

During my first year as a PhD student at the University of New Mexico in 2007, I learned that the Mexican government was trying to eliminate colonial history from state-published educational books. Since the year 2000 the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), aided by right-wing sectors of the political system, has been attempting to erase portions of Mexican history from elementary and secondary school curricula, and during the *sexenio* (six-year presidential term, from 2000 to 2006) of Vicente Fox, it aimed to exclude colonial history from public schools completely.¹ In 2009 the SEP succeeded in deleting colonial history from first- and second-grade curricula. And in 2016, under the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto, the SEP attempted to jettison colonial history from elementary schools entirely with a campaign whose motto went, “Con la mirada fija en el futuro, sin voltear al pasado” (With eyes fixed on the future, without looking back to the past).² At times, the only way teachers could include lessons on the history and arts of the colonial period was through sources available via private publishers.

The controversy over suppressing colonial history has divided conservative and liberal sectors of the government since the middle of the nineteenth century. The project of the nation, as constructed in the official visual culture of Mexico during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, located its glorious past in the history of the Aztec empire, and downplayed three hundred years of European control over the Americas. Consequently, everything from the founding legend of Tenochtitlan to the Aztec calendar became synonymous with *mexicanidad*. The transition from colonies to independent countries required a disassociation from European imperial legacies, and a reunification with the memory of local pre-Hispanic empires such as the

Aztecs, the Maya, and the Inka (excluding smaller Native groups throughout the continent).³

Nationhood in Mexico, as in many other Latin American countries, has thus been measured by a sense of pride that ignores the episodes of history involving the Spanish empire. Outside the legacy of the Virgen de Guadalupe and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (female torch bearers of the constructed mestizo heritage of Mexicans), the history of the colonial period is dismissed in order to highlight a sentimentalized Aztec past, the fights for independence from Spain, and the Mexican Revolution of 1910. This sense of pride, rooted in a selective history and a failed attempt by twentieth-century art historians to equate colonial visual culture with the canon of European art, has put colonial art history in a particularly fragile state. Not only is it completely absent from any Mexican formative educational texts, but other than governmental promotion of towns with colonial built environments (better known as *pueblos mágicos*), colonial heritage is not part of the popular memory.

Instead of looking at the Spanish colonial period and its cultural production as a time where some of early modernity's most cosmopolitan urban centers flourished, art historians have historically perceived Novohispanic art and the visual cultures of other viceroyalties as deficient copies of European art. This erroneous perspective, which to a certain extent persists in many art historical circles today, coupled with an imperialistic sense of nationhood, has prevented many Latinx students and future scholars from focusing on colonial Latin American art. The need remains for more students to critically reevaluate the unique character of Novohispanic art and its historical and cultural

1. Every public elementary and secondary school in Mexico adheres to a national curriculum designed by the SEP. This includes books also created by this government agency.

2. Ivette Sosa Salinas, “La SEP lanza propuesta para eliminar la historia de México de los planes de estudio; se debe ver el futuro sin detenerse en el pasado,” *Diario Noticias Web*, September 20, 2016, <https://diarionoticiasweb.com/la-sep-lanza-propuesta-para-eliminar-la-historia-de-mexico-de-los-planes-de-estudio-se-debe-ver-el-futuro-sin-detenerse-en-el-pasado/>.

3. For more information regarding the nationalist visual culture of the nineteenth century and the adoption of Aztec art and culture into the project of the Mexican nation see Magali Marie Carrera, *Traveling from New Spain to Mexico: Mapping Practices of Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Stacie G. Widdifield, *The Embodiment of the National in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexican Painting* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Raymond Hernández-Durán, *The Academy of San Carlos and Mexican Art History: Politics, History, and Art in Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

particularities. In other words, when raised Latinx either inside or outside of the United States, you will most likely grow up with a patriotic sense of history. But a national pride entrenched in nineteenth-century principles of nation building does not allow for a nuanced understanding of the colonial period. As a result, many Latinx students who dare to make Latin American art history the focus of their college education tend to concentrate on modern and contemporary art, and study issues of identity and nationhood outside the constraints of a colonial legacy. Perhaps this helps explain why Anglo scholars dominate the field of colonial Latin American art history in the United States. However, my experience of growing up in both Mexico and the United States has given me a distinctive outlook on nationhood and identity politics.

