

# UDDP

## Understanding & Dismantling Privilege



Official Journal of The Privilege Institute



ISSN 2152-1875

Volume XIII, Issue 1

Spring 2024

## All Black Lives Matter in the Borderland

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### Abstract

In the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, Black Lives Matter has often been seen as a “northern issue.” The borderland has been described as a bicultural, bilingual space where a majority of the community identifies as Mexican, Mexican American, or Latinx. This essay explores the issue of anti-Blackness in the Latinx community often rooted within our own families and broader community. Anti-Black ideologies are prominent along the U.S.-Mexico border; however, a community of activists, students, and elders are reshaping that narrative. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the borderlands rose up in protest against white supremacy and the state sanctioned execution(s) of Black citizens. The purpose of this article is to document this historical moment of protest in the South Texas borderland region. Current and future scholar-activists can look back on the summer of 2020 as a concrete example of intergenerational and intercultural Black and Brown solidarity. They should know that All Black Lives Matter regardless of the geographic region.

*Keywords:* Latinx, Antiracism, Borderlands, Black Lives Matter

Dr. Christian Ramirez’s research engages the cross-cultural exchange and rebellions forged by Indigenous and African peoples in colonial Veracruz. Through his research, he examines the multiple ways Afro-Indigenous peoples institutionally and epistemologically carved out routes to freedom in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These histories serve as the foundation for understanding contemporary social movements and coalition building among Latine/Latinx and other communities of color. Dr. Ramirez is a first-generation faculty member in the department of Psychology and Sociology at the Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi.

## All Black Lives Matter in the Borderland

In 2020 in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, chants of Black Lives Matter bounced off of building walls and echoed in the spaces between palm trees. Near the city hall in Edinburg, Texas, some 400 people gathered to denounce white supremacy and the murdering of our Black relatives by state sanctioned violence. I use the term *relatives* intentionally. Blackness is not delinked or separate from the Latinx community; rather, it is deeply rooted in Latinidad throughout the Americas and within the borderland itself. A collective energy emerged among intergenerational border residents largely represented by Mexican, Chicana, Latinx, and immigrant community. To date, there is limited data that explores the contemporary moment of racial uprisings that took place in Edinburg, Texas. This paper aims to open up a dialogue and to leave a historical bookmark on the most recent rebellions along the South Texas borderland.

It is imperative to state that the demographics for people of African descent in the Rio Grande Valley are deceptive. According to the census, Black residents account for just under one percent of the population in Hidalgo County, one of the southernmost counties in Texas, and the surrounding areas where the protest took place (census, 2019). The idea that a seemingly non-Black community would stand up for Black lives baffled some people. As one of the organizers of a local dialogue focused on Black Lives Matter on the border, I was asked by a Spanish language news reporter why we were focusing on Black lives when there were Latino children held in detention centers here in South Texas. This question was not surprising considering that Mexico is a short ten-minute drive south with detention

centers aligned on the north side of the border.

His question, however, hierarchically placed a “Latinx” issue atop concerns for police brutality as if both issues were not interconnected. I reminded the reporter that both issues are results of systemic and institutional racism resulting in unjust violence against Black and Brown communities through differing state apparatuses. I restated that while family separation on the border is an important issue, so are Black families separated permanently at the hands of police officers. While we continue to fight for the abolishment of I.C.E. and other border issues, today is about Black Lives. These were my last words to him. Needless to say, this exchange did not satisfy the reporter nor make the evening news.

Anti-Blackness in the Latinx community has taken shape in a variety of ways. The question posed by the reporter exemplified some of those ideas. Family members teach us which physical features are valued and preferred. Media images and narratives shape how Blackness is imagined in Latin America through archetypes. And demographics paint an incomplete narrative of the presence and contribution of Black communities along the Texas-Mexico border. The following sections examine Latinxs and their distancing from Blackness. While anti-Black attitudes are still passed down through cultural messages within our community, there is rising hope for a shifting of this paradigm. Latinx activists are educating themselves and the public to read their own history from a critical perspective that honors the historical and cultural relationship to and with Black diasporic communities in the Americas. These efforts, exposed through the uprising against police brutality in Edinburg, Texas

are a clear demonstration that All Black Lives Matter on *la frontera*.

