

Visualizing



CREATIVE PRACTICES *in*
FASHION, FILM & BEYOND

**ARLENE
DÁVILA**

Visualizing **LATINX**



BUY

Visualizing

LAT INX

CREATIVE PRACTICES *in*
FASHION, FILM & BEYOND

ARLENE DÁVILA

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2026

© 2026 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Livia Tenzer

Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro and Proxima Nova
by Westchester Publishing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dávila, Arlene M., [date] author.

Title: Visualizing Latinx : creative practices in fashion, film, and
beyond / Arlene Dávila.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026003890 (print)

LCCN 2026003891 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478039082 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478034117 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478062714 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Latin Americans—United States. | Art and society—United States—Latin American influences. | Latin Americans in the motion picture industry—United States—21st century. | Hispanic Americans in the motion picture industry—United States—21st century. | Latin Americans—Clothing—United States. | Cultural industries—United States—Latin American influences. | Public art—United States—Latin American influences. | Fashion—United States—Latin American influences. | Clothing and dress—United States—Latin American influences. | Hispanic American art. | Hispanic American artists. | United States—Civilization—Hispanic influences.

Classification: LCC E184.S75 D357 2026 (print) | LCC E184.S75 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026003890>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026003891>

Cover art: Hologram City with Lujo Depot, zoot suit, 2022. Photo courtesy of Carlos Jaramillo.

Contents

Reflections and Gratitude	vii
Introduction	i
CHAPTER ONE. Fashion for the Culture	15
CHAPTER TWO. The Films of the Future	55
CHAPTER THREE. Latinizing Public Art	83
CHAPTER FOUR. Visual Artists at the Front Lines	109
CHAPTER FIVE. Making Moves in the University <i>Reflections on The Latinx Project</i>	133
Final Thoughts <i>Into Action</i>	153
Notes	161
Bibliography	173
Index	183

Reflections and Gratitude

In the midst of the most aggressive attacks on diversity, antiracism work, and people of color in the United States, I write this book as an homage to the work and imagination of Latinx artists past and present. I write with the humility and awareness that antiracist work has never been easy, that the role of scholars and writers is to document and fight against the erasure of our voices, especially at times like this, when the importance of our work is more evident than ever. When entire histories of research, statistical documentation of racism's effects, and records of inequality—archived on websites for the world to see—can be deleted with a single click, we need research, books, and documentation with “real receipts” of our history and achievements. These records must safeguard our works, narratives, and creations from appropriation, erasure, or selective interpretation by those who may not know, or care, about this history, whether through deliberate action or omission.

In this spirit, I want to acknowledge and convey my deepest appreciation to all the artists and cultural workers who inspired this book and my writing and who agreed to be interviewed, hosted me in their studios, and shared their work and stories however possible, whether in coffee shops, at their homes, in studios, or over Zoom. I deeply appreciate the immense labor and challenges they navigate, and I am grateful for the time in which they shared their work and creative processes with me. All artists are identified by name, except in rare cases when identification was not possible—such as during public events or when they chose to remain anonymous.

My colleagues and dear friends Karen Mary Davalos and Elizabeth Chin encouraged me to write this work from the start, believing in the importance of documenting and uplifting the works of Latinx artists. I thank them for their guidance and faith in my work throughout the years. My work is always better

because of their feedback, direction, and inspiration. I am also extremely thankful for the numerous friends and colleagues who strengthened this book with their input and suggestions, especially Gabriel Magraner and Patricia Zavella, who read and commented on several chapters. My deepest thanks to Mary Valverde, Alex Rivera, Carlos Gutierrez, Josué Ramírez, Urayoán Noel, Yasmin Ramirez, Aida Hurtado, Cristina Beltrán, Orlando Ochoa Jr., Dulcina Abreu, and Isabel Saavedra-Weis, who provided feedback on specific chapters, as well as to my colleagues at The Latinx Project at New York University (NYU) for inspiring my work. I am also especially grateful to my husband, Francisco Esteva, for standing by me always throughout the writing process, and to the Guggenheim Fellowship for their generous support that facilitated a sabbatical research leave that made it possible to write this book. Finally, I thank Karen Jackson-Weaver for organizing the writing workshop during her tenure at NYU's Office of Inclusion, which brought Ada Ferrer and me together to write—a practice we continued individually throughout the final stages of my writing, making this process less solitary and more fun. Once again, the team at Duke University Press, especially editor extraordinaire Ken Wissoker, deserves my highest praise and appreciation for seeing the value of this work from the start. Huge gratitude is also due to the peer reviewers who strengthened this book with their generous and rigorous comments. Yet I reserve my deepest appreciation for the students, readers, and young people engaging with this work, those who are passionate about Latinx culture, history, and communities. You are the future.

