

# CONSTRUCTING LATINONESS: RUMINATIONS ON READING *LOS CONFUNDIDOS*

JENNIFER M. RUSSELL†

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Latino.” What does the term mean? To whom does it apply? And under what circumstances?

I once tried to communicate its meaning to my six year old. We were in the car driving somewhere when he announced that Angel, one of his best buddies, was white. His declaration startled me the way all his prior articulated observations about “race” had startled me. On this occasion, however, I detected error rather than piercing insight, and eagerly sought to set him straight.

“Angel is not white; Angel is Latino.”

“What does Latino mean?”

“It means that Angel is brown.”

“Mom,” my son continued, “Angel is not brown. Can’t you see? He is white. I am brown.” He extended his left arm as proof. “That means that I’m Latino.”

I said nothing else, for his body language—brown arms folded across his chest and eyes brilliant with defiant indignation—told me that he believed he said all there was to say on the matter. It was another moment of inglorious parenting. More significantly, it was an example of confusion surrounding the “Latino” designation.

In her article, *Los Confundidos: De-Conflating Latinos/as’ Race and Ethnicity*, Professor Gloria Sandrino-Glasser observes that in the United States “race” is a bipolar construct—one is either “black” or “white.”<sup>1</sup> Americans and immigrants whose ancestry hails from the countries comprising Latin America do not fit comfortably in this black/white paradigm. The peoples of Latin America are of mixed “races,” a creolization of Native Peoples and the de-

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† Research Scholar, UCLA Center for the Study of Women. J.D., 1984 New York University School of Law. Many thanks to the faculty at Western State University College of Law to whom a previous version of this essay was presented. The views expressed herein, along with any errors, are my own.

1. See Gloria Sandrino-Glasser, *Los Confundidos: De-Conflating Latinos/as’ Race and Ethnicity*, 19 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 69 (1998).

scendants of Spanish European colonizers and enslaved Africans. Accordingly, much confusion surrounds the "racial" classification of these peoples in the American "race" schematic.

Sandrino-Glasser additionally argues that a result of this confusion is the treatment of diverse Latin American peoples as a homogeneous nation-like group on which a categorical identity—"Latino"—is then imposed. Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans, the three groups Sandrino-Glasser specially addresses, are merged into a distinct virtual nationhood because they all originate not only from outside the geographic, but also the cultural, boundaries of the United States. More important, the clumping together of these diverse peoples on the basis of nationhood has facilitated a conflation of nationality categories with "race" concepts to form "Latino," an identity that is oppositional to both the "white" and "black" identity categories.

What follows are my ruminations on some of the larger points of Sandrino-Glasser's thesis, which furnishes a compelling reason for examination of the framework within which a "Latino" identity is constructed.

## II. THE NOT SO PUZZLING PERSISTENCE OF THE BLACK/WHITE PARADIGM

In *Los Confundidos* Sandrino-Glasser asserts that "[a]lthough some critical race scholars have recognized the need for diversity in Critical Race Theory, the focus remains for the most part on a white/black racial paradigm."<sup>2</sup> This assertion echoes the claims of many other scholars of color seriously concerned with racialized subordination and the terms of its existence in American culture and legal jurisprudence. On one hand, there is greater recognition of what David Hollinger identifies as an "ethno-racial pentagon" or "five-part demographic structure," within which individuals must routinely declare themselves "Euro-American (or sometimes white), Asian American, African American, Hispanic (or sometimes Latino), and Indigenous Peoples (or sometimes Native American)."<sup>3</sup> But at the same time, the doctrinal rules and policies of "racial" remediation are all too often restrictively predicated on bi-polar "racial" identities.

Many have sought to understand the persistence of the black/white paradigm in light of the European American experiences with immigration and the African American struggles for civil rights.<sup>4</sup> I will not rehearse those observations here. Instead, I will

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2. *Id.* at 159.

3. See DAVID A. HOLLINGER, POSTETHNIC AMERICA 23 (1995).

4. See, e.g., Rachel F. Moran, *Neither Black Nor White*, 2 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 61

attempt an explanation of the black/white paradigm and its persistence in terms of the intellectual heritage of Euro-American modernity and the ontological narrative of American nation-ness. My argument in particular is that the black/white paradigm is a predominant organizing—constitutive—theme of Euro-American modernity. The black/white paradigm is inconceivable and incomprehensible without understanding how “European” or “white” identity was created by encounters with others deemed to be “savages.”