Soon after I was born in Los Angeles, my parents decided to raise me and my older sibling in their hometown of Ciudad Juárez, a decision for which I will always be thankful. Then when I was thirteen, my father, tired of crossing the border for construction work every morning, decided to move back to the States. His hard work and focus on manual labor *nos inculcó valores* (instilled values in us) that defined success beyond a college education. Nonetheless, my sister took the first step: like my father, she began to cross the border every morning to attend El Paso Community College. My first insight into the value of a college education came not from an intellectual desire to achieve a degree in the humanities, but out of the work ethic my family instilled in me of accomplishing goals through labor and sacrifice. By 1998 we were living in Las Vegas, a city not necessarily known as a college town, where many Latinx people prefer a well-paid career in the hotel service industry to a path in higher education.

During my second undergraduate year, I took an art history course by chance. A friend told me about some big-time art critic teaching in the art history department of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), and I decided to enroll. From my first survey course, I knew I wanted to be an art historian. My education in Las Vegas helped me appreciate the canon of European painting, which is a necessary step in understanding colonial Latin American visual culture. It was not until I traveled to the magnificent sanctuary of Atotonilco in the state of Guanajuato that I decided to make colonial art the focus of my graduate studies. But this was not an easy decision. As a first-generation college student and the first PhD on either side of my family, I knew it would affect my entire family financially.

But I was determined to find out why I was so well versed in Michelangelo and Caravaggio and knew nothing about this so-called Sistine Chapel of the Americas.

Later as a master's degree student, through the advising of the brilliant faculty at the University of New Mexico, I quickly understood what my standing would be if I decided to pursue colonial art history as a career: I would be an outsider both in Mexico and in the United States. And indeed, as a scholar practicing art history on both sides of the border, my capabilities have been often valued according to a minority status. In Mexico I am viewed as a gringo scholar, and in the United States, fellow faculty members and students alike often tokenize my role in the classroom.

Now, as a visiting professor, I still stand in a precarious place when it comes to my authority on my country's visual culture. I battle with students' expectations about the value of Mexican art beyond the well-known modernists; sometimes they dismiss my classes before even enrolling. This restrictive understanding of Latin American cultural production stems from the same patterns that affect these modern nations; from current governments' perspectives, understanding the nuances of the colonial period and the way it directly affects contemporary power structures and hegemonic institutions does not make for a healthy nation. Furthermore, for many cultural reasons, art history is dominated by Anglo scholars (most humanities disciplines are). Although they have greatly enhanced our perspectives on the colonial period and its material and visual cultures, they may undermine the importance of having a Latinx scholar teaching this subject to Latinx students. Each semester always ends with notes from students who tell me how much they appreciate learning about their culture through the lens of a Latinx scholar. The challenges, however, neither start nor end in the classroom.

Given the economic insecurities faced by many families when they first migrate to the United States, I have noted a pattern of Latinx communities embracing higher education only by the second or third generation. Even when we decide to invest in a college career, we are often obligated to drop out early in order to prioritize job security and *el bienestar de nuestras familias* (the well-being of our families). Furthermore, the number of Latinx students admitted to universities with the budgets that allow for necessary field research and a free education is extremely low, creating yet another obstacle that does not permit for a vigorous community of Latinx academics to grow. When a lack of diversity exists in scholarly circles, the professional student

body and workforce that feeds cultural institutions follows suit. The result is galleries and museum spaces that only celebrate Latinx culture via special events and exhibitions (which, given the lacunae in the field, in turn reinforce the sense that our identities are rooted only in Mesoamerican and modern artistic traditions). Year after year, Latinx audiences flock to local museums only when a retrospective of Frida Kahlo is in town, or for *Día de los Muertos* festivities. In other words, the present patterns of inclusion in cultural institutions around the country simply ratify the work of empire—that is, the supremacist nationalisms that undermine minorities in the United States—leading to a sense of patriotism rooted in two hundred years of nation building. November, and in some cases September and October (during Hispanic Heritage Month and the independence celebrations of many Latin American countries) are the only times when museums truly cater to us. All these conditions have obligated our communities to value physical labor over a possible career in academia. However, those patterns are quickly changing.

