

## Bordering Latinidad: Black Joy and Queer Refusals in the Poetics of Alán Peláez López

By Joshua R. Deckman

The discourse of *mestizaje*, the ideology of racial and cultural mixing, has long served as a foundational myth in the construction of Latin American national identities and continues to exert considerable influence on contemporary understandings of *Latinidad*. While often presented as a narrative of harmonious fusion and inclusivity, *mestizaje* has historically functioned to erase Black and Indigenous presence, enforce assimilation, and uphold colonial hierarchies of power. This essay argues that the poetic and artistic interventions of Alán Peláez López (they/them), a queer, Afro-Indigenous (Zapotec), and formerly undocumented poet, offer a radical and necessary challenge to the exclusionary borders of a *Latinidad* often undergirded by *mestizaje*. Peláez López's work, I contend, not only exposes the violences inherent in these dominant narratives but also charts a path toward a decolonial “future”—a future rooted in the celebration of Black Latine joy, queer resistance, and an unwavering commitment to accountability, thereby “betraying” the fraught promises of a cohesively imagined, yet ultimately exclusionary, pan-ethnic unity. Their poetry and digital activism create vital spaces for what they term an “abundance where [we] thought there was none”—the vibrant lives, histories, and desires of those systematically marginalized within and by dominant articulations of Latine<sup>1</sup> belonging.

The urgency of Peláez López's project became starkly evident to this author during a keynote address at Dominican University's “¡El Futuro is Here!” Conference in the Summer of 2021. This interdisciplinary conference, while aiming to underscore the “importance of *familia* in the context of faith and everyday life” and “the rich *tradiciones* of the *culturas* that make *Latinidad* in the United States such a rich diversity of *comunidades*,” nevertheless trafficked in an uncritical embrace of these terms (“¡El Futuro Is Here!”). Such an approach largely failed to address, or actively ignored, the complex realities of Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, LGBTQIA+ individuals, non-binary gender expressions, and spiritual practices diverging from a Judeo-Christian legacy—a silence particularly resonant within institutional spaces that often uphold traditional, heteronormative family structures. The concept of *familia*, while often invoked as a source of strength and cultural cohesion within Latine communities, can also function to reinforce patriarchal norms, heteronormativity, and the marginalization of those whose family structures and chosen kinships deviate from the idealized nuclear family. Similarly, the notion of *tradiciones* can be wielded to essentialize cultural practices, freezing them in time and excluding the dynamism and evolution of cultural expression, particularly among marginalized groups.

During the Q&A session, I posed the question: “What are the potential dangers in centering *mestizaje* and *familia* to produce understandings of Latine cultures, and how might this limit the types of stories that can safely unfold within these spaces?” This query was met with a response that reinscribed the very erasures I sought to question. The speaker asserted that, regardless of background, “we” can find *mestizaje* everywhere, suggesting it offers a universal home. This seemingly benign assertion, however, profoundly flattens and dismisses the power dynamics inherent in *mestizaje*. It papers over the violent histories of colonialism, slavery, sexual violence, and anti-Blackness that are inextricably linked to the project of *mestizaje*, and by extension, to mainstream conceptions of *Latinidad*. By claiming universal applicability, it actively masks how

*mestizaje* has historically served to assimilate, marginalize, and erase distinct Black and Indigenous identities and experiences under a purportedly harmonious mixed-race ideal.

This opening anecdote, then, serves as a microcosm of the larger tensions that Peláez López addresses in their work. It highlights the ways in which dominant discourses of *Latinidad*, even within seemingly progressive spaces, can perpetuate exclusionary practices and reinforce existing power structures. Peláez López's interventions are crucial because they create a counter-narrative, centering the voices and experiences of those who have been historically marginalized and offering a vision of a *Latinidad* that is truly inclusive and liberatory. Their work is a call to move beyond the superficial celebration of diversity and multiculturalism and engage in a deeper, more critical examination of the historical and ongoing legacies of colonialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy within Latine communities. To explore these interventions, this essay will proceed in three sections. First, it will unpack the historical and ideological limitations of *mestizaje* and its perpetuation within certain understandings of *Latinidad*, drawing on the work of scholars who have critiqued its exclusionary tendencies. Second, it will analyze Alán Peláez López's digital activism, focusing on their influential "*Latinidad* is Canceled" meme as a potent example of their challenge to dominant narratives and their demand for accountability. Finally, the essay will examine Peláez López's poetry collection, *to love and mourn in the age of displacement*, to illustrate how their poetic explorations of Black joy, queer resistance, and embodied experience offer a powerful vision for a decolonial future that transcends the borders of exclusion.

