either small group discussions or whole class discussion in which they share their responses to the writing prompt.

Visual Analysis and Content-based Instruction

- Show students the *casta* painting in Figure 1 (other *casta* images can be accessed and downloaded for educational purposes from www.artstor.org). A general online search can also yield *casta* paintings suitable for classroom use. Guide student analysis by asking:

What do you see in this collection of images? [Prompt students to pay attention to physical features, clothing, environment, and items that may indicate economic status (clothing, household



Figure 1. This *casta* painting from eighteenth-century Mexico depicts a man and woman of different races, along with their offspring who were assigned specific racial identities.

(The copyright-free image was downloaded from Artstor, www.artstor.org.)

objects, setting, etc.) and interactions among the people.]

What do you think the words at the bottom of each image mean?

[Ask a volunteer to read aloud each of the terms. Explain that the top lines are the racial terms for the two adults in the image; the word below is the racial identity assigned to their offspring.]

How does racial identity seem to be connected to economic and social status?

Where and when do you think this illustration was produced?

- Explain that this is called a “*casta*” painting from eighteenth century Mexico. Provide students with background information about *casta* paintings, wherein men and women of different races were depicted with their off-

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- Casta Paintings, Collectors, and Critics in Eighteenth-Century Mexico and Spain,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 14, no. 2 (2005): 169–204. DOI 10.1080/10609160500314980
18. Telles, 21; Wade, 93.
19. Dawn Duke, “From ‘Yélide’ to Movimiento de Mujeres Dominico-Haitianas: Gendering Problems of Whiteness in the Dominican Republic,” in *At Home and Abroad: Historicizing Twentieth-Century Whiteness in Literature and Performance*, ed. La Vinia Delois Jennings (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 61–92.
20. Telles, 21, 24.

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NÉGRITUDE IN LATIN AMERICA *from page 41*

spring, who were assigned a specific racial identity.

- Discuss with students that in colonial Latin America, mestizaje (race mixing) led to racial identities that are different from those that emerged in the United States. Ask students to consider how this might affect issues of power and supremacy.

Student Research:

- Assign a Latin American country to students either individually or in pairs. Students will research Afro-Latin@s in their assigned country and create a brief presentation that includes information about the group's history, population statistics, images, and other pertinent graphics. Students may create either a paper poster presentation or a digital presentation.

Day Two

Student Research: Allow students to continue their research and create their presentation. An additional day of research may be allotted at the discretion of the teacher.

Day Three

Presentations (two options)

Walking Gallery: Allow half of the students to set up their research projects first, being available for explanation and questions as the other half of the class tours the “gallery.” The students will then switch roles so that the other half of the students’ projects can be displayed and viewed.

Oral Presentations: Make available a computer or document camera and projector to project students’ work on a large screen. Allow students to present their work to their peers, answering questions as they arise.

Curricular Extensions

- Sociology: *Blanqueamiento* is the process of socially and biologically whitening oneself or a group of people. Why might someone from a lower classification in the casta images want to engage in the process of blanqueamiento?
- Anthropology: *Mestizaje* refers to “race mixing.” How are mestizaje and blanqueamiento related? Why do you think that some scholars believe that mestizaje and blanqueamiento together contributed to the erasure of blackness in Latin America?
- World History: How was “race” constructed in colonial Latin America? Why were the colonial powers concerned about mestizaje?
- U.S. History: Compare and contrast the effects of mestizaje and the “one-drop rule” (*Plessy v. Ferguson*) on black identity in Latin America and the United States.
- Government: In what ways can blanqueamiento and racial stratification be considered informal practice versus official public policy?
- Economics: How does racial stratification discourage upward socio-economic mobility for those in the lower strata?