'You Can't Define a Community, It's Not a Monolith': How Latinx University Students are Using Hybrid Counterpublics to Challenge 'Latinidad'

Alexis-Carlota Cochrane

Department of Communications and Multimedia, McMaster University

Major Research Project

Supervisor: Dr. Christina Baade

August 2021

A major research project submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

(Communication and New Media)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Christina Baade, for her endless encouragement and support, as well as Dr. Andrea Zeffiro for believing in me and taking on the role of second reader. Thank you to research participants Sofia Palma-Florido, Veronica Herrera, Matias Arko, Fernando Marte and Paloma Torres for sharing their stories and their impactful work creating Latinx community spaces across Ontario. Finally, thank you to my parents for always encouraging me to pursue academia, especially because they could not.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this work, the term Latinx is utilized as a gender-neutral, non-binary alternative to *Latino* or *Latina*. Unlike English, Spanish is a gendered language and lacks a gender-neutral singular pronoun. Masculine nouns in Spanish often end with the letter O, like *Latino*, and feminine nouns often end with the letter A, like *Latina* (with exceptions). In English, if someone identifies as non-binary, they can use they/them as a singular pronoun, or alternatives such as ze/hir/hirs, ey/em/eir, etc. Spanish is slowly adapting with the popularization of *elle*, a gender-neutral singular pronoun that functions as 'they' does in English, but this still leaves the question of how to refer to a group of Latinos in a gender-neutral way.

In this work, I have chosen to use Latinx, but I do wish to stress that this is not a perfect word. Simply, many people dislike the term Latinx. They argue that it is further imposing colonial norms on the Spanish language. Others say that it simply doesn't make sense—how do you pronounce 'Latinx', especially in Spanish? I considered using Latine, a newer alternative that works to answer some of the faults found in the utilization of Latinx. Latine works in English and Spanish, and it follows a similar structure to the gender-neutral pronoun *elle*. But *elle* is still a newer term that might still be unfamiliar for many. Needless to say, there is no

perfect solution. Language is ever-changing and we, as Spanish speakers, are currently adapting to find more inclusive solutions. Here, I have chosen Latinx, with the intention to include all Latinx experiences, as well as one term can. But I also believe that Latino, Latina, Latinx, Latine, and even Latin American can be interchangeable.

I ask that you approach the term Latinx with flexibility. If Latinx doesn’t feel right to you, feel free to use Latina, Latino, Latine, Latin American or something else entirely. I have chosen Latinx with the aim of being inclusive; in that inclusion is the ability for readers to choose what best fits their own identities and contexts.

Introduction

In November of 2018, the Afro Indigenous poet Alán Pelaez Lopez created an Instagram meme that critiqued Latinidad's exclusive, white-centric discourses and limitations for building solidarity with Black and Indigenous people. The image was heavily circulated by countless Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx who, like Pelaez Lopez, agreed that Latinidad did not accurately represent them and called for its cancellation. This was the first instance of #LatinidadisCancelled, a hashtag that would soon create an entryway into larger Latinx cultural discourse online. In 1985, Felix Padilla had coined the term Latinidad with the aim of framing Latinx culture as inclusive, diverse and interconnected. However, in recent years, a growing body of Latin American activism has argued that Latinidad was built upon racist, colonial ideologies that erase Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx experiences and promote colorist preferences for a whiter/lighter 'ideal Latino' character. Thus, not only does Latinidad's 'inclusive and diverse' narrative exclude non-white experiences from the umbrella of Latinx identity, but it also promotes white-centric monolithic representations. Pelaez Lopez's hashtag intervention, along with related discussions about the navigation of racialized and white identities within Latin American and Spanish Caribbean contexts, demonstrate how digital community spaces act as counterpublics where Latinx participants can join conversations relevant to their communities and can learn collaboratively.

This major research project qualitatively analyzes how Latinx university students in Ontario who are members of the Organization of Latin American Students (OLAS) take part in digital community spaces to develop hybrid counterpublics, in which they participate in conversations about culture and identity, particularly in relation to more recent critiques of Latinidad. Latin American student groups like OLAS act as connective spaces for Latin

American-identifying students on post-secondary campuses; thus, OLAS is a good place to find Latinx students who are actively engaged in questions of Latinx community and identity. The organization has many chapters across Ontario, Canada, and beyond, including OLAS McMaster, OLAS Ryerson, OLAS York and OLAS University of Toronto. At its core, OLAS chapters provide Latinx students with a place on campus to build community within the Latinx diaspora, celebrate and learn about Latin American and Spanish Caribbean culture, and educate the wider university community on issues that affect Latinx students and communities. OLAS chapters in Ontario became more connected in 2021, when Fernando Marte, then-OLAS Ryerson president, founded the non-profit Coalition of Latin American (or Latinx) Students (CLAS). Observing that OLAS chapters were not collaborating beyond their respective campuses despite bearing the same name, Marte organized the coalition. CLAS creates a platform for greater connection amongst the Latinx student diaspora in Canada, increasing the size of community that Latinx students have access to and allowing them to engage with students at campuses across the country.

By conducting individual interviews with OLAS members participating in this inter-campus community, I aim to better understand how Latinx students are utilizing digital community spaces to participate in cultural conversation and connection. Guided by Pelaez Lopez’s critiques of Latinidad, our conversations focused upon the anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity and white privilege within Latinx culture, examining how these students are informing themselves and their communities about larger issues that impact the diverse Latinx community. This research also considers counterpublics that include but are not limited to digital, network-facilitated spaces, which I call *hybrid counterpublics*, and investigates how OLAS creates hybrid spaces for Latinx students to navigate identity and culture.

This research will address the following questions:

- How do Latinx students in Ontario interpret and critique the concept of Latinidad and monolithic representation in Latinx culture?
- How do hybrid counterpublics facilitate cultural connection and navigation for Latinx students who are members of OLAS?
- How are Latinx students in Ontario utilizing digital communities to continue to connect amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic?

I situate my research on Latinidad, monolithic representation and hybrid counterpublics on two key theories: Chicana cultural theory and digital counterpublics. Chicana cultural theory offers crucial tools for navigating the complexity of Latinx identity and representation. In particular Gloria Anzaldùa's concept of borderlands, or border theory, challenges notions of binary, either/or identities in relation to race, culture, language, sexuality and religion and argues for recognizing coexistence of multiple identities (1987). In particular, border theory gives insight into the struggle for Blackness and Indigeneity to coexist within Latinx cultural contexts. It also helps explain the binary frameworks through which white- and Mestize-centric identities are idealized in Latinx culture and its representation. Nancy Fraser's account of subaltern counterpublics provides a framework to analyze how Latinx groups can coalesce as their members collectively navigate Latinidad's oppressive ideologies and develop "oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990). Because this research primarily focuses upon digital spaces for community building and cultural navigation, I think with Marc Lamont Hill's discussion of digital counterpublics in order to interpret the digital spaces in which these connections take place, while also extending Hill's work to consider hybrid counterpublics that involve both in-person and "digitally networked" elements (2018).

Pelaez Lopez's hashtag #LatinidadIsCancelled encourages the deconstruction of Latinidad, emphasizing "just how *mestizo*, white-centering, anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-queer the [Latinx] culture remains" (Martinez, 2020). This campaign called attention to the representational fault in Latinx identity. As Aguilera argues regarding the categorization of "The Latino Vote" throughout the 2020 United States Presidential election, the Latinx experience is diverse "in terms of national origin, in terms of generation, in terms of language use, nativity, class, gender, gender identity, sexuality" (2020). Like Latinidad, the categorical notion of the Latino Vote upholds white-centricity and Black and Indigenous erasure. This discussion and many others like it fail to acknowledge that while the Latinx community is highly diverse, the notion of racial diversity is strategically withheld from Latinx representation. Thus, this work aims to examine how Latinx students in Ontario are actively challenging the monolithic representation upheld by Latinidad through their collective navigation of culture and identity within the hybrid counterpublic space.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I will discuss Latinidad's oppressive history and how Blackness, Indigeneity and Latinidad's struggle to coexist. I will then situate my concept of hybrid counterpublics, building on Fraser's subaltern counterpublic and Hill's digital counterpublic.