### **Problematizing Mestizaje and Latinidad: Legacies of Erasure**

To fully appreciate the radical nature of Peláez López's interventions, it is crucial to situate their work within the broader scholarly critiques of *mestizaje* and *Latinidad*. *Mestizaje*, far from being a neutral descriptor of cultural mixing, emerged as a potent ideological tool in colonial and post-colonial Latin America, particularly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries onward. Its roots lie in the Spanish colonial caste system, which rigidly stratified society by race, placing Peninsular Spaniards at the top and Indigenous and Black populations at the bottom. While initially a means of hierarchical classification, *mestizaje* evolved in the post-independence period (post-1820s, gaining prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as seen in figures like Porfirio Díaz in Mexico) into a national ideology. José Vasconcelos's influential 1925 essay *La Raza Cósmica* ("The Cosmic Race") notably articulated *mestizaje* as the spiritual and biological synthesis of all races, presenting it as Latin America's unique contribution to humanity and its path to national progress. This vision, however, actively obscured the violent processes of colonization and the ongoing marginalization of Black and Indigenous peoples.<sup>2</sup>

As scholars like Lourdes Martínez-Echazabal, Peter Wade, Marta Caminero-Santangelo, Rafael Pérez-Torres, and Ylce Irizarry have extensively documented, *mestizaje* aimed to forge national unity by promoting an idealized "mixed race" subject, the *mestizo*. This process, however, was predicated on the violent assimilation or outright erasure of Indigenous populations and the systematic denial of Blackness. The myth of racial democracy, often accompanying *mestizaje*, served to obscure persistent racial hierarchies and ongoing anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. Melissa Nobles directly challenges this myth, arguing that it masks deep-seated inequalities and prevents meaningful engagement with racial justice by proclaiming a multiracial ideal in which "Latin American societies are nondiscriminatory and that their deep economic and social disparities have no racial or ethnic component" (Nobles 1). As a consequence of this type of thought, discussions on Blackness, Indigeneity, sexual orientation, gender, and non-hegemonic

cultural practices are often pushed to the periphery. They are not considered productive for the preservation of the status quo or for those who are able to comfortably inhabit Latine spaces without having to question that comfort. In blindly defending *mestizaje* as the category into which all iterations of *Latinidad* can be found, we fall into the same type of racial trap—where the *mestizo* norm works to silence and police other bodies that do not easily fall into line.

The construction of the *mestizo* as the ideal national subject was often accompanied by efforts to “whiten” the population through immigration policies and social engineering projects. This process involved the active suppression of Indigenous cultures and languages, as well as the forced displacement and marginalization of Indigenous communities. Black populations, descended from enslaved Africans, were also systematically excluded from the national narrative, their contributions to the nation's cultural and economic development often ignored or minimized. The legacy of this exclusionary process continues to shape contemporary Latin American societies, where Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations often face significant discrimination and inequality. Chicana/o artists have actively resisted the homogenizing tendencies of *mestizaje*. Laura E. Pérez, for instance, examines how Chicana artists reclaim Indigenous spiritualities and aesthetics to challenge the colonial underpinnings of *mestizaje*. Her work asserts the vitality of Indigenous cultural practices and resists the erasure of Indigenous knowledge within dominant narratives of Chicana/o identity.

Similarly, the concept of *Latinidad*, while providing a basis for political organizing and cultural affirmation within the United States, often replicates the exclusionary logic of *mestizaje*. *Latinidad* can homogenize diverse experiences, prioritize certain national origins (often those with European ties), and marginalize Black and Indigenous Latines through the privileging of Spanish, normative cultural practices, and the silencing of dissenting voices. Tatiana Flores’s essay “*Latinidad* Is Cancelled: Confronting an Anti-Black Construct” (2020) argues that *Latinidad*, as it is frequently deployed, is inherently anti-Black and calls for its dismantling to create space for more liberatory forms of identification. Flores contends that *Latinidad* cannot be reformed, as its foundation is rooted in the oppression of Black people, and advocates for a radical reimagining of identity that centers Blackness.

Likewise, in her article released in November 2020, “Dear Latinos: Your Antiblackness Will Not Save You,” Michaela Machicote writes:

The assumption that we are all one ‘hive mind’ when it comes to how we view social and political unrest in this country is not only false but dangerous. It is dangerous because those of us who walk in this world as phenotypically Black, Indigenous, darker-skinned, queer, womyn, and disabled (from marginalized backgrounds) experience this unrest in very different and often violent ways than others who are lighter-skinned, racially ambiguous, white, cishet, or abled. (2)

This quote underscores the potential risks of hiding behind pan-ethnic identity markers such as Latino and *mestizo*, because within these categories there are individuals who experience their “*Latinidad*” in very different ways. Machicote writes particularly within the context of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement that took the United States by storm. She comments on the ways that those she thought were members of her “Latino” community, remained silent in the face of Black suffering—and even cites that some felt that because BLM did not directly address “Latino issues,” it was not a movement that needed their work. This is precisely where she locates the fraught politics of Blackness within *Latinidad*. In these comments, Blackness is always spoken

about as something *other*, something that does not concern *Latinidad* because it is separate. After tracing the ways in which many Latine and Chicane movements were influenced and led by Black movements in the United States, Machicote underscores the fact that many Latine individuals are also Black and that they should not have to feel that they must choose between their Blackness and their *Latinidad*, when *Latinidad* does not offer them a safe haven. Here, the insistence on difference implies much more than a drive toward classification or false sense of unity. Rather, it guides the process of social imagination and traces how certain bodies come into contact with, brush against, and push back upon, others. What kind of future can one imagine if the collective to which they belong continues to reject and deny their existence to favor a system forged by anti-Blackness, settler-colonial states, and white supremacy?