### On Anti-Blackness in the Latinx Community

Anti-Blackness in the Latinx community is all too common historically and contemporarily, and if unchecked will continue to be a norm within Latinx culture. Growing up in a Latinx community and a Mexican immigrant family, I have witnessed whiteness being praised and admired. It was not uncommon to hear phrases such as, “*Mira, salio bien bonita con ojos azules.*” Translated this means, “Look, she came out pretty with blue eyes.” Other times I would hear community members instructing their kids to not stay out in the sun so much to avoid becoming darker than they already were. Aura Bogado (2014) recollects, “When we begin dating, some of us are told that we have a duty as Latinos to ‘*mejorar la raza*’ which means, ‘to improve the race.’ This was sometimes directly told to us but also inscribed in comments about other couples.” These examples are a haunting reminder of Maria Elena Martinez’s (2008) scholarship on Spanish racial genealogical projects. Specifically, Martinez addresses the ideology of “*limpieza de sangre*” or the cleansing of the blood through which Indigenous and Black families could generationally improve their social status if they married and procreated with European descendants. This is a historic example of how both anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity in colonial Latin America continues to be rooted in U.S. Latinx culture. The U.S. borderland is no exception to this colonial idea of “*limpieza de sangre.*”

In an article published by the Spanish newspaper “El Mundo,” Omar Hernandez (2019) asks, “¿*Porque muchas de las personas Mexicanas o Latinx marrones que*

*conozco albergan tales pensamientos antinegros?*” He is asking, “Why do so many brown Mexican and Latinxs that I know harbor such anti-Black thoughts?” This is a question many younger Latinxs are asking of the older generation and among one another. While there are many answers to this question, it is important to follow the history and look to the inception of modern Latin America beginning with the colonial encounters between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Medallaine C. Cahuas (2019) posits that there is a persistent refusal to connect Blackness with Latinidad, which shapes Latinx societies in both Latin America and the diaspora in the United States.

For example, Cahuas (2019) points to the absence of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as a key economic and social institution among Chicano studies curriculum. More specifically, she challenges Anzaldúa’s (1984) seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, an all too habitually referenced piece of literature in Chicano Studies, as not adequately accounting for the experiences of Black Latinxs, Black Mestizas, or Afro-Latinxs. This means that invisibility of our Black relatives persists even in intellectual Chicano circles. It is no wonder our *abuelitas, tios, tias, primos, primas, brothers, and sisters* struggle to see a linked history between the African diasporic communities and themselves.

For non-Black Latinxs, Bogado (2014) states, the anxiety over having difficult conversations is rooted in the contradiction that we can simultaneously be oppressed and be oppressors. Some of the anti-Black bias among non-Black Latinxs is driven by the misconception that Black people do not support the immigrant rights movement. This quid pro quo deficit thinking contributes to anti-Blackness, especially on



the border. It assumes that Black Latinx people do not exist or participate in immigrant rights movements. Hernandez (2019) makes an important point when he states, “*No hay Latinidad sin negrura en primer lugar,*” or “There is no Latinidad without Blackness in the first place.” This statement is unquestionable considering the multiple social contributions of the African diaspora in the making of Latin America and Latinidad.

