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Transnational Racialization:

How Immigration Transforms Conceptions of Race in Mexico and the U.S.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Sociology

by

Sylvia Zamora

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Transnational Racialization:

How Immigration Transforms Conceptions of Race in Mexico and the U.S.

by

Sylvia Zamora

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Vilma Ortiz, Chair

The dominant paradigm of American race relations has changed dramatically in the last two decades, as the prevailing White-Black binary is challenged by mass migration from Latin America. Although immigrants arrive to the U.S. with racial ideologies and practices that originate in their countries of origin, we know little about how ideas about race “travel” with migrants across borders, and the implications of this for immigrant incorporation into the U.S.’ racial structure. My dissertation examines how migration to the U.S. transforms immigrant understandings of race. Whereas the U.S. racial system has been historically characterized by the rule of hypodescent, Mexico is an *indo-mestizo* nation where the primary social distinction is that between indigenous peoples and the dominant *mestizo* population (persons of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry). As such, nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje* construct Blackness as invisible and foreign to the nation. Despite these distinctions in U.S. and Mexican racial

contexts, scholars of U.S. racialization often limit their analysis to immigrant experiences with race *after* they have migrated. Yet, failing to examine how immigrants construct racial meaning in the *sending society* renders incomplete our understanding of how racial hierarchies and encounters are navigated in the *receiving society*.

This multi-site study draws from 75 in-depth interviews with three distinct samples of Mexican respondents: non-migrants in Guadalajara, as well as recent and long-term immigrants in Los Angeles. Findings show that the maintenance of transnational ties between immigrants and those remaining in the home country facilitate Mexicans' engagement with U.S. racial ideologies prior to migration. As immigrants gain direct exposure to the U.S. racial system, they communicate their observations and experiences with racial encounters – particularly with U.S. Blacks -, discrimination, employment and residential segregation back to Mexico, a transnational process of *racial remittances*. In the second part of my dissertation, I turn my analytical focus to the immigrant experience in Los Angeles. I argue that immigrants often renegotiate their pre-migration constructions of race upon settling into their lives in the host society. Residential and occupational patterns in Los Angeles, duration in the U.S., and the frequency of social encounters with Blacks, Whites, and others, influence how Mexicans make sense of racial hierarchies, including their position in the U.S. racial order. While these factors saliently shape attitudes and perceptions about race and identity, I further highlight how this process is affected by legal status. With increased exposure to anti-immigrant prejudice and blocked opportunities for upward mobility, immigrants view themselves as occupying a distinct racial status vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites, illustrating a clear departure from the U.S.' White-Black binary.

This dissertation of Sylvia Zamora is approved.

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2014

DEDICATION

*Para mis padres, Sergio y Guadalupe Zamora, quien me dieron todo, sin pedir nada.
Gracias por su apoyo incondicional.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS ON TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND RACE

In recent decades, the U.S. Latino population has become an increasingly *immigrant* population¹. Latino immigrants – of which Mexicans are the large majority – are continuously dispersed throughout the nation, settling into traditional gateways, and increasingly into new destinations. There is a clear consensus among scholars that the post-1965 increase in Latin American immigration to the U.S. is challenging the long-standing Black-White racial paradigm (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Marrow 2009; Lee and Bean 2010; Frank, Akresh, and Lu 2010). However, there is far less scholarly consensus on where Latinos will fit within the evolving racial order, what characteristics may explain emerging trends in Latino social and racial identity, and perhaps most importantly, what the political consequences may be for alliances with African Americans, the nation's largest minority group after Latinos.

In particular, the growing documentation that Latinos are exhibiting patterns of social distance from African Americans raises important questions about which side of the “racial divide” Latinos will position themselves in, and potential implications for the future direction of the U.S. racial order. Recent demographic transformations have led to claims of a “Latin Americanization” of U.S. society, in which the displacement from neighborhoods and institutions that some African Americans are experiencing has been attributed to the growing Latino population and their increasing demands for social and political inclusion. Indeed, U.S. scholars of race relations have identified perceived threat from rising Latino immigration and perceived competition for scarce resources and political representation as key factors leading to Black and Latino conflict and tension (Gay 2006; McClain 1990; Kaufmann 2003). On the other

¹ 62% of the U.S. Latino population is foreign born (U.S. Census)

hand, scholars also find that Latinos, and *immigrants* in particular, tend to hold negative views toward Black Americans and are unlikely to perceive a linked fate with Blacks in the U.S. (McClain et al 2006). While existing studies deepen our understanding of how Latino immigration is changing U.S. racial dynamics, many do not fully capture how migration from Latin America to the U.S. might produce a unique lens through which immigrants construct race, identity, attitudes toward others, and their own position within existing socioracial hierarchies.

In this dissertation, I argue that understanding some of the key mechanisms affecting the choices immigrants make when negotiating racial encounters – and their social position in the U.S. racial hierarchy - requires a transnational framework that systematically examines racial conceptions “here and there.” In light of the U.S.’ unprecedented demographic transition, which has been fueled largely by Latino immigrants, it is surprising that many U.S. scholars of race relations and immigrant incorporation tend to gloss over the central role that race has played in the lives of immigrants prior to migration. In addition to the powerful impact that home country racial systems and ideologies can have in shaping immigrant worldviews and values, the racial *context* of the origin country determines which groups immigrants come into contact with, and how racial boundaries are played out and reinforced, all prior to setting foot in the U.S. These “pre-migration” factors no doubt influence how immigrants, upon arriving to the U.S., construct meaning about race, identity, and their status in the new society. As such, failure to acknowledge these and other relevant factors of the sending society racial system leave us ill equipped to fully capture how immigrants are (racially) incorporation to U.S. society.

How immigrants become incorporated into the host society also requires some attention to how social ties between migrants and their kin in the home country may further influence how understandings of race are challenged, negotiated, or transformed in the process of transnational

migration (Levitt 2001; Kim 2008; Roth 2012). In recent decades, a large body of scholarship known as transnationalism studies have investigated the process by which immigrants maintain social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement (Basch et al. 1994:7). While transnationalism studies have extended our knowledge of migrants' political, civic and economic practices across borders, migration scholars have largely overlooked *sociocultural* transnational exchanges, especially how racial ideas, behaviors and practices "travel" with migrants to new localities and shape patterns of incorporation into the host society's racial structure (Levitt 2001; Kim 2008; Roth 2012). Similarly, scholars interested in immigrant racialization in the U.S. have focused almost exclusively on the host society, limiting their attention to immigrant experiences with race *after* migration (Waters 2001; Marrow 2009).

Although the existing racial hierarchy in Americas can be attributed to the legacy of European conquest and colonialism, U.S. and Latin American racial systems have developed in quite distinct ways. Latin American societies have generally been characterized by their distinctly fluid and ambiguous racial categories, in which one's position in the racial hierarchy can be based on skin color and socio-cultural markers such as class, education, and language. On the other hand, U.S. society is best known for its historically Black-White binary, rooted in ideologies of racial purity such as the one-drop rule, and rigid racial categorizations relegating racially mixed individuals to the Black category (Telles and Sue 2009). Moreover, across Latin America, meanings of blackness vary both at the level of national discourse and in everyday interactions. In Mexico, for example, blackness has been effectively erased from nationalist ideologies of race, giving way to a *mestizaje* discourse that promotes a specific racial mixture comprised of indigenous and Spanish ancestry. The label "Black" or "Negro," therefore, is often used as a descriptor for Mexicans with dark skin or acquired tans, as well as a marker for race or

afro-descendancy². Black Mexicans, who tend to be concentrated along the coasts of Veracruz and La Costa Chica, to this day remain nearly invisible to the mainstream mestizo population.

Although Mexico and the U.S. share a national border and have a long history of social, economic, and political relations, differences in their respective racial contexts and systems raise questions about how migration from one nation to the other alters how individuals make sense of race in the host society. Mexican immigrants originate in a society where meaningful interactions with Blacks are nearly non-existent and where Blackness is made invisible in nationalist racial discourse. For many, migration to the U.S. marks the very first time they interact with Black persons. In addition, as immigrants seek to establish new lives in the U.S., they not only draw on preexisting knowledge and behaviors, they must also devise new strategies for navigating the unfamiliar racial landscape. No longer can Mexican immigrants experience the privilege of being the dominant ethnoracial group in their society, as *mestizos* do in Mexico. Instead, newcomers must adapt to an Anglo-dominated society that racializes Mexicans as inferior and criminal “illegal aliens” who have no claims to U.S. citizenship.

Equally important, immigrant experiences with, and observations of, U.S. racialization communicated back to friends and family in the home society can potentially reformulate how individuals conceptualize race in Mexico. As such, scholars of race in Latin America have much to gain from studies of migration and U.S. immigrant incorporation that take an explicitly transnational approach to the racial formation process. Indeed, there is a historical precedent to the transmission of U.S. racial frameworks to Latin America, namely via U.S. military occupation and state institutions, from the U.S.’ implementation of racial segregationist policies in Cuba’s armed forces (De La Fuente 2000), to U.S. Census officials’ imposition of a Black-White classification scheme in Puerto Rico (Duany 2005). In recent decades, U.S.

² See the methodology section for more on the use of racialized terms in Mexico.

multiculturalist discourse – along with its vague notions of multi-ethnic diversity and equality that often avoids discussions of racism - has made its way to several Latin American nations, including Mexico. Arguably, the transmission of racial discourse on multiculturalism and racial tolerance to Mexico influenced the State to officially recognize the existence of racial discrimination, albeit only as recently as 2004 (Telles and PERLA 2014). Given these considerations, how migration to the U.S. may in turn alter *Mexican* social attitudes about race and inequality is a question of central importance in this study.

This project draws on a multi-site methodology that compares Mexicans' experiences with race and social hierarchies in two field sites: Guadalajara, Mexico and Los Angeles, California. In this attempt to bridge the local with the global, I pay attention to the racial system that prevails in the immigrant sending and receiving societies, as well as how one might reinforce the other and vice versa. To do so, I draw on two theoretical frameworks: racial formation and migration theory on transnationalism. Racial formation theory, put forth by Omi and Winant (1994), refers to the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the meaning and importance of racial categories, which are subject to change over time and across societies. This approach moves away from treating race as a concept that is subsumed or reduced to broader categories, and instead treats race as a “central axis” of social relations. A key formulation of this theory is its emphasis on racialization – the attribution of racial meanings to social groups, practices and relationships – as a process that emerges from *ideological and discursive* constructions (Omi and Winant 1994).

Racial ideas and concepts are not bound by nation-states. Transnationalism, which recognizes that migrants maintain social contact with people, communities, and institutions in their home countries, is useful for understanding how migration can impact processes of

racialization both “here and there.” A central aim of this dissertation is to illustrate how the maintenance of transnational communities impacts processes of racialization. I pay attention to 1) how racial ideologies and discourses shape - and are shaped by – social interactions *locally*, and 2) how transnational *migration* reconfigures individuals’ constructions of race. By merging racial formation and transnationalism theories, this dissertation elucidates how migration from Mexico to the United States can result in a particular process of *transnational racialization* that has far reaching consequences for race relations, identity, and the group positioning of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. racial order.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I review the sociological literature on U.S. race relations and scholarly predictions about the changing dynamics of the U.S. racial order, followed by a review of the empirical study of African American and Latino relations and the limitations of these studies for a transnational comparative analysis of immigrant and native group relations in the U.S. I then expand on the main theoretical framework of this study, transnational racialization, and in doing so, critically assess existing studies in this emerging field. I end by introducing the research questions driving this study, the research methods, and finally, its aims and contributions to the scholarly literature.

The Sociological Study of Race and Ethnic Relations

The study of race and ethnic relations has been central to the sociological examination of immigration and assimilation (Park 1950). According to Robert E. Park (1950), assimilation was

the end stage of a “race-relations cycle.” Park theorized that the “race-relations cycle” consisted of several stages: immigrant groups would first experience contact with the core group (middle-class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants), then competition over resources and territories, followed by accommodation and eventual assimilation (Park, 1950). Although Park’s theory has provided a foundation for sociologists to examine the impact of immigration on U.S. race relations, several scholars of race and contemporary immigration have offered new theories predicting the future of U.S. race relations.

Predicting The Future Direction of The U.S. Racial Order

The major demographic shifts taking place in the U.S. have led scholars to question the adequacy of frameworks based on the Black-White binary for examining racial and ethnic relations in the twenty first century (Lee and Bean 2007; Telles et al 2011). As such, several models of the American racial order have emerged to explain these new trends (Bonilla-Silva 2002; Murguia and Saenz 2002; Lee and Bean 2007). The first is the White/non-White model, or the people of color hypothesis, which places Whites in a category of their own, separate from all minority groups, not just African Americans. Under this model, Latinos would fall on the “non-white” side of the color line, and express a sense of commonality with Blacks as marginalized minorities. This model implies that Latinos will distance themselves from Whites and position themselves closer to Blacks.