The first European encounters with peoples of color in what is now the United States of America were with Native Peoples, “red” peoples, if you will. Why not, then, a red/white paradigmatic understanding of “race” in America? Without doubt, as the historian Ronald Takaki in his essay *The “Tempest” in the Wilderness* argues, “the native people of America were viewed as the ‘other’.”<sup>5</sup> They appeared to lack everything the English identified as civilized—Christianity, cities, letters, clothing, and swords. Native Peoples were viewed as cruel, barbarous and backwards. They were thought of as governed by their passions and libidinal energies, and thus, they personified “savagery.” They were exactly what their English colonizers feared becoming:

To the colonists, the Indians were not merely a wayward people: they personified something fearful within Puritan society itself. . . . Indians failed to control their appetites, to create boundaries separating mind from body. They represented what English men and women in America thought they were not—and, more important, what they must not become. As exiles living in the wilderness far from ‘civilization,’ the English used their negative images of Indians to delineate the moral requirement they had set up for themselves. As sociologist Kai Erikson explained, ‘deviant forms of behavior, by marking the outer edges of group life, give the inner structure its special character and thus supply the framework within which the people of the group develop an orderly sense of their own cultural identity. . . . One of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is *not*.’ By depicting Indians as demonic and savage, the colonists . . . were able to define more precisely what they . . . [feared becoming].<sup>6</sup>

Native Peoples were not the only representations of “backwardness” and “savagery” available to Europeans during the period of American colonization. The Europeans colonizing America were

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(1997).

5. See Ronald Takaki, *The “Tempest” in The Wilderness: The Racialization of Savagery*, in *A DIFFERENT MIRROR: A HISTORY OF MULTICULTURAL AMERICA* 24, 31 (1993).

6. *Id.* at 40-41 (emphasis in original).

descendants of Europeans who three centuries earlier made contact with Africa. And as portions of Patrick Brantlinger's important essay, *Victorians and Africans*, demonstrate, many Europeans believed Africa to be the center of evil, a hell on earth, a dark continent on which "savagery" reigns.<sup>7</sup> Africans, accordingly, were constructed as primitives possessed by demonic darkness. And as in the case of the Native Peoples of America, Europeans displaced their own "savage" impulses on to Africans, for within the myth of the dark continent was a "submerged fear of falling out of the light, down the long coal chute of social and moral regression."<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, European ideology of "savagery" was developed and nurtured at a time of expansion and empire building. Europeans ascribed "savagery" to Native Peoples and Africans, and then invoked it in a socio-political context of conflict and competition over land and labor to justify the subjugation, exploitation, enslavement and even the elimination of Native Peoples and Africans.

The construction of "savages," was (and still is) crucial to Euro-American modernity with its obsessions with boundaries (mind/body, reason/passion, reason/morality, science/superstition), and pretensions to order, civility, rationality and progress. Encounters with Native Peoples and Africans facilitated the European understanding of "rationality" and "civilization" since to a great extent the content of these concepts was dramatically demonstrated through European efforts against the "ignorance" and "barbarity" of Native Peoples and Africans. "Savagery," then, was the contrasting image of the European (and in time, the American as well).

While Native Peoples and Africans were similarly constructed as "savages," Europeans drew a distinction between the two that, to this day, informs the black/white paradigm. It was possible to educate and thus "civilize" Native Peoples, but not Africans. In Virginia, for example, where the "savagery" of Native Peoples was viewed largely as cultural,<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson implored them to abandon their way of life—nomadic hunting, for example—and to adopt the culture of the white man.<sup>10</sup> Jefferson expected Native Peoples to "enclose farms as private property and learn arithmetic so they would be able to keep accounts of their production."<sup>11</sup> Ultimately for Jefferson, as Takaki points out, "Indians as Indians would not be allowed to remain within the borders of civilized soci-

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7. See Patrick Brantlinger, *Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent*, in "RACE," WRITING, AND DIFFERENCE 185-222 (Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed., 1985).

8. *Id.* at 215.

9. See Takaki, *supra* note 5, at 36.

10. *Id.* at 47.

11. *Id.* at 47-48.

ety."<sup>12</sup> Their option on one hand was to continue their "barbarism" and face removal or even extermination, or, on the other hand, renounce their ways—in other words, denounce their Indianness—and step within the boundaries of "civilization."

Africans, by contrast, were thought of as beyond the redemptive grasp of "civilization." History, according to noted philosopher Hegel, is the story of "Civilization." And, Hegel infamously placed the African outside of "civilization" because Africa "is no historical part of the world."<sup>13</sup> Indelibly located outside the boundaries of "civilization," Africans were thought incapable of relinquishing their "savagery." To Europeans, Africans were less than primitive, they were below the lowest starting point on a human evolutionary scale.<sup>14</sup> And as such, incompetent candidates for human advancement.