Social media has increased our access to scholarly role models. When black and Brown academics gain a PhD they are now celebrated in many blogs and pages dedicated to lifting up our communities. The second-generation model is breaking, and more and more first-generation students have role models in the form of successful Latinx scholars. From a personal perspective, my podcast, *Latinos Who Lunch*, receives weekly emails from listeners who are contemplating attending graduate school. Most of these messages hit on similar notes: financial difficulties, and uncertainty regarding whether a career in the humanities may have value in their lives and futures. This is a recurrent topic of many episodes of the podcast. I always answer with the same statement: in order to change the system and affect the canon, we need more Latinx scholars in positions of power. We need more Latinx professors teaching Latinx students.

We need to diversify our universities from the top down and not just find pride in campuses with diverse student bodies. The meaning of diversity in universities around the country has been distorted to signify only undergraduate classrooms with students of various cultural backgrounds. In order to diversify graduate programs in the humanities we must change the face and color of our faculty and administrative offices. And most importantly, as in Latin America, we need to highlight the importance of understanding the colonial period in all levels of education. In order to better comprehend the historical legacies of race

relations throughout the Americas, Miguel Cabrera and *casta* paintings should be part of every high school curriculum. The challenges faced by all Native peoples after 1492, and the ways they resisted colonial oppression, should be taught at every level of public education. This is particularly important if we are actively seeking to challenge the narrative of Mexico as a nation, which normally only includes imperial structures that are pre-Hispanic. Furthermore, an understanding of the history of Afro-descendants and mixed-race groups and their significant contributions to the visual and material cultures of Latin America can potentially inspire similar students to continue studying those contributions. It is for this same reason that in all my colonial art courses I spend several weeks covering my own area of research: the culture of Native resistance in New Spain.

A careful analysis of the ways many Native groups were portrayed in painting and literature reveals the stereotypes that still affect us today. Most importantly, the exploitation of the figure of the cannibal, barbarian, and savage present in maps, martyr portraits, hagiographic literature, and *casta* paintings reflects a general anxiety on the part of colonial powers toward the tenacity of Indigenous communities against the threat of colonization. For instance, studying the so-called Pueblo Revolt of 1680 not as a rebellion of the Native pueblos of New Mexico but as the first US revolution could reshape our understanding of US history. Explaining the 1609 slave rebellion of Gaspar Yanga in Veracruz as one of the first revolutions on the continent contextualizes the history of Afro-descendants beyond their mere presence in *casta* paintings and Christian images of the Three Magi. It is for this reason that I make a point to contextualize the visual culture of the colonial period through contemporary examples.

Teaching the *casta* system in tension with 1980s soap operas and contemporary films allows students to see the fights for equality that have yet to be fought. The stereotypical renditions of American Native peoples first found in European maps of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries can be placed in a global context by showing clips of the “cannibal genre” of horror films popular in Italy in the 1970s. Shortening the gap between the historical images presented in the classroom and the stagnant tropes of people of color in contemporary popular media reveals to students the value of studying the colonial period. Colonial visual culture is filled with these types of examples, which have the capacity to reshape our understanding

of a period that tends to be romanticized, and as a consequence dismissed by many students seeking to learn more about the history of their people. To create new generations of Latinx students that value a career in colonial art history, and to dismantle the identity politics of empire, we need to change our general understanding of Latin American history, which in my opinion can start in a Spanish colonial art history class.

Emmanuel Ortega
University of Illinois at Chicago

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emmanuel Ortega—is a curator, podcaster, and visiting professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Ortega has lectured nationally and internationally on images of *autos-de-fé* and nineteenth-century Mexican landscapes. He contributed the chapter “Hagiographical Misery and the Liminal Witness: Novohispanic Franciscan Martyr Portraits and the Politics of Imperial Expansion” to the edited volume *Visualizing Sensuous Suffering and Affective Pain in Early Modern Europe and the Spanish Americas* (Brill, 2018).