The second hypothesis, much like the first, is based on a binary racial paradigm. Known as the Black/non-Black model, or the Black exceptionalism hypothesis, it suggests that the most significant color line is that which separates Blacks from all other groups. Minority groups of color such as Latinos and Asians will racially distance themselves from Blacks in efforts to

position themselves closer to Whiteness. The racial boundaries separating Blacks from Whites will remain rigid and more difficult to penetrate than those separating Latinos and Asians from Whites. In essence, Blacks will remain at the bottom of the racial hierarchy while some Latinos may be absorbed into Whiteness or occupy a separate category altogether (Lee and Bean 2010). Empirical evidence for this model is found in the higher rates of intermarriage between Asians and Latinos with Whites than between Blacks and Whites (Feliciano et al 2009), and higher levels of residential segregation among Blacks than Asians and Latinos. In this scenario, it is not required for Latinos to be treated or identified as Whites, but that they become “meaningfully” closer to Whites than Blacks in the racial hierarchy. Whites, in turn, will show preference for Latinos and Asians than for Blacks.

The tri-racial model is a third hypothesis that includes an intermediate “honorary white” category resulting in a white vs. honorary white vs. collective black hierarchy that is based on class and skin color rather than racial ancestry (Bonilla-Silva 2002). Bonilla-Silva (2002) proposed this model to suggest that in cases where upward mobility is achieved, particularly among light-skinned Latinos, Latinos will be granted by Whites an “honorary white” status in order to buffer racial conflict. The Black category will expand to “collective blacks” to include dark-skinned Latinos. Many Dominicans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Central Americans will be considered “collective blacks” due to their racialized incorporation as colonial subjects, refugees from wars, and illegal migrant workers. This model predicts that lighter skinned Latinos will move away from the “collective black” status, yet not fully assimilate into White racial status. Dark skinned immigrants in this case will be closer to Blacks than Whites in terms of socio-economic and racial status. It could reveal a complex racial hierarchy in which Latinos will

no longer be placed in a single all-encompassing ethnoracial category, but will instead be situated differently along the U.S. racial order.

The racial status of Latino groups is complex and has changed over time. For example, Mexican Americans have a historical legacy of being considered “off-white” (Gomez 2009). This happened after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo when Mexicans living along the border became U.S. citizens overnight and gained federal U.S. citizenship at a time when only White immigrants could become naturalized U.S. citizens (Gomez 2009:437). However, Mexican Americans were not fully accepted as White. In fact, many were regarded as “but little removed above the Negro” by elites and average White Americans, illustrating the “in-between status” of Mexicans in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Gomez 2009). The tri-racial model highlights the importance of factors not necessarily attributed to race or ethnicity, such as class, educational level, skin color, and even historical context in placing some groups higher in the American racial hierarchy. This example also illustrates that individuals of Mexican descent in the U.S. have a historical precedent of occupying a distinct racial status in a society that has long been characterized by its Black-White racial binary.

Immigrant Racial Distancing from African Americans: Evidence of a Black/Non-Black Hierarchy?

New studies are suggesting that new Latino immigrants (particularly in the South) will follow the black/non-black model, and engage in the practice of social distancing from African Americans as a strategy to achieve social mobility (McClain et al 2006; Marrow 2009). Latino immigrants, argue McClain et al (2006:573), will follow in the footsteps of the Chinese migrants in Mississippi during the late 1800’s who, despite initially being relegated to the Black category by White plantation owners, actively sought the approval of Whites and soon adopted Whites’

negative attitudes toward Blacks (Loewen 1988). The Chinese immigrant case is one of few historical cases where a non-White immigrant group was able to permeate the rigid color line and gain a sort of honorary White status. If the patterns observed in the Chinese immigrant case are predictive, it suggests that Latino immigrants can similarly achieve an honorary White status, especially if they make efforts to distance themselves from Blacks. If this is the case, it is unlikely that Latinos will perceive Blacks as natural allies in the struggle for social and political equality (McClain et al 2006:574).

A common approach to the study of race relations between African Americans and Latinos in the U.S. is to focus on factors leading to conflict and competition. With more studies detailing African Americans' attitudes and perceptions of Latinos (and immigration policy), fewer explore Latinos' racial perceptions of African Americans and the meanings they attribute to Blacks in the U.S. (Kaufmann, 2003; McClain et al 2006; Mindiola Neimann and Rodriguez 2002; Gay 2006; Johnson and Oliver 1994). Further, many studies of inter-group conflict have been derived from case studies of major cities (Los Angeles, Miami, and New York), although increasingly there are case studies on Southern regions, where Latino immigrants are beginning to settle in significant numbers. While some studies specify the region and Latino population in question, such as Mindiola et al's (2002) study of Mexican and African American relations in Houston, a majority of extant studies, particularly those based on national surveys, tend to treat the Latino population as homogenous, generalizing across regions and nationalities. For example, Vaca's (2004) well-known book titled "*The Presumed Alliance: The unspoken conflict between Latinos and Blacks and what it means for America*" argues that Latinos and African Americans face direct competition, citing examples ranging from Cubans in Miami, Mexican

Americans in Los Angeles and Houston, and Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans in New York City.

If Latino immigrants arrive to the U.S. with negative attitudes toward African Americans, this may suggest that factors identified in existing studies, such as social contact, physical proximity, and racial threat or competition for resources, cannot fully explain why Latinos may perceive little commonality with Blacks. An additional explanation may be that immigrants are exposed to U.S. anti-black ideologies while in their origin country. Racial ideologies are often exported globally through U.S. media, return migrants recounting their experiences with race in the U.S., or some other source. In essence, considering that not only bodies and goods are flowing back and forth between Mexico and the U.S., but also cultural values and ideas about race, it can be problematic to suggest that Latino immigrants are inherently anti-Black and merely carry over these attitudes during migration.

The generalizations in many studies examining Latino racial attitudes gloss over the well-documented fact that Latin American nations each have their own unique racial and ethnic composition. Across Latin America, nations have articulated their own set of national ideologies and discourses on race that help determine the distinct patterns in racial and ethnic self-classification among various Latino groups in the U.S. Moreover, because nations each have their own set of political and economic relations with the U.S., different immigrant groups may encounter vastly different contexts of reception. These nuances call for specificity in the Latino group in question when examining relations between Blacks and Latinos in the U.S.

In one notable example where national origin is taken into account when examining African American and Latino political coalitions, Kaufmann (2003) finds that half of her Puerto Rican sample believe they have “a fair amount” or “a lot in common” with Blacks, with

Dominicans having the next highest level of affinity at thirty-nine percent. Mexicans, Cubans and Salvadorans perceive less affinity for Blacks, at thirty percent, thirty-three percent, and twenty-two percent, respectively. One possible reason for this is the racial differences between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, many of who are Afro-Latino, and Mexicans and Central Americans, who tend to be more indigenous or *mestizo* than Black. However, as literature has shown, only a very small percentage of these groups self-identify as Black, with Mexicans among those with the lowest percentage (Candelario 2008). While they may not readily identify as Black, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans feel more connected to African Americans than do Mexicans and Salvadorans, suggesting that Latinos' attitudes toward Blacks may vary based on differences in historical and regional context, and national origin (Kaufmann 2003).

Not recognizing that Latinos in the U.S. are comprised of many distinct nationalities, cultures, and races, some perceiving more or less in common with Blacks, can be misleading when generalizing about Latinos' views of Black Americans. Dominicans and Puerto Ricans might perceive greater commonality with African Americans than do Mexicans and Salvadorans due to the larger population of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans with Black ancestry. At the same time, if afro-descendant Latinos are more likely to be treated as Black in the U.S., they may be more motivated to employ specific strategies of racial distancing from African Americans than their mestizo counterparts, such as Mexicans. In other words, Latinos who are perceived as Black by broader society may exhibit the greatest efforts to disassociate from the category than say, Mexicans, who are typically not viewed as Black. These nuances highlight the need for studies that pay careful attention to the unique relationship between different Latino groups and Black Americans. Thus, case studies of Mexican and African American, or Dominican and African American relations are best situated to further our understanding of Black-Latino

relations because they can take into consideration distinctions such as context of reception to the U.S., racial contexts of home society, region of settlement in the U.S., varying degrees of physical proximity to African Americans, and distinct experiences with racialization.

Methodologically, existing studies of racial attitudes have traditionally relied on quantitative surveys that measure the extent to which individuals and groups show support for certain policies directed at specific racial groups, the extent to which they agree with certain racial stereotypes, or express a sense of commonality with other groups. While quantitative studies have made lasting contributions to the study of African American and Latino relations, they fall short of getting at the qualitatively different meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to race and racial groups. Surveys also do not adequately reveal the social and interactional mechanisms through which individuals acquire racial perceptions of themselves and others. Most importantly, quantitative studies have not examined the racial ideas and perceptions that immigrants have of African Americans *prior* to migration, which may largely shape their views once in the U.S. Such an analytical framework would complicate the existing notion that Mexican immigrants' negative views of Black Americans are due to a historical legacy originating in Mexican racial hierarchies.

In sum, the existing literature on Latino immigrants' conceptions of race is limited in three important ways. First, the point of departure in much of the analysis is the post-U.S. migration experience. Most survey-based studies of racial attitudes take place *after* immigrants have already migrated to the U.S., thus failing to account for pre-migration views and experiences. Second, as mentioned above, many of these studies have treated Latinos as a homogenous group, despite differences between the immigrant generation and the U.S.-born. Third, and most importantly, most studies have not accounted for the notion that racial

knowledge, although it may ‘travel’ with migrants to the U.S., is mediated by transnational migration via social ties that migrants maintain with non-migrants who remain in the origin country. Thus, without a transnational methodology that accounts for the racial context of immigrants’ home society as well as the transmission of U.S. racial ideology to Latin America, very little is known about the mechanisms that may explain existing patterns of Latino immigrant racial distancing from Blacks in the U.S. In other words, the question of whether immigrants’ anti-black sentiments originate in the home society, in the post-migration experience, or some combination of both remains severely under theorized in the literature.

Transnationalism and Race

Whereas the concept of transnationalism has been used to theorize about the nature of cross-border connections linking immigrant sending and receiving societies, much of this literature has focused on economic and political ties – namely, remittances in the form of money that migrants transmit back to their origin country, and how it impacts development, as well as migrants’ transnational engagement in politics, hometown associations, religious organizations, and so forth (Waldinger 2013). While scholars of transnationalism have contributed great insight into migrants’ political, civic and economic practices across borders, many have, until recently, underestimated *sociocultural* exchanges, especially how ideas about race “travel” with migrants to shape patterns of incorporation into the host society’s racial structure (Levitt 2001; Kim 2008; Roth 2012).

The theoretical framework in this dissertation owes much to the conceptual and empirical work of scholars Jorge Duany (1998) and Peggy Levitt (2001), who informed my earlier thinking on the transnational social and racial lives of Latino immigrants. Specifically, Levitt’s concept

social remittances - defined as the norms, practices, and other forms of social capital that circulate between immigrants and their home countries – proved analytically useful for examining Mexicans transnational experiences with race. Conceptual and empirical work on social remittances among transnational migrants has been expanded upon and further refined by scholars of race such as Ginetta Candelario (2007), Nadia Kim (2008), Wendy Roth (2012), and most recently, Tiffany Joseph (2011), and Jennifer Jones (2012). These scholars have made notable contributions to the growing field of transnational racialization by examining how migration to the U.S. changes immigrants’ cultural perceptions of race and identity (Duany 1998; Itzigsohn et al. 2008; Joseph 2011; Kim 2008; Roth 2012; Candelario 2007).

For example, Kim’s (2008) work on Korean immigrants illustrated how U.S. ideologies purporting the racial superiority of Whites over Blacks were introduced into Korean society through U.S. military occupation, media, and the social ties between immigrants and their kin in Korea. For example, among the first to examine “social remittances on race,” Kim showed how media coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles unrest televised in Korea, particularly the violence directed at Korean-owned businesses, shaped Korean perceptions of African Americans as criminal and violent, exposing would-be Korean emigrants to U.S. racist ideologies long before arrival to the U.S. Kim further shows how pre-migration understandings of American racial dynamics subsequently influenced immigrants’ construction of racial boundaries once in the U.S.

Because U.S. race scholars have long turned to Latin America for comparative analysis of race, most of studies of transnational racial identity have focused on Latin American migrants, particularly those from countries with large afro-descendant populations such as the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Brazil (Duany 1998; Candelario 2007; Roth 2012; Joseph 2011). Duany’s (1998) groundbreaking study of Dominican transnational identity found that migration

from the Dominican Republic to the U.S. changed immigrants' cultural definitions of racial identity. Whereas Dominicans tended to classify themselves as White, Hispanic, or Indio in the home society, U.S. society classified them as Black. The contradiction between immigrant self-identification as non-black and public perception of them as Black resulted in the "intense stigmatization, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination [of Dominican immigrants]" similar to that which native-born Blacks are subjected (Duany 1998:148). In other words, although most Dominicans did not self-identify as Black, migration to the U.S. and society's subsequent treatment of them as Black signaled a shift toward their position as a racial minority.

Advancing Duany's work on transnational Dominican racial identity, Candelario (2007) contributed new insight to understanding how racial terms and perceptions change upon migration. She argued that negrophobic (Anti-Haitianist) discourse embedded in Dominican nationalist discourse intersected with U.S. anti-black racial ideologies, resulting in Dominicans opting out of a Black identity in favor of one rooted firmly in Hispanicity - in the sending and receiving societies. Hispanicity discourse (articulated as an identity rooted in a mixture of indigenous, European, and to a lesser extent, Black ancestry) in both the Dominican Republic and U.S. contexts essentially functions as an alternative to Blackness for Dominicans. Whereas adopting an identity rooted in "Hispanicity" means opting out of the White category, particularly in the U.S., Candelario (2007) argues that mostly importantly, it has allowed Dominicans to opt out of the Black category. Hispanicity at the discursive level, therefore, can be understood as a strategy for social distancing from Blackness in the U.S.