INTRODUCTION

In recent NYC Fashion Weeks, designers Willy Chavarria and Raul Lopez (Luar) have consistently shone, winning awards and accolades as “the beating hearts of American fashion.” Hailing from working-class backgrounds, they stand out in the highly exclusive world of high fashion with their unapologetic embrace of their cultural roots, their friends and families, and even the grittiness of their urban backgrounds. In Chavarria’s words: “I like wrinkles, and I like crooked teeth; I like the flaws that make us real.”¹

Los Angeles-based filmmakers and MacArthur Fellows Cristina Ibarra and Alex Rivera have dedicated their careers to producing independent films illuminating critical facets of Latinx history and identity. However, their work does not primarily focus on challenging Hollywood’s gatekeeping or its superficial portrayals of Latinidad. Instead, the couple has established an independent film-making laboratory that generates opportunities and reshapes dominant models of film production and distribution.



FIGURE I.1. Gina Gwen Palacios, *Los Cotton Kids*, 2023. Ink and acrylic on bedsheet, clothesline, clothespins, dirt, lace tablecloth, and plastic, 72 × 84 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Gina Gwen Palacios, an artist from Brownsville, Texas, depicts a group of cotton-picker children in her mixed-media installation *Los Cotton Kids* (2023). The image is painted on a bedsheet pinned to a clothesline over a bed of South Texan dirt and a lace tablecloth, referencing the domestic economies that sustain agricultural workers' families and the broader economy. Coming from a family of field-workers, Palacios was discouraged from acknowledging her ethnic

and class background during her prestigious MFA program. However, this only strengthened her resolve to incorporate these elements into her work, which delivers a proud and unapologetic message: “My community and my history are valuable and beautiful.”²

These are just a few among many instances of contemporary Latinx creatives striving to visualize Latinx communities, transform society, and assert inclusion on their own terms. They approach their creative endeavors with a commitment to purpose, intention, and an abundance of style and ingenuity, embracing a newfound confidence to showcase the value, joy, and complexity of Latinx identities. Sometimes, their methods involve highlighting vernacular and popular culture to expand aesthetic repertoires, just as Chavarria and Palacios do. Other times, they must establish new spaces and institutions that foster transformation. But above all, they affirm that it is high time for Latinx people to be seen—fully.

Visualizing Latinx elevates the stories of contemporary creators working primarily in fashion, independent filmmaking, and public art, all of whom confront the systemic erasure of Latinx creativity. Despite making up 20 percent of the US population, Latinx people, and particularly Latinx artists, remain consistently overlooked across key sectors—from Hollywood and film to museums. Across the board, cultural industries have failed our community, making it increasingly difficult to assert our rights to create and exist.

At the same time, Latinx people continue to be hypervisible in dehumanizing depictions of crime, immigration, and poverty, where they are often portrayed as a threat. I write in the midst of one of the most aggressive attacks on Latinx people in the United States, at a time when even the word *Latinx* has been effectively banned from public discourse, when Latinx communities are primary targets of mass deportations, and when overt expressions of our culture are dismissed as “DEI” or deemed suspect or “un-American.” Yet history reminds us that there has never been a time when Latinx people were not under attack. “Inclusion” has often meant being reduced to tokenized figures, strategically targeted by corporations and political parties, or treated as a homogeneous bloc of consumers or voters. In the twenty-first century, it is unsettling that the conversation around Latinx people remains confined to such narrow representations at play for centuries.³ *Visualizing Latinx* argues that seeing and appreciating the vibrant and complex creativity of Latinx art and visual culture can be transformative and revolutionary. Documenting contemporary artists enriches our imagination, helping us move beyond the polarized, static, and dehumanizing representations that have dominated for so long, in the hope of ending them once and for all.