### **Examining White Privilege among Latinxs**

Anti-Blackness along the Texas borderland may be in part informed by an extension of white privilege that Latinxs and Mexicans have fought for and been afforded in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, in 1929, the Mexican American organization known as the League of the United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) was formed in my hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas (Dowling, 2014). According to Sociologist Julie Dowling (2014), their main efforts were to get “Mexican” removed from the 1930 census and replaced as white. In an interview with NPR, Dowling states:

It worked against them in some ways, because they claimed segregation and discrimination, the parties being accused of discrimination could say, ‘Well, no, you’re white.’ So, this history of claiming whiteness has been a strategy that Mexican Americans and other Latino groups have used to try to lobby for acceptance – claiming Americanness, claiming whiteness. (Demby, 2016)

In an attempt to reduce their own experiences of racial violence by claiming whiteness, they simultaneously distanced

themselves from Indianness, from their mixed ancestry, and from Blackness.

Rarely are these histories interrogated outside of university settings or ethnic studies coursework. This leaves an absence of consciousness in relation to the racial ethnic struggles of Afro-descendants in Texas (Dowling, 2014). Latinxs and Chicanxs must do the difficult work to unlearn their racial biases, their historical privileges, and their proximity to whiteness in order to confront anti-Blackness within the community. One way to do this is to confront the issue of white privilege and anti-Blackness head on. Diana Lugo-Martinez (2017), for example, makes the point that calling out anti-Blackness in the Latinx community means acknowledging white privilege, calling out the internalized racism, prejudice, bigotry, hate, and violence that we perpetuate. She argues that the Latinx community has consciously and subconsciously played into the colonizer’s plan to stand as far apart from Blackness and Brownness as possible (Lugo-Martinez, 2017). Without a sound understanding of colonial projects from Spain and the U.S., Latinx communities along the border will continue to have an unclear sense of relation to African diasporic communities.

### **Complicating Latinidad Through the African Diaspora**

The existence of Afro-Latinos and the discrimination they face in the United States can be mystifying for many people in part because U.S. notions of Blackness primarily consist of English-speaking African Americans, writes Tanya Kateri Hernandez (2020). Her scholarship indicates that Latinxs who identify themselves as “Black” have lower incomes, higher unemployment rates, higher rates of poverty, less education, fewer opportunities, and are more likely to reside in segregated neighborhoods than

those who identify themselves as "white" or "other" (Hernandez, 2020). Latinidad is thus not a static or monolithic experience structurally or at the individual level. According to sociologist and race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010), no one is immune to these realities.

In an essay written in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), Eduardo recollects his own experiences with his family and how those social interactions were shaped by race. Eduardo, a Black Puerto Rican, recollects the many instances his lighter-skinned family members would denigrate the "Black" side of the family. He makes the point that his lighter-complexioned family members were also of African descent but that markers of whiteness, such as lighter eye color and skin tone, created a false sense of superiority among them. He writes, "As a child struggling for affection and identity, I remember how much I loved visiting my Black side of our family. They always welcomed me with open arms, whereas my White family members treated me in a more formal, distant manner. As I matured and recognized the racial roots of some of these family dynamics, I raised hell with my immediate family" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, pp. 445). The internalization of racial ideologies creeps into even the most educated families even though people with less formal education are mistakenly used as a scapegoat for harboring such ideas.

Bonilla-Silva concludes his essay by speaking directly to Afro-Latinxs who have migrated to the new racial landscape of the United States. He warns that there will be moments of shock and realization that in the U.S. you may be considered Black first and Latinx second. "Be prepared," he states, "Afro-Latinos must resist the temptation to participate in the game of racial innocence that their families play. That is, we must

learn our histories and not repeat the nonsense we hear in our communities, such as the idea that racism is just a U.S. problem and that we do not have racial problems back home" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 447). Bonilla-Silva demonstrates the role of our family units in passing on anti-Black attitudes and values.

Our families are often the first social institutions where anti-Black values are learned and passed down. It is also a place where many of us can begin to undo centuries of learned behavior that devalues Black lives. Educating our kin on the racism that exists within our own families may not have an immediate result, but it begins to uproot the misinformation about our Black relatives in the Americas and beyond.