The most recent of study to focus on Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, is Roth's (2012) work, which draws on theories of cognitive science and cultural sociology to advance the concept of *racial schemas*: "a bundle of racial categories and the set of rules for what they mean,

how they are ordered, and how to apply them to oneself and others.” Roth argues that racial schemas vary across nations, and that upon migrating to a new society, individuals bring with them existing racial schemas, adopt new ones, and create new amalgams, all of which are then transmitted back to the sending society via interpersonal ties and U.S. media. Focusing on identity formation, Roth specifically looks at how Latino pan-ethnicity (which she describes as a U.S. nationality schema) was communicated back to non-migrants, who began to embrace Latino identity despite not having had an “immigrant experience” in the U.S.

Caribbean immigrant’s racialized experiences, however, are quite distinct from those of Mexican immigrants. Namely, many Caribbean immigrants have visible Black ancestry and as Candelario (2007:12) asserts, are “more likely to be treated like native blacks in the public sphere, school system, workplace, and in relations with state authorities.” This unique feature of the Dominican, Puerto Rican and Brazilian racialized experience in the U.S., however, has meant that existing studies of transnational racialization are mainly concerned with questions about whether immigrant groups will adopt a Black identity and thus position themselves closer to native Blacks, move closer to Whiteness, or assume a separate racial status within the existing racial structure.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The central argument in this dissertation is that racial ideologies and discourses in both Mexican and U.S. societies “travel” with migrants transnationally to intersect in unique ways that help determine how Mexican immigrants interpret experiences with racialization in the U.S. These experiences include social interactions with, and attitudes about, Black and White Americans, racial discrimination, identity, and perceptions about their group status in the racial

order. Recent empirical studies examining Mexican immigrants and the U.S. color line have addressed how factors such as the context of reception and existing racial dynamics at the local level impact immigrant incorporation to their new place of settlement (Jones 2012; Marrow 2009). By taking into account how race operates in the Mexican immigrant sending and receiving societies, my dissertation contributes to the growing literature and adds depth and nuance to scholarly interpretations of the Mexican immigrant experience in the U.S.

Mexicans provide a strategic case for studying how migration transforms conceptions of race because Mexico is a traditional sending nation experiencing unprecedented rates of return migration (due largely to the U.S. economic crisis). Mexicans are by far both the largest Latino and immigrant group in the U.S. According to the 2010 Census, six in ten Latinos are of Mexican descent. Among the Mexican descent population, roughly 37% were born in Mexico, many who arrived after 1990. These figures suggest a steady replenishment of Mexican immigrants and their cultural values and practices (Jimenez 2008). Mexicans are also dispersed throughout the nation and come into contact with various racial groups, particularly Black Americans. The long tradition of mass migration from Mexico into the U.S. also provides a unique look at the entire spectrum of the incorporation process, from very recent migrants to individuals who have lived in the U.S. for longer periods than that spent in their country of origin.

While some scholars of Mexican immigration and race tend to focus almost exclusively on the U.S., my study challenges U.S.-centered approaches to the study of immigrant racial formation by impelling scholars to reflect more on the consequences of circulatory migration flows for localized racial hierarchies in sending and receiving regions. Lastly, a transnational approach to the study of Mexican immigration and race relations can help us begin to tease out

how immigrants are being incorporated into the U.S. racial order and the implications of this for the future of U.S. racial dynamics.

Data And Methodology

This study takes a transnational comparative approach to examining the experiences of Mexicans in two research sites: Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico and Los Angeles, California, United States. I conducted 75 in-depth interviews between June 2010 and January 2012 with a cross-section of Mexicans: non-migrants in Mexico (n=30), recent migrants with three years or less experience in the U.S. (n=15), and long-term immigrants with ten years or more in the U.S. (n=30). Following the interview, respondents filled out demographic surveys indicating their educational background, socioeconomic status, occupation, racial and ethnic identity, perceived skin color, and degree of contact with U.S. immigrants.

Although ideal, it was not feasible to conduct a longitudinal study that would allow me to collect data from the same individuals prior to, during, and after migration to the U.S. To best account for this methodological limitation, I included three sample groups, each within a different point in the migration trajectory: non-migrants, immigrant newcomers, and long-term immigrant residents in the U.S. The immigrant newcomers provided some analytical insight into how more established immigrants might have viewed race prior to migrating, given their intermediary position between a non-migrant and a long-term immigrant. They are similar to non-migrants in some aspects, having only recently left their lives in Mexico, yet unlike non-migrants, they have acquired some direct experience with the U.S. racial system. Long-term immigrants, on the other hand, have significantly more experience navigating the U.S. racial

terrain and were best fit to speak about how incorporation to U.S. society has altered their views, attitudes, and cultural practices.

Recruiting Respondents and Sample Characteristics

Study participants in Mexico and the U.S. were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. To maximize variation, I interviewed individuals from different locations and respondent networks. I recruited individuals in neighborhoods, public parks, cafes and local businesses. Respondents were also referred by personal contacts. Interviews lasted one hour to ninety minutes and were conducted in Spanish by the author. Respondents were provided a modest financial incentive in the form of a gift card for their time and participation. To increase the similarity in class and educational background of immigrants and non-migrants, I restricted the sample to working class individuals with less than a college education. Respondents' level of schooling ranged from less than a primary school education to some college. Because Mexican immigrants, particularly recent immigrants, have lower mean levels of education than the average U.S. immigrant (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006), I excluded individuals with a Bachelors, Masters, or PhD degree. While levels of education (and even occupation) may affect immigrants' constructions of race and racial attitudes, for comparative purposes, I chose to limit the same to working-class individuals. This sample is therefore not intended to be representative of the entire Mexican immigrant experience, although it captures the dominant experience, which is that of "low-skilled" immigrant from Mexico. The non-migrant sample was further restricted to individuals who had not traveled abroad for more than six months at the time of the interview.

Respondents were also selected based on their geographical origins in Mexico. Whereas the non-migrant sample lived and worked in Jalisco, I restricted the immigrant sample to

individuals who originated from Western-Central states such as Michoacan, Zacatecas, Nayarit, and Jalisco. This allowed me to get as close as possible to a mainstream mestizo sample. This means I did not include interviews with Mexicans who looked phenotypically Black (i.e. Afro-Mexicans) or indigenous (Mayan, Zapotec, Mixtec, etc).

Recent migrants to the U.S. were the most difficult population to reach, due in large part to their undocumented legal status, which causes many to live under the radar, so to speak. To recruit this sample, I canvassed Latino immigrant neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles and relied on personal contacts working in immigrant worker centers or with day laborers. I also asked long-term respondents if they know anybody from their home state who had recently migrated to Los Angeles. The recent migrant sample included many individuals that were unemployed, homeless, or both, and therefore had reason to be suspicious of researchers like myself. As part of my research protocol, I did not collect any personal, identifying information such as names or cell phone numbers. As such, many interviews with recent migrants were conducted on the spot, as most were hesitant to schedule a different time and place to meet, perhaps out of fear that I might be an Immigrant Enforcement Agent.

Respondents in both Mexico and the U.S. held similar occupations, such as maintenance and grounds keeping, construction, factory laborer, street vendor, and homemaker. Respondent ages ranged from twenty-five to sixty. Legal status varied, from almost half of the sample being undocumented, to several holding legal residency, naturalized citizenship (mostly long-term immigrants), and two were “in process” of legalization. The median age was thirty-seven for both immigrant and non-migrant respondents. Although gender is not a primary focus of the dissertation as it stands currently, I nonetheless included equal numbers of men and women in

each sample group, for a total of thirty-seven men and thirty-eight women³. Given that intervening factors like skin color and phenotype are known to shape individuals' racial conceptions, my sample includes mestizo Mexicans with light to dark brown skin tones.

Description of Field Sites

Region was an important factor in the selection of respondents. Guadalajara is a major city in the state of Jalisco, located in the central-western region of the country. Jalisco in many ways represents traditional Mexican culture, as many symbols of “Mexicanness” recognized nationally and internationally originate in this region, such as mariachi music and tequila. Jalisco ranks seventh among Mexican states in emigration to the U.S. (INEGI 2010) and as a traditional sending community, is an ideal site for studying how transnational migration shapes racial conceptions in sending and receiving regions. Although Jalisco is home to indigenous populations, the region is largely characterized as *mestizo*, and best reflects the national population, of which 64.3% identified as *mestizo* in a recent survey (Telles and PERLA, 2014). Because the larger aim of this study is to uncover the effects of migration on conceptions of race among the Mexican immigrant population, I focus specifically on the most racially representative sample: mestizo Mexicans from traditional sending communities. This should not be taken as a study of Afro-Mexicans or the coastal region of Mexico.

As a traditional immigrant gateway, California has already undergone some of the major demographic transitions that are being projected for the entire nation. Latinos already outnumber Whites in California (U.S. Census 2011). As such, it has important implications for future national trends and evolving race relations. Due to the long history of Mexican immigration to

³ Male migrants have historically outnumbered female migrants. However, the gender gap in migration is closing. In 2011, 53 percent of the immigrant population was male, and 47 percent female (Stoney and Batalova 2013).

Los Angeles, there exist unique features that allow for a more nuanced conceptual and empirical examination of Mexican immigrant and native group racial dynamics. First, Mexican origin Latinos make up 78% of all Latinos in the metropolitan region (U.S. Census 2011). Los Angeles also has a large concentration of Mexicans from Jalisco and Western-Central Mexico more generally.

The Mexican origin population can be found across various neighborhood contexts, from predominantly Latino to mixed Black and Latino, and White and Latino (although the latter is likely to be the case in low-income neighborhoods on the outskirts of Los Angeles, such as the Inland Empire). Many of the neighborhoods where Blacks and Latino immigrants live in close proximity tend to be economically distressed and experience crime rates higher than the national average. It should be noted that because most immigrants in this study are working-class, they are likely to come into contact with poor blacks. Given these circumstances, many of the social interactions observed and discussed during interviews were structured by a context of socioeconomic disadvantage. Paying attention to any differences in these neighborhood dynamics can shed light on important factors shaping inter-group relations, such as physical proximity, group size, and perceived threat for limited resources.

The multi-site approach is useful for examining comparisons in the racial perceptions of non-migrants in Mexico, who presumably have limited to no personal contact with African Americans and the U.S. racial system, and immigrants, who have a variety of experiences living, working, and casually interacting with Blacks and racial hierarchies in the U.S. context.

Data Analysis

The interview questions were guided by existing theoretical frameworks that inform scholarly thinking about the formation and reformulation of racial perceptions in the transnational migration process. I aimed to capture Mexicans' conceptions of race, perceptions and experiences with ethnic and racial discrimination in Mexico and the U.S., attitudes toward racial 'others,' and the nature and frequency of their transnational social ties. The interview protocol was split into two main sections; while both sections asked questions about racial and ethnic dynamics, the first focused on Mexican society and the second on the U.S. After conducting a few pilot interviews, I adjusted certain questions and wording to better reflect terminology and colloquialisms as they are used in everyday informal conversations (see "A Note on Comparative Racial(ized) Terminology" below). All interview data was transcribed in its original language (Spanish) and uploaded to Nvivo, a software program used to store, code, and analyze qualitative data systematically. The data were coded thematically to reflect recurrent themes and issues that appeared in interviews.

A Note on Comparative Racial(ized) Terminology

Carrying out research on comparative race in Latin America and the U.S. requires careful attention to how race discourse is employed in everyday informal conversation, in local and national contexts. Terms often lose their original meaning when translated from Spanish to English and vice versa, especially when the terms are used as slang or in humor because they may go unobserved by researchers unfamiliar with the culture or history of a region. As several scholars have pointed out, the label "black" (*negro*) can have many different meanings in Mexican society (Lewis 2000; Sue 2012; Vaughn 2005). While in the U.S. the label "Black" is typically reserved for individuals perceived to be *racially* Black, in Mexico it can refer to skin color, such as an indigenous person with very dark skin color - but who would not necessarily be

categorized as racially Black. Sue (2012) describes this as the “sun discourse,” which refers to brown *mestizo* Mexicans who get darker due to a sun tan and thus turning “Black.” A common phrase would be, “Look at you! You stayed out in the sun too long and turned Black!” The use of the color label “Black” has negative connotations and is often used in a harsh, exaggerated manner to imply that someone’s dark skin is undesirable or unattractive. However, “Black” is also used as a racial descriptor to refer to an individual who is perceived to be racially Black, often based on physical markers other than skin color, such as hair texture, phenotype, or accent. Often, when employing either meaning of the term, Mexicans use the more politically correct term “*moreno*” or “*raza morena*” in place of “*raza negra*” (“Black race”). As previously discussed, Afro-descendants in the Costa Chica region of Mexico identify as “*morenos*” as a way to position themselves closer to indigenous-based constructions of Mexicanness (Lewis 2000), although there is some evidence for the increasing identification as Negro (Telles and PERLA 2014).