This book grows out of my long-standing work as a Latina scholar, writer, and cultural equity activist investigating Latinx invisibility in visual

representation industries, from advertising to the art world. For decades, my research has consistently shown how these industries have failed to recognize Latinx communities as a central component of US history and culture. Each time, my analysis reveals how Latinx people are reduced and homogenized into sanitized representations of Latinx visibility in mainstream society and how little has changed in the past twenty years for people of color in the more significant art and culture industries. Most recently, I studied Latinx invisibility in the contemporary art world, documenting the general ignorance about what Latinx art and artists do, even in cities like New York, where Latinx people are all around.⁴

In other words, I am fully aware of the challenges facing contemporary visual industries and the precarity of cultural work. Most importantly, visibility is always contingent—it can obscure, stereotype, or flatten identity when reduced to marketable tropes, as I discussed decades ago in *Latinos, Inc.* Still, readers familiar with my earlier work will notice an intentional shift. While each chapter documents aspects of the political economy shaping the work of contemporary creatives, a focus that has characterized my scholarship for decades, I also move toward highlighting the ingenuity of artists and the small yet meaningful gains they achieve—despite the many challenges, even when their work never reaches audiences beyond their immediate communities. My aim is to explore the stories, creations, and lives of inspiring Latinx artists, creators, and activists who work tirelessly to break through barriers and constraints, shedding light on their inventive strategies for visibility.

Visualizing Latinx highlights their ingenuity and worldmaking practices and, in particular, points to their resourcefulness and mix-and-match approaches that align with the spirit of *rasquachismo*. This term has been used in cultural and visual culture studies to describe the creative and resistant strategies used by Latinx communities, incorporating subversive sensibilities and a mix of materials and references, ranging from the excessive and flamboyant to the simple and sublime. However, *rasquachismo* involves more than aesthetics. More powerfully, it signals subversive dispositions and attitudes. While visual research has often focused on the excessiveness of materials, vibrant colors, and the fusion of high and low references, especially from commercial objects and ornaments, the essence of *rasquachismo* lies in the mindset of resourcefulness, confronting institutional culture, and defying dominant hierarchies of value. And it is evident in people taking risks, being bold, and fearlessly innovating through any means necessary.⁵

In this regard, this concept is as timely as ever and in direct conversation with a larger discourse in Latinx studies about worldmaking amid the challenging conditions of contemporary life and the difficulties of artmaking. Think here of

the movidas that Chicana feminists have urged us to recognize as covert strategies of struggle, contesting and expanding normative ideas and practices. These strategies may fall outside the traditional understanding of what is considered politically significant, but they can nonetheless be highly subversive and generate new practices and ideas.⁶ Think also of “el arte de bregar,” the vernacular mindset of everyday types of struggle against adversity and injustice embedded in the Puerto Rican disposition of bregar, of making do in spite of, no matter what.⁷

In fact, we’re in the middle of a theoretical renaissance to describe the multiplicity of Latinx aesthetics and creative practices that revolve around mixing genres, materials, and references, and most of all on unsettling colonial-based hierarchies and binaries of high/low value and culture. For instance, consider the work on nepantla aesthetics by Chicana scholar Karen Mary Davalos, drawing on Chicana artists’ in-betweenness and border-culture aesthetics emphasizing hybridity, blending, and the mingling of styles without conforming to normative art histories, or as she puts it, “an aspect of visual sovereignty, a way of seeing that does not reinforce Eurocentric interpretation.”⁸ Jillian Hernandez’s “aesthetics of excess” is also relevant for pointing us toward artistic authorship in the realm of dress and bodily adornment that troubles hierarchies of high and low and performs indifference to assimilation and whiteness.⁹ Equally important is Kency Cornejo’s “visual disobedience” for understanding art as praxis, which recognizes “that decoloniality does not reside in the academy . . . [and centers] artists as creative makers, thinkers, and theorists.”¹⁰

Even our own artists, to describe their work, are developing generative terms that are applicable to Latinx creativity more broadly. For instance, Shellyne Rodriguez’s concept of *quebrao* highlights “the baroque-ness that hides itself within its brokenness” and the strategies of reinvention, malleability, and remix, such as those through which Black and Puerto Rican kids of the South Bronx created “an avant-garde movement (hip hop) literally from the ashes of burning buildings.”¹¹ Born out of the specific contexts of Puerto Rican culture (*bregar*), the aesthetic strategies of working-class women and girls of color (aesthetics of excess), South Bronx communities (*quebrao*), Chicana feminists (nepantla aesthetics), or Central American artists (visual disobedience), respectively, each term shares a similar ethos of appreciation for the inventive acts of mix-and-match culture-making at the margins that are evident throughout contemporary Latinx visual culture. All these concepts highlight the creative malleability involved in drawing from various sources, elements, and genres within both sanctioned and alternative cultures to sample, remix, and reinvent. They urge us to focus on the powerfully inventive, transformative, and subversive practices of Latinx artists and creatives, along with their cultural and political significance.