Latinidad: Concept and Critique

Latinidad was first theorized by Felix Padilla in his work on Latino Ethnic Consciousness. The term represented an attempt to collectively embody various Latinx experiences and cultures, connecting these Latinx experiences beyond native country, or *patria* (Padilla, 1985). Two decades after Padilla's initial conceptualization, Rodríguez delved deeper into the notion of Latinidad as "a particular geopolitical experience but it also contains within it the complexities

and contradictions of immigration, (post)(neo)colonialism, race, color, legal status, class, nation, language and the politics of location" (Rodríguez, 2003). Though historically celebrated for its framing of Latinx cultural connectivity across diverse experiences, we must also understand the anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity and white supremacy that is upheld by Latinidad, working in tandem with the notion of 'racial mixing' (Rivero, 2005; Sanchez, 2018; Martinez, 2019; Salazar, 2019; Nolasco, 2020). As elucidated by Yeidy M. Rivero, "in many Latin American and Spanish Caribbean nations, *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, is a key factor in the construction of a racially integrated society, because everyone, regardless of skin color, is racially mixed, and hence, an equal member within the nation" (2005).

What is often omitted from explanations of *Mestizaje* is that within the act of racial mixing is the prioritization of whiteness and, thus, the intentional and institutional erasure of Black and Indigenous cultures (Rivero, 2005; Salazar, 2019; Nolasco, 2020). The process of *Blanqueamiento,* or whitening, erases Blackness and Indigeneity, upholding the belief that this act is "thereby improving on or lessening the supposedly inferior [B]lack or [Indigenous] racial traits" in order to '*mejorar la raza',* a common Spanish phrase translating to 'improve the race' (Rivero, 2005). Thus, discrimination and, specifically, the erasure of Black and Indigenous experiences that are deeply embedded in Latin American and Spanish Caribbean practices of colorism and colonialism also shape understandings of Latinidad and *Mestizaje* (Haywood, 2017; Nolasco, 2020). While intended to unite the Latinx community, the notion of Latinidad works to ostracize many in the already under-represented Latinx community (Cruz, 2019; Araújo, 2020).

Blackness, Indigeneity and Latinidad's coexistence is especially complexed due to white supremacy's embeddedness in Latinx culture (Throne, 2018; Dache et al., 2019; García-Louis & Cortes, 2020; Martinez, 2020). The concept of Latinidad prioritizes whiteness and the erasure of

Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx experiences, further reinforcing the belief that these identities exist separately, rather than coexisting as Anzaldúa argues they do (1987). Afro-Latina singer Amara La Negra discusses the pressure to choose between Latinidad and Blackness, reiterating the societal belief that these identities are unable to coexist: "[Other people] were like 'You're not Black. You have to pick. Are you Latina? You Dominican? Are you Black? You kind of have to pick'" (Perez et al., 2020).

Digital Counterpublics and Hybrid Counterpublics

If the coexistence of multiple identities and greater representation of Black and Indigenous Latinx identities are the best ways for countering the problematic hierarchies upheld by Latinidad, how does this actually come into being? One way is through the formation of a hybrid counterpublic. Nancy Fraser's concept of the 'Subaltern Counterpublic' challenges Habermas's notion of the public sphere, theorized as a collective space for people to publicly discuss societal issues that affect them and their communities. Fraser argues that such theorizations of the public sphere neglect to address the inaccessibility of these spaces for oppressed, marginalized people, who are often intentionally excluded from these public conversations (1990). Fraser asserts that those excluded from the public sphere can create counterpublics in which they develop "oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990). Hill argues that many counterpublics have since "relocated, constituted, or extended to virtual, online, and other digitally networked spaces, resulting in the formation of *digital counterpublics"* (Hill, 2018). He theorizes that this digital shift has taken place due to the rapid advancement of digital technology, increased access to the internet and social networking sites, and the popularization of smartphones. Thus, as more of the public sphere begins to exist in the digital space, so do counterpublic spaces.

One of the most notable examples of a digital counterpublic is the #BlackLivesMatter movement against anti-Black violence (particularly by law enforcement), which was catalyzed when the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner by police officers were widely shared over Black Twitter (Carney, 2016; Hill, 2018). Hill argues that Black Twitter (simply, a community of Black Twitter users who often discuss Black-specific experiences and social issues) acts as a digital counterpublic to "engage in forms of pedagogy that reorganize relations of surveillance, reject rigid respectability politics, and contest the erasure of marginalized groups within the Black community" (2018). The #BlackLivesMatter movement demonstrates how digital counterpublics support diverse dialogues through Black public discourse, cultural conversation and connection (Carney, 2016; McArthur, 2016; Brown et al., 2017). Similarly, #LatinidadIsCancelled fosters critical dialogues within the Latinx community through the creation of spaces to challenge Latinidad's white-centricity (Valenzuela, 2013; Carney, 2016; McArthur, 2016; Brown et al., 2017; Martinez, 2020). McArthur argues that social media can provide spaces for narrative interrogation, creating alternative interpretations that counter "racist, sexist and classist media narratives with authentic stories" (2016). Cultural conversations that take place in these digital counterpublics build awareness of issues facing underrepresented communities, which may not be discussed within the public sphere, or modern-day mainstream media. Often called a social media revolution, #BlackLivesMatter and other digital counterpublics create a framework for bringing underrepresented, marginalized communities together through community conversations and identity navigation (Anderson et al., 2020).

OLAS and social groups like it are not limited to social media; instead, they exist at the cusp of subaltern and digital counterpublics. While these oppositional community spaces are facilitated digitally, they do not exist solely within Hill's definition of "virtual, online, or other

digitally networked spaces" (2018). Like OLAS, many of these community spaces leverage digital networks to connect their participants, especially based on the "identities, interests, and needs" of the subaltern counterpublic, but these communities interact beyond digitally networked spaces (Fraser, 1990). Thus, I propose that OLAS exists as a hybrid counterpublic—one that exists digitally but is not networked entirely online. Hybrid counterpublics utilize digital spaces beyond social media that connect those with similar interests, experiences, or values in common: examples of these spaces include Zoom Calls, Messenger Chats, and Discord Servers, whether or not these connections were originally facilitated through social media.

Methods

Through my data collection, I first and foremost prioritized creating space for community voices. This project is heavily dependent on Latinx youth sharing their stories, experiences and navigations of identity and culture; thus, an interview process featuring a small sample of Latinx students allowed for these community members to tell their stories in-depth, and in their own words. I considered analyzing social media posts but decided against this methodology because I wanted to create a space where Latinx youth could choose how they are represented, not how others interpret them online.

I conducted individual in-depth interviews with five Latinx students who are OLAS chapter members. There was no intricate selection process—all students who expressed interest in the study were offered interviews and five were able to fit the hour-long sessions into their already exam-ridden April. Coincidentally, the smaller number of participants allowed for a more thorough analysis of each interview. In the interviews, we addressed how participants utilize hybrid counterpublics to participate in cultural conversation, connection, and navigation, particularly regarding discussions of Latinx identity, thinking alongside Pelaez Lopez's critiques

of Latinidad’s anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, and idealized, monolithic representation. These sessions aimed to better understand how Latinx students interpret Latinidad and monolithic representation, how they connect through hybrid counterpublics and, particularly, why these connections have become especially important amidst the lack of social interaction brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Positionality and Accountability

It was my intention as a researcher within the diaspora to format these interviews as intra-community conversations, prioritizing community building and care. I wanted to reflect on what we are already doing successfully as a community, as well as how we can improve and where we are in dire need of change. Within a discussion and analysis of identity, it is especially important to note my own positionality. I am a Queer, white Latinx cisgender woman, but my whiteness is unquestionably at the center of my being because of the power and privilege it upholds.