Recognizing that meanings and labels attributed to blackness are contextual, I was careful not to impose U.S. racial categorizations during interviews and avoided generalizing, employing instead specific descriptors such as “Negros Norte Americanos/North American Blacks,” “Afro-Americanos,” “Afro-Latinos” or “Latino Americanos de Afro-decendencia/Latin Americans of African descent,” “Inmigrantes Africanos/African immigrants” in the case of immigrants from African nations, and “Mexicanos Afro-decendientes/Mexicans of African descent.” African Americans were broadly defined as African descendants born and raised in the U.S., including second-generation Black immigrants. Thus, I use the terms African Americans, Black Americans, and Blacks in the U.S. interchangeably, unless otherwise noted.

In a similar vein, what constitutes “White” and the boundaries of whiteness are contextual and can vary between Mexico and the U.S. In the Mexican context, for example, a light skinned Mexican might be referred to as “blanca/White” or “guera/light skinned.” This color label does not typically indicate a person’s racial categorization (a light skinned or “White” Mexican would likely be perceived as Mexican, not Anglo or of the White race). To describe racially White persons or Anglos, Mexicans tend to use terms like “Americano/a,” “gringo/a,” the demeaning term “gabacho” or “Yankee,” as well as the more neutral descriptors “blanco/a” and “guero/a.”

Reflexivity

As the U.S.-born daughter of Mexican immigrants, I am reflexive about how my own personal and social characteristics might influence the research process. In Mexico, most people assumed I was a native, as my lifelong immersion in Mexican culture, fluency in Spanish, and phenotype – brown skin, dark eyes, and straight dark brown hair – allowed me to “pass” as a local, even after extensive interactions with natives. However, in my role as interviewer, I was simultaneously an insider and outsider, as differences in our experiences, education, and in some cases, class and legal status became important. Revealing my identity as a U.S. citizen and researcher from an elite university proved to be both an advantage and disadvantage in discussions of race. While I was able to play the “naive foreigner” who needed to be enlightened about how race functions in Mexican society, I was at times viewed as an “American” who might become offended by respondents’ harsh criticisms of U.S. society. Nonetheless, my unique social position enables me to bring to my work a comparative perspective that is both nuanced and informed by experiences straddling both worlds.

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 2, the first empirical chapter, analyzes the historical origins of race relations and racial ideologies, as well as contemporary racial dynamics in Mexico. I examine how Mexicans construct meaning about social hierarchies, skin color prejudice, social and economic disadvantage, and racism in Mexico. I compliment this analysis with respondents' observations and experiences with discrimination in Mexico in the context of localized racial and ethnic relations, primarily with the indigenous who are the second largest group next to *mestizos*, and to a lesser extent, Blacks and/or Afro-Mexicans. This chapter establishes a fuller understanding of the racial "lens" through which Mexican immigrants to the U.S. view race in the receiving society, and thus lay the foundation for interpreting subsequent chapters examining the ways in which U.S. migration alters Mexicans' conceptions of race, inequality, and the formation of the U.S. racial order.

Chapter 3 examines the ideas and narratives about race that immigrants in Los Angeles communicate back to their friends and relatives in Mexico. Findings show that the maintenance of transnational ties between immigrants and those remaining in the home country facilitate Mexicans' engagement with U.S. racial ideologies prior to migration. As immigrants gain direct exposure to the U.S. racial system, they communicate their observations and experiences with racial encounters, discrimination, employment and residential segregation back to Mexico, a transnational transfer of racial remittances. Specifically, findings elucidate how U.S. immigrant perceptions and attitudes of African Americans are formed and relayed back to the sending community to influence the views of non-migrants – *even in the absence of direct contact with U.S. blacks*. Whereas recent scholarship has documented immigrants' preference to maintain social distance from Blacks upon migration to the U.S., my findings challenge assumptions that

these attitudes are a product of the U.S. incorporation process. I end with a discussion of the findings' implications for how new migrants to the U.S. will navigate the racial order upon arrival.

In **Chapter 4**, I turn my analytical focus to the immigrant experience in Los Angeles. I argue that Mexicans' pre-migration ideological constructions of race are reformulated upon settling into their lives in the U.S. While migrants bring with them ways of thinking about race that originate in the home society, they also arrive with preconceived notions about Black Americans and U.S. race relations. I demonstrate how they soon adapt to new U.S. social realities and racial hierarchies that alter how they perceive their status in the existing racial order. Residential and occupational patterns, duration in the U.S., and the frequency of social encounters with Blacks, Whites, and others, influence how Mexicans make sense of racial hierarchies and identity. While these factors saliently shape attitudes and perceptions about race and identity, I also highlight how this process is affected by gender, legal status, and skin color. Ultimately, with increased exposure to anti-immigrant prejudice and blocked opportunities for upward mobility, Mexican immigrants come to believe they occupy a distinct racial status vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites, illustrating a clear departure from the U.S.' White-Black binary. Legal status and anti-immigrant discrimination, whether perceived or experienced directly, are important in shaping understandings of their socioracial status. Contrary to recent studies suggesting that Latino immigrants are moving closer to whiteness, findings in this chapter suggest that immigrants are neither moving closer toward Blacks nor Whites. Rather, Mexican immigrants are identifying as a distinct "racial" group marked heavily by a precarious immigration status and blocked access to rights associated with citizenship.

Chapter 5, the concluding Chapter, provides a summary of the key findings of the dissertation. I address how my findings expand on the sociological theorizing about transnational migration and race relations by assessing how migration from Mexico to the U.S. transforms immigrants' conceptions of race, and in turn impacts how Mexicans come to view their social position in the U.S.'s evolving racial hierarchies. In this chapter, I also discuss how the theoretical implications of this study extend beyond the Mexican case to other ethnic and racial immigrant communities. I conclude my study with some brief recommendations for the future direction of race and immigration studies for an increasingly multiethnic society.

CHAPTER 2

RACIALIZATION IN THE HOME SOCIETY: ETHNORACIAL HIERARCHIES AND DISCRIMINATION IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

During a discussion of discrimination in Mexico, Estela, a thirty-year-old Administrative Assistant from Guadalajara with light skin color, stated that she believes Mexico is a racist country. When I asked her to explain how racism functions in Mexico, she remarked:

It isn't necessarily discrimination against someone's race. You see, we have the misfortune of being the type who discriminates based on someone's appearance. So, we discriminate in the physical appearance and then in the economic [sense], and in the way one talks. So, I feel that Mexico is 100% racist, on Mexican terms.

Estela's quote affirming the racist nature of Mexican society might appear at first glance to contradict the notion that Mexican society, and Latin America more generally, actively denies the existence of racism. However, her interpretation that racism is not based strictly on a person's race, but rather on the way one looks (i.e. skin color and phenotype), and their social class status, exemplifies quite well the ways in which discrimination and social inequality are constructed in contemporary Mexican society.

Recent studies on social stratification in Mexico have confirmed the existence of drastic economic inequality based on skin color (Villarreal 2010; Flores and Telles 2012). Mexicans with the darkest skin tone were found to have the lowest socioeconomic status and conversely, those in the upper classes tended to have lighter skin. It is precisely because of the intimate relationship between skin color, phenotype, and class status that Mexicans have a difficult time disentangling color, class, and ethnicity in their discussions of racial and ethnic discrimination. Nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje* that promote a homogenized Mexican "race" further complicate understandings of racism in Mexico. Moreover, the large indigenous population,

which has faced some of the most severe inequality, has discursively been treated as an ethnic rather than racial group, explaining in part why Mexicans often hesitate to use the label “racism” to describe the anti-indigenous discrimination that some observe almost daily.

In this chapter, I aim to clarify and expand on Estela’s notion that Mexico is “100% racist, on Mexican terms.” As a nation that prides itself as a racially homogenized mestizo citizenry, I am interested in how Mexicans construct meaning about, and experience, racial and ethnic discrimination. I aim to understand the nature of social relations between the mainstream mestizo population and racialized “others.” I pay close attention to how Mexicans view social and racial hierarchies, skin color prejudice, social and economic disadvantage, and racism in contemporary society.

In thinking about the construction of Mexican racial hierarchies and social relations in comparison to those in the United States, I draw on Appelbaum et als (2003:2) definition of racialization to mean “the process of marking human differences according to hierarchical discourses grounded in [Spanish and British] colonial encounters and their national legacies.” This definition allows for the consideration of differential racialization processes in the Mexican immigrant sending and receiving societies, and how these processes interact to uniquely shape the Mexican immigrant experience in the U.S.

I aim to advance a contextual understanding of how mestizo Mexicans understand blackness and experience race in their country of origin in order to establish a fuller understanding of the racial “lens” through which immigrants interpret race upon migration to the U.S. This chapter, therefore, lays the foundation for interpreting subsequent chapters examining the ways in which U.S. migration alters Mexicans’ understandings of race, inequality, and their position in the U.S. racial hierarchy. As detailed in Chapter 4, upon migration to the U.S.,

Mexicans draw on preexisting racial schemas acquired in Mexico to make sense of the new racial landscape (Kim 2008; Roth 2012). This is especially the case for immigrants who migrate as adults, and whose socialization into the particularities of race in their origin country occurred during their formative years.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Mexican Racial State: Ideologies of Race And Mestizaje

The U.S. and Latin America are two cases where European colonizers have subjugated both indigenous populations and African slaves (Tannenbaum 1946). The racial ideologies of these two regions, however, developed and are manifested in quite distinct ways. The most notable difference is the U.S.' rigid racial categorization versus Latin America's more fluid and ambiguous racial distinctions (Wade 1993). The U.S.' historically Black-White binary has given way to prevalent notions of racial purity and racial distinctions grounded in biological explanations. In contrast, Latin America's Black-White *continuum* of racial categories signifies that racial classifications have not been limited to Black and White but rather a wide range of "colors" (Wade 1993; Flores and Telles 2012). These varying racial constructions illustrate the socially constructed nature of race, whereby particular meanings ascribed to certain social and physical traits are historically specific and culturally mediated.

Mexico is characterized as an indo-mestizo nation. Unlike the U.S.' Black-White divide, in Mexico the primary social distinction is that between the *mestizo* (the embodiment of Spanish and indigenous racial mixture) and the indigenous (Lewis 2000; Sue and Golash-Boza 2008; Villareal 2010). Unlike Latin American nations where Blackness constitutes a more dominant image of the nation, such as Cuba and Brazil, in Mexican racial discourse, the *mestizo* has come to represent the quintessential Mexican where ethnic, rather than racial differences, are

recognized (Lewis 2000). Although the indigenous are sometimes commonly referred to as a “race” (as in “*la raza India*”) discussions of “race” in Mexico have traditionally focused on ethnic differences among the indigenous such as language, dress and customs (Villarreal 2010).

In its strictest form, *mestizaje* can be defined as racial mixture. Ideologically, however, the term is loaded with meaning grounded in notions of racial hierarchies and white superiority. Martinez-Echazabal (1998:23) argues that the concept of *mestizaje* is not the recognition and proclamation of ethnic difference, but rather the Eurocentric glorification of a cultural similarity. In fact, *mestizaje* is an extension of broader Latin American “whitening” elite discourses that sought to eliminate Blackness and homogenize their populations (Wade 1993). Indeed, *mestizaje* as an ideology and practice (i.e. marrying a lighter skinned person to “better the race”) continues to organize social relations and interactions throughout Latin America today (Bonilla Silva 2009). This has led some scholars to argue that official state endorsement of *mestizaje* in Mexico and other mestizo nations has not only erased Afro-descendants from the national imaginary, but has also served merely as a symbolic gesture of racial harmony while doing nothing to actually improve race relations (Martinez-Echazabal 1998; Sue 2013).

Although no other colony received more African slaves than Mexico during the middle of the seventeenth century, Afro-Mexicans have remained a small percentage of the total population⁴. Given the vastness of Mexico’s indigenous population,⁵ some suggest that African descendants have mixed with indigenous and European mestizos and were essentially absorbed into *mestizaje*, becoming rather indistinguishable from darker skinned Mexicans. Yet, today

⁴ In colonial Mexico, the Afro-Mexico population never exceeded two percent (Palmer 1976). In a recent Mexican survey, only about 3% of Mexicans identified as either Black or *mulatto* (PERLA).

⁵ The indigenous population declined rapidly in the 17th and 18th centuries as a result of European conquest and diseases. Colonizers thus turned to slaves from Africa to work in the mines and as domestic servants (Seed 1982).

Afro-descendant Mexicans are very much a part of Mexican society, existing mostly in communities along the coasts of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Guerrero.

Nothing solidified the erasure of Blackness from the Mexican national imaginary like the promotion of *mestizaje* in the aftermath of Mexican independence in 1821. During the nation building process, elites called for a newly reinvented nation in which a mixed race citizenry could unify under a common identity. Nationalist ideologies of the time celebrated a particular brand of *mestizaje*—Spanish and indigenous race mixing—as key to national cohesion and thus, modernization (Knight 1990; Trevino Rangel 2008). In the post-revolutionary period of the 1920s, intellectuals like Jose Vasconcelos and Manuel Gamio reconfigured nationalist ideology, leading to an official state sanctioning of *mestizaje*, and further solidifying the so-called disappearance of Blackness (Hernandez Cueva 2004; Knight 1990). This particular brand of *Mestizaje*, as noted in Vasconcelos’ *La Raza Cosmica*, was highly influenced eugenicist ideas of the time imported from Europe and North America (Stephen 1991) made “visibly” Black or mulatto Mexicans officially invisible. It was not until the mid 1940s when Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, an ethnologist and historian, carried out the first academically recognized study of Afro-Mexican communities in Guerrero on the South Pacific coast of Mexico. Blacks in Mexico, however, have remained largely invisible in the popular imagination (Vaughn 2005; Sue 2013).

