

The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast
Are We Latinx? Constructs of Inclusivity

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

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[VALERIE STEELE]

Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

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[VALERIE STEELE]

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[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Hi, my name is Tanya Melendez-Escalante, Senior Curator of Education and Public Programs at The Museum at FIT. This episode is a pre-recorded conversation I had with Aida Hurtado and Willy Chavarria on the topic, "Are We Latinx? Constructs of Inclusivity" at the Moda Hoy Latin American and Latinx Fashion Symposium that took place on October 7, 2022.

Aída Hurtado is the Luis Leal Endowed Chair in the Department of Chicana and Chicano studies at the University of California, Santa Bárbara. She is co-editor of *MeXicana Fashions: Politics, Self-Adornment, and Identity Construction*. Willy Chavarria was born in Fresno, California. With a focus on art and commerce, he studied graphic design at the Academy of the Arts and launched his namesake label in 2015. Chavarria takes literal content from his own upbringing in both the agricultural fields and the housing projects of the San Joaquin Valley and combines it with a high fashion sensibility and love for luxury. He is the recipient of the 2022 Cooper Hewitt National Design Award for Fashion Design, and has become increasingly famous for the work he's been doing at Calvin Klein.

Dear Aída, dear Willy, we are very honored and grateful that you are able to join us today to discuss inclusivity and our Latinad. So before we tackle this huge elephant in the room, which is the term Latinx, would you mind sharing with our audience a bit of your careers, a bit of your careers, Aída, in academia, and in fashion, Willy?

[AIDA HURTADO]

So I'm originally from Texas and to be precise, I'm from South Texas, McAllen, Texas, and that's the area that belonged to Mexico before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. And if you talk to anybody from Texas, no matter what they're talking about, they'll start, "In 1848,"

[AUDIENCE AND TANYA LAUGH]

[AIDA HURTADO]

... and so it's a very long conversation. After that, I went to the University of Michigan to grad school, and I was trained in social psychology and then went on to the University of California Santa Cruz where I was in the Psychology Department for over 20 years and then ended up moving to UC Santa Barbara, University of California Santa Barbara to chair the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies.

And in the beginning of my career, I did most of my work with Chicanas and Chicanos and other Latino/x folks. When I moved into ethnic studies, it really gave me the flexibility and the creativity to start talking, mixing those—what I had done before on identity and identification with fashion, so I'm very grateful to be in that kind of creative space where I can combine everything I'm interested in.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And Willy?

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

My name is Willy Chavarria, and unfortunately, I didn't prepare any notes, but I work in fashion. I work for Calvin Klein as Senior Vice President of Design, and I also have my own brand under my own name, Willy Chavarria. And, I actually speak through my art for the most part. So, the reason I started the brand with my team was because first of all, I had fashion training.

So I had gone to art school, and while I was in art school, I was working in the shipping department for a fashion brand. It was Joe Boxer before they were later sold to Kmart or something. But I kind of worked my way up from there. So when I started working for them, I realized, okay, you can make a living off this art, so I really followed that as

my passion. Then I worked for a lot of companies. I worked for Ralph Lauren and other companies and eventually, it was time for me to just start my own line and take the risk of trying to make it.

And I had a store at one point in SoHo that closed about eight years ago. It was the best thing I ever did, close that store, because in SoHo, I was paying a fortune for a small space. But, I decided that because of the way I was raised with a Mexican family and a very clear opinion on social justice, I really wanted to do something that made a difference, politically. And at the time, when I launched the brand, it was before COVID, it was before Black Lives Matter, so it was rather risky at the time, actually. So, it was amazing to do a very political show and have it be well received by the people, and that is what brought me here.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

So how do you see fashion in relation to identity?

[AIDA HURTADO]

Well, I just wanna get a little bit academic here, and that's because the way I entered the analysis of fashion was trying to— social psychologists look at what people believe about themselves, and we profoundly respect that subjectivity. So whatever makes sense to them, it's our job to understand and then try to analyze.