Pointing to a distinction between the "savagery" of Native Peoples and that of Africans is not to deny the fact of European extermination of and domination over Native Peoples. It is, however, to acknowledge that the "savagery" of Native Peoples and that of Africans was constructed differently. It is also to illustrate an unmatched ontological and epistemological distance between Africans and Europeans.

Any doubts that notions of African "savagery" endure in contemporary American "race" discourse is easily dispelled on reading Andrew Hacker's influential *Two Nations*, in which he writes:

Black Americans came from the least-known continent, the most exotic, the one remotest from American experience. Among the burdens blacks bear is the stigma of "the savage," the proximity to lesser primates. Hence the question in many minds: Can citizens of African origin find acceptance in a society that is dominantly white, Western, and European?<sup>15</sup>

For Hacker the answer to that query is evidently "No," since, in his estimation,

the "Africa" in African-American contrasts with much of the European structure of technology and science, of administrative systems based on linear modes of reasoning. Today, Africa is the least developed and most sorrow-ridden of continents. It has more than its share of malnutrition and debilitating diseases, and at least its share of tribal rancor and bloodshed. It seems always to be petitioning the rest of the world for aid. Since the close of the colo-

12. *Id.* at 49-50.

13. See GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL, *THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY* 99 (J. Sibree trans., 1991).

14. See Brantlinger, *supra* at note 7, at 203.

15. See ANDREW HACKER, *TWO NATIONS: BLACK AND WHITE, SEPARATE, HOSTILE, UNEQUAL* 13 (1992).

nial era, over a generation ago, there have not been many African success stories.<sup>16</sup>

The thrust of my argument is that persistent reference to, and framing of “race” matters in terms of a black/white paradigm is a contemporary, polite euphemistic way of talking about “savages” and “civilization.” A black/white paradigm directly implicates two, and only two, “racial” groups only to the extent that African Americans or “blacks” embody “savagery” and European Americans or “whites” embody “civilization.” The reality, however, is that a black/white paradigm links not just African Americans and European Americans in a peculiar calibration of “civilization.” Operationally, a black/white paradigm configures all racialized groups, including Latinos, into a web of social relationships with each group pitted against the other and vying for the honorific designation—“civilized.”

### III. THE FACT OF LATINONESS

The fact of blackness, as noted by Frantz Fanon, is the composition of the “self as a body.”<sup>17</sup> To be black is to be burdened with a bodily self-consciousness. As Fanon explains,

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world.<sup>18</sup>

Bodily consciousness in Western societies, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argues, is the bedrock on which the social order is founded.<sup>19</sup> The physical body is always *in* view and *on* view.<sup>20</sup> Just by looking at the physical body one discerns a person’s beliefs and social position. The presence or absence of particular genitalia, skin pigmentation,

16. *Id.*

17. See FRANTZ FANON, BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS 111 (1967).

18. *Id.* at 110-111 (emphasis in original).

19. See OYÈRÓNKÉ OYÈWÙMÍ, THE INVENTION OF WOMEN: MAKING AN AFRICAN SENSE OF WESTERN GENDER DISCOURSES 1 (1997).

20. *Id.* at 2.

cranium size—all are key to situating persons in Western social systems.<sup>21</sup>

This is similar to the conflation argument Francisco Valdes makes when he points out how what he has identified as “Euro-American hetero-patriarchy . . . constructs sex as the determinant of gender, conceptualizes gender as the social dimension of sex, and treats sexual orientation as the sexual performance of gender.”<sup>22</sup> According to Valdez, “persons born with penises are supposed to exhibit a particular social personality and persons born with vaginas another” so that “sex determines, and becomes conflated with, gender.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, “sex-derived gender” is conflated with sexual orientation—“sexual orientation signifies sexual personality; it is the sexual dimension of gender.”<sup>24</sup>

The work of both Oyêwùmí and Valdes underscores how the physical body is implicated in the construction of socio-political categories and epistemologies. Both express concern with how the physical is conflated with or embodies social differences.