Lorgia García Peña's scholarship meticulously demonstrates how dominant narratives of *Latinidad* obscure the centrality of Blackness in Latin American and Latine histories, perpetuating a "colonial wound." She writes that translating Blackness "can simultaneously confront the internal borders that produce bodies as foreign (and therefore Other within the nation) and the pervasive dominance of Hispanicity and *mestizaje* that erases them from the dominant understanding of *Latinidad* and Latinx diasporas" (8). García Peña's work emphasizes the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism in shaping the identities and experiences of Afro-Latine people, calling for an understanding of Black Latine identities that acknowledges the complexities of diaspora and migration and a more direct engagement with the tensions within hegemony, "exposing the experiences of nonhegemonic Black subjects living between belonging and unbelonging" (9). Thus, she calls for an examination of Black lived knowledge and radical existence against antiblackness and the violence of assimilation. This myriad of critical perspectives collectively illuminate the contested nature of *mestizaje* and *Latinidad*, demonstrating why Peláez López's interventions, particularly their emphasis on Black joy and queer resistance, are vital disruptions.

These critiques of *mestizaje* and *Latinidad* are not simply academic exercises; rather, they have profound implications for the lives and experiences of Latine people. The exclusionary logic of these concepts can fuel discrimination and marginalization within Latine communities. Therefore, engaging with these critiques and striving for more inclusive and equitable forms of *Latinidad* is imperative, and Peláez López's work provides a powerful example of how art and activism can contribute to this crucial project.

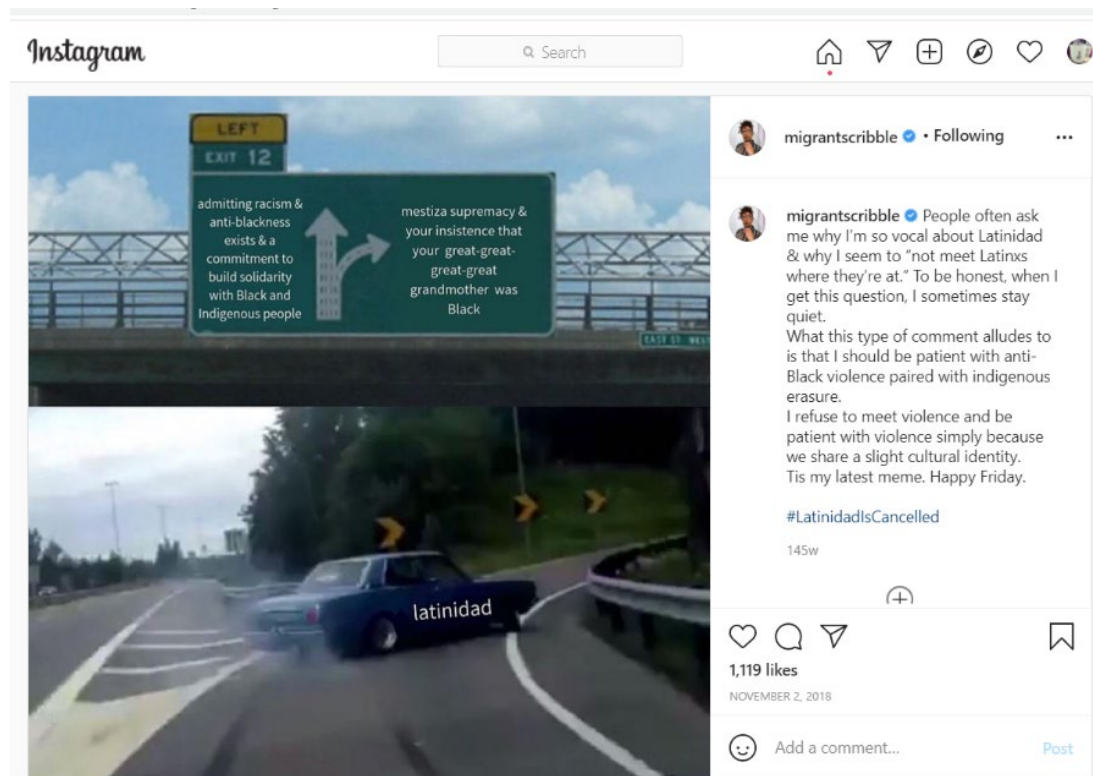
### **Alán Peláez López's Poetic and Digital Insurgency: "*Latinidad* is Canceled"**

Alán Peláez López confronts these exclusionary frameworks not only through their poetry but also through incisive artistic and digital activism. In the introduction to their anthology of queer and Black writers of Latin American descent, *When Language Broke Open*, they urge critical scholars to "relate to Blackness, gender, and sexuality not as stagnant identities, but as entry points into a politics that can help envision a future where it is easy to live" (XVII). Citing Puerto Rican author Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, they advocate for prioritizing "afrosanación" and "afroreparación"—"afrohealing" and "afroreparation"—as essential for creating a just and equitable future. This necessitates a critical denunciation of ongoing projects of white supremacy and *mestizo* hegemony to fundamentally disrupt how we understand Blackness within *Latinidad*.