So in the US, I think it's very difficult to talk about groups of people, because we're very, sort of our whole analysis is on individual identities. What are your individual choices? How do you pull yourself from your bootstraps and all that. So it's very difficult to understand that social identities are as important and many times, for many of us, more than individual identity. And so that the way that we fashion ourselves, the way that we dress ourselves, sometimes we don't even have the words for it, but we're expressing those social groupings that are important to us and that we feel we belong to en nuestro corazon, like it's the core of us. And so, even though we don't know how to articulate it, we may-- fashion became a very sort of symbol, if you will, or a signifier of those social identities.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And Willy, how do you see fashion and identity co-mingling in your practice?

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

Well, I agree very much. Well, like what Aída said, it's very, very much a core of who we are, how we present ourselves. In this country, of course we're fortunate enough to be able to buy clothes or get clothes that can define our own style. So, the way I fell in love

with fashion was actually before I even realized there was a fashion industry, and it was seeing my family and the people around me define themselves in how they dressed, and there was no talk of fashion. This is before the internet and way before Instagram. But the fashion that I was seeing was a cultural definition of ourselves. And I would see people, myself included, define ourselves by the culture that we identified with. And as I grew older, I would see more people expressing things in the same way. And then, as I've come to where I am now with my own brand, through my casting, and through how I present the clothing, I want it to show people that I am familiar with, that are me and my family and my friends, at the highest possible levels. And I think that is part of how I see fashion.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And so, Aída, words matter. There has been an evolution in the terms that we use to identify people of Latin American descent in the United States. What is your take on the matter?

[AIDA HURTADO]

First of all, we're now a national population and prior to the '70s, we were mostly located in the southwest. So if you wanted to know anything about mostly Mexican-descent Latinos, you just had to survey the five Southwestern United States. Eventually, we're now everywhere. So we are composed of a really, really large— you know, the largest population next to people of white descent or European descent. And in California, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, we are the majority. And in California, which is the most populous state, we are the majority, and the majority there are of Mexican descent. So, I think that that complexity gets manifested in the composition of that enormous population.

So we represent over 33 countries, over 450 languages. And so that the naming of this population with all its complexity kind of baffles the majority of the US population. And so therefore, we've struggled with what it is that we're gonna call ourselves.

And so these are necklaces that you can get on the internet. And primarily, we identify ourselves as our country of origin, right? So some say, "Nicaragua," some will say, "El Salvador." And I think for us, that have been here for, you know ... To the prior map, before it was the US, I think the word Chicana and Chicano has a different kind of meaning. It's a politicized rootedness in the fact that no pertenecemos a Mexico y no pertenecemos a los Estados Unidos fully, but instead of feeling bad about it, we created our own word, our own legacy, our own artistic expression, our own fashion.

And it's that claiming of identity that is embodied in the word Chicana. And we invite

anybody to identify as Chicano, so it's not exclusive.

[AIDA LAUGHS]

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And Willy, in an interview with WWD, they asked you whether you considered yourself Latinx. Would you share with us what you responded to that question, and have your ideas evolved?

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

Yeah, I remember I was-- I kind of said that I was evolving at the time with the way I related to that word. And when I first heard it, Latinx, I thought it might be something more divisive, talk of divisiveness, I think, when I first started to hear about it. But the more I learned about it, the more I've grown to love that word, and I use that word for myself. I don't always use it, you know, I think it's still a new word.

So in my car over here, I asked the driver about it and he was like, "What I've never heard of it," and he was Latino.

[TANYA LAUGHS]

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

But I like it in the same way that the word Chicano was formed. Because I know that used to be a bad word, but it was adopted, and it became something beautiful. It became an identity for people, and I was raised Chicano. I just believed that's what I was. I thought it was a good word. And I loved that!

And, ultimately words are evolving. They're always evolving. So for example, the word "queer," we were just talking about this. I consider myself queer, but when I was a kid, that was a very bad word. That was like other bad words.

[WILLY LAUGHS]

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

You know, you just didn't say that. And then now, I think it's taken on a new form. So I think the word Latinx is the same. It's ever-evolving. I don't necessarily associate it with gender relation or LGBTQ, I don't necessarily think of it as that. I think of it as the wide range of Latin people who don't always feel like they have fit in the traditional masculine/feminine stereotypes that have been part of our culture for a long time. So yeah, I think it's a cool word.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And there have been heated debates about the use of this word. What do you think about that, Aída?

