Title: Passing the Fitness Test: Representation of the Latina/o body in the Immigration Debate

Abstract: In this paper I identify and discuss the contemporary discursive construction of the Latino/a body as a national threat by some academics opposed to Latino immigration. In their alarmist narratives, these conservatives conjure images of deviant and inferior Latino immigrant bodies to produce fears of over population, economic crisis, social decay, criminality, and genetic inferiority. I first analyze the doctoral dissertation of Jason Richwine, former employee of the Heritage Foundation, as an entry point to a larger discussion of what Leo R. Chavez calls the “Latino Threat Narrative,” that is, the popular myth that Latinos are a threat to the well being of US society. For Richwine, there exist significant differences in intelligence between whites and Latinos, differences that although partly due to upbringing, are ultimately tied to genetic determinism. I place Richwine’s reliance on presumed genetic differences within a historical context, one that includes the late 19th and 20th century discourses of immigration and biological determinism. I argue that Richwine’s work, like that of Samuel P. Huntington before him, ultimately promotes violence against Latinos. As a conclusion to this paper, I briefly discuss the work of queer undocumented visual artist Julio Salgado, who portrays in his poster art defiant “undocuqueer” bodies that challenge the “Latino Threat Narrative,” and instead put forth defiant notions of desire, love, and community. In Salgado’s work, I find a radical proposal for inclusion that can serve as an alternative to dehumanizing notions of the body, one that can move us closer to conceptions of community that go beyond the exclusionary and violent logic of legal citizenship and biological determinism.

Biography: Agustin Palacios is a professor of La Raza Studies at Contra Costa College, where he serves as co-chair for the Africana/Chicano/Ethnic Studies Department. He graduated from UC Berkeley’s Ethnic Studies Graduate Program. His dissertation, (Dis)Claiming Mestizofilia: Chicana/os Disarticulating Euromestizaje, is a transnational intellectual history of the idea of mestizaje. As a child he lived in the Mexican border-town of Mexicali, two blocks away from the border wall, and later moved to Salinas, where his mother worked as a farm-worker. His academic work focuses on Chicano/a and Mexican intellectual history, racial formations, social Darwinism and eugenics, coloniality and discourses of Latinidad.