

The Tangled Braid: Race as Signifier in the Art of Sula Bermúdez-Silverman

Catalina Chernavvsky Sequeira, University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

In *Table for Elegua, Table for Elijah* (2018), Sula Bermúdez-Silverman creates an autobiographical meditation focused on the potential of hair as a racial signifier. Through two video works embedded in the installation, Bermúdez-Silverman juxtaposes her mixed-race identity with the controversial figure of Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who insists she is Black. This paper examines how the artist incorporates Dolezal's story not to sensationalize it, but to grapple with the questions her controversy raises about racial legibility and the cultural wound it left on Black communities. Using critical texts by Nicole Fleetwood, Saidiya Hartman, Sandra Ruiz, and José Esteban Muñoz that conceptualize race, colorism, and its relationship to *latinidad* as well as its manifestations in the United States, I argue that Bermúdez-Silverman reveals the inherent slippage between racial and ethnic boundaries, which are perpetually blurred and re-signified. Rather than resolve ambiguities surrounding identity, Bermúdez-Silverman insists on dwelling in them, making visible the precarity and contingencies of racial categories. With the videos exemplifying a small part of what the artist sought to investigate through *Table for Elegua, Table for Elijah*, they demonstrate how she did not privilege appropriative behavior that left a cultural wound, but rather used it to better understand the multivalent facets of her own identity, dissecting the wound in an attempt to find healing.

Keywords:

racial legibility, appropriation, colorism, visuality, installation, video art

In June 2015, the internet erupted with the story of Rachel Dolezal, a white woman in Spokane, Washington who was president of the city's NAACP chapter and claimed to be Black. Dolezal's false posturing ignited a complicated and harmful debate regarding racial identity in the United States. Identifying as a woman who was born white but is now Black, she used her adoptive siblings and biological and adoptive children to affirm her racial identity. Moreover, she claimed the generational suffering of Black people in the United States as her own. Her story went viral across conservative and liberal news outlets alike. Dolezal added fuel to the fire by appearing on major television news programs such as *The Today Show* and *The Real*. This media attention culminated in Dolezal's publication of a memoir entitled *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World* in 2017, an attempt to mitigate the public damage she had done to her own reputation.¹ What is poignant about Dolezal's story is not her public persona but the platform she was given both before and after being outed as white. It raises the question: would a Black person claiming to be white in the United States today be taken as seriously and make for such a widespread news story? Probably not, given the complex history of racial passing, which

1 She was also the subject of a documentary film on Netflix in 2018 to tell her story and that of her family. See *The Rachel Divide* directed by Lauren Brownson (United States: Netflix, 2018).



Figure 1. Sula Bermúdez-Silverman, *Table for Elegua, Table for Elijah*, 2018, clay dominoes, level vials, tar brush, Drakels, spork, hair pick, Elijah's Cup, Manishewitz concord grape wine, seder plate, salt water, Polly pocket, Lazy Kate, artist's hair, herramientas de Santería, 7 knob green candle, butt plug, kanekalon synthetic hair, napkin contract, railroad spike, iron round hair brush, stainless steel potato masher, dome magnifier, offerings for Elegua: ache de santo, cascarilla, chamalongos, cowrie shells, coyote teeth, guinea pepper (grains of paradise), clavo de linea, jutia pescado humado, macutos, brass bell, obatala egg, toasted corn, 3 x 7 x 7 ft when closed. Installation view from *Neither Fish, Flesh, nor Fowl*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, 2020. Photograph by Elon Schoenholz.

at times allowed Black people to benefit from the advantages of a white identity. In the contemporary moment, a Black person claiming to be white might be dismissed, without so much as a newspaper column or clickbait headline.²

I preface this essay with Dolezal's story because of her involvement in *Table for Elegua, Table for Elijah* (2018, fig. 1) by artist Sula Bermúdez-Silverman and because of the questions her

2 For discussion on the history of "passing" and "reverse passing" illustrating various instances in which white people passed as non-white, see Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008) and Daniel J. Sharfstein, "Rachel Dolezal's 'Passing' Isn't So Unusual," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/magazine/rachel-dolezals-passing-isnt-so-unusual.html>. Another similar example of a woman who claimed to be Black and Latina is the case of Jessica Krug, who revealed in 2020 she had appropriated Blackness as part of her racial identity. Unlike Dolezal who never admitted publicly to being white, Krug published a public admittance and apology for her actions in a blog post. See Michael Levenson, "Professor Investigated for Posing as Black Has Resigned, University Says," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/us/jessica-krug-george-washington-university.html> and Poppy Noor, "White US professor Jessica Krug admits she has pretended to be Black for years," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/03/jessica-krug-white-professor-pretended-black>.

controversy raises about racial legibility. We enter gallery spaces with preconceived notions of what it means to be Black or white, notions that are most often rooted in lived experience. Thus, *Table for Eleggua*, *Table for Elijah* is significant both as an exercise in the artist's self-exploration and because of the affective resonance it activates in viewers. Bermúdez-Silverman's engagement with Dolezal's story is not about sensationalizing her, but about the cultural wound she represents.

Created as part of Bermúdez-Silverman's MFA thesis at Yale University, *Table for Eleggua*, *Table for Elijah* is an installation comprised of a two-piece table with objects meticulously arranged across its surface. It includes spiritual items, like offerings for Eleggua from Santería and Elijah's cup of wine from Judaism—religions practiced by Bermúdez-Silverman's grandmothers, respectively. The spiritual tokens sit alongside children's toys, various hair tools, kitchen utensils, and sex toys. Other pieces include six dreidels emblazoned with images of Canadian rapper Drake ("Drakels"), a compact Polly Pocket hair salon play kit, and a Lazy Kate with the artist's hair spun onto it. Two videos are positioned on opposite sides of the table: a video triptych titled *Duck Test* (2018) and a single-channel work, *Removal of Faux Locs Installed by Nkechi Diallo (aka Rachel Dolezal)* (2018). These videos, which exist within the context of the overall installation, also serve as documentation of an unfinished project that explores racial signification and its contribution to identity formation.³ The objects combine to create a kind of portrait of the artist; items that may have been found around her childhood home are combined with more obvious traces of the self, such as video recordings and human hair collected from the artist's hairbrush.

Table for Eleggua, *Table for Elijah* is primarily autobiographical. Only in the video *Duck Test* does Bermúdez-Silverman share her investigation of self with someone else, namely, Rachel Dolezal. Bermúdez-Silverman, who is of Jewish and Afro-Puerto Rican heritage, became interested in Dolezal's physical resemblance to herself. As she explains, "The reason I was so intrigued by her was that all she did was change her hair in order to become 'Black.' That is kind of the same line I straddle on [...] The scale can be tipped one way or another depending on how someone views me, and it's mostly my hair that does that."⁴ This observation points to how visibility structures racial perception. As Nicole Fleetwood writes, seeing racial difference is never simple; it becomes more complicated for those of mixed race, whose skin color may not, for example, register as Black while their features suggest otherwise.⁵ In Bermúdez-Silverman's case, hair becomes the marker of her racial ambiguity.

Colorism—discrimination based on skin tone within the same racial or ethnic group—complicates this terrain further. Fleetwood observes that "colorism attempts to fix a scale of blackness based on dominant structuring principles of the field of vision," yet simultaneously produces anxiety about vision's failure to detect difference.⁶ She continues, "Because colorism as a system of creating and maintaining racial differences produces its own failure—that is, certain bodies escaping detection—the US legal system historically has been and continues to be a central

3 Sula Bermúdez-Silverman, email exchange with author, March 21–April 29, 2022.

4 André-Naquian Wheeler, "sula bermudez-silverman turns her hair into embroidered works of art," *i-D Magazine*, June 18, 2018, <https://i-d.co/article/sula-bermudez-silverman-turns-her-hair-into-embroidered-works-of-art/>.

5 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visibility, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 72.

6 Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 73.

institution for regulating and adjudicating colorist practices.”⁷ Both Dolezal and Bermúdez-Silverman occupy positions of relative privilege due to having a light complexion, yet their proximity to whiteness marks them in pointedly different ways. Dolezal performed Blackness for over five years largely through the wigs she wore or how she styled her hair, while Bermúdez-Silverman’s hair signals her Afro-Latina identity. The slippage of racial detection operates in both directions, though with vastly different stakes.

As an Afro-Latina of Puerto Rican descent, Bermúdez-Silverman navigates not only colorist ideology but also *latinidad*, which scholar Tatiana Flores argues is rooted in anti-Black racism.⁸ Further, as Sandra Ruiz writes, Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory remains trapped in a time loop of colonialism since its annexation in 1898.⁹ To be Puerto Rican, as Ruiz notes, is to be inherently of mixed race, bound by temporal boundaries beyond linear history due to the island’s quasi-colonial status.¹⁰ Yet, the boundaries between race and ethnicity are perpetually blurred and re-signified, leaving the question of what it means to be Afro-Latina unresolved even in contemporary scholarship. José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “brownness” captures this: a racialization that indexes vulnerability to discrimination, xenophobia, and dehumanization, operating similarly to anti-Black racism and not reducible to Latinx identity. His “brown commons” resists racial capitalism’s individualizing effect through shared affective experiences and conviviality.¹¹ As he states, “Brown, it is important to mention, is not strictly the shared experience of harm between people and things; it is also the potential for the refusal and resistance to that often-systemic harm. Brownness is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility.”¹² Like Muñoz’s concept of Brownness, Bermúdez-Silverman’s artwork refuses easy categorization, insisting instead on the instability and at times futility of racial and ethnic boundaries.¹³

What remains consistent across *Table for Elegua*, *Table for Elijah* is the artist’s fixation on hair and its many forms, both on and beyond her body. In the installation, several combs and brushes are laid out alongside kitchen utensils that might resemble hair tools, including a large spork and a potato masher. On a three-bobbin arched Lazy Kate, Bermúdez-Silverman has spun her hair like any other fiber to create strands of yarn. By experimenting with the ways in which

7 Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 76.

8 Tatiana Flores, “‘Latinidad Is Cancelled’: Confronting an Anti-Black Construct,” *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 3, no. 3 (2021): 58–79.

9 Sandra Ruiz writes, “The Puerto Rican situation exists simultaneously under too much time and timelessness: on the one hand time has appeared to stand still for the island, basically unchanged in its quasi-national status since the annexation of Puerto Rico to the United States in 1898. The island’s lack of a ‘liberatory moment’ makes it difficult to read through traditional constructions of time and subject completion, so I turn to temporal acts of excess and redeploy them as resistance, inner strength, survival, transformation, and self-determination through scenes of endurance. [...] There’s a way to read with and through unwantedness, I suggest, that does not destroy the futural prospects of the subject under a looping colonialism.” See Sandra Ruiz, *Ricanness: Enduring time in anticolonial performance* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 25.

10 Ruiz, *Ricanness*, 2. Further, the 2010 and 2020 census data show an increasing number of Puerto Rican citizens identify as non-white. See Isar Godreau and Yarimar Bonilla, “Nonsovereign Racecraft: How Colonialism, Debt, and Disaster are Transforming Puerto Rican Racial Subjectivities,” *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 3 (2021): 517.

11 José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2–3.

12 Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 4.

13 Sóla Saar Agustsson, “Artists at Work: Sula Bermúdez-Silverman,” *East of Borneo*, March 31, 2021, <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/artists-at-work-sula-bermudez-silverman/>.

her hair can be presented and signified, the artist challenges the fundamental idea with which she started: her hair as the sole indicator of her racial difference. Hair as racial indicator can be manipulated in ways that skin complexion cannot. The artist, for example, could straighten her hair to indicate whiteness. If she cuts all of her hair, her racial ambiguity may be exacerbated or may dissipate. The malleability and instability of hair seem self-evident for the artist,

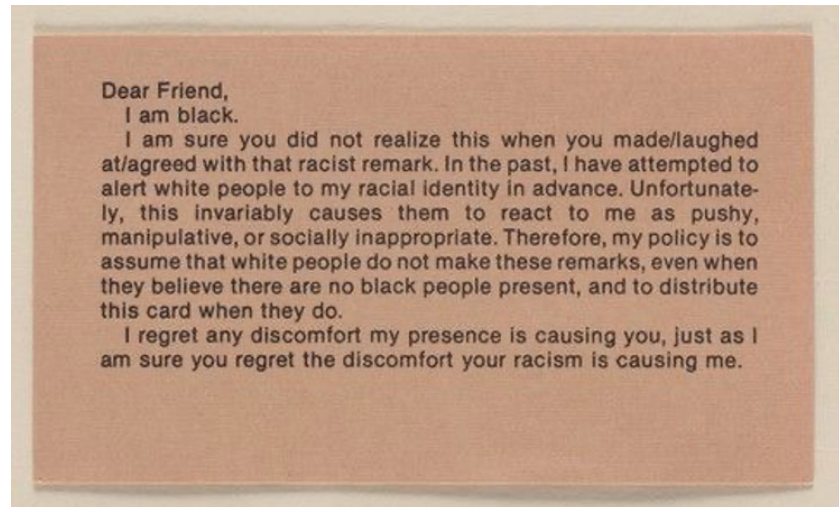


Figure 2. Adrian Piper, *My Calling (Card) #1*, 1986, offset lithograph, 1/8 × 1 1/8 in (0.3 × 2.9 cm). Image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.

as she displays vestiges of hair once on her body now turned to waste material. While her work takes many subtle, implicit forms, Bermúdez-Silverman's approach to signifying her race is also reminiscent of a much more confrontational work by Adrian Piper. Piper's *My Calling (Card) #1* (1986, fig. 2) challenges assumptions about racial legibility and confronts everyday racism.¹⁴ Like Piper, Bermúdez-Silverman insists on disrupting comfortable assumptions, though her strategy differs. Whereas Piper hands out cards to those who have made racist remarks, Bermúdez-Silverman invites Dolezal into an extended, complex collaboration.

The video *Duck Test* documents segments of Bermúdez-Silverman and Dolezal's nine-hour conversation in a fabricated hair salon while Dolezal braids the artist's hair. The video contains no sound, and Dolezal's face is never fully visible. By withholding audio and image, Bermúdez-Silverman denies Dolezal a platform for redemption or explanation, forcing viewers instead

14 In handing out her calling card, Piper negates her ability to "pass" as white, and concludes with the statement, "I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me." Piper by no means initiates the discomfort, but by calling it out she disturbs the recipient of the card and strips them of the ability to claim any innocence in the matter. As David Marriott concisely points out, the calling card signifies "acts of negation and denial, the incipient hypocrisy when white people—innocently or not, unwittingly or not—imagining themselves unobserved by blacks, give vent to barely repressed forms of conscious and unconscious hatred." Marriott highlights the "accidental nature" in which hatred, discomfort, and contempt arise through such exchange catalyzed by Piper's performance. The artist denies any ability for a racist remark to go unnoticed or forgotten and brings forth as Marriott states, "the affect of those veiled scenes to social consciousness, to show how racism in American social life can itself be exchanged again and again, and especially when the targets of such violence are denied any symbolic equivalence as presences." Both Piper's *My Calling (Card) #1* and the controversy of Rachel Dolezal have to do with a self-identification that might contradict what people see, or what is real. In the case of Piper, she calls attention to her Blackness to stand up against racism in everyday life, though she might not appear Black as her calling card indicates. For Dolezal, she presents as Black though she is white. Although these are extremely different circumstances, they share in their strained similarities in their practice of self-presentation and performativity. See David Marriott, "On Racial Etiquette: Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Cards)*," *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 1 (2013): <https://www.pomoculture.org/2016/09/25/on-racial-etiquette-adrian-pipers-my-calling-cards/>.

into discomfort and speculation.¹⁵ When the artist discusses the work, however, she reveals that Dolezal was “easy to get along with” and “charming and sociable”—revelations that complicate the audience’s moral certainty and serve as a reminder of people’s complicated humanity.¹⁶



Figure 3. Internet meme of Jeremy Meeks’ mugshot, 2015. Image courtesy of BBC News.

Dolezal’s story is one that should be taken seriously and risks collapsing the identities of constantly persecuted peoples with those who have historically experienced privilege due to their incorrectly presumed racial superiority. At the same time, it is just one more product of popular culture, one that everyone might collectively gawk at for its absurdity for a few days or weeks, until the next hit piece. Dolezal’s story can be understood as a paradigm of our current moment in pop culture: the age of the internet and misinformation, “going viral,” memes, clickbait, and instant fandom. This is complicated, however, by Bermúdez-Silverman’s construction of a careful milieu that looks like a retro hair salon with checkered floors, art on the walls, and colorful tools, some of which re-appear on *Table for Eleggua*, *Table for Elijah*. These nostalgic elements are intermixed with current trends, bringing the viewer constantly back to the present moment in *Duck Test*.

One such moment is a prolonged view of a small clipping of *The New York Times* “Arts” section that sits at the bottom of the salon mirror. The image is a mugshot of Jeremy Meeks that turned into an internet meme which in turn landed him a modeling career when he was released from prison in 2016. In 2015, Meeks was convicted of being a felon in possession of a firearm stemming from a charge from the previous year in Stockton, California.¹⁷ Upon Meeks’s arrest, his mugshot was posted by the local police on Facebook, and internet users instantly took to editing various captions onto the image on account of his presumed attractiveness. The image is highly stylized, which is unusual for such a portrait. With tattoos covering his neck, his sharp jawline, and piercing blue eyes, Meeks presents viewers with “reproducible racial alterity, nationalism, and hypermasculinity,” as Fleetwood writes.¹⁸ Through his appearance and tattoos—specifically the teardrop on his left cheek—Meeks is a prime example of what Fleetwood describes as “racialized alterity in the context of urban fashion and Black masculinity,” that is, “how the black male body signifies within and outside of black communities a form of coolness through racialized and masculine difference and a diaphanous ‘outlawness’

15 Bermúdez-Silverman, email exchange with author, March 21–April 29, 2022.

16 Wheeler, “sula bermudez-silverman turns her hair into embroidered works of art.”

17 See Veronica Rocha, “‘Hot Felon’ Jeremy Meeks released from federal prison and gets job offers,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-hot-felon-jeremy-meeks-released-20160309-story.html> and J. Freedom du Lac, “‘Hot mugshot guy’ Jeremy Meeks has been sentenced to 27 months in federal prison,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/02/06/hot-mugshot-guy-jeremy-meeks-has-been-sentenced-to-27-months-in-federal-prison/>.

18 Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 152.

that maintains an affective quality even as it functions as a highly reproducible and mass-marketed commodity.”¹⁹ Meeks’s mugshot as an object of illicit visual pleasure defies expectations, thus coming as a welcome surprise to meme creators.

The fascination with Dolezal is in some sense a futile one, not unlike a viral meme that dies just as quickly as it is born. Dolezal’s story in the limelight is undoubtedly charged with more complex issues of racial identity than a meme like Meeks’s mugshot—one that in fact opened a new professional avenue for him as a runway model. As long as she garners media attention for claiming to be Black, Dolezal detracts from the voices of Black women who are fighting to be seen on equal terms with men and on equal terms with white individuals, including Spokane-based activists and NAACP members Kitara Johnson and Latoya Brackett who were deceived and felt negatively impacted as a consequence of Dolezal’s actions.²⁰

Removal of Faux Locs Installed by Nkechi Diallo (aka Rachel Dolezal) documents a different intimacy from *Duck Test*. In *Removal of Faux Locs*, Bermúdez-Silverman sits alone for several hours, directly facing the camera as she removes the braids Dolezal installed. The video opens with the artist making direct eye contact with the camera, asserting her gaze and agency. As the video accelerates, she continues locking eyes with the camera every few seconds, reminding viewers that she is looking back as actively as they are watching her. Midway through, text flashes on the screen that states, “I had to go eat something,” acknowledging the prolonged labor involved. In the final minutes, the video returns to normal speed as light fades; she finishes brushing out her natural hair, closing her laptop as the room darkens.²¹

Removal of Faux Locs demonstrates a quotidian discomfort familiar to many women with textured hair, a process usually hidden in private, intimate spaces. For viewers without textured hair, Bermúdez-Silverman makes visible an arduous, repetitive labor that is all too frequently expected but overlooked. For those with textured hair, she creates space for recognition and solidarity. The difference between the discomfort of *Duck Test* and *Removal of Faux Locs* lies here: one is interpersonal and speculative, while the other is embodied and shared.

A key instrument in the creation of *Duck Test* and *Removal of Faux Locs* is present in *Table for Elegua*, *Table for Elijah* and privileged on the artist’s website: the Actor Employment Agreement between Dolezal and Bermúdez-Silverman (2018).²² The agreement is printed onto a

19 Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 152.

20 Johnson says, “We need to hold our leaders accountable. How is anybody supposed to believe any word that comes out of your mouth when she talked about their roles of race for African-Americans and the disparity? She was speaking truth, but now, in Spokane, it’s hard to push that message. And who’s affected by this? All the people that the NAACP had been advocating for.” She continues describing Dolezal, “I don’t care what color she is, I don’t care how she ethnically identifies, but it’s not okay to lie. That’s not okay.” Moreover, Beckett says of Dolezal, “She destroyed something that now we have to rebuild, if we can. She created the destruction for any Black woman after that, because she was pulling this race card,” and “In Black culture, if someone’s saying that they’re Black, you’re not going to question it.” See *The Rachel Divide*, online, directed by Lauren Brownson (United States: Netflix, 2018).

21 As Fleetwood writes, “Video art, in general, led to a movement of self-conscious artistic practice in which the artist used the medium of video for an often intimate exploration of the self, most intimately one’s own corporeality.” That is exactly what is evidenced through Bermúdez-Silverman’s two video works, particularly in *Removal of Faux Locs Installed by Nkechi Diallo (aka Rachel Dolezal)* as viewers are obligated to confront the muscle movements, tiredness, and repetition that the artist endures. See Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 191.

22 The Actor Employment Agreement previously appeared reproduced on the artist’s website, however the site is no longer extant.

cloth napkin and presented alongside the videos and objects on the table. The agreement brings viewers back to reality. Dolezal is not just a character in Bermúdez-Silverman's work nor is she simply a figment of internet pop culture. She is a real person, who was compensated for her participation in *Duck Test* and given standard terms and conditions prior to the project. Dolezal's legal name change from Rachel to Nkechi Amare Diallo in 2016 necessitates closer scrutiny. The act mirrors, disturbingly, Saidiya Hartman's decision to change her name from Valarie to Saidiya:

I asserted my African heritage to free myself from my mother's grand designs. Saidiya liberated me from parental disapproval and pruned the bourgeois branches of my genealogy. It didn't matter that I had been rejected first. My name established my authority with the people, extirpated all evidence of upstanding Negroes and their striving bastard heirs, and confirmed my place in the company of poor black girls—Tamikas, Roqueshas, and Shan-equas. Most of all, it dashed my mother's hopes. I had found it in an African names book; it means "helper."²³

Given that Hartman is a brilliant pioneer of reframing our understandings of slavery, history, and archiving, Dolezal's seemingly parallel act represents something entirely different. Hartman's name change was recuperative, reclaiming an erased cultural inheritance. Dolezal's was appropriative, though she too might have found her new legal name in an African names book. Both claim reinvention through naming, but the latter constitutes cultural theft. Bermúdez-Silverman invites us to sit in this discomfort: the recognition that the same gesture can enact either healing or violence depending on who performs it and from what position of power.

Bermúdez-Silverman had no intention of further promoting Dolezal or sensationalizing her story. As the artist claims in a 2018 interview: "My project was less concerned with her as a person and more about the cultural wound that she represents for so many people of color. Her notoriety reveals the depth and intensity of the pain and frustration people, namely Black people, feel about race and appropriation in the United States."²⁴ Ultimately, the videos were just a small part of what Bermúdez-Silverman sought to investigate through *Table for Eleggua*, *Table for Elijah*. The artist did not privilege appropriative behavior that left this "cultural wound," but rather used it to better understand the multivalent facets of her own identity. Bermúdez-Silverman dissected the wound in an attempt to find healing.

Table for Eleggua, *Table for Elijah* was included in Bermúdez-Silverman's first solo museum show, *Neither Fish, Flesh, nor Fowl* (2020–2021) at the California African American Museum (CAAM). Yet institutional recognition brings its own complications. CAAM specifically sought an Afro-Latinx artist, revealing how institutions confine artists within predetermined racial and ethnic taxonomies even as they strive to uplift them. Bermúdez-Silverman has declined other opportunities when she discovered all-white artist rosters, recognizing that her light skin and relative visibility position her as a "palatable face." When asked about how her racial ambiguity informs people's assumptions of her work, Bermúdez-Silverman stated:

I have a lot to say about that. Particularly during the Black Lives Matter uprising, I started getting emails and invitations, but I mostly declined the opportunities because I would go to the website and I would see there were literally zero Black artists on these rosters. It was clear that I was going to be a palatable face for them to put as their Black artist, right?

23 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 8.

24 Wheeler, "sula bermudez-silverman turns her hair into embroidered works of art."

First of all, this opportunity should go to somebody else who is darker-skinned than me or more visually Black. It's like, "You look sort of different, but you still have white skin." Even when I got the CAAM show, I was like, "Why am I the one getting this opportunity?" It's hard because even though I can pass as a white person, the context of how I'm perceived changes every single day.²⁵

Much like how Dolezal may have benefited from her lighter complexion during her tenure as president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP, so too does Bermúdez-Silverman recognize the ways in which her appearance benefits her over other Afro-Latina artists and how she might be more readily tokenized as a Black and/or Latina artist in a sea of white creators. Such self-awareness catalyzes conversations surrounding issues of representation, inclusion, and equity. Rather than resolve ambiguities surrounding identity, Bermúdez-Silverman insists on dwelling in them, making visible the instability and precarity of racial categories and the persistent violence of attempting to contain people within them. Her work demands that viewers remain uncomfortable, refusing easy answers and instead confronting the tangled structures of race, ethnicity, and visual legibility that shape how we see and are seen.

25 Interview by Folasade Ologundudu, "Sula Bermúdez-Silverman," *Foundwork*, 2022, <https://foundwork.art/dialogues/sula-bermudez-silverman>.

Bibliography

Bermúdez-Silverman, Sula. Email exchange with author, March 21–April 29, 2022.

California African American Museum. “Sula Bermúdez-Silverman: ‘Table for Eleggua, Table for Elijah.’” Facebook, March 29, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=251392303337040>.

Dreisinger, Baz. *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

du Lac, J. Freedom. “‘Hot mugshot guy’ Jeremy Meeks has been sentenced to 27 months in federal prison.” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/02/06/hot-mugshot-guy-jeremy-meeks-has-been-sentenced-to-27-months-in-federal-prison/>.

Fleetwood, Nicole R. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Flores, Tatiana. “‘Latinidad Is Cancelled’: Confronting an Anti-Black Construct.” *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 3, no. 3 (2021): 58–79.

Godreau, Isar and Yarimar Bonilla. “Nonsovereign Racecraft: How Colonialism, Debt, and Disaster are Transforming Puerto Rican Racial Subjectivities.” *American Anthropologist* 123 (2021): 509–525. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/10.1111/aman.13601>

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Marriott, David. “On Racial Etiquette: Adrian Piper’s My Calling (Cards).” *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 1 (2013).

Muñoz, José Esteban. *The Sense of Brown*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.

Ologundudu, Folasade. “Sula Bermúdez-Silverman.” *Foundwork*, 2022. Interview with Sula Bermúdez-Silverman conducted by Folasade Ologundudu. <https://foundwork.art/dialogues/sula-bermudez-silverman>.

Rocha, Veronica. “‘Hot Felon’ Jeremy Meeks released from federal prison and gets job offers.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2016. <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-hot-felon-jeremy-meeks-released-20160309-story.html>.

Ruiz, Sandra. *Ricanness: Enduring time in anticolonial performance*. New York: NYU Press, 2019.

Saar Agustsson, Sóla. "Artists at Work: Sula Bermúdez-Silverman." *East of Borneo*, March 31, 2021. <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/artists-at-work-sula-bermudez-silverman/>.

Sharfstein, Daniel J. "Rachel Dolezal's 'Passing' Isn't So Unusual." *The New York Times*, June 15, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/magazine/rachel-dolezals-passing-isnt-so-unusual.html>.

The Rachel Divide. Online. Directed by Lauren Brownson. United States: Netflix, 2018.

Wheeler, André-Naquian. "sula bermudez-silverman turns her hair into embroidered works of art." *i-D Magazine*, June 18, 2018. <https://i-d.co/article/sula-bermudez-silverman-turns-her-hair-into-embroidered-works-of-art/>.