### **Anti-Blackness in the Media**

In Mexico, there are many photographic, theatrical, and multimedia representations that emphasize and exaggerate features of Afro-descendants (González, Jackson, Pellicer, & Vinson III, 2010). For example, the infamous Latin American (specifically Mexican) cartoon, *Memín Pinguín*, (figure 1) reflects the author's perspective on the subject but creates an overall inaccurate and stereotypical picture of Blackness (González, Jackson, Pellicer, & Vinson III, 2010). Paloma Fernández Sánchez (2015) reflects on the racial ideology *mestizaje* and its whitening discourse in the *Memín Pinguín* comic series. She notes that Black characters, exclusively represented by Memín and his mother Eufrosina, are portrayed as physically and intellectually inferior with no agency.

Their characters' actions are contrasted against their white compatriots and authority figures. Those authority figures judge the two Black characters' actions as mostly

illogical or incorrect (Sánchez, 2015). First published in the 1940's, these characters were a source of entertainment for an entire generation, perhaps two, in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. It is Mexico's version of Black face in comic form. The damaging, inaccurate images of *Memí Pinguí* are yet another example of anti-Blackness in Latinx culture. These images and ideas, however, are not limited to the Mexican side of the border, as many of these same comics make their way to South Texas. These images played a role in shaping the perspectives of a post-World War II generation of Mexican immigrants moving to the agricultural citrus farms of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Historian Enrique Krauze explains the phenomenon related to *Memín Pinguín*, "people identified with *Memín Pinguín* because he was poor and he suffered because he was poor, not because he was Black. As a matter of fact, I do remember one story of *Memín Pinguín*, the only story when he really suffers because of his color" (Ludden, 2005). He goes on to state that the only place Memín suffered was when he traveled to the United States. This particular viewpoint from the Mexican perspective perpetuates the narrative that racial conflicts are American or "northern" issues. This idea is passed along the border wherein Black issues are considered to only be relevant in metropolitan areas with sizable Black communities. Thus, issues pertaining to Black community members along the border are seen as distant and unrelated to the broader Mexican immigrant and Chicana community.

### **A Shifting Borderland Paradigm**

To date, the literature on the African diaspora in Texas primarily takes on early colonial encounters between Indigenous, Spanish, and African communities in the

17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chambers, 2016). There is also special interest in the history of the North African Moor *Esebanico*, who traversed the Gulf of Mexico and interiors of Texas (Rodríguez, 2021). These histories are important to the development of race in the South Texas region. However, there is an absence of data or analysis that focuses on the contemporary moment and racial uprisings of 2020. For these reasons, it is important to document the actions of young people working to dismantle white supremacy through organized rebellions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Young activists who protested for racial justice in 2020 demonstrated a turning point of consciousness against anti-Blackness in the Rio Grande Valley. The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, captured through a cell phone video recording, generated an uprising of rebellions throughout the United States (Boone, 2020). These rebellions, oftentimes misjudged as riots, demanded an end to state sanctioned violence against the Black community. Protests reached as far down as the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, a predominantly Mexican and Latinx community living in a developing urban and agricultural region on the U.S.-Mexico border. With an estimated 90% of its residents identifying as Latinx, the Black Lives Matter protests in this area looked more racially homogenous than it did in some of the larger metropolitan cities across the country. A young, energized generation stood in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 in Edinburg, Texas (Lopez, 2020).

Misael Ramirez, founder of the activist group Craft Cultura, hosted a community dialogue promoted as "Black Lives on the border" on social media platforms. When asked why he felt the need to organize this

event, he states, “We have a history of violence here on the border. We know what is to suffer at the hands of white supremacy. Police brutality. These aren’t riots going on, these are conscious rebellions” (Wilson, 2020). The conversation among the 60 attendees centered on the idea that we all have a role to play in educating our families and communities that have internalized the idea that Blackness does not exist in Mexican and Latinx culture. Community dialogues such as the one that took place in Edinburg, Texas have been powerful tools for Latinx community members who are often working on social justice issues individually or within institutions.

