The Problems of Measuring Race and Ethnicity

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There are many reasons why we, as historians, might worry that LASA would take it upon itself to measure race and ethnicity among its members. One is the impossibility of designing a set of bureaucratic categories that could reflect the complexity of individual identities. This is particularly daunting in an organization with a membership from many societies, each engaged in distinct conversations about race, color, and ethnicity, and each with different expectations about how such identities or markers will be counted. In the United States and Puerto Rico, for instance, the census and a wide range of social institutions count "race," a set of categories based on descent. Some countries in Latin America, like Brazil, count by "color" as well as recognizing the ethnic category "indígena." Other countries, like Argentina and Venezuela, do not count either color or race regarding people of European and African descent, but do recognize membership in indigenous communities. Meanwhile, popular ideas about racial or ethnic identity vary widely from place to place, and often stand at odds with official methods of counting. Not only do most attempts to measure race and ethnicity do an imprecise job of reflecting the various ways that people in the Americas imagine themselves, but as most scholars now believe, these institutional attempts at counting do not measure any underlying "reality" of racial or ethnic identifications. They generally reflect much more closely the ways that politicians and bureaucrats imagine race and project it onto diverse populations.

The question of whether and how to count race in an organization like LASA, based in the United States but composed largely of Latin Americans, is made even more complicated by the history of U.S.-Latin American relations. As we write this article we are in Brazil, where pitched debate over the implementation of race-based affirmative action policies for higher education and government posts turns precisely on the question of whether a focus on race (particularly on "blackness"), and on race-based quotas, stems from a U.S. experience rather than a Brazilian one. In the eyes of opponents, the fact that affirmative action seems to come from the United States is evidence that the project is ill-suited to Brazil's distinct dynamics of racial identification and politics. This argument is in keeping with long-standing claims that Brazil is fundamentally different from the United States in its racial formation and relations. The idea that Brazil has a flexible system of color identification, extensive racial and cultural mixture, and absence of legal discrimination, *unlike the United States,* has been a source of pride for many elite and non-elite, white and non-white Brazilians. These arguments are common in many other parts of Latin America. Differences between racial formations and systems of counting race in the United States and Latin America, both real and imagined, have long been at the center of official and popular Latin American ideologies of national identity and integrity.

Those who support race-based affirmative action here in Brazil respond that these claims to national difference hide practices of systematic (if not legalized) discrimination that have historically functioned in much the same way as anti-black discrimination in the United States. This kind of argument too is familiar in many Latin American contexts, where projects to expose racial inequalities seek explicitly to challenge historical claims about racelessness or racial harmony. In some contexts, activists look favorably on racial enumeration as a means to demonstrate racial inequality. Brazil's Movimento Negro, for instance, has attempted since the late 1970s to replace the color categories "preto" and "pardo" with "negro" (a race- or descent-based category similar to the U.S. category "black"). Creating statistics that count all African descended people as "negro," they argue, will make the realities of Brazilian racism more evident. In other contexts, such as Argentina, activists recognize that the failure (since the late 19th century) to count indigenous and African-descended people has helped make those populations invisible, buttressing a discourse of a homogeneous white nation. Yet if there are obvious ways in which counting race and/or color differently might help to combat varied kinds of racism in Latin America, such projects run the risk of opening an even wider gap between official ways of counting and popular forms of identity. Most Brazilians whom activists in the *Movimento Negro* would like to count as "negro," for instance, do not see themselves as such. For many activists, this general reluctance to accept the category of "negro" reflects a false consciousness produced by national myths of mixture and racial harmony. In this situation, counting by race provides an opportunity for activists to educate African-descended people about their true identities.

As historians of race in Latin America, we are both strong proponents of the idea that race is a social construct that operates differently in different local contexts and at different historical moments. We particularly do not believe that popular identities in Latin America are simply false consciousness, or the result of mystifying discourses that hide underlying racial "realities." But by the same token, we are skeptical of Latin American discourses that try to fix and naturalize "national" or "Latin" racial systems in opposition to the United States. While race indeed operates differently in different places, local racial systems grew out of parallel institutions and common international discourses, and they were always substantially constituted through contact with one another. In

defining and debating racial questions, Latin Americans have borrowed, translated, and combined a range of ideas about racial identities and politics. Anti-racist causes—even ones that make use of discourses of "blackness"—are no more foreign to Latin America than racial hierarchies. We should not avoid taking stock of race or talking about race among ourselves for fear of imposing a U.S. concern where it does not belong.