I believe it is also important to clarify my positionality as white, and not ‘white-passing’ within the Latin American context because the term ‘white-passing’ is incredibly harmful. I can be white and Latinx, just as one can be Indigenous and Latinx or Black and Latinx or Afro-Latinx. Latinx identity is not a ‘race’—in fact, Latinx identity can (and often does) exist complexly and intersectionally. It is the ideology that, as Amara La Negra asserts, one has to pick between their race and ethnicity that ostracizes many of Black and Indigenous Latinx identities from the larger Latinx community (Perez et al., 2020). Thus, the utilization of the term white-passing suggests that I am not authentically white, diminishing and denying my complicity and responsibility in upholding white supremacy within my community, unintentionally or otherwise. To acknowledge one’s white privilege is to acknowledge the harm whiteness has caused Black, Indigenous, Afro-Latinx and Latinx who identify as people of colour. It is also to acknowledge

that as a white person, I have directly benefitted from colorism and the narrative of the 'Ideal Latino'. But acknowledging this privilege alone is not enough. White Latinx must take accountability and must utilize their privilege responsibly to center the voices of the oppressed and the erased. I believe it is to show up and act, just as much as it is to step back, listen and learn.

This work should not be the only work referenced, particularly in discussions of Latinidad, white privilege, and internalized colorism. I ask that readers also leverage resources created by Black, Indigenous and Latinx folks that identify as people of colour[1]. My voice should not be where you stop.

Recruitment

I recruited participants for the research project over social media, posting a call for participants to various OLAS social media accounts in Ontario, including chapters at the University of Toronto, McMaster University, York University and Ryerson University. Participants were informed that the data collection process consisted of a one-hour Zoom interview in which participants were asked how they use social media to discuss and promote Latinx racial activism, learn more about diverse experiences of the Latinx community and critique the anti-Black, anti-

[1] Recommended Readings:

Dache, A., Haywood, J., & Mislán, C. (2019). A Badge of Honor not Shame: An AfroLatina Theory of Blackimiento for U.S Higher Education Research. *The Journal of Negro Education,* 130-145. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1571&context=gse_pubs.

García-Louis, C, & Cortes, K. L. (2020). Rejecting Black and Rejected Back: AfroLatinx College Students' Experiences with anti-AfroLatinidad. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *0*(0), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2020.1731692

Haywood, Jasmine M. 2017. "'Latino Spaces Have Always Been the Most Violent': Afro-Latino Collegians' Perceptions of Colorism and Latino Intragroup Marginalization." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)* 30(8)

Sanchez, D. (2018). Racial and Structural Discrimination Toward the Children of Indigenous Mexican Immigrants. *Race Soc Probl* 10, 306–319 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-0189252-2

Indigenous and white-centric narrative upheld by Latinidad. Through this social media graphic, I requested that all participants meet the following criteria: (1) be self-identified as a Latinx student, (2) be over the age of eighteen years old, (3) be a participant in Latinx community on social media, and (4) be an OLAS member in Ontario.

Participants

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Name	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Person of Colour	Self-identification
Matias	Male	he/him	No	White Canadian with Latin background
Sofía	Female	she/her	Yes	*Mestiza* Latina (no connection to Indigenous roots)[2]
Fernando	Male	he/him	No	Afro-Latino
Paloma	Female	she/her	Yes	Mixed Latina, Canadian and Mexican background
Roni	Female	she/her	Yes	*Mestiza*, to only be used within Colombian context[3]

Table 1 provides a breakdown of all five participant profiles. Two participants identified as male, and three identified as female. Within this group, three participants identified themselves as people of colour, and two did not. The question about identity was phrased, "How do you identify, in terms of gender, race and ethnicity?" I provided further clarification if needed. The delineation of race and ethnicity was structured to avoid generalizations in terms of national identity (for example, "I'm Peruvian") because answers of this sort often limit the ability to reflect about racial stigmatization, which was vital in this research.

[2] Sofía noted her Indigenous ancestry but has clarified that she has no direct connection to those Indigenous roots due to the intentional erasure of Indigeneity in prior generations.

[3] As a Colombian-born participant, Roni explains that although the term *Mestiza* 'makes sense' within a Latin American and Spanish Caribbean context, when being used in North America, it does not well encompass the complexity of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean mixed heritage. Therefore, Roni identifies as *Mestiza* when analyzing identity through a Latin American lens. She chose not to identify in the 'North American' context.

Interview Process

Because this research was completed during university closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all recruitment and interviewing was completed online. The interviews were scheduled using Calendly, an online scheduling software that allows participants to choose from available pre-determined time slots. Self-scheduling was increasingly important for students given that our interviews took place in late April and early May when many students were engaged with final exams and assignments. All interview-related correspondence took place over email, including participants being provided the link to their interview, which took place over Zoom.

Participants were provided with letters of information and a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview. I also posted the questions in the Zoom chat so that participants could reference them textually throughout the interview. All interviews were recorded, with consent, solely for the purpose of transcription. Once the transcription process was completed, all audio and video recordings were deleted. I utilized zoom’s auto transcription function to transcribe participant responses, which I later reviewed for accuracy and style. Participants were informed throughout the process that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could decline to answer questions or end the interview process completely without penalty. I also encouraged participants to take breaks during the interview as needed, particularly when discussing difficult subject matter (identity, oppression, racism). Because some of these reflections call upon past traumas, participants were provided mental health resources. Participants were also offered the option to choose a pseudonym should they wish to not have their name appear in the study; no participants chose this option. This study was reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

In these interviews, the initial questions situate the participant’s positionality, particularly their gender, race, and ethnicity. Following typical interview practice, the questions that followed delved into more detail about participants’ experiences when taking part in digital Latinx spaces and cultural conversation. Questions such as, ‘how has social media helped you learn more about how Latinx culture is oppressive or exclusive?’ and ‘how do you think accurate representation of the diversity of the Latinx community can be best created?’ were formulated to be open ended, with follow-up questions to guide participants to expand on their responses and experiences. Clarifying questions were also asked during these interviews when participants’ responses utilized jargon that is not common knowledge or to explore valuable but unexpected threads. I also prepared definitions for participants, which was particularly relevant when discussing the term ‘Latinidad’. One of the participants noted that they had noticed instances of Latinidad within Latinx culture before they had access to the terminology. Participants were invited to share examples of Latinx community and connection that they have engaged with or learned from, as well as projects that they have interacted with or produced in order to reveal the various forms of community in which these critical conversations take place.

Gaps in Representation

I write this piece during the summer of 2021, when the highly anticipated Latinx-starring musical drama film *In the Heights* has just been released. The cast is made up almost entirely of Latinx actors, and amongst them, many are white or Mestize-presenting. While many have praised the film’s diversity and how it is ‘making space’ for more Latinx representation in mainstream film, others have criticized the lack of Black and Afro-Latinx representation alongside the rhetoric that this is acceptable. This rhetoric claims that as a Latinx community, we should accept these exclusive and white-centric representations in order to ‘open the doors’ for

more diverse (namely, Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx) depictions later.[4] Messages like these uphold the notion that Black and Afro-Latinx experiences, as well as Indigenous experiences, are second tier and will only be addressed when white and *Mestize* Latinx needs and desires are satisfied.

Many Latinx representations, conversations, and spaces function in a similar way, prioritizing white and *Mestize* experiences, and ostracizing Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx. I have discussed this with multiple Latinx researchers, and we have noticed similar patterns throughout our various Latinx-centered research projects. The outcome is often consistent—there is a lack of Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx representation in these studies. The calls for participants typically go out through Latinx organizations, such as OLAS, but Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx are underrepresented in these organizations as well. This is not the fault of these underrepresented identities; rather, it prompts me to ask, do Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx feel welcomed and represented in Latinx spaces? As Haywood writes, '*Latino spaces have always been the most violent* [for Afro-Latinx]' (2017). We should ask: are we actively prioritizing Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx experiences in these conversations and spaces? Are we challenging the idealization of whiteness and lightness in the Latin American and Spanish Caribbean community that often lead to the exclusivity of these spaces?

The majority of participants in my study were hesitant to identify themselves with a specific race. Some noted that, although they benefit from the colorism in Latin America and Spanish Caribbean culture due to their lighter complexions, they also do not appear 'white' in white spaces and, thus, identify more generally as people of colour. Two participants identified as

[4] This is a paraphrase of Rita Moreno's original comment on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.* Although she later calls her statement 'dismissive of the [B]lack lives that matter in our Latin community', she never directly apologizes, only stating in a tweet that she is 'disappointed' with herself.