The Mexican state has played a dominant role in the development and reproduction of hegemonic racial ideologies that determined the social inclusion and exclusion of certain populations. Borrowing from Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of the racial state, Mexican sociologist Trevino Rangel (2008:672) argues that Mexico is a racist state evidenced by its reproduction of structures of domination that privilege lighter skinned mestizos while marginalizing indigenous and other dark skinned or “foreign” populations. Indeed, Mexico’s

historical immigration laws discriminated against Chinese and Black immigrants, constructing them as “undesirable citizens” and “unassimilable” (Trevino Rangel, 2008). The ideology and practice of *mestizaje*, with its emphasis on whiteness as the essential ingredient for modernity and social progress, is arguably the root of racist thinking and practices in Mexico today.

The Denial of Racism In Mexico and Latin America

Ironically, the glorification of *mestizaje* and its resulting racial mixture in Mexico, and other Latin American nations, has been viewed by some as a testament to the region’s superior race relations compared to the U.S. (Sue 2013; Sawyer 2006:124). Often comparing their nations to North America and South Africa, many Latin American leaders acknowledge that explicit racism and institutional discrimination exist in “other parts of the world,” but not at home.

Dulitzky (2005) maintains that Latin Americans are prone to conceal, twist, and cover up the fact that racism and racial discrimination exists in the region. Despite the fact that Blacks throughout the continent are disproportionately poor, uneducated, victims of political violence, and experience overall substandard living conditions, Dulitzky (2005) argues that Latin American governments exhibit three different types of denials of racial discrimination: literal denial (nothing has happened), interpretive denial (what is happening is actually something else), and justificatory denial (what is happening is justified).

While the U.S.’s historical legacy of legal segregation has created a society that is today riddled with racial disparities seen in almost all indicators used to measure structural inequality, from education to residential segregation (Wilson 1990; Massey and Denton 1998), Latin American racism has been more difficult to measure (Telles 2004). Some Latin American countries exhibit higher rates of intermarriage and lower rates of residential segregation, which

would appear to some to indicate less racial discrimination. Yet, several studies have found that racial discrimination and institutional racism in Latin America continue to exist (Sawyer 2006; Telles 2004; De La Fuente 2001). Based on his study examining race relations in Brazil, Telles (2004) finds a seemingly contradictory coexistence of both positive social relations across racial lines and rampant racial discrimination. Another study found differences in how individuals perceive structural racism from the State and individual racism directed from one person to another (Oboler, 1995; Duany, 2005). Although some individuals may deny that systemic racial discrimination exists in their country (i.e. legal segregation), there exists the possibility that they may simultaneously acknowledge that racist behavior affects people's lives, as the two need not be mutually exclusive. This possibility would imply that Mexicans who deny the existence of racism in their country (or deny having any personal racist or racially discriminating thoughts or actions toward others), may in fact also express an awareness that certain groups, like the indigenous, indeed experience social injustices due to their phenotype or "race."

Race And Social Inequality In Contemporary Mexico

In 1994, a representative of Mexico to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination declared that "the phenomenon of racial discrimination did not exist in Mexico," arguing that discrimination against the indigenous and other marginalized groups was due to socioeconomic factors, not race (Munoz 2009). However, the notion that Mexico is a country free of racism does not hold much weight, as recent studies have presented ample empirical evidence of stratification by both skin color and social class. Villareal (2011) and Flores and Telles (2012) recently found that skin color and socio-class origins work together to produce and reinforce social inequality and discrimination in contemporary Mexico. In fact, ten years after

the UN declaration was made, the Mexican State officially recognized the existence of racial discrimination, and as recent as 2001, it amended a Constitutional Article to officially penalize any form of discrimination based on ethnicity, language, gender, or race (Telles and PERLA 2014).

The official endorsement of anti-discrimination legislation and other national and regional efforts to eliminate racism, however, have not had much success. Skin color discrimination permeates nearly all aspects of life in Mexico and is alive and well in the stories of my respondents. Put simply, Mexicans with the darkest skin tone – the indigenous, Afro-Mexicans, and some mestizos - face the greatest disadvantage in society as they are among the poorest and remain severely underrepresented in higher occupational and educational levels (Villarreal 2011; Flores and Telles 2012:486; Sue 2013; Telles and PERLA 2014). Not surprisingly, in a society that covets light skin, the whitest looking Mexicans reap the greatest social and economic advantage.

What are Mexicans' social attitudes about discrimination, and what factors contribute to such attitudes? The Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America, administered by Princeton University, is one of the most recent ongoing efforts to empirically examine national patterns of racial and ethnic identity and how they relate to social attitudes about discrimination in Mexico and other Latin American nations (Telles and PERLA 2014). While findings present a complex picture of how the national ideology of *mestizaje* operates on the ground to shape how individuals perceive their own and others' race and ethnicity, in general the study reveals that 1) the wording of questions on race and ethnicity may have some influence on how individuals report their identity, 2) that mestizo identity remains the dominant classifier for race in Mexico, and, yet it is a fluid identity in which context and factors such as skin color and social class

determine who identifies as mestizo and social attitudes on discrimination, and that 3) lighter skinned Mexicans were more likely to report that discrimination based on skin color exists.

In a recently published study of race and color hierarchies in Veracruz, Mexico, Sue (2013) finds that Mexicans commonly silenced discussions of racism, or outright denied its existence, and very rarely challenged national ideologies of *mestizaje*. Sue argues poignantly that Mexicans' hesitance to openly discuss racism or asserting its role in sustaining Mexico's inequitable social relations actively upholds the racial status quo. This practice of "explaining away discrimination" is at times most evident among darker skinned Mexicans, who may not be cognizant of the fact that although they have the most to gain from exposing racism, their silence only reinforces existing ethnoracial and skin color hierarchies. Interestingly, the few who openly discussed racism tended to be highly educated individuals with lighter skin tones, a finding supported by the national survey data examined by Telles and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (2014), and which suggests that one need not be a "victim" of racial discrimination to acknowledge its impact on society.

Sue's work is also among the few qualitative studies to "expose the entanglement of interconnected dynamics that surround race and color in Mexico" and in so doing, makes an important contribution to understanding how ordinary Mexicans navigate racial terrain in their home country (Sue 2013:5). Her study, however, highlights the experiences of Veracruzanos – Mexicans from a region known to have a large afro-descendant population. The extent to which her study participants may appear phenotypically Black may produce findings different from those in my study, which examines racial attitudes and perceptions among a mainstream mestizo population in a traditional sending region. These differences are important when considering

how Mexican immigrants to the U.S. experience race and racialization, as migrants from Mexico's Western-Central region are among the most socially incorporated in U.S. society.

FINDINGS

Varying Interpretations Of Discrimination In Mexico

In a society that embraces the ideology of *mestizaje* and the idea that Mexican-ness is best defined as a mixture of various races, how do Mexicans make sense of social and racial discrimination? In this section, I discuss the many interpretations of discrimination in contemporary Mexican society, as it is defined and experienced by individuals in Guadalajara, Jalisco. While findings show that some respondents compare Mexico to U.S. understandings of racism as a way of explaining away racism in their home country (Sue 2013), I argue that this in and of itself does not lead to the outright denial of discrimination based on race. Although many respondents did not readily rely on racism discourse to explain the marginalization of indigenous Mexicans, many identified it as a form of discrimination based on race and/or skin color.

Mexican's overwhelming perception that the most prevalent type of discrimination in society stems from socioeconomic status has indeed played a role in the country's limited social recognition of racial discrimination. In this chapter, however, I show that respondents interpret racial discrimination in many different ways, which often includes overlapping structures of difference such as skin color, education level, and cultural markers such as dress and language. These findings are consistent with Telles and PERLA (2014), who suggest that understandings of "racism" in Mexico are more varied than dominant U.S. understandings, and argue that many Mexicans are indeed aware of, and acknowledge, racial discrimination in their country. Lastly, I examine respondent perceptions of "others" and inter-group relations at the local level to illustrate how socioeconomic status, skin color, and ethnicity are *racialized* and combined, best

explain how individuals define and experience racial discrimination and ethnoracial identity in their home country.

A Denial of Racism? Structural Definitions of Racism

In Mexico, the term “racism” is not used too commonly when describing the many forms of discrimination that are prevalent in society. The discourse on racism, which is inherently rooted in the unequal treatment of “different” racial groups, would contradict the national racial project of *mestizaje* and its central emphasis that Mexicans are racially mixed. This insistence that race, and therefore, racial difference is not a main feature of social division in Mexico is reflected in some respondent’s reluctance to call something racism, even in cases where there is agreement that certain groups are marginalized due to skin color and phenotype.

There were only a handful of respondents who outright denied the existence of racism in Mexico. Most of these individuals tended to ascribe to narrow definitions of racism characterized by the presence of racially exclusionary laws or policies, as exemplified by the U.S.’s Jim Crow Laws, for example. When asked whether racism exists in Mexico, Eva, a thirty-nine year old with medium brown skin responds:

No. In my opinion racism doesn’t exist here in Mexico...If racism existed here they wouldn’t permit, for example, for people to set up restaurants. And one goes and consumes from them and you’d see people and treat them badly, or humiliate them. I think you would be able to see it [the racism].

This quote best demonstrates a conceptualization of racism that first and foremost necessitates the presence of segregationist laws that prohibit certain groups from owning property or frequenting certain business establishments. If one follows this logic, it makes sense that individuals (and political elites) might claim that racism is nonexistent in Mexico. Yet, this narrow definition of racism as merely structural overlooks the reality that individuals can also

perpetuate racist behavior and attitudes. Moreover, unlike the U.S., Mexico has not instituted Jim Crow type laws. Yet, Eva comments that if racism existed, one would “be able to see it,” presumably in the way that Jim Crow segregation was visible in the U.S., and was brought to international attention by Black activists and movements. The U.S. is rather infamous in Mexico for its historically racist practices, which Mexicans are made aware of via the transmission of U.S. media, culture, and information communicated by immigrant contacts residing in the U.S.

At times, the absence of legal racial segregation seemed to inform respondent’s views that indigenous people were treated equally in Mexico. When asked whether she believed that indigenous groups were discriminated against in Mexico, Alicia, a thirty-eight year old housewife with darker brown skin commented:

No. They live here and have the same services, the same opportunities to frequent the same stores, to walk the same streets. I see there is respect for their way of dressing, because it is very different.

Similarly to Eva, Alicia’s understanding of racial discrimination is rooted in images of U.S. Jim Crow segregation, in which Black persons were prohibited from entering “White only” establishments or per racial etiquette, expected to step off the sidewalk or move to the street side when Whites were approaching. Such a definition of racism that is limited to the systematic, legal and institutional realm often fails to identify individual acts of discrimination, despite the highly visible unequal status of the indigenous. From this perspective, a light skinned mestizo employer who refuses to hire dark skinned or indigenous person could escape accusations of racial discrimination.

Another respondent, Miguel, denied racism by stating that because Mexicans are of one race – mestizos -, they could not possibly be racist toward each other. This interpretation also appears to be highly influenced by U.S. racial ideologies, in which racism would be defined

primarily through the prism of White on Black oppression based on a clear racial order. According to Miguel, if “other” races do not exist in Mexico, it is logically impossible for Mexico to be a racist society at least theoretically. Not only does this interpretation ignore the racial and ethnic diversity within Mexico, ranging from Black to Chinese Mexicans, it also shows how discrimination against the indigenous is commonly seen as an issue of ethnic difference rather than a manifestation of racism.

A small minority of respondents outright denied racism or attempted to justify it by comparing it to the “truly racist U.S.” Yet still, although several respondents expressed some awareness of discrimination based on race or ethnicity, most did not call it racism. For example, Carmen, a housewife in her late thirties with darker brown skin, denied the existence of racism, noting that she has never observed discrimination in public or has personally felt discriminated against for any reason. However, further along during our interview while discussing the status of indigenous people in Mexico, she did not hesitate to comment that the indigenous face a lot of prejudice. “I think it’s unfair when indigenous women street vendors set up the things they’re selling only to be harassed by authority figures for not carrying permits,” she stated. In this case, Carmen denied that racism exists while simultaneously noting that indigenous people are unfairly targeted by authorities simply because they are indigenous. This seeming contradiction illustrates how discourse on racism remains largely taboo in Mexico, or at the very least, has yet to become part of mainstream discourse on race, ethnicity and social inequality.

Social Class and “Economic” Discrimination

Most respondents agreed that discrimination based on social class and status is one of the most pressing social problems in Mexico. This may explain why class discrimination was the most common theme mentioned during discussions of racism and discrimination in Mexico. This

perception changes once Mexicans migrate to the U.S., where legal status and Latino racial identity take center stage in shaping understandings of social hierarchies and inequality. As I show in this section, social class emerges as *the* reference point for interpreting and explaining unequal treatment in Mexican society. These findings are supported with national data, which shows that the most common type of perceived and experienced discrimination among Mexicans is “economic” (Telles and PERLA 2014).