Peláez López's digital activism, particularly their influential Instagram meme, powerfully encapsulates this challenge. In November 2018, Peláez López created an Instagram meme that quickly went viral, giving voice to the growing frustrations with a *Latinidad* that often avoids

confronting its internal contradictions. This specific meme, titled “*Latinidad* is Canceled,” serves as a potent and widely recognized example of their consistent pattern of leveraging digital platforms for socio-political critique. The meme’s visual metaphor of a highway exit sign effectively represents the critical juncture at which *Latinidad* finds itself. The straight path ahead, symbolizing accountability and solidarity, is clearly marked: “admitting racism & anti-Blackness exists & a commitment to build solidarity with Black and Indigenous people.” This route demands a willingness to acknowledge *Latinidad*’s historical perpetuation of racism and anti-Blackness and a commitment to genuine alliances with Black and Indigenous communities. In stark contrast, the exit ramp to the right, representing denial and the perpetuation of oppressive structures, reads: “*mestiza* supremacy & your insistence that your great-great-great-great grandmother was Black.” This option highlights the tendency within some segments of *Latinidad* to cling to *mestizaje* narratives that erase Black and Indigenous presence and to deflect criticism with superficial claims of connection to Blackness. The meme’s central image of a car, boldly labeled “*Latinidad*,” making a sharp, blurred turn onto the exit ramp visually signifies a hasty retreat from accountability and a preference for the comfortable narratives of *mestizo* supremacy. The blurred motion conveys urgency and a desire to avoid confronting the difficult truths about race and power within *Latinidad*. Peláez López’s original post poignantly articulates this tension:

People often ask me why I’m so vocal about *Latinidad* & why I seem to ‘not meet Latinos where they’re at.’ To be honest, when I get this question, I sometimes stay quiet. What this type of comment alludes to is that I should be patient with anti-Black violence paired with Indigenous erasure. I refuse to meet violence and be patient with violence simply because we share a slight cultural identity. Tis my latest meme. Happy Friday. #*Latinidad*isCancelled. (@migrantscribble)



*Latinidad Canceled* meme, 11/02/2018

As Janel Martinez observes, this meme elicited strong reactions, revealing the deep divisions within *Latinidad*: “With each repost or share, Latines, a large percentage identifying as Afro-Latine and/or Indigenous, championed Peláez López’s meme and called for cancellation. Others, many who would be racialized as white or mixed-raced (mulatto or *mestizo*) Latines, contested the message” (2). This polarized response underscores the accuracy of Peláez López’s critique: *Latinidad*, despite its claims of inclusivity, has often served the interests of a privileged, often lighter-skinned, *mestizo* demographic, marginalizing those who do not conform to its implicit racial and cultural norms. The meme’s power lies in its accessibility, biting humor, and use of social media vernacular to stage a profound critique of racial politics within Latine communities. It functions as a form of what Urayoán Noel (2019) terms “queer migrant poetics,” leveraging the affordances of the digital platform to articulate dissident subjectivities and challenge dominant narratives. Noel’s concept illuminates how queer and migrant artists use language and performance to disrupt normative understandings of identity and belonging. Peláez López’s meme exemplifies this, employing humor and visual imagery to challenge the dominant narrative of *Latinidad*.

Peláez López’s declaration, “*Latinidad* is canceled,” resonated widely, signifying not a rejection of all collective identification but a refusal of a *Latinidad* that perpetuates anti-Blackness and Indigenous erasure. It is a demand for a radical reimagining of solidarity and community, grounded in justice, equity, and the dismantling of all forms of oppression. The meme effectively skewers the common rhetorical tactic of invoking a distant Black ancestor to deflect charges of anti-Blackness or to claim an inclusive *mestizaje*. This tactic often involves a superficial engagement with Blackness, attempting to absorb it into a narrative of mixture without addressing the persistent anti-Black structures. It is a way of claiming connection to Blackness without taking responsibility for the ongoing violence and discrimination faced by Black people. This is the “*mestiza* supremacy” the meme critiques: a version of *Latinidad* that professes inclusivity while marginalizing and silencing Black voices and experiences, perpetuating a form of cultural appropriation that erases the specificity of Black experiences and reinforces the myth of racial democracy. Ultimately, the meme is both a critique and an invitation—an urgent call to choose a different path: one of accountability, solidarity, and a genuine commitment to dismantling racism and anti-Blackness within and beyond Latine communities. It is a call for a radical transformation of *Latinidad*, grounded in justice, equity, and liberation for all. The meme’s effectiveness lies in its ability to provoke dialogue and challenge viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about race and power within *Latinidad*, compelling them to examine their own complicity in perpetuating oppressive structures. Peláez López’s strategic use of social media as a platform for political activism demonstrates the potential of digital spaces to amplify marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives, forging pathways toward the “ruptured and reparative futures” they envision.

### **Peláez López’s Poetic Exploration of Black Joy and Queer Resistance**

Peláez López’s poetry collection, *to love and mourn in the age of displacement* (2020), further elaborates the critiques staged in their digital work, offering an intimate and powerful exploration of Blackness, queerness, migration, and decolonial love. The term “decolonial” here refers to a critical approach that actively seeks to dismantle the lingering power structures and epistemologies inherited from colonialism, particularly those that perpetuate racial, gender, and sexual oppressions. Drawing on thinkers such as María Lugones, Emma Pérez, and Juan Flores, a decolonial framework emphasizes the importance of knowledge production from marginalized communities, recognizing their resistance as central to forging alternative futures beyond coloniality.<sup>3</sup> The collection, they state, “became an offering to myself: a reminder to lean on that

which aches, but to also hold that which provides pleasure” (i). This dialectic of pain and pleasure, mourning and joy, is central to their poetic project, which insists on the radical potential of Black joy as a form of resistance and worldmaking. In a talk at Marywood University, Peláez López described this depiction of joy as a way to “hyper exist”—a means of asserting visibility and vitality in the face of systemic erasure and violence. This “hyper existence” is not merely a personal act but a political one, challenging the dominant narratives that seek to dehumanize and erase Black and queer people. This reclamation of joy and pleasure is profoundly political, particularly within contexts that seek to define Black and queer bodies through narratives of suffering. The emphasis on Black joy directly counters the anti-Blackness embedded within *mestizaje* and *Latinidad*. It reclaims agency and disrupts the narratives of pain and trauma often imposed on Black people.