Mestiza[5] specifically, and one identified as 'Mixed', or of mixed race. The term *Mestiza* is more commonly used within the Latin American and Spanish Caribbean context, specifically by those who have grown up within or had strong cultural ties to the region. The utilization of the term "mixed", despite having a similar definition, will not be used interchangeably with *Mestiza* in this work because these terms often differ in their contextual usage, specifically a North American context in comparison to a Latin American and Spanish Caribbean context. Despite the terms *Mestiza* and Mixed both signifying mixed racial identities, no participants identified directly as Black or Indigenous. One of my interviewees identified as Afro-Latino, although they did not identify as a person of colour. Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx representation is particularly lacking within this work and connects to the larger lack of Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx students within OLAS, where participants were recruited, as well as within other 'Latinx Spaces'.

Latinidad and Monolithic Representation

Monolithic representation, particularly white-centric representation, is deeply embedded in Latin American and Spanish Caribbean culture. To analyze these white-centric representations and anti-Black and anti-Indigenous depictions more closely, the interviews centered around two key questions:

1. What are ways in which Latinx culture can be oppressive or exclusive?
2. Latinidad has been critiqued for representing a monolithic Latinx identity, specifically, a white-centering, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous Latinx identity. What's your opinion about this?

[5] The term *Mestiza* specifically refers to women with mixed ancestry, particularly European and Indigenous lineage. *Mestizo* refers to men with mixed ancestry. *Mestize* is often used as a gender-neutral term.

The second question gives a clear description of what Latinidad upholds—a white and *Mestize*-centering, anti-Black, and anti-Indigenous Latinx identity. This was done to ensure that participants understood what the term Latinidad signified and could reflect on how it exists and affects their own lives and identities.

It is important to note that no community is monolithic and, thus, no single persona can represent the complexity of a community. Despite this, an 'ideal Latino' character is consistently upheld within both Latinx and non-Latinx media. Throughout the discussions with our participants, we uncovered that the ideology of the 'ideal Latino' as OLAS Ryerson executive and *Latino Soy Yo* Podcast Co-host Matias refers to it, is an archetype that none of our participants feel well represented by.

The Idealized Latino

Padilla's concept of Latinidad was an attempt to link a wide range of Latinx identities, but, as Meredith Hill once said in reference to marketing, "when you speak to everyone, you speak to no one". Sofía, OLAS McMaster's Co-president, expands on this notion, arguing that by upholding a 'sweeping' term that was intended to apply to everyone, we really only speak to a certain kind of person, and exclude everyone else in the process:

> This kind of sweeping term erases identities that are so intentionally erased, so by just calling everybody Latino, people who look like me [as a *Mestiza*] become THE person and individuals who are Indigenous and Black are completely erased from the term Latino. That is what we continue to see perpetuated in media, in the culture, in the Latin American society and the greater global society.

When we are considering purposeful erasure, as Sofía discusses, terms like *Mestiza*, *Mestizo*, or *Mestize* function in a similar manner. As elucidated by Rivero, *Mestizaje* attempts to uphold the

notion of equality as "everyone, regardless of skin color, is racially mixed, and hence, an equal member within the nation" (2005). According to the ideology of *Mestizaje*, race is not an impactful identifier because everyone is 'mixed' in some way and, therefore, is equal regardless of race. However, as OLAS McMaster community member Roni elucidates, this is definitely not the case. According to Roni, while race and racial privilege were not often discussed in her elementary school in Colombia, there was an implicit hierarchy that placed whiteness at its forefront:

> I learned very early on, the only thing they taught us in school [in Colombia] about race was *mestizaje* and that was 'I may be *mestizo* and you may be *mestiza*, but your *mestizaje* matters more than mine' […] *Mestizaje* is not one unison thing, it's a shade of colors thing that starts to arrange…[As Colombian students,] we do learn that, like 'you're a *mestiza* but if you're mixed with like Black, then [someone who is not mixed with Black] is a little better than you'.

Mestizaje is not an equitable ideology; instead, as Roni explains, race and identity 'start to arrange', upholding colorism and pigmentocracy.[6] *Mestizaje* also denies notions of racial privilege that can be experienced by whiter and lighter-presenting Latinx in suggesting that we are 'all racially mixed and thus equal'—but are all 'racial mixtures' truly equal when, like Roni recalls, certain mixtures are more valued than others? Sofía argues that many of these hierarchical ideologies are engrained into Latin American culture, upholding white supremacy and purposefully excluding Black and Indigenous Latinx identities:

> The culture of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity has almost become a joke with the greater Latin American community that I think is so ingrained in our culture and in our

[6] Pigmentocracy refers to a system of privilege dependent on skin pigmentation, or skin colour.

> psyche as Latin Americans. That is, first, inexcusable but also very, very hard to hide. It is very overt and very evident in our history, in our stories, our songs, our culture. In all of the forms of culture, we see this exclusion of Black and Indigenous peoples in this preference of the white Aryan individual and their characteristics.

Whiteness and white features have long been prioritized and idealized within Latinx culture. They are the features that are represented in the media, that have been coded as desirable historically, and that often translate to privilege within Latin American and Spanish Caribbean spaces. As result, we often see Latinx identity represented as white and *Mestize* characters, alongside the intentional erasure of Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx experiences, which continues to uphold these idealized, monolithic representations.

'*Mejorar a la Raza*': Idealizing Whiteness[7]

The culture of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity is heavily engrained into Latin American culture. Not only is this gravitation towards whiteness present within Latinx representation in the media, but it is also upheld within many Latinx family structures through practices of colorism. Haywood finds that "family was the primary influence in shaping how [Latinx] view themselves as it relates to skin tone and hair texture", specifically through shaming of Black and Indigenous features, and celebrating Eurocentric beauty standards (2017). This monolithic portrayal of Latinx identity, repeatedly idealized as white and *Mestize*-centric, is encouraged in familial spaces, and fallaciously depicted as an act of 'care' due to the systemic privileging of whiteness and being 'fair skinned'. Roni reflects on the internalized racism her grandmother experienced,

[7] **Trigger Warning:** This section mentions assault and body issues on page 25. If you struggle with body image, you can find resources here: https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/body-image-self-esteem-and-mental-health. If you been victim to sexual harassment or sexual assault, you can find next steps, support, and treatment options here: https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/body-image-self-esteem-and-mental-health

as well as the ideologies that she was taught as a child, which she only recognized were problematic when she became older and more critical about race and identity:

> [My grandmother and I] were watching high school musical, and there was Gabriella and Troy and [my grandmother] was like, 'you see how Gabriella is darker and Troy is lighter[8]? That's what needs to happen. Gabriella is darker so she found herself a white man to have better looking kids. That's what you need to do.'

Statements like this one are common within Latinx culture. As Sofia explains, Latinx culture favours white or European characteristics over those which are Black and Indigenous. 'To better the race' or *'mejorar a la raza'* is a common phrase used in Latin American and Spanish Caribbean spaces that promotes these idealizations of whiteness.

As Rivero explains, the erasure of Blackness and Indigeneity is an act of whitening or *Blanqueamiento* and believed to 'better the race' through "lessening the supposedly inferior [B]lack or [Indigenous] racial traits" (Rivero, 2005). Roni reflects on how both she, as well as her grandmother, have experienced self-hate due to these ideologies. For Roni's grandmother, this manifests through viewing her own skin color as 'ugly' due to having a darker complexion:

> [My grandmother]'s darker than me, right? So, she'll say 'oh that looks so pretty on you, I could never wear that because I'm darker than you'. Or like, 'I could never do that […] you could do it because you have more fair skin, but I could never do that, I'm so ugly'…and at the time, I was like 'what does that mean…?' but now that I've digested it, I'm like…huh.

[8] For those who have not seen Highschool Musical, Gabriella Montez was portrayed by Vanessa Hudgens, who is of Filipina, Irish, French and Native American descent. She is visibly a person of colour. Troy Bolton was portrayed by Zac Afron, a white actor.

For many Latinx, these ideologies are engrained from childhood. As Roni explains, she has been exposed to whiteness and lightness being more desirable from her grandmother's experiences as a darker-skinned Latina, but also through conversations had in the Colombian school system that prioritized proximity to whiteness. Roni expresses that when she came to Canada, she often felt that her body was ostracized for differing from her white peers, so much so that she developed self-hate and body issues. As a child, her body was so heavily eroticized that she would wish she could gain weight as an act of hiding to avoid the constant harassment she experienced in elementary school:

> People were making fun of me, and girls would genuinely follow me and asked me if my ass was real like, […] they would be like 'is your ass real, or did you get it done [in Colombia]?'. I was like twelve [years old]. I developed body issues…people would literally assault me, like this guy once put a push pin on my butt to see if my butt would deflate.