[AIDA HURTADO]

Well, I think the debates are around what Latinx excludes. So we think of it as inclusiveness, but I also think you also have—there's the other side of the coin, right? So the thing with Latinx is that it is a political unification of what has been excluded, so I completely support it, but I also think it denies the fact that to get Chicana, the A, you know, to get the feminine gender into our public discourse took a feminist movement, and it took a of people's lives, a lot. And that we are beginning to re-experience that oppression with the abolition of abortion. And now we know what it felt like for people growing up in the '60s, where gender was like only men. And so Chicana, for example, in our department, it was the Department of Chicano Studies until about, I don't know, 12 years ago where they added the A. So the A cost us a lot. And so I think to obliterate that or to make it X, in a way, denies that movement.

And so for me, it depends on what the audience is. It depends on what the purpose is. It depends what the political movement behind it is. I don't think I ever use "Hispanic" unless I'm forced to, or if I'm being respectful to somebody else who does. But, so I think specificity as a writer is really important, because otherwise we homogenize entire populations.

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

Yeah, I totally agree. And also, definitely it needs to be used according to your audience, even if it's two people or one person.

[AIDA HURTADO]

Yes

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

I would never use that term with my grandparents.

[AIDA HURTADO]

Yes

[TANYA AND AIDA LAUGH]

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

Or my parents, I'm sure they don't even know that term. But when you think about it, the language was created by the Spanish coming to this land and reforming the Indigenous languages.

[AIDA HURTADO]

Yes

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

So it makes us think that language is ever evolving, and it's almost a little bit of a sign of rebellion. I see it as that, so there's a little bit of a cool factor in it, I think. language is ever evolving,

[AIDA HURTADO]

Right. Right. I agree.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Well, and for us, for example, when we were sharing on social media information about this symposium, we got some comments from our followers who were objecting of us using the word Latinx or other colleagues in other institutions. And so, it is a word that needs to be prepared to talk about, because it's not...

But I feel that if we had said, "Hispanic,"

[AIDA HURTADO]

Yes.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

...or if we had said, "Latino, Latina," there is no, and we cannot list all the Latin American countries, so that's part of the dilemma of the fact that Latin America is a construct, right?

[AIDA HURTADO]

Yes. yes.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

So there's never going to be a perfect word for something that doesn't have... it's kind of diffused and ever changing.

[AIDA HURTADO]

And also, I just wanna say, when we use the X, what I'm saying to young people, to anybody, "I see you, I support you, I'm with you," right?

But I also don't wanna give up what I had to fight for to get the A. And I also wrote a book about the young men in our community, and I want to honor the O, because I want to explore the negative aspects that patriarchy does to the O. So that's why I'm saying it just depends on the specificity of your purpose and also the discussion. I kind of got converted after this morning when I saw Latinx and how thoughtful you were in going through that process. I said, "Yeah okay, I'm behind it," because you thought about about it, and I think that's what we're asking people to do.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Yes, and as you both said, there's not a one-size-fits-all, right? For example, the people who were born in Latin American countries and came here as an adult, I am an example of that, you can use Latino or Latinx or Hispanic, but the truth is, I am Mexican by nationality. I was born in Mexico and probably many of the people who came here as adults will say you know, "I am from where I grew up, I'm Argentinian," or "I am Bolivian" and so again, it's a word that we're trying to contain much more than a few letters can really accomplish.

[AIDA HURTADO]

Absolutely.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And there is this idea of inclusivity, like what is inclusivity in fashion? As we said before, the politics of fashion are very complex. What's your take on that? And I guess let's start with you, Willy, since you are a practitioner?

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

Sometimes I just don't want to be included.

[PARTICIPANTS AND WILLY CHUCKLE]

[AIDA HURTADO]

That's true.