Their work resonates with José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification,” as elaborated in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). Muñoz argues that queers of color often engage in disidentification, working on and against dominant cultural forms, neither fully assimilating nor entirely rejecting them, but transforming them to articulate alternative modes of being and belonging. This process involves a critical engagement with dominant ideologies and a strategic deployment of cultural codes to create spaces for queer of color subjectivities. Peláez López’s engagement with *Latinidad* exemplifies this disidentificatory practice: they do not simply reject *Latinidad* outright but dismantle its oppressive aspects to reconstruct it on more equitable and inclusive terms. Their focus on Black joy and queer pleasure offers a powerful counter-narrative to the often-somber tones of trauma and displacement, insisting on the capacity for life, love, and celebration even amidst systemic violence.

The poem “an encounter with my heart” exemplifies this embodied ethics of care and resistance, offering a counterpoint to the *mestizo* ideal that often erases embodied pain and lived experience. The speaker addresses their heart directly: “corazón, i didn't realize that when you ached, / our pain migrated to different cells of our body / ... / querido corazón, I am ready to feel you. /... / today, i point to you, corazón, / & proudly testify: / it hurts here // it hurts / here // it hurts // here” (2-3). This poem charts a journey from a diffuse, unrecognized pain to a located, acknowledged ache within the *corazón*—a site of emotion, desire, and embodied knowledge that has been neglected by dominant narratives of *Latinidad*. This act of “feeling” the body fully, of recognizing and naming its pain, becomes a crucial step toward healing and liberation, directly challenging the *mestizo* tendency to prioritize idealized notions of the body over lived realities. The speaker's willingness to engage with their pain, to “feel” it and acknowledge it, is a form of self-care and self-affirmation, reclaiming agency over their body and narrative in a context that often denies them both. This emphasis on embodied experience is a key aspect of Peláez López's work. Their poetry is rooted in the lived realities of their body, history, and experiences of migration, queerness, and Blackness, directly confronting the *mestizo* imaginary that seeks to disembody and abstract lived experience. They challenge the tendency to abstract and generalize about identity, insisting on the specificity and complexity of individual experiences, and testifying to the body's power to resist oppression and create new forms of being and belonging outside the confines of *mestizo* norms.

Later in the collection, the reader learns that the speaker's beloved has left because the speaker's body, accent, and legal status did not “fit” within conventional national and social imaginaries. In “Illegal Intimacy,” Peláez Lopez writes: “querido, / I miss / our intimacy, / but I am done / justifying to you / why you / should love an / ‘illegal alien.’” (17). This experience of

rejection and exclusion is common for queer and migrant people, who often find themselves caught between worlds, unable to fully belong within the dominant *mestizo* framework. Peláez López's poetry voices this displacement and longing, yet also offers a vision of hope. In these poignant lines from Alán Peláez López's poetry, we witness a powerful articulation of queer love, self-affirmation, and a rejection of oppressive cultural norms: "I hope you / realize how fucking / magnificent and beautiful / you were in those moments / of ungovernable / intimacy, unruly love, / & unapologetic tears" (Peláez López, *to love and mourn*, 20). This "ungovernable intimacy" and "unruly love" suggest a relationship that defies societal constraints and expectations, particularly those that police queer expressions of affection and desire within a *mestizo*-centric *Latinidad*. The "unapologetic tears" further emphasize an emotional honesty and vulnerability that resists the pressure to conform to stoic or heteronormative ideals and embrace a mode of being that is raw and true—without ceding space to a rhetoric that would demand an explanation. This tension introduces a sense of fragility, a "failed foundational fiction" where love and acceptance are constantly threatened by the exclusionary logics of *mestizo* supremacy. The use of the word "magnificent" elevates the beloved's emotional expression to something sacred and worthy of celebration. This becomes an act of defiance against a culture that often devalues and dehumanizes queer bodies, especially those further marginalized by race or immigration status, in order to uphold a *mestizo* ideal.