As Latinx culture often idealizes whiteness and lightness, many Latinx students grow up seeing these historical preferences portrayed in their own lives, be it through discussions in familial spaces, the portrayal of Latinx identity in Latinx and Non-Latinx media, as well as through their interactions inter and intra-culturally. Thus, hybrid counterpublic spaces for connection and community such as the Organization of Latin American Students (OLAS) become increasingly necessary when rejecting and unlearning these exclusive ideologies.

OLAS as a Hybrid Counterpublic

Celebrated as a place for community growth, many of the participants noted that their involvement in OLAS was the first time they had access to Latinx community outside their family. This was consistent for both Canadian-born participants and participants who have

experienced immigration.[9] In considering OLAS as a hybrid counterpublic, I will analyze the ways in which these spaces facilitate digital and in-person connections for the Latinx community, as well as reflections of identities that are not represented in the mainstream. For participants, these connections and learning opportunities were increasingly facilitated on social media due to the university closures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Various OLAS university chapters digitally share informative content pertaining to the greater Latin American community, including critical discussions about how Blackness and Latinx identity can intersect, country-specific activism like the 2020–2021 mass protests in Colombia and Peru, and community projects educating and encouraging intra-community conversations, such as those on mental health stigma in Latin America. As a community space, OLAS challenges the idealized, monolithic representations that are so frequently represented in the mainstream, creating spaces for counter-interpretations and identities as theorized by Fraser's subaltern counterpublics. Below, I will delve into OLAS's role as a hybrid counterpublic, especially in the context of COVID-19, considering the ways in which the OLAS community creates an accessible site for cultural learning, agency, diversification, as well as community-based projects.

Cultural Connection

In his interview, Matias described his involvement with OLAS as a way to educate himself on the complexity of Latinx identities, specifically identities beyond those that are represented in mainstream media:

[9] The term 'first-generation' has been purposefully avoided within this work due to the confusion surrounding its definition. Many sources argue that the term 'first-generation' cannot apply to those born outside the country they have immigrated to, for example, first-generation Canadians cannot be born outside Canada. To counter this, many naturalized citizens, or citizens that acquire citizenship to a country that they have immigrated to, are often also referred to as 'first-generation'.

> I think OLAS is a gateway to expand my knowledge about what it truly means to be Latino and all the other parts of what that brings.

As someone who did not have many links to other Latinx youth until he joined OLAS, the organization provided a space for Matias to learn firsthand, alongside his community, about how complex and intersectional Latinx identity can be. Matias’s connection with Latinx culture through the OLAS community and online community projects has helped him navigate his belonging in the Latinx community. He notes that his friendships, access to greater community and the opportunities to learn within OLAS has helped him feel more secure in and understanding of not only his Latinx identity, but also the greater nuance of Latinx identity beyond monolithic representation:

> [Being involved in OLAS has] given me more of a sense of purpose within my own Latin self. I am more willing to now identify within the Latinx Community because of OLAS, because I have that place right now where my buddies and my friends are who understand the things I have in my own life, so I think OLAS has been a really good place of opening up my Latin personality and being more open [in terms of that personality]. OLAS has *fundamented* my interest in Latin culture but also the issues surrounding Latinos.

This experience was similar for OLAS Ryerson executive and *Latino Soy Yo* podcast co-host Paloma. As a Mexican Canadian, Paloma describes her involvement with OLAS as a method to ‘enforce’ her culture through cultural connections with other Latinx students. Paloma explains that through these hybrid counterpublics, she has been exposed to not only a deeper understanding of her own Mexican culture, but also a variety of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean cultures that she had not experienced before:

> Being of mixed race, growing up, I didn't know a ton about Mexican culture […] I didn't know slang, didn't know enough about the actual culture itself, and so, once I educated myself on that […] then I started learning about other cultures in Latin America and how different they really are.

Through exposure to the diversity of Latinx identities and ‘how different they really are’, OLAS as a hybrid counterpublic creates an environment for Latinx students to break away from the ‘ideal Latino’ ideology that we so commonly see represented. Given that these idealized identities are often how Latinx are portrayed in the public sphere, experiences like Paloma’s diversify knowledge and constitute “oppositional interpretations” within the hybrid counterpublic space (Fraser, 1990). When exposed to various cultures in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean, we move away from idealized identities and the sweeping term of ‘Latinidad’, beginning to understand how diverse Latinx identity can truly be.

Self-Representation and Diversification

Digital media provides an accessible space to challenge the monolithic narrative of Latinx identity. We see this through the act of Latinx youth posting their diverse experiences and navigation of Latinx identity online. Latinx representation is diversified through these self-representations that go beyond the white and *Mestize*-centric narratives that are often idealized within mass media and in Latin American and Spanish Caribbean spaces. Sofia notes that self-representation on social media has allowed her to learn more about the complexity of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean identity through influencers who simply share their lives, experiences, and resources. These Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx are quite literally re-writing these exclusive ideologies, simply by sharing their stories and educating others about their experiences on social media. Thinking with Anzaldúa through the theoretical framework of

Borderlands, these representations move beyond singular forms of identity, and instead highlight how identities can exist in multifaceted, and often intersectional ways. Sofia expands on how beneficial this exposure has been for her own navigation of Latinx identity:

> One of the things that I have been able to see is people, particularly Black and Indigenous Latin Americans, just sharing their lives, just becoming influencers and becoming individuals who are like 'yeah, I'm Latino and [another identity]' or 'I'm this [identity] first and I'm also Latino or Latina or Latinx'. And so, I think that has been essential to my own growth in expanding my own perspective of what it means to be a Latin American person.

Paloma regards the OLAS hybrid counterpublic space as one that is inherently educational. It allows for Latinx-identifying students and non-identifying students alike to learn more about ‘what it means to be Latinx’ and how complex and intersectional these identities can be. Paloma reflected on OLAS Ryerson’s Black History Month campaign in which OLAS Ryerson drew attention to Black social issues and how they intersect with Latinx identity. She argues:

> [The community creates space for] educating people and saying like, ‘there are Afro-Latinos out there that identify as Black and are taking issue with [protests such as Black Lives Matter] and want this to be heard’… I guess people wouldn't assume it's an issue in the Latin community, but it definitely is one…social media allows people to talk more about different sides to the culture.

Not only is the hybrid counterpublic space educational, where our participants note they have learned about Latinx experiences that they both relate to and differ from, it also provides Latinx folks the agency to represent themselves, placing their lived experience at the forefront of these cultural discussions. For example, Roni notes that she was often referred to as a ‘spicy Latina’

when advocating for herself, her opinions and passions completely disregarded on the basis that she was just being ‘spicy’ and ‘over-emotional’:

> In class, my points weren’t taken serious because before, it was ‘oh, you’re being all spicy Latina’ and even if I was actually making a valid point and advocating for myself, people didn't take me seriously. They're like ‘oh, you're just being overly emotional’. And I just…I felt really uncomfortable with that because I was just like “damn, I’m just only this one [stereotype]?”

Hybrid counterpublics provide a space to start this conversation, where Latinx youth can represent themselves beyond singular, idealized depictions of Latinx identity. It provides a space for sharing diverse lived experiences, an aspect that Roni argues is often left out of mainstream spaces, such as traditional academic environments:

> In academic terms, I feel like people don't respect lived experiences, they think just because an experience is [represented one way, all experiences are the same] and other experiences are kind of left at the door and to me, those [underrepresented experiences] are the most important, because what you experience and what I experience? Completely different.

Thinking with Roni’s call for diversification, these hybrid counterpublics are also an accessible cultural learning environment, where Latinx youth can share and learn about various diverse experiences, especially those that are purposefully underrepresented such as Black, Indigenous, and Afro-Latinx experiences.