Disparities in social status are intimately tied to skin color stratification such that upper class or high social status is associated with “White” or light skinned Mexicans, while those associated with poverty tend to be darker skinned. Describing social relations between different “levels” or social strata in Mexico, Martin, twenty-eight year old Administrative Assistant with medium brown skin tone explains, “I believe there is, and more than anything, there are people who like to discriminate others who are not at their level.” I asked her to specify what she meant by “level,” to which she replied, “Economic.” Martin further compared economic discrimination with that based on skin color, stating,

For me there is more racism here in Mexico based on economics than people discriminating against you based on [skin] color.” I’ve seen people who talk bad when they go to Plaza Tapatio, the [indigenous] people who sell potato chips...It’s like saying ‘you’re not at my level’ and they’ll tell you that you can’t mix with them...

Class based issues are particularly relevant in Mexicans’ explanations for existing social and racial inequality. In the above quote, Martin makes a specific reference to the indigenous street vendors who set up makeshift stands selling fried potato chips (often with their children in tow) in the main Plazas throughout town. Being told that she should not “mix” with the indigenous street vendors also exemplifies the social boundaries and distance that mainstream mestizo society so often creates between themselves and the indigenous, particularly the poor.

Conceptions of discrimination often draw upon differences in treatment between upper class, light skinned Mexicans and those with “fewer opportunities,” which are almost always in reference to working class and poor, darker skinned mestizos or indigenous people. Diego, a light skinned factory worker in his early forties explains racial discrimination in the following scenario:

What happens is that sometimes there are people who aren't educated and they don't give them jobs because they can't read or write. Instead of giving them support, because they're in their own country, they are treated less than.

Discussions of discrimination often included phrases like “some people have less opportunity.” In doing so, respondents are implying that certain sectors of society have greater access to education, good jobs, and higher pay, while those who face significant barriers to upward mobility do so because they face discrimination. In the above quote, Diego suggests that marginalized groups are further stigmatized by being seen or treated as inferior. Diego's language seems coded because he never explicitly mentions the indigenous, despite the fact that the common racist assumption is that if indigenous people are illiterate or in poverty, it is because of their so-called backwards mentality and inherent simplemindedness.

Marcos, an electrician in his forties with medium brown skin, works as a maintenance man in a luxury condominium located in a trendy, upscale part of town. Over the years, Marcos has had many encounters with tenants, who he described as “upper class white Mexicans.” He recalled instances where those at the top of the economic hierarchy treated him in a demeaning way because of his lower class status. For example, instead of making polite requests for maintenance, some tenants simply order him to get things done right away. In other instances, Marcos enters tenant's apartments to conduct maintenance work. At times, he has been inside the apartment while tenants prepare lunch or dinner. While some of the friendlier tenants have

offered him something to eat, Marcos has never been invited to sit in the dining room table, being expected instead to eat while standing up or take his food to his work area. Marcos was able to recount several experiences leading to demeaning interactions with Mexico's privileged sectors. To him, these social interactions constitute discrimination based on a combination of social class and skin color.

Skin color is all too often used as a physical marker to stereotype individuals as poor, working-class, or upper class. Discussing the intimate link between class status and skin color, another respondent, Samuel, a twenty-nine year old assistant director of a small manufacturing business explains:

Well I think [racism] functions in terms of difference based on colors. You get marked or they marginalize you. Like I just said about money, they put you in a certain socioeconomic status based on your [skin] color. I've seen instances where they don't let *morenos* [dark skinned Mexicans] in certain places.

For Samuel, who is a shade darker than medium brown skin, color prejudice is the root of discrimination in Mexico. Skin color is a physical descriptor that others use to make stereotypical assumptions about one's social class status, which may lead to differential treatment. The association of light skin with money, status and education often results in privileged treatment for lighter Mexicans, sometimes even by dark skinned individuals.

Educational status was also strongly associated with "economic" discrimination. In an earlier quote, Diego explains that indigenous people struggle to find decent jobs because they are not educated and thus cannot read or write. He argues for more government support and adequate educational resources for the illiterate. Indeed, Flores and Telles (2012) found that Mexico's educated class is comprised overwhelmingly of lighter skinned persons. In the quote above, Diego was referencing indigenous people, who in his opinion, encounter the worst discrimination on the job market. Diego's explanation for why many indigenous people lack

education is structural, citing the group's limited access to government resources. Yet, all too often, the explicitly racist assumption is that indigenous people are not represented in the educated, upper classes simply because they are intellectually inferior and do not value education.

Economic and educational disparities – and the discrimination faced by those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy - emerged clearly in the data as respondent's most common frame for interpreting and explaining social inequality in Mexico. Different treatment based on social class status was identified as a major social problem plaguing Mexican society. While scholars of race in Latin America have long pointed out that existing socioeconomic hierarchies are rooted in racially stratified colonial labor structures, data in this study show that Mexicans often draw on economic explanations to make sense of why certain groups are on top of the social and racial hierarchy while others have remained at the bottom.

While the plight of the poor and the reality of social class disparities in Mexico cannot be ignored, this dominant framing of social inequality can have the unintended consequence of masking the effects of color and ethnoracial discrimination. As discussed in the following section, respondents, particularly those with darker skin tones, shared many experiences where they believed skin color was a salient factor in the way they were unfairly treated by family, teachers, and broader society. As this chapter discusses, the overlapping effects of skin color and social class hierarchies only served to complicate the way Mexicans come to make sense of, and explain, inequality and discrimination in their country.

Mexico's Color Lines and Skin Color Prejudice: "Gueros," "Morenos," "Prietos," y "Negros"

Because the dominant view of Mexican society has been that class, not race, is the most important factor determining one's social, economic and political position, some maintain that

the role of skin color in Mexican social stratification has been largely denied or overlooked (Flores and Telles 2012). In addition to experiencing the greatest barriers to economic mobility in Mexico, individuals with darker skin also must bear the brunt of the social stigma attached to indigenous or Afro features in a society that covets white skin, light eyes and hair color. Skin color prejudice – and its negative emotional and psychological impact - runs deep in society, and can be observed even in the most intimate settings, including in family, marriage, and friendships (Sue 2013).

Several respondents with darker skin tone recalled experiences where they felt they were treated differently because of their color. Mario, a forty-six year old construction worker who described his skin color as “*moreno*,” illustrates this point well. As a contractor in the construction industry born in Guadalajara, Mario has travelled extensively and lived in other regions of Mexico. During our interview, which took place in the courtyard of a luxury condominium where he had been contracted to repair the swimming pool, I asked if he ever felt that he was treated differently due to his skin color. He sighed deeply and proceeded to recount a painful childhood experience that he described as having “left a mark on [his] life that [he has] carried for many years.” When he was eight years old, he auditioned for the chorus group in his school. “I was the best vocalist out of the four who were recruited [to audition],” he said proudly. Despite his talent, Mario believed he was overlooked for the leading role in favor of a light skinned peer. He remembers his teacher commenting, “‘It’s because that kid, well, he’s *guerito* [light skinned].’” “It was because of my color” he remarked, regretfully. The “White” student selected would go on to represent the State in a national competition held in the nation’s capital. “I cried,” he said. “It hurt me in my soul.” What is remarkable about this experience is that it is not unique to Mario. Several respondents with dark skin recounted childhood experiences where

skin color was a salient factor shaping interactions with peers. In school settings, lighter skinned students would make racial jokes about dark skin or indigenous phenotype, and at times, even teachers were believed to have given preferential treatment to students with the lightest skin.

Beyond experiencing social exclusion due to skin color, some respondents expressed that they have been targets of discrimination due to assumptions about economic status based on skin color. Samuel recounted a time he frequented a nice restaurant in town. While he waited to be seated, another party who he described as “White” Mexicans arrived and was seated before him. Roberto believed that the group “was seated right away because the waiters assumed they have more money and will spend more or tip better.” Although he offered this experience as an example of skin color discrimination in Mexico, Samuel’s comment clarifying, “I’m not totally Black but I’m also not White,” upholds skin color hierarchies and appears to suggest that the waiters would have been justified in giving that kind of treatment to someone who is “totally Black.”

Discussions of skin color prejudice and discrimination often reveal the varying meanings of Blackness in Mexican society. For example, when probed to share specific examples of how individuals are treated differently in Mexico based on their skin color, Diego stated, “well I notice sometimes that ‘*personas negritas*’ (*Black persons*) are treated as less than.” Due to Mexican’s common use of the color label “negro” to refer to mestizos who have “stayed out in the sun too long,” I asked Diego to clarify what he meant by “Black persons,” and he replied “Mexicans.” This is revealing of Mexico’s racial context. Mexicans often refer to persons with very dark skin as “*negros*,” even though when probed further it becomes clear that they are not referring to Black foreigners, such as African Americans or African immigrants in Mexico. Often, when I asked about Blacks, without specifying Black *Americans*, or Afro-descendant

Mexicans, many respondents' point of reference was dark skinned Mexicans. Due to the prevalent use of color labels in Mexico, in many cases, it was not until I specifically asked about Afro-descendant Mexicans that respondents understood I was not referring to Mexicans who have dark brown skin. It appears that in the relative absence of Afro-Mexicans in the region, when asked about "Black people" many respondents read this as a color label referring to Mexican mestizos with dark skin. Again, it serves to reveal how Blacks as a *racial* group have relatively little salience in this region of Mexico when compared to the U.S.

Racial jokes about skin color and phenotype are so prevalent they are often taken as harmless fun. As Sue (2013:151) illustrates in her work, this type of humor is derogatory and demeaning toward the recipient, who often goes along with the joke so as not to breach the social etiquette of challenging racial humor. Dark skinned respondents were more likely to be the objects of racial jokes, and not surprisingly, they were among the respondents who expressed deep pain from memories of being ostracized as children. For example, Jose explains one of the nicknames he heard among the neighborhood's children,

They tell you, 'you damn *tepocate*'. I don't even know what that is but it's I think it's a really dark animal. I think they make the comparisons because it is something really black and it's like you are just as black as that thing.

Jose further explains that nicknames are very common in Mexico and claims that people take them for what they are: funny nicknames or even terms of endearment. Terms like "negro," and "Memin" are commonly used to refer to Mexicans with dark skin or Afro phenotype, while "India Maria" is a popular term used jokingly to refer to someone with indigenous features, dress, or most problematic, social behaviors associated with the indigenous, including improper use of the Spanish language, lack of cultural capital and presumed intellectual inferiority, and exaggerated humility or modesty.

Moreover, while those on the darker end of the skin color spectrum tend to bear the brunt of racial jokes, Mexicans of all colors and phenotypes partake in racial humor. At times, individuals with dark skin would make fun of those with *darker* skin in the family or within their social circles, perhaps as a distancing strategy or a way of calling the attention off of themselves. Nonetheless, participating in this type of humor regarding one's appearance is viewed as a hallmark of Mexican culture.

Color prejudice can also take the form of dating preferences or family (dis)approval of romantic or marriage partners. Carolina, who has dark brown skin, and long straight black hair, describes a time when her father-in-law disapproved of her because of her dark skin and indigenous features. According to Carolina, her husband is a "White" Mexican from San Miguel de Alto, a town in the state of Jalisco famously recognized as a region with "good looking...light skinned people with colored eyes." She explains:

When I got married, my father-in-law didn't like me, because they're white. Tall. In San Miguel el Alto, over there near Tepetitlan, there are a lot of *gente guera* and since I'm *morena* and everyone there is 'white' they didn't like me cause I'm supposedly *india*....He would always say [about his son marrying me], 'fucking *india* that he went and found himself' and he told me that himself...But many years later once we got to know each other, well, he changed and stopped calling me *pinche india*.

Mexico is a large country with vast regional diversity in ethnoracial composition. The region of Jalisco, particularly Los Altos, is known for its large concentration of White, European descendant Mexicans. Beauty pageant contestants from the region – many of who have very light skin, tall, slender bodies, and colored eyes - are lauded and admired as gendered and racialized representations of Mexico's beauty. It is within this racial context that Carolina experienced feelings of disapproval from her in-laws due to her darker skin and indigenous features. Mexico is similar to other Latin American countries in that assessments of whiteness, *mestizaje*, and indigineity are based in part on individual's understanding of his or her own social and racial

status. In this case, the father in law's *whiteness*, both in terms of his appearance but also his identification with a region of Mexico that is racialized as White, informed his own views and preferences for his son to marry a lighter skinned woman.

Perhaps no other racial epithet better exemplifies Mexico's deeply rooted anti-indigenous prejudice like *pinche india* [fucking Indian]. Indeed, the unequal treatment of indigenous people was often brought up during discussions of skin color prejudice and discrimination more broadly. When asked directly if they believed that indigenous people faced unequal treatment, for several respondents it was difficult to deny the reality of anti-indigenous sentiment in the country. Ricardo, a thirty-year-old musician with darker brown skin he described as *moreno*, explains, "Look, normally you see it even in the lower middle class. They insult others 'damn Indian,' I don't know, many things happen. And that's what you see here in Mexico." Rosario, another respondent, discussed the association commonly made between indigenous people and poverty or the "lower class":

Many people when they see people from the lower class, like the 'Marias' ... people are like 'los indios' and well, we are also Indians. Even the same indigenous people when they are dressed with their traditional clothes they're like 'look how ugly that looks'. So yes, there is discrimination.