The subsequent lines shift to a declaration of future self-determination: "querido, / one day you will / denounce this / culture you (and / lately, I) have internalized. / I will not be waiting" (Peláez López, *to love and mourn*, 21). Here, the speaker acknowledges the internalization of a harmful "culture," likely one marked by homophobia, racism, and xenophobia. This culture is something both the speaker and their beloved have been forced to absorb, shaping their self-perception and their relationships. The speaker's insistence that they "will not be waiting" underscores the urgency of breaking free from these internalized oppressions and challenging the *mestizo* norms that perpetuate them. It also hints at the potential for this love to be fractured or incomplete if the beloved cannot fully denounce the toxic culture that surrounds them. At the same time, within this rupture, a newness pushes through—one that is grounded on rituals of self-love and new community: "I still awake for / coffee and morning / writing. So, yes, I / am doing fine / without us, / thank you / for asking" (20). This creates a powerful tension in the poem. On one hand, there is a deep love and appreciation for the beloved's authentic self-expression, a desire for a liberated intimacy. On the other hand, there is an impatience with the slow and painful process of decolonization and a refusal to compromise the speaker's own well-being for the sake of a love that may not be fully reciprocated in a truly liberated context outside of expected ideals. The speaker's stance is one of self-respect, a commitment to their own liberation, and a recognition that love itself can be a site of struggle when it intersects with systemic oppression. The "failed foundational fiction" emerges from the contradiction of seeking a stable, loving foundation in a world that actively undermines the very possibility of that stability for certain bodies, especially those that disrupt the *mestizo* norm.

The poem yearns for a future where their "ungovernable / intimacy, unruly love, / & unapologetic tears" can be recognized and celebrated (20), demanding a world where queer love and Black bodies are not subjected to the violent logics of assimilation and respectability inherent in *mestizo* supremacy. It is a call for a radical transformation of social and political structures to create space for diverse forms of love and belonging that actively challenge *mestizo* hegemony.

Peláez López's insistence on joy also constitutes a form of queer materialism, resisting the *mestizo* tendency to disembody and de-materialize experience. While their work is deeply personal and emotive, it is grounded in how material conditions—legality, race, class, geography—shape lived experience. Their poetry reveals how “capitalist, anti-Black, and settler colonial legacies [are] mapped onto the body” and how the body can resist these forces (Brown, “Bitter Brown Femmes”). Queer materialism, as developed by scholars like Mel Y. Chen in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012), emphasizes the intersection of material realities with queer identities and experiences. Chen argues that queer bodies are shaped by and interact with the material world in complex ways. Peláez López's poetry exemplifies queer materialism by exploring how race, gender, sexuality, and migration are embodied and experienced in material contexts, challenging the *mestizo* ideal's attempt to erase these material realities.

In this context, the celebration of Black pleasure “disrupts this flow” of *mestizo* politics that privileges certain forms of desire and celebration while marginalizing others. It centers the grieving and loving of bodies marked by intersecting legacies of violence in Mexico and the US. This queerness, as Peláez López articulates, “need not always be explicitly about sex or sexuality” but becomes “a critical politics that intersects with their critique of *mestizaje*.” Their work expands the definition of queerness beyond sexual orientation and gender identity, recognizing its broader political and social implications and creating space for alternative forms of kinship and connection.

At the end of their collection, Peláez López closes with “AN OFFERING,” a powerful reflection on the act of identifying cultural wounds, a process often suppressed by the homogenizing tendencies of *mestizaje*. Recalling a writing workshop where participants were asked to write about the first time their culture was wounded, Peláez López meditates on the profound significance of acknowledging these impacts: “To identify a wound is to identify that something that had a material impact in your life happened...we are asked to ‘move on.’ That’s not fair and we shouldn’t accept that culture, so I ask you to really think about wounds, how they manifest, who has power over them, and how we can witness our own wounds when the world assumes that our wounds are insignificant” (35). This reflection directly challenges the *mestizo* narrative that often downplays or outright ignores the historical and ongoing wounds inflicted upon Black, Indigenous, and queer communities in the name of a unified, harmonious identity. By urging the recognition of wounds deemed “insignificant” by a dominant *mestizo* gaze, Peláez López centers the very experiences that this ideology seeks to erase.

Counteracting the pressure to “move on” – a pressure often exerted by the dominant culture to maintain the illusion of cohesion – Peláez López insists on the necessity of celebration as a potent act of resistance and a vital component of healing amidst grief and pain. They offer alternative writing prompts, such as “The first time my culture was celebrated was...,” directly subverting the focus on wounding and creating space for the affirmation of marginalized cultural experiences. Peláez López leaves the reader with a profound message: “[This] is an invitation to you to continue meditating on what it means to be a better relative to yourself and others. Often, I’ve been ashamed to think about my desire(s), grief, and celebration(s), but today, I say, *fuck shame*, and offer you these questions” (36). This final call to “fuck shame” resonates with their earlier poetic declaration and underscores a defiant rejection of the shame imposed by a *mestizo* supremacist culture—or any cultural force—that devalues non-normative desires, grief, and celebrations. By centering these experiences and framing their exploration as an act of relationality and self-care, Peláez López offers a powerful decolonial praxis that actively disrupts the

exclusionary logic of *mestizaje* and opens pathways toward a future where all cultural expressions and embodied experiences are valued and celebrated.

### **Decolonial Futurity: Accountability and the Relinquishing of Abstraction**

A central tenet of Peláez López's vision for a decolonial future is the demand for accountability and the rejection of abstract, homogenizing notions of community—the “unapologetic tears” of the failed dream of pan-ethnic unity. In their poem “when dreaming of the future means letting go,” they explicitly challenge the “fantasies of unity” that underpin mainstream *Latinidad*. The poem calls on the reader to “let go” of the neoliberal rhetoric of multicultural belonging that often masks deeper inequalities. This rhetoric frequently promotes a superficial celebration of diversity, failing to address the underlying power structures that perpetuate inequality. Instead, Peláez López advocates for a more critical and nuanced understanding of community, one that acknowledges the historical and ongoing legacies of oppression.