Oyêwùmí additionally argues that the discourse of the body is prominent in the West because the West privileges the visual.<sup>25</sup>

The reason that the body has so much presence in the West is that the world is primarily perceived by sight. The differentiation of human bodies in terms of sex, skin color, and cranium size is a testament to the powers attributed to “seeing.” The gaze is an invitation to differentiate. . . . The term ‘worldview,’ which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s privileging of the visual.<sup>26</sup>

Within the black/white paradigm the physical body is spectacular because it encodes social boundaries that are drawn on the basis of phenotypical and physiognomical differences. It is the black body that is the focus of stigma and devaluation and marginality. The white body, by contrast, is valorized and even celebrated with an endowment of presumptive rights.

Latinoness poses unique challenges to the visuality and bodily consciousness of a Western society such as the United States. Skin

21. *Id.* at 1.

22. See Francisco Valdes, *Unpacking Hetero-Patriarchy: Tracing the Conflation of Sex, Gender & Sexual Orientation to its Origins*, 8 YALE J.L. & HUMAN. 161, 168 (1996) (emphasis in original). See also Francisco Valdes, *Queers, Sissies, Dykes, and Tomboys: Deconstructing the Conflation of “Sex,” “Gender,” and “Sexual Orientation” in Euro-American Law and Society*, 83 CAL. L. REV. 1 (1995).

23. See Valdes, *Unpacking Hetero-Patriarchy*, *supra* note 22, at 166.

24. *Id.* at 167.

25. See OYÊWÚMÍ, *supra* note 19, at 2-3. See also Martin Jay, *Scopic Regimes of Modernity*, in MODERNITY & IDENTITY 178 (Scott Lash & Jonathan Friedman eds., 1992) (stating that “it is difficult to deny that the visual has been dominant in modern Western culture in a wide variety of ways.”).

26. See OYÊWÚMÍ, *supra* note 19, at 2-3.

color, hair texture and other obvious biological characteristics commonly used for conceptualizing, organizing and determining "race" are at best imperfect indicia of Latinoness. In the American scheme of bipolarized racial ordering, Latino bodies are paradoxically both black and white. Yet, Latinoness is neither black nor white.

The fact of Latinoness is that culture, rather than the physical body, is the site of difference and degeneracy, and thus the medium through which alternate (although co-existing) conceptions of "race" are constructed. As popularly understood, culture corresponds with nationhood and nationality. And for this reason it is not surprising that the nation-ness of the peoples of Latin America—no matter how distinct each is from the other—would be a constitutive element of a "Latino" race.

No doubt hegemonic imposition is a fact of Latinoness. As Yen Le Espiritu's study of Asian Americans indicates, the process whereby linguistically, culturally and geographically diverse groups emerge as a unitary panethnic group is bound up with power relations. According to Espiritu, "a more powerful group seeks to subordinate another, and in so doing, imposes upon these people a categorical identity that is defined by reference to their inherent differences from or inferiority to the dominant group."<sup>27</sup> Anglos, the dominant group in the United States, commonly mark the racial inferiority of Latinos with measurements of English proficiency and the characteristics of "la familia" that are contrary to their notions of the nuclear family.

Once in place, however, the construct "Latino" becomes "an ontological condition of social life."<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the raw facts of their particular distinct histories, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and other peoples of Latin American descent who are present in the United States must locate themselves in relation to and make sense of their life experiences in light of widely promulgated and available

27. See YEN LE ESPIRITU, *ASIAN AMERICAN PANETHNICITY: BRIDGING INSTITUTIONS AND IDENTITIES* 6 (1992).

28. I appropriate this phrase from Margaret R. Somers & Gloria D. Gibson, *Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity*, in *SOCIAL THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY* 37,38 (Craig Calhoun ed., 1994). In their project to bring together narrative and identity in the interpretation of social action and social being, Somers and Gibson emphasize research findings that show that people are embedded in and guided by stories:

that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that "experience" is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.

*Id.* at 38-39.

(though often distorted) social narratives that essentialize them into a single identity category.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Sandrino-Glasser's inquiry into the "Latino" designation is a much needed one. It should serve as an important reminder that all identity designations are by-products of the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the discourses of history, culture and society.<sup>29</sup> Constructions of Latinoness (and blackness and whiteness) are rendered within socially and historically specific discourses that depend on the physical body as well as cultural practices to establish boundaries between "savagery" and "civilization."

On reading *Los Confundidos*, I thought long and hard about the "Latino" designation, the terms of its meaning, and its application. The next time my son poses the question "What does Latino mean?" my hope now is that I will have in my possession accurate, non-academic language to aid his understanding of the constraints and choices confronting us all as we are named and name ourselves as racialized beings.

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29. See Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, in *IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, CULTURAL DIFFERENCE* 225 (Jonathan Rutherford ed., 1990) (referring to identities as "the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.").