Community Projects

Many of the interviewees are also community organizers. Not only have they connected with their communities through the hybrid counterpublic of OLAS, but they have also utilized hybrid

spaces to facilitate these connective spaces for others. For example, participants Matias and Paloma host *Latino Soy Yo,* a radio show and podcast catering to the younger generation of Latinx. Matias describes the podcast as a 'community in which Latinx members or the Latinx Community can come and reside with the things that [the hosts] are talking about' and feel represented and understood. As Matias noted, he grew up not having access to many Latinx friends his own age. *Latino Soy Yo* creates a youth-centric Latinx community for Latinx youth who, like Matias, might not have access to these social spaces. Paloma also noted how beneficial it was for her to have spaces to talk about her identity with other community members who understand her experiences, which is much of what they do through *Latino Soy Yo.*

Sofia, through her role as Co-president at OLAS McMaster, hosts *Cafecitos*, a weekly zoom-facilitated social session that focuses on building community on the cusp of virtual and in-person spaces. Sofía explains that *Cafecitos* creates a space where attendees can 'socialize with other Latin American individuals, may they speak Spanish or not'. Inspired by a point in her life where she was craving Latinx community, Sofía facilitates these hybrid spaces for students at McMaster and across Ontario.

Together, Sofía, Roni and I organize Sin Stigma, a community project that mobilizes Latinx-centric mental health data and mental health resources. This project reached over 80 Latinx-identifying students across Canada and addresses both the stigma often associated with mental health within the community and the underrepresentation of Latinx in mainstream discussions of mental health and wellness. Not only are these spaces important for reclaiming agency, but they also create connective hybrid countepublic spaces where Latinx students can connect digitally and partake in Latinx-specific conversations about mental health, stigma, and a lack of mainstream representation.

Hybrid Community Spaces Amidst COVID-19

Hybrid communities create connective spaces that cannot be overlooked, especially in the context of COVID-19. Due to university closures as result of the COVID-19 pandemic, all OLAS organizations made the shift to online events and online community building; as Sofía notes, these hybrid spaces were 'not necessarily spaces that [students] have chosen but have been imposed' on them. Zoom, social media and chatrooms facilitated the organization's activities and social events for the entire year. Hill illuminates that many counterpublics have also relocated to the digital space due to technological advancement such as the popularization of smartphone technology (2018). This digital shift was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited opportunities for in-person counterpublic spaces. Thus, we will consider these hybrid community spaces and how they functioned throughout the virtual shift.

In the Context of COVID-19

As isolation and lack of social interaction become a rising issue for university and college students, counterpublic spaces like OLAS are more important than ever. Matias describes OLAS community events as:

> a place where people can come and talk to one another, in Spanish or not, and have that sense of community within younger [Latinx-identifying] adults. For them to have a community where they can relate to things and have friends that understand the pressures that they might be going through.

As Matias reflects, OLAS provides a community space for Latinx students to relate to one another. This is particularly important, not only because students were living through a pandemic and had minimal social interaction, but also because they often lacked Latinx friendships before they associated themselves with OLAS (as discussed in the 'Cultural Connection' section).

COVID-19 and the online learning shift also contributed to a larger dispersal of the community, at times internationally. Fernando reflected on the difficulties of social event organizing across time zones while still focusing on facilitating community spaces for Latinx students through the Ryerson Chapter:

> Within COVID, I think one of the biggest difficulties was just getting everybody together because we all have different schedules now. Even though [all OLAS Ryerson events] are online, it's still trying to connect with different people. Some people might be in different time zones; we have people in Argentina, in Chile, and we are trying to communicate with them saying ‘hey, when are we going to do this event?’ but it's like, a four-hour [time] difference.

Despite the difficulties when scheduling due to differing time zones, Fernando also sees the benefits of organizing online. For example, many students who were currently in Latin America, specifically Peru, Chile, and Argentina, were able to join events virtually despite being abroad. This would not have been possible for events pre-COVID, as majority of them were held in-person on campus.

Similarly, inter-university connection became more accessible. Students from OLAS Ryerson were able to attend OLAS McMaster events due to barriers such as geographic distance, cost of commute and overlapping schedules becoming more manageable during the online shift. According to Sofía, building these connections and partnerships across OLAS chapters in Ontario has been vital to growing a network of Latinx students across Ontario, and across Canada:

> There's a lot of redundance in resources and redundance in events and redundance in what is available to people like ourselves, so […] instead of re-doing something that was

> already happening [for example, redoing an OLAS Ryerson event again at OLAS McMaster], we promote those and join them and collaborate with them so that has had a big value, also in expanding and creating bigger spaces, where our own little OLAS McMaster community can access a bigger OLAS community.

Despite the online shift making events more accessible, Sofía has also expressed the limitations of emotional capacity when connecting and facilitating online. She points out that burn out and the overwhelming amounts of screen time that students are expected to endure have made the organizing process much more difficult, and emotionally taxing for organizers and for community members alike:

> Burn out really, really has been a big limitation because all of us are students and some of us have jobs on top of [our studies and connection to OLAS], so most of us are spending an entire day in front of a screen. Understanding that some people’s emotional and social battery is not the same as my own has been very much at the center of how I operate as a leader and as a community facilitator during [COVID-19], and also being conscious of that for myself because I do a lot so I have to be very, very conscious of my own limitations and my own time and emotional capacity and social capacity for all of this, because [facilitating cultural activities and resources] is a lot of work and it's very taxing and at times, it is very thankless work.

As result of COVID-19, the ways in which student organizations like OLAS run has completely shifted, leaving many organizers overworked when finding solutions. These community organizers are often volunteers, and thus, are not compensated for their work despite how much more vital connection and community has become amidst a global pandemic. Although these conversations are critical for cultural navigation and community building, we must also be

conscious of the ways in which the current online system also impedes students, how community organizers are exploited, and how community facilitator and community member roles can intersect.

The Importance of Brave Spaces

Throughout our discussion of facilitating spaces for connection online, I had my apprehensions. Can hybrid counterpublic spaces truly provide the community that is so often associated with in-person environments? I posed this question to Matias, asking whether having these conversations online, particularly over Zoom, make them feel more artificial and less authentic due to the screen separation. When having such personal discussions surrounding topics of race, identity, privilege, and oppression, I hypothesized that doing so online would create a barrier, further complicating these already complexed conversations. But to my surprise, Matias completely disagreed. He argued that when these conversations are facilitated online, those participating are more willing to be open and 'share their ideas because they know that they have the comfort of being […] behind a screen':

> I think that having the comfort of being behind a computer screen, you might be more willing and more open to say certain things that you wouldn't in person, especially if we're talking about identity […] I found it easier to express my ideas and question certain things that maybe I wouldn't have if it was in person. I might have been a little bit scared to see the amount of people looking at me.

For Sofía, the screen was also not a barrier as I originally anticipated; instead, it encouraged a braver space. Brave spaces, according to Arao and Clemens, differ from safe spaces because they facilitate the realistic and rightful discomfort that is associated when having honest conversations surrounding topics of social justice (Arao & Clemens, 2013). This bravery is essential when

navigating discussions of race, identity, privilege, and accountability. Sofía reflects on the safety and brave spaces that exist within hybrid counterpublic spaces:

> For myself, [being online] made certain, very difficult conversations feel much safer because at the end of the day, I’m just Sofía, in my own room and that's it […] So, there are benefits to [having these conversations online], safety is a big one, confidence is another and the option of having your camera off while your voice quivers on the other side.

Sofia elucidates how this screen-based environment removes her from possible spaces of harm and creates a safer space in which community members can be brave, to ask questions that perhaps are uncomfortable and to be emotional.

It is through these brave, hybrid counterpublic spaces that, as Matias illuminates, difficult but necessary conversations can occur:

> I think that people should talk about certain things no matter how taboo they are, how uncomfortable. I think that if you foster an environment where people can talk about these things, I think that there is a lot of room for individuals to learn new things, and even grow as an individual through that discussion.

Taboos, or conversations that promote discomfort, are necessary for cultural growth. Matias observes that in order to have these conversations, we must foster spaces where they are welcomed and encouraged, with the prioritization of learning and growth. Fernando points out that these welcoming and inclusive spaces are a prioritization of OLAS Ryerson:

> We’re just trying to make it so that it's not really something that's so threatening or it’s not an environment where you have to worry about entering. I feel like Latin Americans are really welcoming in a sense. I just want to continue that environment.