Rosario's quote illuminates how poverty is racialized in Mexico. As Historian Alan Knight (1990:100) so eloquently puts it, "Indians have remained subject to informal discrimination, based on anti-indian prejudice, which is rooted in the subsoil of Mexican culture...A whole range of prejudices and discriminations therefore exists, but exists in defiance of official ideology. Indian languages are officially endorsed, but unofficially frowned upon." As Rosario expressed, by looking down upon their own traditional clothing as ugly, even indigenous people internalize Mexico's deep-seated legacy of anti-indigenous ideology. As another respondent, Carmen, explains, dark skinned Mexicans were often viewed as inherently inferior to "White"

Mexicans. “Almost the majority of Mexicans, or I think everyone, has that opinion that just because you see someone as *prieto* [dark] or very *moreno*, you believe he is inferior to you. And sometimes they have more money than you!” Indeed, even in cases where an indigenous person may have high socioeconomic status, they are not immune to racial discrimination.

In contrast to the experiences of discrimination observed by many respondents with darker skin tones, those with lighter skin rarely expressed that they had been treated differently due to their color. Interestingly, although very few lighter skinned Mexicans believed that they had ever been victims of unequal treatment, several openly acknowledged that skin color discrimination toward those with darker skin is a common problem. Jackie was among the lighter skinned respondents who when asked if she believed she had ever been discriminated due to her appearance, responded, “No. Up until this point, no.” She further explained, “Maybe it’s because I am a bit more White. If I were *morena* well, I’d be saying something different, right?...I’m a bit more White, I don’t appear to have burnt, very dark skin, that’s why. If not, I’m certain I would be answering that differently.” Jackie’s experience is representative of larger patterns in the data. Individual experiences with discrimination appear to vary by skin tone, with dark skinned respondents reporting more direct experiences with color prejudice than those with the lightest skin color.

However, Jackie’s nuanced views on skin color discrimination also demonstrate that direct experience with skin color prejudice is not a necessary condition to express *awareness* of it. Indeed, Whiter Mexicans were just as likely to acknowledge that skin color discrimination is a prominent social problem in Mexican society, and that it disproportionately affects those with darker skin color. My findings are consistent with Telles and PERLA (2014), who show that although people with light or medium-colored skin, as well as those who self-identify as *mestizo*,

tended to report that they have not personally experienced discrimination, many nonetheless acknowledged that social discrimination exists in Mexico.

Moreover, whereas Sue (2013) argues that silence around discussions of race discrimination are common and represent Mexicans' active denial of racism, respondents in my study showed increasing awareness of color discrimination, which some interpreted as a form of racism. Perhaps the increasing awareness might be due to Mexico's recent national campaign against discrimination, led by the National Counsel For the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED). The organization released a video calling Mexicans to join efforts to eliminate all forms of social discrimination, including that based on gender, disability, age, and race. The campaign is part of the State's efforts to increase social recognition of discrimination, and could do a lot to dispute claims that Mexican society is in denial of, and refuses to act against, racism.

While discourse on racism has yet to become the dominant framework for thinking and talking about discrimination based on skin color, a small minority of respondents conceptualized racism similar to dominant U.S. understandings - as the different and unequal treatment of people due to race, which is determined by skin color and phenotype. In other words, treating someone as inferior because of his or her skin color was understood as a form of "Mexican style racism." Take Mauricio, a forty-three-year old office manager with medium brown skin, who explains:

Here, you notice racism by the differences between people. Simply because of skin color you are devalued, you are made to feel less than or inferior...we all have the same rights but simply because of certain physical features you are discriminated. Look at indigenous people.

In the U.S., popular conceptions of racism often draw on examples of White on Black discrimination. However, in the few cases where Mexicans acknowledged racism and were further probed to explain how Mexican racism functions, the examples provided referred to the

social and ethnoracial distinction between the numerically dominant mestizo population and the indigenous. As discussed previously, indigenous people in Mexico are *the* marginalized group in society, occupying the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy in many ways akin to African Americans in U.S. society.

In this section I have illustrated the various ways in which Mexicans make sense of discrimination in contemporary Mexican society. I began with a discussion of how racism is defined, providing examples ranging from the denial of racism to different interpretations of discrimination, such as that stemming from skin color prejudice. I showed how social class differences operate as the dominant framework used to define and explain ethnoracial discrimination in Mexico. These understandings of socioeconomic discrimination are further linked to observations of, and experiences with, skin color prejudice. Yet, because the dominant view is that class, rather than race per se, is the driving force determining one's position in society, racial discrimination can be easily obscured, even in the face of rampant anti-indigenous attitudes and behaviors.

Yet, findings show also reveal that a majority of respondents acknowledged the existence of skin color prejudice, whether they were directly affected by it or not. Several respondents, particularly those with darker skin, reported instances in which they believed to be discriminated based on skin color. Individuals with lighter skin, on the other hand, rarely reported direct experiences with unequal treatment due to their color. What is clear is that most acknowledged that skin color prejudice is pervasive in Mexican society, although it tends to come secondary to economic based explanations for social inequality.

RACE RELATIONS IN MEXICO

“Any analysis of race and racism in Mexico demands some grasp of Mexican race relations”

- Alan Knight (1990:72)

In this section, I discuss the local racial context in Guadalajara, Jalisco to examine the nature of inter-group relations between the mainstream mestizo population and various groups, including indigenous Mexicans, Blacks of different national origins, and to a lesser extent, Asian immigrants. Findings show that indigenous people are constructed simultaneously as central to Mexican (racial) identity and “othered” as a group racially distinct from the typical Mexican. This sentiment supports existing studies showing that the primary social distinction in Mexico is that between the dominant mestizo population and the indigenous (Villarreal 2010).

Blacks, on the other hand, far from occupying a central place in national constructions of the Mexican “race,” are viewed as foreign and Blackness as mutually exclusive with Mexican-ness. Such conceptions of Blackness as foreign to the nation are reinforced and exacerbated by the relative absence of Black persons in the local racial context. Encounters with Afro-Mexicans in Guadalajara are few. As an international city, locals have some contact with U.S. Black and African tourists or foreign diplomats, but it is very infrequent. As I discuss in this section, respondents’ interactions with Blacks – of any national origin – are uncommon in a racial context where their numbers are few and in many cases, perceived language barriers exist. As such, most respondents could not distinguish Afro-Mexicans from others perceived to be Black, and almost all Blacks were commonly described as foreigners.

As an international city, Guadalajara also hosts immigrants from many other parts of the world, including China, Korea, and Japan. It is therefore, noteworthy to say that Asian immigrants are a (small) part of the racial landscape in several parts of Mexico. Many Asian

immigrants come to Mexico as entrepreneurs, setting up small businesses such as restaurants and stores selling miscellaneous household items. Although they are a minority population in Guadalajara, similarly to Blacks, Asians were perceived as foreign to the nation. Asians are viewed as intelligent, hard working businessmen, and crafty. At the same time, however, nationalist sentiments portray Chinese merchants as invading Mexico, selling cheap “knockoff” goods and products, and displacing local Mexican merchants. While contemporary social attitudes toward Asians were negative at times, they tended to be relatively positive, especially compared with Blacks.

The Simultaneous Glorification and Othering of the Indigenous

In national discourse of race, the category “indigenous” has been ideologically constructed in contrast to the dominant mestizo population. In other words, whereas *mestizaje* celebrates racial mixture, indigenous people are commonly discussed in ways that constructs them as a “pure race” that is simultaneously outside the dominant group, yet a central element of it. Similar to the status of African Americans in the U.S., who occupy the lowest rungs of the racial hierarchy, the indigenous in Mexico are highly racialized as the “other” in society. Today, although official national ideology embraces the indigenous element in *mestizaje*, popular perceptions of Indian inferiority continue to permeate society.

The Mexican Census has treated the indigenous category as a cultural identity defined primarily, but not exclusively, by linguistic criteria. Thus, *indigenismo* is constructed as an ethnic – rather than racial - category, and rests on the premise that through cultural assimilation into the mainstream mestizo culture (i.e. speaking the dominant Spanish language and dressing in western clothing), one could presumably move out of the indigenous category. Language is

highly racialized in Mexico and similar to phenotype or education level, can become a marker for racial inferiority and discrimination. As I show in this section, despite their glorification as the “pure race” of Mexico, indigenous people are perceived as an inferior and marginalized ethnoracial group, both in everyday interactions and popular discourse.

Respondents reported having very limited interactions with indigenous people in their daily lives. Almost none had any indigenous neighbors or co-workers. Eva explained that indigenous people live somewhat near her neighborhood, but “not too close. There are indigenous people outside of the city, but not in my community.” When social encounters did take place, they were primarily in public spaces and in the context of street vendor and customer interactions. Some respondents explained that many of the indigenous people in Guadalajara do not actually live in the city, but come down from “*la sierra*” [the mountains] to sell hand-made crafts and food items in the city’s main plazas. In the quote that follows, Eva best exemplifies the response many respondents gave to the question “have you ever interacted with indigenous persons?”:

No, the truth, no. I have never had, like, an interaction, or conversation with one, no. Only one time I went for a stroll and more than anything you walk by their food stands to buy something from them...it’s delicious, their traditional food.

Although many respondents reported very little interactions with indigenous people, many commented about the prevalence of indigenous street vendors. In the above quote, Eva expressed a somewhat favorable attitude about the traditional food sold by indigenous street vendors. However, others made comments alluding to the unsanitary conditions of the food stands such as Karina, who stated, “they’re sleeping in the streets. They work so hard selling their potato chips, but no. Sometimes people don’t buy from them because they look dirty. Poor things.”

For the most part, indigenous Mexicans were perceived as outside the boundaries of Mexican-ness and metropolitan life. Indigenous communities are often associated with rural or mountainous regions, remote locations, and poverty. This stood in sharp contrast to the urban life of most respondents. Respondents explained the lack of social interaction between themselves and indigenous people by noting that the indigenous usually travel to the City during the day for work, and then headed back to their communities in the outskirts of town when their day was over.

In fact, a unique feature of Mexico's vast geographic landscape is that regional differences often determine who is perceived as indigenous and what it means to be indigenous. Carmen, for example, commenting about the discrimination faced by indigenous people and the differences in skin color among Mexicans notes:

Well they have suffered a lot because they don't give them their place as true Mexicans. There is no need for a person to be whiter or darker, well, we're all Mexican. Just because here they carry the Spanish race, they conquered more over here and they [the indigenous] in the *pubelos* further away it's more difficult for them.

The intersection of race and region can be traced back to the Spanish conquest and colonial social stratification systems. In the above quote, Carmen seems to suggest that the indigenous are not as mixed with the Spanish race because they were tucked away in remote areas that were hard to reach by Spanish conquistadores. Yet, it is well known that indigenous people have a long history of internal migration out of their rural communities and into the urban sectors of society where they have greater access to thriving economies. While the apparent lack of racial mixing of some groups may have more to do with social attitudes and anti-indigenous or anti-Black prejudice on the part of lighter skinned mestizos, Carmen's quote reveals some of the social boundaries that exist around geography, resulting in a so-called lack of racial mixture, and thus contemporary social inequality.

Phenotypic differences like skin color and facial features were also markers of difference between mainstream mestizo populations and “pure” indigenous people. Martin commented:

I have some neighbors who are indigenous. I interact with them. No much, but mostly with one of them. I say they’re indigenous because I don’t know, their skin is a bit different from ours. You can see it even in the hair and from the face, their phenotype is different from mine.

Although respondents rarely admitted to holding prejudicial views toward indigenous people, most were able to readily provided examples of how mainstream society looks at “Indians” with disdain.

Language also played a major role in constructing social boundaries between the indigenous and mainstream mestizo population. As Pablo explains:

For example, in the Central Zone [of the city], the vendors, I figure they are indigenous because I am short, but the characteristics of an indigenous person are *moreno*, short, and what do I know, the way they talk because they have a certain accent if they have a distinct language, right? You can tell right away.

Expressing a similar sentiment about differences in language spoken, Samuel states:

Samuel: I believe they are a forgotten race. They are a group of people that are completely forgotten by the government, and I don’t get too involved in government issues...but I’m sure that they are completely abandoned and persons who I’ve seen in many pueblos that are Tarascos, and their homes are made of adobe with the roof made of cardboard and laminate. I’ve gone to some of the stores where they don’t speak Spanish. It could be my point of view that the government has forgotten them because they are a marginalized people because they are very poor. And it shouldn’t have to be that way.

Sylvia: Do you believe there is discrimination against the indigenous?

Samuel: I think so. There is a lot of discrimination. We are a society that speaks Spanish and there are the indigenous who speak their tongue. There is a very marked separation between those of us who speak Spanish and those who speak in tongue.

Language is a clear marker for difference. In the Mexican context, the dominant language is Spanish, however, the country’s various indigenous groups speak several hundred different

dialects. Discourse around Mexican-ness is embedded in ideas about Spanish cultural influence, and the assumption is that to be authentically Mexican, one must, or should, speak Spanish. If sharing a common Spanish language binds a nation together, indigenous groups not fluent in Spanish or those who acquired it as a second language are by definition excluded from the nation and thus Mexican-ness.

At first glance, *mestizaje* may appear to be an inclusive racial ideology that lauds Mexico's indigenous ancestry. In reality, however, Mexican elites have always been preoccupied with the "Indian problem." Indigenous people have been "discriminated against for being Indian and at the same time admired for being the 'real soul' of Mexico, living proof of Mexico's noble pre-Hispanic heritage" (Friedlander, *Being Indian* p. xvii, quoted in Knight 1990:101). For example, some respondents romanticized the indigenous as proud carriers of the original culture and customs of Mexico. These respondents were notable in their glorification of indigenous people as the essence of the Mexican race. Alejandro, who classifies his skin color as *moreno* and identifies racially as "Mexican," explained that indigenous people are "the roots, the true people of Mexico."