For example, most of the people who attended the community conversation were working professionals. As different community members took turns to speaking at the gazebo, (figure 2) they provided insight of how racist anti-Black ideologies are embedded in the medical field, in law enforcement, in schools, in mental health facilities, and in other spaces. Many times, these experiences happen in isolation and are difficult to confront in professional settings. The community dialogue allowed people to express their frustrations with institutional racism and anti-Blackness while identifying a common experience that validated their observations.

### Figure 1

*Black Lives on the border community dialogue, Edinburg, Texas, June 2020*



Also present at the community dialogue were college aged students and local artists. Their presence and participation led to a conversation on using local community art as a form of cultural resistance with the broader border community. In short, this gathering was steeped in the activist tradition of the region. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, borderland activism has focused primarily on access to education and agricultural farmworker labor rights

(Martinez, 2019; Villagrán, 2020). These intersecting issues continue to be important issues on the border. In 2020, these social issues intersected with the Black Lives Matter social movements of the last decade. Political consciousness is thus embedded into the memory of borderland residents (Anzaldúa, 1984).

The following day, on Sunday June 7<sup>th</sup>, a protest took place in front of the City of

Edinburg Municipal Building about a block from where the community dialogue took place the day before. Upon arrival, a small group organized themselves to offer water and hand sanitizer. Rarely, if at all, was anyone not wearing a mask throughout the protest. Signs and posters varied in their descriptions of racial injustices. However, it is worth noting that Black Lives Matter was centered as the core issue rather than an amalgamation of other social issues experienced by non-Black people of color. Elders in the community drove by honking their horns and giving enthusiastic thumbs-up to the pool of protestors. It was refreshing to see community members give signs of appreciation and encouragement considering the deep-rooted anti-Black values that are too often expressed within the Latinx community.

Both the protests and community dialogue on the border serve as examples of a new generation of thinkers, community members, activists, professionals, elders and students working to create a new more just way of being on the border. These moments were the beginning of the long-term internal work of unlearning anti-Black attitudes and the long-term struggle for institutional change. Border activists and residents, however, are creative and are familiar with what it means to create culture that is not defined by the broader U.S. While there remains work to be done, the borderlands are a community of people who authentically live and express the meaning of All Black Lives Matter.

### **Conclusion**

This article fills an important gap in the contemporary literature on anti-Blackness on the border. There has been little documentation of the racial uprisings in South Texas outside of newspaper articles

and local media outlets. It is imperative to leave an academic account of 21<sup>st</sup> century social movements along the borderlands that were explicitly articulating a rejection of anti-Blackness. The South Texas borderland is a sight where racial and colonial violence has resulted in racial segregation and land dispossession (Orozco, 2010), the separation of children from their families (Teicher, 2018), and the historic lynching of Mexicans and Chicanxs (Carrigan & Webb, 2003; Wills, 2019). Yet, local activists and youth along the border are linking these historic struggles with Black liberation movements across the U.S.

Cultural exchange between Chicanxs and Black diasporic peoples continues to occur through a shared struggle and experience with and against white supremacy. It is efforts such as the ones being formulated in the Rio Grande Valley that give hope to an anti-racist culture within the Latinx community. Internalizing messages of self-hate has had a profound impact on Latinx families. It has produced a thick shell preventing many Latinx people to see themselves as oppressors to other racial and ethnic communities, particularly to our Black relatives. As an educator, I take on the responsibility to unlearn these deeply embedded anti-Black ideologies and challenge my students to think about the interconnected social and cultural relations between our communities. Pedagogy is a serious endeavor towards liberation. In the words of the late scholar Max Monroy-Miller, “We have to educate, escalate, until we liberate.” All Black Lives Matter in the borderland.



**Figure 3**  
*Black Lives Matter protest in Edinburg, Texas June 2020*



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