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

So I think inclusivity sometimes gets overused, maybe. For me, I've been called inclusive, and I've done things that have included people who are normally excluded. But for me, it's not being so inclusive as much as it is celebrating people for who they are. I think in fashion specifically, people of color have tried to be included by changing, by adapting to the fashion world around them. I intentionally did not want to do that. I intentionally wanted to have a brown team, celebrate brown people on my runways, and make it a brown brand. So for me, it's, well, inclusivity is great. It's great to include others of course. We don't exclude people, but for me, the focus is really on celebrating the people that are normally unseen.

[AIDA HURTADO]

I think that for me, let me answer in two ways. One is, I like the distinction between focus and inclusiveness. Focus means that, by definition, not everybody's gonna be included. But if you make your focus explicit and clear and purposeful, and try to have some positive outcome in the world, then I think that's okay to be focused. The inclusivity without that kind of thought is really not very valuable, I think. And I always like to—I give my students this, this is my favorite for everything, and that's the metaphor of capirotada. I don't know if you've ever had that Mexican dish.

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

Mmmm.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

It's so good.

[AIDA HURTADO]

It's probably one the only dessert my mom knew how to make and it was like you found anything in the kitchen, you put it in. If you had nuts, if you had rotting bread or whatever, and pour a lot of sugar over it, and that's it. That's your dessert. And so, in that sense, I like the way fashion, you can incorporate things depending on how you want your capirotada to taste. So it's not mindless, it's not just randomly, but it is availability.

So what I study, the kind of fashion I study, is not fashion designers per se, but it's la gente that goes to the Goodwill or goes to the local swap meet, and they make their earrings, they sell their earrings. There's an aesthetic or the way viejitas crochet their tortilla warmers. There's an aesthetic that comes out of what is available. And the capirotada can also be very tasty, but it's not available to us. And so to me, making that explicit is what I think is a different dimension to fashion and self aesthetics and self

fashioning that manifests the social identities that many times nobody else sees.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

And I guess we only have a couple minutes left. This has gone by so fast. So really quickly, how do you feel your specific heritages have been a positive contribution to your respective careers? Because sometimes being from a minority background can be seen as an obstacle, but I think there also is, it comes with its advantages. If you could think of maybe one positive that has come of your background Aída, would you like to go?

[AIDA HURTADO]

Well, this to me is like the *MeXicana Fashions* edited book that I did was a rediscovering of childhood practices that I didn't even know I had. It was with my grandmother teaching me how to sew with her Singer machine. It turns out everybody I know had a grandmother with a Singer machine.

I was like, okay, this is... and so it opened up practices and a potential analysis of those practices that were normalized, so normalized that they were invisible to me. And now, it's a source of creativity. It's a source of communication. I'm being thrown into another world with you guys there. It's wonderful, and I'm beginning to see aesthetics in a very different way as a result of reexamining those childhood practices, including going to the Goodwill and repurposing clothes and looking good at quinceaneras and baptisms, 'cause we know how to party. And so, it's like you had to have a new outfit for everything. And so all that stuff just was organically an art, not only in mind, but in our communities and redefining them as fashion or as self-crafting, I think it's very exciting for me.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Thank you, and Willy?

[WILLY CHAVARRIA]

I agree with so much of what you said, Aída, and I feel like my cultural identity has shaped my entire existence in everything I do. And the fashion aspect of it has just been one of those things. I think I work hard because of my upbringing. I think that my family came to the United States, worked in the fields and worked, worked, worked for a better future or my better future. So I think that's one aspect.

I also think that something that has actually been an incredible blessing and even somewhat of a surprise is being so true to my fashion vision and very much taking elements of who I am, elements of my culture and weaving them into the story of what I

make. And I think there was a period when I was making things that were almost saying like, "Look, this is Chicanismo or Chicanx," on the runway.

And now, I think as I grow as a designer, and my team gets more and more sophisticated, we continue to evolve that fashion, but the foundation of it is always—it's grounded in our cultures.

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

Yeah, wonderful, and we're out of time. This has been a wonderful conversation. If you would join me in thanking Willy and Aída.

[AIDA HURTADO]

Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

[TANYA MELENDEZ-ESCALANTE]

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