They write: “In the future / there is no abstract *Latinidad* / because that requires us to hold on to all the stories we tell about one another / and not many include Black, Indigenous, Asian, sick and disable, or queer and trans kin. / In the future, there is no abstract ‘*latinidad*’ / there is accountability” (7). This passage starkly highlights the exclusionary nature of dominant *latinidad* narratives, which often prioritize certain experiences while marginalizing others. Peláez López insists that a truly inclusive future necessitates a radical shift away from these abstract notions of unity and toward a concrete commitment to accountability. This accountability involves acknowledging the harm inflicted upon marginalized communities and taking tangible steps to redress those harms.

This call for accountability represents a radical epistemological shift. It redirects the conversation from debates about the mere definition of community or the contours of a pan-ethnic label toward the material and ethical obligations that community members have to one another, particularly to those historically marginalized and silenced. It is a call for a more ethical and just way of being in community, grounded in empathy, respect, and a commitment to liberation for all. Peláez López argues that canonical histories of *latinidad* have often wielded Brownness and *mestizaje* as their “entrance card,” invoking narratives about “who ‘we’ are and how ‘we’ got to be here” that systematically exclude or minoritize Black and Indigenous narratives. These narratives frequently celebrate racial and cultural mixing without acknowledging the violence and oppression inherent in that process, creating a false sense of unity and belonging that masks persistent inequalities within Latine communities.

As an alternative, Peláez López proposes looking toward stories and traditions rooted in queer, trans, and Black liberation. This requires a critical departure from the foundational myths of Chicano nationalism, essentializing Borderlands rhetoric, and uncritical *mestizo* consciousness to instead ask how Latine communities can become truly “accountable” to each other. This accountability necessitates a critical examination of whose desires, pleasures, joys, and triumphs are centered in the forging of any collective vision of futurity. It is a call for a more inclusive and equitable way of imagining the future, one that centers the voices and experiences of those historically marginalized and silenced.

The violent discourse of *mestizaje*, as Peláez López consistently demonstrates, not only erases the lived experiences of Black and Indigenous Latines but also actively conceals the brutal

histories that produced the very “mixture” it purports to celebrate. This erasure constitutes a form of epistemic violence, silencing marginalized communities and preventing their full participation in the construction of knowledge and meaning. By grounding their work in an unblinking acknowledgment of the “settler colonial, capitalist, and imperial projects” that have shaped the Americas, Peláez López refuses to allow the violence of the past—the rape of ancestors, the forced reproduction of enslaved peoples, the internalized anti-Blackness manifest in rhetoric like “mejorar la raza”—to be forgotten or sanitized. They insist on the crucial importance of remembering and reckoning with the past to build a more just future. Furthermore, Peláez López emphasizes that even within the framework of *mestizaje*, “not all Latine peoples experience this mixture in the same way.” This crucial distinction highlights the intersecting dynamics of race, color, class, and gender that continue to stratify Latine communities. It challenges the notion of a monolithic *latinidad* and insists on recognizing the diversity of experiences within Latine communities. Peláez López's work is informed by an intersectional perspective, recognizing the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and the necessity of a holistic approach to liberation.

It is precisely for these reasons that Peláez López insists on the urgency of centering Black joy, pleasure, and love. These are not apolitical emotions but potent categories for reimagining the future, making marginalized selves visible, and celebrating ongoing processes of liberation. They are a way of resisting the dominant narratives that seek to dehumanize and erase Black people and of creating new possibilities for joy and connection. Their poetry culminates in a bold declaration, an expletive of defiance and self-affirmation: “fuck shame” (*to love and mourn*, 26). This rejection of shame—the shame imposed by racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and colonial logics—is a powerful act of self-reclamation and a crucial step toward building a decolonial future where all bodies can thrive. It is a way of asserting the inherent worth and dignity of Black and queer people and of creating a space for joy and celebration.

These critical questions have most recently led Peláez López to engage with representation in Latine media, specifically through their *Teen Vogue* column on the film *In the Heights*. In “On ‘In the Heights,’ Imagination, and When ‘Latinidad’ Falls Apart,” they address the limitations of Latine imaginations in Hollywood and the danger this poses for envisioning alternative future worlds. Peláez López grounds their analysis in the shared colonial undercurrents of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States, asserting that these geographies are bound by the violence engendered through European settler-colonialism, the enslavement of African and African diasporic peoples, and the oppression of Indigenous communities. Consequently, they argue that to adequately address *Latinidad* on screen, one must “commit to highlighting the stories of Black, Asian, Indigenous, and multi-ethnic and mixed-race peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent without flattening any of their experiences.” The failure of *In the Heights*, in its predominantly white and white-passing casting, represents a missed opportunity to engage with the diverse backgrounds, languages, tones, and experiences within Latine communities and to explore both their successes and failures in showing up for and loving one another. Peláez López suggests that the film could have fostered critical conversations and even facilitated a recognition of shared struggle through difference, thus paving the way for a more rigorous form of solidarity. In his attempt to acknowledge the lack of Black representation in the film, Lin-Manuel Miranda, according to Peláez López, seems to misunderstand the core of the protests and criticism. While Miranda claimed to have “fell short” in trying to “paint a mosaic” of the Latine community, Peláez López argues that the very discourse of a multicultural mosaic lies at the root of the issue: “The

criticism from Black people is not that the ‘mosaic’ was incomplete, but that dark-skinned embodiments from a non-white community were erased to uplift those who benefit from white privilege. The notion of mosaics, multiculturalism, and *mestizaje* are keenly rooted in distancing themselves from the material conditions and realities of Black people in this continent” (3). In this assertion, Peláez López once again urges the reader to consider the inherent erasure within a *mestizo* imaginary and how this ultimately limits our ability to envision the social world, continually questioning who belongs and who does not belong within the Latine community.