A Need for Community

As we reflected on in ‘Latinidad and Monolithic Representation’, the Latinx community is anything but a monolith, and thus what community looks like and how its representation affects our participants varies. Despite this, all our participants noted the importance of hybrid counterpublic spaces for connection and learning. Paloma notes that, as someone of mixed identity, joining these Latinx community spaces help reinforce her own identity and sense of belonging:

> Joining these communities has kind of helped me reinforce that okay, I actually do belong in [the Latinx] community, it’s not that I don't know enough about it. It's kind of allowed me to embrace that.

In fostering inclusive spaces that welcome a wealth of Latinx experiences, we move away from the notion of Latinidad, or the ‘ideal Latino’ and, instead, begin to represent Latin American identity in its complexity and intersectionality.

Matias discusses how he values the OLAS community for allowing him to compare his own experiences with other Latinx youth, as well as be exposed to Latinx experiences that he cannot relate to, but instead learn from, diversifying his understanding:

> I get to listen to the experiences of [other members from OLAS Ryerson] and see how it compares to mine, which is something that I haven’t had a lot within my life because I’ve only had a few Latin friends here in Toronto.

For Sofía, her access to the Latinx community is what she refers to as a ‘cultural and social safety net’. In reflecting on her past experiences with severe racial violence, Sofía reflects on the importance of hybrid counterpublics, something she lacked during these instances of trauma, racism and isolation.

> [In my past experiences], there were no formal spaces for diversity and for supporting diverse identities, particularly racialized, marginalized individuals. There were also no informal spaces for me to find any community or find any relief from truly the nightmare [of severe racial violence] that I was living during that time, so when I arrived at McMaster two years after that terrible experience, I just so desperately wanted community and so desperately wanted to keep people from experiencing what I had felt, that emotional and social isolation that I felt.

Both Sofía and Matias touch on core principles of connection and relation – for Matias, it is being able to share his upbringing and see it reflected in those around him, something that he notes he did not have access to before joining OLAS. For Sofía, it is creating a safe space, heavily inspired by assuring that no other students would have to suffer the trauma and isolation that she has in the past. Sofía argues that she has made facilitating connective and welcoming hybrid counterpublic spaces like OLAS her ‘life duty, creating a space where people would never have to feel [trauma, racism and isolation]’.

Despite many participants noting that they have found a site for connection within OLAS, Roni cautions us about how exclusive of a community it can be. These organizations are based within an English-speaking academic institution and, therefore, factors like language fluency, financial status, and other systemic barriers can prevent community members from accessing this community space:

> We meet in a group where we are all kind of privileged to be in university and […] we all are intellectually capable of understanding terms like race and ethnicity so when we talk about [identity] in this context, we can understand and respect each other's perspective, but I think outside of [the university] context, I haven't found that.

Thus, while being conscious that community spaces are indeed necessary, in further research, we must also consider the barriers that prohibit Latinx students from accessing these spaces and the ways in which we continue to make these spaces, as Fernando puts it, welcoming environments.

Reflection

Latinidad upholds an idealized, monolithic Latinx identity—one that is white and *Mestize*-centering, anti-Black, and anti-Indigenous. It functions as a sweeping term that purposefully erases those who do not fit the idealized identity and, thus, results in the lack of Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx representations, as was the case with musical *In the Heights*. The culture of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity which is heavily ingrained in Latin American culture upholds the prioritization of whiteness (or *Mestizeness*), often resulting in practices of colorism throughout Latinx spaces. As a hybrid counterpublic, OLAS provides an accessible site for cultural conversation and navigation that goes beyond idealized identity. This work reflects on the acts of cultural learning, self-representation, diversification, and community action that OLAS facilitates, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2019-2021. Delving into the creation of brave spaces and community through the lens of hybrid counterpublics, this research shows how Latinx students are utilizing digital spaces to challenge Latinidad and rewrite their own diverse narratives.

What has stuck with me through the entirety of this writing process is a quote from Roni, which was originally shared with her by her father.

> My dad always says that one person is one whole universe, and the amount of stories that have to come together to put that one person at this point in time are too many to sit here and talk about.

Latinx identity is complexed and multifaceted. It is not a single ‘sweeping’ experience, or an idealized identity, but instead, acts as an umbrella of experiences, some of which drastically differ from each other. There are many other factors and identities that can affect one’s ‘Latinx experience’—race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ability, and countless others. Thus, how does one even begin to define Latinx experience or Latinx identity when my experience or your experience can differ from another’s so immensely? When we hear ‘Latinx identity’, who do we picture? How is the ‘ideal Latino’ often represented? We must reject the monolithic representation and idealized Latinx identities that Latinidad embodies, and seek more empowering representations of Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx experiences. But even that is only just the beginning.

This research has gaps in that the interviews did not have prominent Indigenous and Black-identifying Latinx representation, a common thread seen in various research projects on Latinx communities (see Haywood). In continuing research, these vital perspectives must not only be considered, but uplifted, especially due to the historical erasure that we continue to see in present day. There is an unquestionable onus on white and *Mestize*-Latinx to act in legitimate allyship and utilize their privilege to advocate for Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx. Centering Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx voices also means that white and *Mestize* voices must step back. As Roni argues, ‘It's a lot of talk of terminology, of activism, but not actually doing the work to center those voices because if that work was being done, we would not be here talking about it’.

References

Aguilera, J. (2020, November 10). Why The Complexities of 2020 'Latino Vote' Were Overlooked. Retrieved from https://time.com/5907525/latino-vote-2020-election/

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In Landreman, L. (Ed.), The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators (pp. 135-150). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Araújo, K. (2020, June 13). Why Black Latinos Need To Cancel Latinidad Today. Retrieved from https://www.blackstew.com/2020/06/12/why-black-latinos-need-to-cancel-latinidad-today/

Brown, M., Ray, R., Summers, E., & Fraistat, N. (2017). #SayHerName: a case study of intersectional social media activism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *40*(11), 1831–1846. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334934

Carney, Nikita. (2016). All lives matter, but so does race: Black lives matter and the evolving role of social media. *Humanity & Society*, *40*(2), 180-199.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241. doi:10.2307/1229039

Cruz, A. (2019, October 04). Latinidad Is Being Cancelled By Afro And Indigenous People Who Do Not See Themselves Represented. Retrieved from https://wearemitu.com/culture/afro-indigenous-latinidad-cancelled/

Dache, A., Haywood, J., & Mislán, C. (2019). A Badge of Honor not Shame: An AfroLatina Theory of Blackimiento for U.S Higher Education Research. *The Journal of Negro Education,* 130-145. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1571&context=gse_pubs.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text,* (25/26), 56-80. doi:10.2307/466240

García-Louis, C, & Cortes, K. L. (2020). Rejecting Black and Rejected Back: AfroLatinx College Students' Experiences with anti-AfroLatinidad. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *0*(0), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2020.1731692

Hall, S. (2001). The spectacle of the other. *Discourse theory and practice: A reader*, 324-344.

Haywood, Jasmine M. 2017. "'Latino Spaces Have Always Been the Most Violent': Afro-Latino Collegians' Perceptions of Colorism and Latino Intragroup Marginalization." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)* 30(8).

Hill, M. L. (2018). "Thank You, Black Twitter": State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance. *Urban Education*, *53*(2), 286–302. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085917747124

Lei, C. (2018, August 05). Majority Of Black Americans Value Social Media For Amplifying Lesser-Known Issues. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2018/08/05/635127389/majority-of-black-americans-value-social-media-for-amplifying-lesser-known-issue

Martinez, J. (2020). *For Some Black People, The Term "Latinx" Is Another Form of Erasure*. VICE. https://www.vice.com/en/article/dyz9ak/black-diasporans-latinx-term-another-form-of-erasure

Martinez, J. (2019, July 30). When it Comes to Latinidad, Who Is Included and Who Isn't? Retrieved from https://remezcla.com/features/culture/when-it-comes-to-latinidad-who-is-included-and-who-isnt/

McArthur, S. A. (2016). Black girls and critical media literacy for social activism. *English Education*, *48*(4), 362-379.

Nolasco, V. J. (2020). Doing Latinidad While Black: Afro-Latino Identity and Belonging. Theses and Dissertations Retrieved from https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/3713

Padilla, Felix M. (1985). *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago*. 1st Edition. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press.

