

HYPERALLERGIC

A Conversation on Latino Representation in US Art History Departments

- by [Seph Rodney](#) on January 4, 2016



Dr. Adriana Zavala, associate professor of art history, and director of the Latino Studies program at Tufts University (photo by Christine Cavalier)

In November 2015, I started a [conversation with professor Steven Nelson](#), who had initially tweeted his findings regarding the number of tenured black professors of art history in the United States. Subsequently, I was contacted by Rose Salseda, a PhD student who, along with other scholars of Latino art, has founded the [US Latina/o Art Forum](#). Salseda suggested contacting one of the co-creators of the forum, [Dr. Adriana Zavala](#), associate professor of art history and director of the Latino Studies program at Tufts University. I spoke with her about her research on the state of Latina/o representation in US art history departments.

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Seph Rodney: *Hi Adriana. You teach in the art history department?*

Adriana Zavala: Yes, I'm an art historian. That's what my PhD is in. I teach principally Latin American art, but I also direct a variety of programs. One of them is our Latino Studies Program, which is different than Latin American Studies. I'm thrilled that students here are interested in either Latin American or

Latino art, but the demographics of those classes differ. I'm teaching one of my classes on Latin American art — I trained on Mexican art history, so most of my teaching focuses on Mexico — but I have a survey class on Latin American art, which focuses on Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, and Cuba. That class will typically be about one-third art history majors and two-thirds you name it. When I teach my class on US Latino art, it's between 50–60% students of color, which is really unusual in an art history class at Tufts. That's because of the subject matter. It's a very politicized class. It's a class that's cross-listed with our American Studies program.

SR: *Rose Salseda reached out to me and suggested that I speak to you about the state of Latino representation in art history programs in the United States. You sent me [an article](#) you'd recently written for [the academic journal] [Aztlan](#). Perhaps you could outline for me your salient points of that.*

AZ: A couple of years ago, I was invited by the Getty to participate in a symposium on Latin American art because they've been funding these projects they call [Pacific Standard Time](#). In preparing for that Getty talk, I started doing social science, quantitative research on how much the field of Latin American art history had grown since I entered the field in 1994. The article includes tables that show a 10-year period from 2002 to 2012, but the truth of the matter is I did research back to 1992, because we had the Quincentenary of Columbus' so called "Discovery of the New World." Because of that celebration, Latin America suddenly was on everybody's radar in academia. For reasons of aesthetic clarity, I decided in my *Aztlan* piece to just focus on a 10-year period.

What you see is a 400% growth in the number of doctoral dissertations produced [that are] focused on Latin American art history — 400% growth! Then I was really interested in how many people are teaching US *Latino* art history? You see that 96 doctoral dissertations were completed in art history focused on Latin American art. In that same year period, 13 were finished in US *Latino* art history. I probe why that difference [exists] because, yes, Latin America has been on the US' radar in a new way since 1992, but we hear constantly about the demographic shifts in this country, about the fact that Latinos are going to be more than 50% of US population in a couple of decades. We hear about this constantly and it's mostly in the negative.

SR: *You're making a distinction between American studies, Latin American studies, and Latino studies. Tell us what those distinctions are.*

AZ: I'll start with Latin American Studies. If you have a program in Latin American Studies, you're going to have people trained in anthropology, history, sociology, in language, in literature, in art history sometimes, and that's true of all of those types of programs because they're interdisciplinary, but in Latin American Studies, those people are going to be focused on their field in Latin America — the history of Latin America as a region, the sociology, the political science of Latin America.

American Studies is an interdiscipline that emerged in this country more or less after the 1960s. In American Studies, there are two broad camps. One is an intellectual enterprise, a field of scholarly study that focuses on the salient characteristics of the American experience in the US. It can do so in a way that it is in great measure celebratory. It can also do so in a way that looks critically at structural inequality in the US, at racialization and racism, at the intersections of the US experience and class, gender, and particularly colonialism and imperialism.

Then US Latino Studies, and I always end up having to say *US Latino*, because if I just say Latino Studies, people just assume I'm talking about Latin America. When I'm talking about US Latino Studies, I'm focusing on the intersectional relationship between the United States and the so-called lived American experience in this country for people of the Latino/Latin American diaspora. These might be people who are fourth-generation Mexican Americans whose families have always lived in Texas, when Texas was part of Mexico and then part of the US, or Puerto Rican Nuyoricans, or Puerto Ricans who move back and forth between the mainland and the island, or very recent Salvadoran migrants living in east Boston.

SR: *What did you find out about representations of Latinos/Latinas in higher education, particularly at the level of full and associate professors?*

AZ: Latin American art history is one of the biggest growth fields in art history, but that's not the case for US *Latinos*. I've only been able to identify six full professors. Actually only one of them teaches Chicano or Latino art full time. Meaning that they are also, like me, Latin Americanists, most of them. Most of the people that teach US Latino art history, they're incorporating American artists, meaning non-Latino in a comparative framework. That's pretty alarming that if you lump US Latino and Latin America together, it would seem the field is doing great, but when you really just focus on the people that are dedicated to bringing forward knowledge of the art and visual production of people who identify as US Latino or can be identified that way, there's only one.

SR: *How did you find this out?*

AZ: I tabulated data I found through the College Art Association. They publish an index of doctoral dissertations in progress and doctoral dissertations completed. We also have an association called the Association for Latin American Art. They have a website where they list graduate programs. Starting from that, I sent out a survey to as many people as I could find where I said, "Tell me about what your dissertation was on. Tell me about what you teach. Do you teach courses focused on Chicanos or US Latinos?" I think I sent it out to about 75 people and about 40 replied. Then I also started reaching out to those grad students in the CAA's indices. I found six grad students, who, judging from the titles of their doctoral dissertations, I could tell were working on US Latino and I just emailed them. Then they

referred me to a couple others, but right now I only know of eight doctoral students writing dissertations on US Latino topics.

SR: *What are the numbers for people who are more or less strict Latin Americanists?*

AZ: I believe something in the vicinity of 95 colleges and universities have Latin American art history. I think you could safely say there are approximately 95 colleges and universities with field specialists in Latin American art history.

SR: *With this explosion of interest in Latin American art historical study, why have this emphasis on US Latino study when they seem to be parallel tracks of study?*

AZ: That's a good question. Because they're not parallel tracks of study, because when we're talking about US Latinos and Chicanos, we're talking about people whose history, their political experience, their cultural experience is conditioned in some form by a state of colonization within the US. You just have to listen to the political rhetoric right now to know that these are communities that are still described routinely in a racialized way, in a classist way, and as second- or third-class members of the US community.

Art history can be taught and researched in a way that is quite elitist and quite depoliticized and doesn't interrogate its own assumptions about hierarchies of culture. You could just teach the canon of great works coming out of Western Europe and ignore the US, ignore Latin America. You can do that and get away with it. Part of my commitment as an art historian is to promote understanding about a community, an ethnic community and a racialized community, certainly to broadcast how significant their cultural contributions have been to US culture, but also to ask us to think critically about why they're still so underrepresented institutionally.

My point is that, it's not that I want to at essentialize around ethnicity and race, but until we have foothold, we need to preserve these categories because otherwise we will just continue to be invisibilized and marginalized. We're living in a country where we need to understand the Latino community, our Latino brothers and sisters and we need to understand them in all their complexity in their intersectionality. I, as an art historian, believe that art and visual expressive production is such an important part of our human story. It's not just an aside. It's fundamentally how we express our passions, our desires, our anxieties, our tragedies, and we need to study this.