Still, even if we can set aside our concerns about counting race, color, and ethnicity, we might ask the question, "Why ought we to count them?" We should count them, we believe, because the shift in the United States from counting race for purely repressive purposes, to counting for purposes of addressing historical inequalities, is a useful one. As members of an American institution (in the continental sense), we ought to recognize that all of our many societies emerged from processes of colonization and nationalism that placed European cultures and varied formulations of whiteness above both African and indigenous cultures and phenotypes. Although the precise meanings of whiteness, blackness, indigeneity, and mixture may vary widely according to local contexts, all of our societies have historical and ongoing structural barriers that disproportionately bar people who are not white and not culturally European from higher education and academia. Our institutions of higher learning have been especially resistant to indigenous forms of knowledge production. At the same time, the asymmetrical relationship between the United States and Latin America has helped to create a population of more than 40 million people of Latin American descent living inside the United States. While this group is heterogeneous in terms of class, color, and nationality, as a whole its members experience extremely restricted access to higher education. LASA is perhaps not in a position to radically transform these structural barriers. But we fully support its stated goals of increasing outreach to, and membership from, three major historically excluded groups: indigenous people, Afro-Latin people, and U.S. Latinos. To that end, strategically adopting the project of counting seems necessary, for how are we to know what is needed or what is working if we do not take stock of who we are?

We support such an attempt, and have some ideas about how to begin the conversation. First, we strongly oppose any system that would assign fixed identities that members would carry with them beyond the initial survey. If we count race, color, and ethnicity, it should only be toward the goal of creating a portrait of the whole organization, not to create official categories of membership marked or conditioned by these descriptors. This may seem self-evident, but given the varied ways that these categories are deployed in our many societies, it is worth being absolutely clear on this matter. The Dominican government, for instance, assigns color categories on national identification cards, and that identification potentially influences every interaction with the state. LASA should make it plain that it is not collecting racial profiles of individuals, and that it will only store the collected information in aggregate, not as part of individual membership files. Moreover, we believe that giving this sort of information should be entirely optional for members.

Second, we suggest that two questions about race, ethnicity, and color be posed to the membership. The first should be wholly open-ended. It should explain LASA's stated goal of mapping the diversity of its membership in the interest of inclusiveness. It should then allow each member to write in a description of her racial or ethnic identity (or to leave the space blank). We feel that open-ended self-identification is a crucial condition for collecting this sort of information, since simply asking members to choose from a set of fixed categories is likely to create feelings of alienation for many who might look at the list and not recognize themselves among its options. We know from personal and anecdotal experience that many Latin Americans experience this feeling when first presented with the racial categories on forms and applications in the United States. Indeed, when the United States added the category "some other race" to the census in 1990, two-fifths of Latinos immediately began to select it—about the same percentage as chose the category "white." What is more, an open-ended question seems more likely to help provide an overall picture of how our members see themselves in ways that checklists cannot. Perhaps too, this method can uncover dimensions of diversity that the organization has not yet considered, but ought to—we particularly would be interested in thinking about the issues of class origins and of nationally displaced and marginalized groups aside from Latinos in the United States (Bolivians in Argentina and Haitians in the Dominican Republic come to mind).

On the other hand, an open-ended question would produce complicated results. The famous 1976 household survey in Brazil, which allowed respondents to write in their own color identifications in addition to official ones, produced 136 different categories. LASA wants to measure its own success at including three main groups that are likely to be underrepresented—people who report African ancestry, membership in indigenous communities (to which we recommend adding "or indigenous ancestry"), or Latino identities in the United States. But an open-ended survey on its own would likely provide data that addressed such categories only indirectly. It seems to us a greater act of imposition to use the process of tabulation to try to sort members'

Desde *Otros Saberes*

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many self-definitions into these categories, than to provide the categories up front, explain the reason for including them, and allow members to self-select as many or as few as they recognize. We therefore suggest a second question, inviting members to be active participants in the tabulation process. We hope that since this choice would not establish an official racial condition of membership, and since it would follow an open-ended opportunity to express complex identities, the stakes for this last question would not seem very high. Nevertheless, we think both questions should be optional, and we suggest that the second include a box allowing members to express opposition to the project of counting by race.