This book spotlights some of these creators' stories to inspire readers to learn more about their inventive practices and to expand our visual repertoire of how we think about and imagine Latinx creativity in the United States. It also aims to bring arts-based humanistic concerns into discussions of equity in creative labor—critical issues at the heart of the work of contemporary Latinx artists. By documenting how artists are both impacted by and driving activism on vital social and economic issues, I call into question strict distinctions between the categories of “artists,” “workers,” and “activists” that have often been used to uphold value hierarchies and maintain an apolitical stance in the arts by isolating “true art” from economic and political concerns.

This book also adds to the growing recognition of the political significance of art-making and its broader influence on civil society, social movements, and political struggles. I am thinking of the long-standing scholarship on activist movements by Chicana and Nuyorican pioneers in the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as more recent works documenting the connection between activism and the law, a field that had not previously been theorized as being affected by or influenced by the actions and practices of artists, or studies of Latina artists organizing in regions that had not been documented previously, such as the Midwest, for example, in Minnesota.¹² *Visualizing Latinx* shows artists actively engaging in social issues and debates, from immigration to gentrification, and broadening work practices and notions of value in the realm of aesthetics and creative markets. Their work also represents strategic challenges to the dominant structures and practices of the creative industries in which they operate.

I center Latinx artists and creators in selected visual creative industries, fully aware that, in our visually mediated world, all creativity is tied to visibility and not limited to the spaces focused on in this work. From the images unleashed by poets and writers in their writing to the purposeful sartorial self-styling of musicians and performers, Latinx visibility is all around. I focus on visual arts, independent filmmaking, public art, and fashion to highlight artists who work in critical global industries that are among the most exclusive and where the visual product is a paramount commodity. This allows us to think about the current state of creative industries involved in visibility and some of the battles for representation waged inside them. Additionally, tackling visibility in fields such as public art and fashion brings complexity to the dominant perspective in contemporary discussions around Latinx art, which focus on museums, galleries, and art fairs as the most exclusive venues for artists of color to navigate when similar dynamics affect the work of Latinx artists working across many other visual culture industries.

The chapters that do not focus on visual industries per se are nonetheless tied to visibility by exploring spaces and issues that shape our recognition and

visualization of Latinx creativity. In particular, a chapter on Brownsville, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley examines geography's role in obscuring the work of artists living and working outside global creative cities. Here, artists must confront the geographical determinism that associates certain topics with specific regions—such as art-making with Los Angeles and New York and immigration with the border—by highlighting the rich tradition of art-making and cultural production outside these major cities. Their key point is that no one can truly understand Latinx art without acknowledging what is happening outside of recognized art hubs, such as in the Rio Grande Valley or, similarly, among Latinx artists in Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and Florida—regions often overlooked in contemporary visual cultural analyses.

Last, I discuss academia's important role in sanctioning and uplifting Latinx studies and making our history visible. I examine the creation of The Latinx Project at New York University (NYU), one of the first interdisciplinary centers focusing on the arts at any major US university, emphasizing the importance of creating Latinx-specific spaces for research and documentation rather than succumbing to the cycle of being perpetually discovered and ignored, discovered and erased, as often happens in most cultural industries. In particular, I emphasize how Latinx spaces contribute to building the infrastructure needed for Latinx visibility and for amplifying interdisciplinary methods, approaches, and understandings that allow Latinx creatives to be appreciated on their own terms—not through mainstream frameworks or assimilationist paradigms that render visibility fragile and temporary.

Beyond the Complexity Myth

As with my previous work, I do not assume all the artists discussed in these pages identify as Latinx. People of Latin American backgrounds in the United States express their identities and diversities in various intersectional and situational ways and use diverse terms to do so: such as *Latino/a/e* or *Hispanic*. Additionally, many Latinx creators are centering Black and Indigenous racialized identities and even eschewing any “Latin”-derived identity altogether. In this context, I use *Latinx* to highlight gender and racial inclusivity and to emphasize that Latinx people have never constituted a monolithic group. It is only white supremacy that wishes to believe that we are a static and straightforward identity group rather than the highly diverse amalgamation we have always been. In this way, I use *Latinx* to express my solidarity with the pursuit of more inclusive and progressive Latinx projects that subvert the white gaze's insistence on simplistic notions of Latinx empowerment and visibility.

Most of all, I propose that we resist succumbing to the never-ending debate over terminology and what to call ourselves and instead let our community define itself—whether as Hispanic, Latino/a/e/x, or anything else—while focusing on uplifting and writing about what our community *is doing*. Furthermore, I critique the “complexity myth” often used as an excuse for our lack of representation in creative industries, from museums to the media. This myth suggests that Latinx heterogeneity across nationality, race, class, and more makes us “too complex” and that this so-called complexity is the root of our erasure. I have heard this argument for decades, always recognizing that this view is also fueled by a lack of Latinx scholars, curators, gallerists, writers, and stakeholders in the arts who could intervene in our interpretation and representation through scholarship exhibitions, archive creation, and artist representation. In particular, it is fueled by the idea that one Latinx curator, scholar, or archivist per institution is enough, rather than recognizing a need for diverse expertise and experiences and for hiring multiple diverse professionals and creatives to properly document and represent our community. In other words, this “complexity myth” is the product of the white-dominant industries involved in our representation—from publishing to fashion and more—rather than an intrinsic quality of Latinx people over any other demographic.

This book also builds on my previous exploration of the racial politics of identity labels that normalize the racialization of some categories in creative industries. In contrast, others remain unquestioned: for instance, the tendency to question “Latinx art” but never “American art” or “contemporary art.” I suggest that centering how Latinx artists and creators navigate their intersectional identities provides valuable insights into the importance of recognizing and embracing the reality of diversity and intersectionality everywhere. In particular, the creatives featured in these pages demonstrate the growing sophistication of a community that no longer needs to dismiss differences to understand itself and can instead embrace these differences inventively as a source of creativity. In this regard, we will also see the strategic value of having Latinx-specific spaces to recognize and uplift the creative outputs of such diverse communities. Above all, culturally specific spaces are essential to addressing the gaps left by white-dominant institutions that have historically excluded diversity, resulting in significant absences in knowledge, archives, representation, and more. These spaces serve as a corrective to exclusive, white-dominant structures and can also foster intercultural advocacy.

Finally, I acknowledge the difficulties of understanding the workings and technical languages of the various cultural industries encompassing distinct fields such as fashion, independent filmmaking, public art, and academia. These

industries are worlds with subfields, contradictions, and tensions that deserve book-length, deep-dive research and consideration. In independent filmmaking, for instance, there's a vast difference between those working with big or small budgets or those making feature films versus experimental films or documentaries. Similarly, there is a range of sectors, concentrations, styles, and approaches in fashion, public art, or academia, making it impossible to represent these fields in their entirety, much less in a single chapter. However, I have long dared to critically engage with fields typically analyzed through narrow disciplines or approaches—such as urban planning, advertising and marketing, or contemporary art—and have learned that there is much to be gained by diving into new areas of research with an open mind and a willingness to learn. The same applies to my writing about artists in Brownsville, Texas. I did not want my unfamiliarity with the rich tradition of Texas scholarship focusing on the border to contribute to the artists' invisibility, thereby not including them in this book.

As a result, this book is not a comprehensive review of all the artists and creators working in these various fields, nor is it a definitive assessment of the worlds of Latinx filmmaking or fashion, an impossible task given the diversity of these fields. As Davalos warns, selecting Latinx artists to write about and study is ultimately idiosyncratic, as Latinx art has yet to reach mass recognition or canonization.¹³ Unlike established artists and artworks, often reproduced in books and catalogs or recognized by the media or with awards, Latinx art has not yet achieved the level of recognition that leads to critical study or selection for art history analysis. Even artists producing work for decades have not reached any level of visibility. I argue that a similar case can be made for the worlds of Latinx filmmaking, public art, and fashion—calling for more works that explore these areas in any way possible.

With this in mind, I offer a glimpse into some exciting and emerging art worlds that have been largely overlooked but are now experiencing a vibrant renaissance to inspire readers' curiosity to learn more about the many Latinx artists and creators who are innovating within them. I approach this discovery through an auto-ethnographic lens, drawing from my own personal trajectory navigating these worlds to reflect on larger social issues impacting the work of the creatives I study. This perspective is most evident in chapter 5 when I discuss the difficulty of carving spaces for recognition of Latinx art and culture in the United States through my own personal experiences and trials while founding The Latinx Project at NYU. As a result, this work reflects my location, collaborations, and the institutional networks that have shaped much of my recent research and curatorial experience. Many of the artists, projects, and encounters I engage with are rooted in—or introduced through—my work at The Latinx

Project, a focus that may risk recentering dominant cultural geographies or obscuring equally vital work happening elsewhere. I offer this not as a universal account, but as a situated one that is grounded in a specific context, while remaining in dialogue with broader movements and voices beyond NYC that call for a more decentralized conversation around Latinx cultural production.

One takeaway from this book is how the various industries and spaces it focuses on seem to operate in silos and how little the Latinx creatives working across these areas know about each other or their work, even when facing similar struggles for recognition and sustainability. Although I am invested in broadly defined Latinx art, I needed to learn more about independent filmmakers and where to find them. Most independent filmmakers I met were equally unaware of fashion designers, who knew little about public art or Latinx visual artists, especially those living outside Los Angeles or New York City. Most of all, no one seemed to know about the current state of Latinx studies in the North American academy and how the battle for recognition affects the diversification of critical creative professional fields.

This observation is one of the reasons I decided to write a chapter on The Latinx Project at NYU, exploring the state of Latinx studies in US universities. What I had witnessed across different visual art fields was evidence of the lack of interdisciplinary content in art schools and the manufactured ignorance in art and humanities curricula, which contributes to the invisibility of Latinx creatives across all fields. In sum, the Latinx creative community is vast, diverse, and often unaware of itself, largely because Latinx creativity across the arts and humanities is not being taught or discussed, and because we lack sufficient platforms to showcase our work and increase its visibility. It highlights the importance of recognizing the achievements taking place in exclusive fields like fashion, which could inspire others in similar ways, and the need for engaging in inter-industry conversations and collaborations to support and strengthen one another. Additionally, blending visual arts, film, public art, and fashion helps dismantle aesthetic hierarchies by moving beyond the white box of the gallery or museum and instead focusing on more publicly accessible aesthetics, whether in the urban landscape or through social media, that are not always recognized as being equally exclusive and elitist and in need of transformation as they ultimately are.

Not surprisingly, I found that the higher and more prestigious the representation domains, the less likely Latinx artists are to be represented, whether in highly coveted calendar spots during Fashion Week or in the most prominent and permanent locations for public art. Akin to my previous work, *Latinx Art*, I also document the tendency to veil Latinx invisibility by homogenizing any person

of Latin American background and indiscriminately counting Latin American artists, filmmakers, and designers as “Latinx.” This trend erases the significant disparities between artists who benefit from national privilege—supported by individual nation/state art infrastructures—and those who work as racial/ethnic minorities in the US context.¹⁴ This is particularly evident in the context of the greater recognition of Latin American film and fashion within mainstream institutions in the United States and beyond. These industries have a legacy of support and validation in Latin America, which has, for instance, contributed to the rise of several internationally recognized and award-winning filmmakers. This stands in sharp contrast to the historical invisibility of Latinx filmmakers.

In this book, I focus on Latinx filmmakers, fashion designers, and other creatives as artists who live and work in the United States, are informed by US racial issues and concerns around race and identity, and have a history of marginalization in creative industries. In particular, I show how crucial it is for Latinx creatives to have access to the most exclusive spaces where they have been largely absent and marginalized because of the incredible transformation possible when artists attain the necessary resources and power to make decisions and create and foster diverse worlds.

For instance, when Willy Chavarria casts models off the street, he is not only making a statement of inclusivity on the runway for all to see but also opening doors for many other Latinx talents in an industry that generates millions of dollars in revenue and impacts many ancillary sectors such as music and advertising (where Latinx people have historically been underrepresented). Likewise, I have witnessed how The Latinx Project at NYU has assisted the career development of many curators and artists. Some have gone on to secure gallery representation or curatorial positions, bypassing or alleviating the regular gatekeeping and nepotism that often dominate the art world. In sum, it is politically significant and necessary for our artists and creators to make it into the most exclusive spaces of universities, fashion shows, film festivals, and more. This book recognizes the power of identifying and visualizing Latinx identity as a key organizing call for intervention and change.

Finally, in different chapters, such as those focusing on film and fashion, we will see many creatives embracing the concept of brownness—such as appealing to having Black and brown teams and brands or casting brown models, especially among West Coast creatives, where brown has often symbolized *Latinidad*.¹⁵ I realized that many were similarly using it to refer to Latinx people and to emphasize racial diversity in their representation by centering Indigenous, Black, and dark-skinned Latinos. It is important to note, however, that using *brown* as a synonym for *Latinidad* is also problematic, as it erases Blackness and Afro-Latinx

people. Additionally, it mistakenly promotes the view that Latinx is a static race or racial identity rather than a racialized pan-ethnicity encompassing multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. That is why I capitalize *Black* but not *brown* or *brownness* when I refer to creatives—to reflect not an identity but their appeal to antiracist, multiethnic, diverse worlds, castings, and representations. This approach highlights what these creatives propose to intervene within historically dominant, homogeneously white industries.