Perez, A., Carrion, K., Yang, A., & Moll-Ramirez, V. (2020). *What it means to be Afro-Latino: "We are diverse in every single possible way."* ABC News. https://abcnews.go.com/US/means-afro-latino-diverse-single/story?id=71681988

Rivero, Yeidy M. (2005). *Tuning out Blackness: Race & Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rodríguez, J. M. (2003). *Queer Latinidad: Identity practices, discursive spaces* (Vol. 24). nyu Press.

Roberts, J. (2019, January 24). #BlackStudentsMatter: Why Digital Activism Is a Voice for Black Students - EdSurge News. Retrieved from https://www.edsurge.com/news/2018-08-23-blackstudentsmatter-why-digital-activism-is-a-voice-for-black-students

Salazar, M. (2019, September 16). The Problem With Latinidad. Retrieved from https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/hispanic-heritage-month-latinidad/

Sanchez, D. (2018). Racial and Structural Discrimination Toward the Children of Indigenous Mexican Immigrants. *Race Soc Probl* 10, 306–319 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-018 9252-2

Valenzuela, S. (2013). Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *57*(7), 920–942. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479375

Velasquez, A., & LaRose, R. (2015). Social Media for Social Change: Social Media Political Efficacy and Activism in Student Activist Groups. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *59*(3), 456–474. doiorg.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1080/08838151.2015.1054998

Appendix A

Interview Questions

On Identity:

1. How do you identify (gender, race, ethnicity)?
2. What pronouns should we use when referring to you in our study?
3. Do you self-categorize as a Person of Colour?
4. Do you use social media and if so, what platforms?

On Social Media Activism:

5. Do you engage with racial activism on the platforms you are active on? If so, how?
    - Can you provide an example?
    - Follow up: Do you specifically engage with Latinx racial activism (for example, sharing Latinx social posts that discuss Latinx experience)?
6. What are ways social media helps you to learn more about diverse experiences of Latinx folks? Follow up: How has social media helped you learn more about or discuss your own experiences colorism and discrimination (particularly Black, Afro and Indigenous Latinx)?
7. Provide an example of a way in which Latinx culture can be oppressive or exclusive that you've learned from your usage of social media.
8. Latinidad has been critiqued for representing a monolithic Latinx identity - specifically, a white-centering, anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-queer Latinx identity.
    - What's your opinion on this?
    - What have you observed? How and why?

9. How do you think accurate representation of the diversity of the Latinx community can be best created?
    - Does social media have the potential to combat monolithic representation by providing platforms for more diverse representation? Have you seen instances of this happen?

On Digital Community

10. If you are affiliated with OLAS, why did you choose to participate in this Latinx collective?
11. What values or limitations do you see in creating digital communities for Latinx folks to connect?
12. What makes a successful digital community for Latinx students?
13. What are ways we can continue to represent the diversity of Latinx experiences within these collectives, particularly Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx experiences?

Appendix B

Oral Consent Script

Hello. I'm Alexis-Carlota Cochrane. I am conducting research about how social media helps Latinx youth learn more about diverse experiences of the Latinx community and critique the anti-Black, anti-Indigenous and white-centric narrative upheld by Latinidad. This interview is part of my Master of Arts at McMaster in Communication and New Media Program in Hamilton, Ontario. I'm working under the supervision of Dr. Christina Baade of McMaster's department of Communication Studies and Multimedia. Thank you for your interest in participating in my research. Have you had time to read the Letter of Information I sent you? **(Response).**

I would like to take a moment to review some main points from the Letter of Information before we continue.

- With your permission, this interview will be audio-recorded to create transcripts for the research project. The original audio file will be deleted once the transcript is available.
- You may feel uncomfortable discussing the oppressive aspects of Latinx culture, such as anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism and white privilege. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. We can also stop at any point should you feel you need a break.
- Throughout this research, only your first name will be identified alongside some chosen statements. An example is: *Carolina says that the ability to self-represent herself as a Latina is empowering.* Should you not want your first name to appear in the study, you have the option to participate in this research confidentially by choosing a pseudonym.

Would you like to choose a pseudonym now? If you say no, you are allowing me to reference you as "(participant name)".

Confirm the following to the participant:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.
- You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the interview for whatever reason.
- If you decide to stop during the interview, we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point, whether returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.
- You can ask to remove your data from the study up until approximately **May 30, 2021.**
- This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Consent questions:

Do you agree to participate in this study?

- Do you consent to your first name appearing in this study alongside your responses?
    - If no, a pseudonym that you choose will be used. What pseudonym would you like to use for this study?
- Would you like a copy of the study results? If yes, where should we send them (email, mailing address)?
- Do you agree to an audio recording, to be destroyed once we create transcripts?
- Do you wish to be identified in the acknowledgements?

Appendix C

Letter of Information

Student Investigator:
Alexis-Carlota Cochrane
Communication and Multimedia
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
E-mail: cochra1@mcmaster.ca

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Christina Baade
Communication and Multimedia
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
905/525-9140 ex. 23349
E-mail: baadec@mcmaster.ca

What am I trying to discover?

This study is recruiting Latinx-identifying youth who are over the age of eighteen years old and involved in a university chapter of the Latin American Association of Students in Ontario (collectively referred to as the OLAS Coalition). I will be analyzing how Latinx university students in Ontario are using social media platforms and online (digital) communities to participate in Latinx racial activism. This racial activism discussion will particularly look into the deconstruction of what is referred to as 'Latinidad' - a term that attempts to combine all Latinx experiences together despite their diversity of race, location, culture, and even language.

Through completing this study, I am hoping to learn more about how Latinx students use and value social media for racial activism and how social media provides a space for Latinx youth to accurately self-represent themselves. I am doing this research to satisfy my Master of Arts in Communication and New Media.

What will happen during the study?

During an individual one-hour Zoom interview, you will be asked to discuss your experiences using social media for Latinx racial activism. With your permission, this interview will be audio-recorded using the Zoom platform to create transcripts for the research project. The video file that Zoom automatically records alongside the audio will be immediately deleted after the interview. The audio file will be used to create transcripts and will be deleted approximately two weeks after the interview when the transcripts are complete. You are welcome to leave your camera off during the interview, and all interview questions will be pasted in the Zoom chat for your reference.

I'm going to ask you questions like:

- What are ways social media helps you to learn more about diverse experiences of Latinx folks?
- Provide an example of a way Latinx culture can be oppressive or exclusive that you've learned from your usage of social media?
- How do you think accurate representation of the diversity of the Latinx community can be best created?

I will also ask questions about how you identify (gender, race and ethnicity). We will also discuss whether or not you identify as a Person of Colour. You can choose not to answer these questions should you not feel comfortable.

Are there any risks to doing this study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable discussing the oppressive aspects of Latinx culture, such as anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism and white privilege. Dependent on your own experiences, these aspects may also be

painful to discuss. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. We can also stop at any point should you feel you need a break. All questions will be sent to two days before the interview so there will be no surprises. All questions will also be posted in the Zoom chat for reference and we can rearrange the questions based on your needs and comfort level.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

This research hopes to benefit the Latinx community. We will be discussing how social media is important in connecting Latinx folks and allows us to learn more about each others' experiences. We will also work to strategize how to create more accurate and inclusive representations of the Latinx community, which has been critiqued for being white-centric. Students may not benefit from this study.

Who will know what I said or did in the study?

Throughout this research, only your first name will be identified alongside some chosen statements. An example is: Carolina says that the ability to self-represent herself as a Latina is empowering. Should you not want your first name to appear in the study, you have the option to participate in this research confidentially by choosing a pseudonym. A pseudonym is an alias that will represent you, but still keep your identity anonymous. If you choose a pseudonym, we will note in the research that the name is a pseudonym to distinguish between those who are using pseudonyms and those who are not.

We will be asking about what university you attend to discuss your experiences with the Organization of Latin American students (or equivalent) but the location of where you specifically attend university will not be published in the study. We will mention which chapters of OLAS we referenced, but not which students are associated with them. The responses you

provide will be kept in a locked office where only I will have access to it. Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can withdrawal your responses after the interview for whatever reason, even after verbally consenting during the interview or part-way through the study or up until May 30th, when I expect to begin the writing process. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed by approximately August 2021. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at: cochra1@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca