

OUR MIGRANT SOULS

A
MEDITATION
ON RACE
AND THE
MEANINGS
AND MYTHS
OF
"LATINO"

AUTHOR OF
DEEP
DOWN
DARK

HÉCTOR
TOBAR

My hometown is located on a flat coastal plain once covered in brush, and intersected by rivers and creeks where pure water has bubbled up from springs since the dawn of the Pleistocene. As a settled, human place, it has belonged to the Tongva and to three different empires. Once it was a rural outpost of the Spanish Crown, and then a Mexican pueblo until it was taken by the United States in a war of conquest and became what it is today: the newest and last megalopolis built in the westward march of Western civilization across the Western Hemisphere. From its first days, Los Angeles was a place where the racial categories of empires mattered, and where people struggled to shake off the markings and the namings of race.

The forty-four original settlers of Los Angeles carried with them the racial designations of New Spain, labels that appeared in the town's first census, in 1781: "mulato," "mestizo," "indio," "negro," and "español." In the next count, nine years later, many of these first Angelenos had become lighter. Pablo Rodriguez, an "indio" in 1781, became a "coyote" (three-quarters Indian, one-quarter European) in

the 1790 census; José Moreno went from “mulato” to “mestizo,” and José Navarro from “mestizo” to “español.” Within a generation, this ethnically fluid group of people, assembled mostly from the lower castes of New Spain, shook off those old categories altogether and gave themselves a rebirth into a new ethnic identity, Californio.

Pío Pico, born in 1801 and the most famous Californio of his time, was an Afro-Español (today we’d say he “presents as Black”) whose father spoke the Indigenous language Tongva and who married a fair-skinned woman from a well-off Los Angeles family. Before the U.S. conquest, Pío Pico rose to become a member of the California elite (he was the last Mexican governor of California), and he epitomized the aspirations of Californios as an ethnic group; the idea that they had somehow transcended the lower castes of New Spain and become “people of reason.”