### **Conclusion: Forging a Future Beyond the Borders of Exclusion**

This essay began with an anecdote from a conference that aimed to envision a “Futuro” rooted in notions of *familia*, *tradiciones*, and a multicultural *Latinidad*. Yet, as I argued, this vision risked replicating the erasures and exclusions that Alán Peláez López so powerfully critiques. In stark contrast to this limited imaginary, Peláez López's work offers many paths toward decolonial “futuros” forged in the fires of accountability, Afro-reparation, and a radical commitment to centering marginalized voices. Theirs is a future that demands a reckoning with the violence of the past and present, while simultaneously celebrating the resilience, joy, and love of those who have been historically pushed to the margins.

Alán Peláez López’s poetic and digital interventions offer more than a critique; they provide a blueprint for a radically reimagined *latinidad*, one that moves beyond the exclusionary confines of *mestizaje* and embraces the messy, vibrant, and often contradictory realities of Black, Indigenous, and queer Latine lives. Their work stands as a testament to the power of art to disrupt dominant narratives, reclaim marginalized histories, and forge new possibilities for collective identification and liberation. By centering Black joy, queer resistance, and an ethic of accountability, Peláez López challenges us to “betray” the comfortable illusions of a unified *Latinidad* that has too often been built on the erasure of its most vulnerable members. Instead, they invite us to participate in the difficult but essential work of building a decolonial “Futuro”—a future where difference is not a site of division but a source of strength, where the “abundance where [we] thought there was none” can flourish, and where all are free to love, mourn, and exist in the fullness of their being.

Their call to “cancel” an exclusionary *Latinidad* is, importantly, not an endpoint but a crucial and productive starting point: an opening for new conversations, new solidarities, and new ways of being in community. It is an invitation to look beyond the received narratives and to listen, with radical attentiveness, to the stories, poems, and songs emerging from those who have too long been relegated to the margins. It is a call for a more just and equitable world, one that is grounded in empathy, compassion, and a commitment to liberation for all. In a world still grappling with the enduring legacies of colonialism, anti-Blackness, and heteropatriarchy, Peláez López’s voice serves as a vital beacon, illuminating a path toward a more joyfully defiant future. Their work reminds us that the borders of our belonging are not fixed but fluid, constantly being remade, and that we all have a role to play in ensuring that the “Futuro” we build is one that truly has space for everyone. It is a call for a collective effort to dismantle oppressive structures and create a world where all can thrive. For this reason, it is urgent to talk about Black joy, pleasure, and love. These are the categories that may perhaps change how we imagine the future, make the self visible, and celebrate the processes of ongoing liberation—while boldly declaring alongside López that it is indeed productive to “fuck shame,” take up space, and make oneself hyper visible.

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<sup>1</sup> Latine (and terms such as *amigue*, *elle*) emerged from genderqueer, feminist, and non-binary communities in Spanish-speaking countries, as a way to neutralize gender in the Spanish language using the addition of an -e. It is often used as an alternative to Latinx, which many trace back to academic circles in the US.

<sup>2</sup> José Vasconcelos's concept of *mestizaje*, as articulated in *The Cosmic Race*, proposes a future “fifth race” emerging from the Americas, specifically through the fusion of the world's four major racial “trunks”: the Black, the Indian, the Mongol, and the White. For Vasconcelos, this “cosmic race” would transcend previous racial limitations, forming a superior, universal humanity through a unique process of racial and cultural integration initiated by Spanish colonization. He champions *mestizaje* as “the moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past” (13). This vision contrasts sharply with Anglo-Saxon models of colonization, which, he argued, led to the “annihilation” of native populations rather than their assimilation into mixed-race societies. While presented as a utopian ideal, Vasconcelos's framework is often critiqued for its inherent racism and its tendency to universalize and flatten distinct racial experiences, particularly those of African and Asian descent, in service of a nationalistic project.

<sup>3</sup> In her introduction to *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez argues for the necessity of a “third space” or “interstitial” perspective, stating: “I contend that the concept of a decolonial imaginary allows us to theorize a time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial, interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 6). This concept emphasizes the importance of analyzing the ongoing effects of colonialism *beyond* formal independence, focusing on the “interstitial” spaces where power dynamics are actively contested and reimagined. Pérez outlines how this decolonial imaginary provides a framework for understanding the agency and resistance of marginalized communities who navigate the legacies of colonialism in their daily lives. These interstitial spaces are precisely what poetry and digital forms of critique are able to open, allowing “us” to pull back the veil of reality and see the inner machinations of colonial domination at work.