Sorting through these issues is more politically urgent than ever amid debates about how we name ourselves and the growing push for people of color to remain invisible or assimilate to whiteness, a futile feat for most.¹⁶ To all readers, I urge the embrace of a politics of assertion and validation to confront the white-washing of race—a process that seeks to undermine race- and identity-based organizing and identification while ignoring the deep structural inequalities that exclude so many people from critical sectors of creative industries. Above all, I hope this book sparks interest and wonder in the diversity of Latinx creativity in the twenty-first century.

The Road Map

The book comprises five chapters featuring Latinx artists working across several cultural industries, from filmmaking and fashion to public art. I also write about visual artists in the Rio Grande Valley to explore the link between region and visibility and about the founding of The Latinx Project at NYU as I reflect on the process of claiming space within institutions during the growing attack on ethnic studies across the United States.

Chapter 1, “Fashion for the Culture,” centers on how Latinx fashion designers Raul Lopez (Luar) and Willy Chavarria are leading the way in fashion industry innovation. I explore how they’ve achieved this by highlighting identity elements, such as gender, sexuality, and class, and by deliberately incorporating Latinx culture, with working-class references in their brand identity and collections. Additionally, I explore how new Latinx fashion professionals—ranging from stylists and writers to archivists—are infusing values of community building, joy, celebration, and defiance into the fashion industry, shaping its diversity and transformation.

Chapter 2, “The Films of the Future,” examines how Latinx independent filmmakers envision new futures and stories, disrupting Hollywood’s systemic misrepresentation of Latinx lives. I draw from interviews with independent filmmakers to explore the difficulties they face in their work. I also assess the current state of film production to highlight the ingenuity of several filmmakers who

are driving an inspiring and foundational Latinx independent film renaissance across the country.

Chapter 3, “Latinizing Public Art,” explores the presence of Latinx representation in public art in New York City. I start by exploring why public art in major cities across the United States is an essential yet contested public visibility and representation realm. I then focus on the ambitious performance of Afro-Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s *Procession of Radical Love and Unity* and Edra Soto’s public art project *Graft* in Central Park. As part of Madison Square Park’s twentieth anniversary, Campos-Pons engaged in a ritualistic journey from Harlem to Madison Square Park, actively uplifting Latinx histories and contesting the history of racist monuments encountered along her path. For her part, in the same season, Soto became the first Latina to open a large-scale public art project in Central Park. I contextualize these projects against the scarcity of public monuments dedicated to and representing Latinx people in NYC. For instance, the first Latina to be commissioned to create a large-scale public art monument in New York City did not happen until 2019. That was *Para Roberto*, honoring the late humanitarian baseball player Roberto Clemente, created by Melissa Calderón, a Nuyorican artist from the South Bronx, after a fifteen-year process.

Chapter 4, “Visual Artists at the Front Lines,” focuses on artists living and working in Brownsville, Texas, to explore questions of region, visibility, and Latinx art production beyond the dominant NYC- and LA-centric focus that dominates discussions of Latinx art. I turn to how artists from this region create and innovate, highlighting insights their work provides regarding the abundant creativity, innovation, and pioneering efforts often overlooked when we concentrate solely on more established art hubs. I explore how artists who are not easily seen due to their geographic location unsettle our regional bias of where creativity lives and thrives while working through some of the most significant issues of contemporary life.

Chapter 5, “Making Moves in the University,” concludes by linking the lack of visibility in creative industries to the wider underinvestment in Latinx studies in the academy, and discussing how Latinx studies can lead the way toward representation and inclusion. I ask why we are so afraid of Latinx studies while showing why it is so necessary and generative to challenge erasure across creative industries. I draw from my decades-long experiences as a scholar in Latinx studies and in establishing The Latinx Project, one of the few interdisciplinary centers for arts and culture in any significant research university across the United States. By promoting the visibility and understanding of Latinx experiences within academia, I suggest Latinx studies can pave the way for more diverse

representations and inclusion of Latinx voices in creative industries and society. I also propose that art-focused programs can foster richer types of interdisciplinary and public-facing scholarly engagements.