In short, we believe that the benefits of painting a self-portrait of our institution for these goals and under these conditions, while including spaces for disagreement and debate, outweighs our significant concerns about the processes and histories of counting. If any group can thoughtfully consider the pitfalls of counting color and race among a multinational membership (without falling into the trap of imagining racelessness in Latin America), it should be the members of LASA.

Los artículos presentados aquí fueron redactados por los y las coordinadores de los proyectos becados por la iniciativa "Other Americas/*Otros Saberes.*" Representan un inventario de los logros y retos encontrados después de aproximadamente diez meses de trabajo intensivo, trabajos muchas veces interrumpidos y por acontecimientos nacionales, tales como atentados contra miembros de la organización protagónica—el caso del Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) de Oaxaca y California—o por ofensivas paramilitares en territorios de poblaciones participantes el en trabajo, como es el caso de Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN) de Colombia.

Sin embargo estos artículos muestran las posibilidades que tiene la membresía de LASA de incidir en los procesos y debates políticos principales en las Américas desde la colaboración horizontal con organizaciones críticas de la transformación social. El conjunto de ensayos representa, en diferentes escalas, momentos cruciales en la política de cultura y territorio en las Américas, desde los espacios de cercanía y familiaridad de la revitalización cultural, hasta la formulación de programas de acción política para reformular leyes nacionales y confrontar embates globales. Estos proyectos fueron seleccionados tanto por la firmeza de la metodología de la colaboración, como por la representatividad de procesos dirigidos por pueblos afrolatinos e indígenas.

En tres proyectos la colaboración se apoyó en el "nutrido archivo de la memoria personal y colectiva de afrodescendientes [e indígenas] contemporáneos para componer otras historias" tanto (trans)nacionales, como es el caso de Puerto Rico (Géliga Vargas), como del conocimiento discusivamente silenciado, como son los casos de las poblaciones afroecuatoriana (León Castro) y Wajãpi (Gallois). Cada proyecto de revitalización cultural se apoyó en la uso y análisis de la tecnología, como la fotografía y el video (Géliga Vargas y León Castro) y en el caso los Wajãpi una consideración, "[d]as especificidades das formas de transmissão de conhecimentos, sobretudo aquelas que diferenciam a oralidade da escrita" (Gallois). Algunas de las fotos producidos por los equipos de investigación se publican aquí.

Los íntimos escenarios de "a transformação dos conhecimentos" sin embargo forman parte de los grandes cambios nacionales marcados por las leyes de reconocimiento étnico. Varios proyectos de *Otros Saberes* confrontan los legatos problemáticos de estas leyes y establecen líneas de acción e investigación para retar la delimitación de las poblaciones indígenas y negras. Para el movimiento negro de Colombia "el Censo convierte en campo de lucha" a partir de la lectura de los resultados del 2005, y "el equipo *visibilización y censo* contribuye a articular el énfasis del PCN en la diferencia con una agenda centrada en los derechos y la igualdad" (Grueso Castelblanco y Escobar). En las regiones autónomas de Nicaragua, el diagnóstico comunal formulado por investigadores Miskitus busca establecer las bases del territorio comunal del pueblo de Tuara pero se encuentra con el límite del funcionamiento de la autonomía, ya que las comisiones gubernamentales no son imparciales (Taylor y Everingham). Por lo tanto los resultados de la investigación formarán parte de una crítica del régimen autónomo actual sostenida empíricamente desde abajo.

Cada proyecto interpretó el mandato de *Otros Saberes* de la investigación colaborativa y horizontal de forma diferente. En el caso del FIOB, las líderes buscan poner la investigación al servicio de la organización, que tiene que integrar más jóvenes y mujeres a los cuadros de liderazgo