I conclude with a list of actionable takeaways designed to inspire readers to create and imagine. At this political juncture—amid rising and overt attacks on our existence—I call for more writing, creating, and art-making.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. See Bobb, “Willy Chavarria and Raul Lopez, Are the Beating Hearts,” and Veitch, “Designer Willy Chavarria Finds This Dumpster More Inspiring.”
2. Unless otherwise credited, quotations from artists, designers, and other interlocutors are drawn from interviews conducted by the author between 2023 and 2026.
3. I discuss the history of these representations in Dávila, *Latino Spin*. See also Santa Ana, *Brown Tide Rising*.
4. See Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*; Dávila, *Latino Spin*; and Dávila, *Latinx Art*.
5. See Gutiérrez, “Rasquachismo,” for a discussion of rasquachismo, which situates it among various terms in Latina/o studies that describe creatively inventive and subversive representational strategies of Latino artists. See also Díaz, “A Genealogy of Rasquache and Camp,” for a review of major debates surrounding the use and applicability of this term in Chicano/Latinx art history. In particular, Díaz challenges its reduction to an essentialist marker of Chicano identity, instead framing it as a “politically charged aesthetic form” that centers the subversive potential of the term (113). For a discussion of “domesticana” by Amalia Mesa Bains as extensions and interventions from rasquachismo, see “Amalia Mesa-Bains and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in Conversation,” *Interventions*, August 30, 2024, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/interventions/amalia-mesa-bains-tomas-ybarra-frausto>.
6. See Cotera et al., *Chicana Movidas*. See also Lopez-Lyman, *Place-Keepers*, for a timely discussion of Latina organizing in Minnesota that brings geographical diversity to the study of artists’ organizing practices by focusing on inter-Latina/x movidas among communities from different Latin American racial and ethnic backgrounds.
7. See Díaz Quiñones, *El arte de bregar*, for the original use of this term, and for a contemporary treatment of its current applications in the archipelago, see Alana Casanova-Burgess, “¿Qué es la brega?,” podcast, 2021, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/la-brega/articles/que-es-la-brega>.
8. Davalos, “Nepantla Aesthetics.”
9. Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess*.

10. Cornejo, *Visual Disobedience*, 17.
11. Shellyne Rodriguez, "Artist Statement," <https://www.shellynerodriguez.com/about> (accessed November 1, 2025).
12. See Sandoval and Latorre, "Chicana/o Activism." For collections of essays on Chicana and Nuyorican art, see Gonzalez et al., *Chicano and Chicana Art*, and Dávila and Ramirez, *Nuyorican/Diasporican Art*. For a legal perspective on activism, see Y. Murray, *We Make Each Other Beautiful*, and Lopez-Lyman's *Place-Keepers* for a study of Latina organizing in the Twin Cities.
13. Davalos, "Nepantla Aesthetics." For a classic essay on the underrepresentation of US Latinx art within academic and institutional settings, see Zavala, "Latin@ Art at the Intersection."
14. In *Latinx Art*, I explain the construction of the category of "Latin American art" as an exclusive field devoid of Black, Indigenous, Latin American, and diasporic artists as well as the circles sustaining this field and artists in greater detail.
15. For a review of *brown* as a term and its many uses in theory and history, see Ruiz, *Left Turns in Brown Study*.
16. The debate over Latino assimilation into whiteness is long-standing and remains a contentious topic in the social sciences, with many arguments relying on single variables to make sweeping claims about assimilation. I won't revisit these arguments here, as I have little to add beyond what I already discussed in *Latino Spin*.

1. FASHION FOR THE CULTURE

1. Bobb, "Luar and Willy Chavarria Won"; Bobb, "Willy Chavarria and Raul Lopez Are the Beating Hearts."
2. Luar closed New York Fashion Week in fall 2023 and winter 2025, and Chavarria debuted in Paris in January 2025. On Luar marking a historic change for Fashion Week, see Bateman, "Luar Ushers in a New Era."
3. Negrón-Muntaner, "The Look of Sovereignty"; Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit*; Peiss, *Zoot Suit*. See also Blanco and Vázquez-López, *Dress, Fashion and National Identity in Puerto Rico*.
4. See Ondine and Frantz, *Axis Mundo*; and the exhibition *Antonio Lopez: Future Funk Fashion* (June 14 to November 26, 2016), El Museo del Barrio, New York.
5. See Escobedo Shepherd, "Chola Style," and Calderón-Douglass, "The Folk Feminist Struggle," for important and classic discussions of chola-style appropriation by mainstream fashion designers. For the importance of digital social media archives in Latinx self-making and of documenting the origins and authorship of these styles in Latinx history, see Herrera, "Preserving Latinx History," and Michelle McVicker, "Preserving the Latinx Sartorial Experience Through Digital Archives," presentation at Archiving Fashion Conference, November 11, 2023, FIT, New York, <https://vimeo.com/883548746>.
6. Designers change Instagram content frequently. The tagline "For the Culture" was listed when retrieved in fall 2024, and it still brands the Luar Threads account as of May 2025. It will likely change by the time of publication, but I note that it was a key branding ethos from its start.