When respondents acknowledged racism or discrimination based on race in Mexico, it tended to be in reference to indigenous Mexicans. Interestingly, this shows that indigenous Mexicans are simultaneously othered as an outsider group based on ethnicity, culture, language and phenotype, while being regarded as "original" Mexicans. Estela, who has light skin color, explained:

So the majority of the people call them 'inditos' or 'las paperas' [women who sell potato chips] and they are plenty discriminated because they don't speak Spanish well, they have their native tongue that after all is very difficult to learn, it's a very complicated tongue. Their beliefs are very rooted and their dress still comes from their tribe...they have a bad rap. They are infamous for stealing and unfortunately, despite them being of our race, the *pure race of us Mexicans*, they are very, very discriminated. Now we are

moving backwards, we want to play a role as if we were the Spaniards holding them down with our foot on their neck.

At the same time, several respondents expressed that they did not believe indigenous people were discriminated against. This may be because they do not have much contact with indigenous people and therefore could not refer to specific instances in which they observed the discriminatory acts. Martin shared somewhat similar sentiments, stating:

Yeah, I've heard people say [bad things] but I feel like that's not how we should treat an indigenous person because at the end of the day we are the same race, almost...they're Mexican. *We are Mexican and at the end of the day it's the same nationality* the only thing that changes is the type of race.

Interestingly, while Martin expresses a sense of we-ness in his construction of Mexican identity, in which the indigenous and mestizo population are “almost” of “the same race,” he simultaneously positions the indigenous as outside normative understandings of Mexican-ness. In saying that indigenous people are the same nationality but of a different race contradicts nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje*, which suggest that Mexicans are unified under one homogenized race.

In summary, it is important to note how regional difference become salient in discussions of race and identity in Mexico. Several respondents identified Jalisco, and specifically the region Los Altos de Jalisco, as a racially White place. For example, Jackie, who is very light skinned with straight, light brown hair and blue eyes, described her skin color as *blanca*. In explaining to me what race she is, Jackie stated that her mother is from Los Altos de Jalisco: “I’m not sure if you’ve heard...They say people from there are white. Perhaps that is my race.” The racialization of region, or the association of someone’s race or ethnicity to a particular location was brought up in two contexts: when respondents noted geographic location in discussions of how indigenous people are outsiders and “not from here”, and as in Jackie’s case, in discussions of

racial identity rooted in regions designated as racially white localities such as Los Altos. In the first instance, some respondents noted – perhaps literally and figuratively - that Indians originate from *la sierra* and are therefore from “outside” the City of Guadalajara.

Anti-Black Attitudes: Blackness, Afro-Mexicans, and Black Foreigners

“What it means to be black in Mexico is inextricably linked with what it means to be indigenous and, likewise, with what it means to be mestizo”

-Bobby Vaughn (2005:119)

To understand how mestizo respondents in this study construct meaning about *Blackness* in Mexico, I asked about Memin Pinguin, who is perhaps the most famous Afro-Mexican character in Mexico. Mexicans are quite fond of Memin Pinguin, who is featured in a hugely popular comic book series first published in the 1960’s. He is depicted as a poor and mischievous boy with exaggerated physical features from Mexico City with a mother who resembles the mammy stereotype Aunt Jemima. Memin is one of the best illustrations of how Blackness is represented not only in Mexican popular culture, but also in ideological constructions of Mexican racial identity.

Some respondents, like Carmen, were hesitant to identify Memin as Afro-Mexican. During our interview, Carmen described Memin as ‘a little short, Black kid, he looked happy, funny...’ When asked specifically whether Memin was a Black person from Mexico she appeared rather perplexed, “it seems like he was Mexican, I don't know. I never thought about it but logically, well you think he’s Cuban or American...” Carmen’s response was typical of respondents, as there is the general lack of awareness among mestizos about the existence of

Afro-Mexicans. Note Carmen's "logic" that if Memin is Black, he cannot be Mexican, but rather Cuban or North America.⁶

In fact, Blacks were often associated with Cuba, the Caribbean, or Africa, but rarely Mexico. To most respondents, Memin was clearly Black, but many hesitated to affirm that he was also Mexican, signaling to what scholars argue is a denial of African ancestry in Mexico. This further supports claims by other scholars of race in Mexico, who note that Blackness is constructed as foreign to the nation, such that meanings of what it means to be "Mexican" are mutually exclusive from what it thought to be "Black" (Lewis 2000; Hernandez Cueva 2004; Sue 2013; Telles and PERLA 2014).

As a symbol of Blackness in Mexico, Memin also reveals much about popular conceptions of racism in Mexico, particularly anti-black stereotypes. A few years ago, a major controversy ensued when the Mexican government issued a postage stamp commemorating Memin. Some U.S. African American leaders took this as a ridiculing of Blacks, pointing out the similarities of Memin to the U.S.' stereotypical Black caricatures popular in the minstrel shows at the turn of the century. The widespread adoration of Memin throughout Mexico symbolized for leaders in the African American community, a display of anti-black racism. The fact that the postage stamps sold out in two days suggests that Mexicans do not take Memin as the problematic racialized character that he is. In fact, many respondents believed that the caricature of Memin is harmless, and even funny.

⁶ There is a history of Cuban migration to Veracruz, Mexico. Afro-Cuban musicians and baseball players have been highly visible in parts of Mexico, serving as a reference point for understandings of (Caribbean) Blackness in Mexico (Sue 2010:277).

The Invisibility of Black Mexicans

Respondents did not deny the possibility that Black Mexicans could exist, but rather, most were simply not aware or familiar with the Black population in Mexico. Mexicans in the western-central region of the country have limited exposure to Black people in their everyday lives. The surrounding region has a large indigenous population, but Afro-Mexicans, who tend to be concentrated along the coasts, and not commonplace in Jalisco. Because it has been assumed that Afro-Mexicans have become completely integrated into Mexican society, forming part of the *mestizaje*, it may be difficult for the average person to distinguish or identify a Mexican with African ancestry. In fact, Mexicans living in Guadalajara come into very little contact with Black Mexicans, and most of the respondents interviewed had never met a Black Mexican.

Many respondents were perplexed when asked whether they had ever interacted with a Black Mexican. Some claimed that they had never seen one. Pablo best exemplifies this response, saying, “No, I don't know. I haven't heard anything about them and I don't think I've never met one.” When probed further, he paused for a second he attempted to clarify the question, asking:

Pablo: As in, from an African father or mother with a Mexican? I only know Johnny Laboriel, he is an entertainer from the 70s from here. Well, but I don't know if he is Mexican to be honest. I had never asked myself that question.

Sylvia: So, what would you say to someone who asked you if black Mexicans exist?

Pablo: I have not seen them. I don't know of them.

Pablo's quote echoes most respondents' expressions about the existence of Black Mexicans. The only way Pablo and others can make sense of a Black Mexican is if he or she is the offspring of a Black foreigner and Mexican national, despite the fact that Johnny Laboriel, the above-mentioned entertainer, is a famous Afro-Mexican. Even though many reported that they had

never seen an Afro-Mexican, some, like Pablo, recognized – at least theoretically – that an individual can be an Afro-Mexican if they are the offspring of a Mexican and Black couple. This illustrates the point made by several scholars that blackness is ignored in Mexican national discourse on race and that Mexicans understand their mestizo identity as a mixing of European and Indian blood exclusively. In essence, Mexicans perceive Blackness and Mexican-ness as mutually exclusive, and Blackness is seen as foreign to the Mexican national identity.

In cases where a famous contemporary Mexican figure, like soccer player Giovannis Dos Santos, looks phenotypically Black, respondents attempted to “explain away” his Blackness. As an illustration of the racial ideology that Blacks are foreign to Mexico, Eva explains that Giovannis Dos Santos is not “really” Black, saying, “Black? He isn’t. He has features, if you see him, he does have features, but he isn’t Black.” Often, respondents expressed the idea that “other” Blacks from Africa or the U.S. are the “true” Blacks, and that any Mexican who may appear to have some African ancestry is not “really” Black. This construction falls in line with mestizaje ideology, and although it challenges the indigenous-Spaniard exclusivity of Mexican mestizaje by bringing in the African element, it nonetheless situates Afro-Mexicans as mixed individuals, and therefore not Black.

“Real Blacks are From the U.S. or Africa”: Interactions with Black Foreigners

Respondent’s discussions of Afro-Mexicans, Afro-Latin Americans more generally, and U.S. Blacks revealed that some are viewed as “true” or “pure” Blacks, while others’ “Blackness” is seen as having been diluted through racial mixture. Here, skin color was one marker of distinction. U.S. Blacks were described as phenotypically much darker than Afro-Latin

Americans, and therefore, authentically Black. Marcia, for example, explained the difference she sees between “real” Blacks from the U.S. and lighter skinned Afro-Latin Americans:

Blacks, Blacks from over there, the United States, are very Black. Their skin is very Black and the ones from over here are not; they are a combination, their skin is Black but it is a little bit lighter, that of the [Afro] Latinos. Their skin is more coffee-colored and over there it is more like chocolate, very deep.

The distinction that Marcia made between “coffee colored Blacks” and individuals with “deep” color reflects common conceptualizations of Afro-Latin Americans as racially mixed, perhaps due to the influence of nationalist discourse on *mestizaje* that dominate Latin America. U.S. Blacks, on the other hand, are understood as racially pure, a version of Blackness that reflects a U.S. discourse on the one-drop rule and a Black-White binary.

Indeed, region was an important factor when making assessments about one’s Blackness. In the few cases where respondents acknowledged that some Mexicans might have African ancestry by virtue of their hair type or skin color, they were often referred to as “*morenos*,” a color term for dark skin that places one in the *mestizo* category as opposed to a purely “Black” category. Blackness, when acknowledged in Mexico, therefore, was described using a skin color metaphor for racial ancestry, and was contrasted to “pure” Blackness from the United States or Africa. In other words, these boundary-making discursive strategies make sense in a nation that promotes *mestizaje*, and illustrate how everyday understandings of Mexicans with visible African ancestry reflect dominant racial ideologies of Mexican-ness as synonymous with racial mixture, as well as U.S. ideologies of the one-drop rule that rest on notions of racial purity.

Blacks from the U.S. are more easily referred to as Black, while Afro-Latin Americans are sometimes given labels referring to skin color. In one instance, Rosario described an Afro-Brazilian priest who lived in her Guadalajara neighborhood as being of the “*raza obscura*” [dark race]. Although Rosario seemed hesitant to label the father racially Black, she nonetheless

recalled that he did not last very long in the local church before being transferred to another location because Mexicans living near the church did not like him simply because of his race. Rosario described this incident, explaining, “We are in Mexico, not in a different country. There’s no need to discriminate other people. We are all equal.” By noting that she is not in a different country, Rosario implies that “other” countries are racist, but Mexico is not. On the other hand, when sharing that she has a cousin in the U.S. who is married to an African American, she refers to the husband as a “Black man.” This exemplifies how Blackness is constructed differently in the Mexican and Latin American context, where ideologies of racial mixture are dominant and reflect everyday discourse in which afro-descendants are given a color label, or whose Blackness is diluted or “explained away.” In contrast, “true” Blacks are often perceived to be foreigners from the U.S., or in some cases, Africa.

When respondents actually encountered Black persons on a somewhat regular basis, it was assumed that they were foreigners, even when it was clear the persons lived in Mexico and/or were not tourists visiting from abroad. Estela was one of the few respondents to report having sustained interactions with a Black person in her neighborhood, explaining:

Estela: I just remembered that by my house there was a Doctor that was Black and he married a Mexican and they had a few daughters.

Sylvia: Do you know if the doctor was from Mexico?

Estela: No, he was not from Mexico. *I never knew where he was from.* I just remember saying ‘ve a la farmacia del negro’ [‘go to the Black man’s pharmacy’]. And that his wife was Mexican. In fact, she was white, wealthy and this lady’s dad was also a very white man and very wealthy.

Note that although Estela admits she did not know where the Doctor was from, she indicates that he was not from Mexico. Yet, at no point during our discussion of him did she provide further details to substantiate her claims that he was not Mexican. Moreover, referring to a high status

professional as “*el negro*” is a powerful illustration of how Mexicans use color labels to deride Blacks and darker skinned individuals regardless of their social standing in society.

When discussing how Blackness is conceived in the Mexican context, it is important to note the powerful influence of media in shaping racial perceptions and discourses. In Mexico today, images abound depicting blacks in highly problematic ways. During the 2010 World Cup, for example, a popular Mexican television program depicted South Africa as a primitive nation, with actors donning blackface, Afro wigs, animal skins and spears (Wilkinson 2010). These century-old stereotypes of Blacks in Mexico, much like Memein Penguin, are reminiscent of early 20th century U.S. characterizations of American Blacks as backward, mischievous, happy-go-lucky, lazy and simple-minded, subservient, and loyal sidekicks (Hernandez Cueva 2004). This is true of Latin America more generally. In Brazil, for example, one study found that Brazilians perceived Blacks there as “friendlier” in contrast to the “racist” and “self-segregating” Blacks in the U.S. (Joseph, Forthcoming). Similarly, Mexican racialized images tend to portray Blacks as non-threatening, a feature made most apparent when contrasted to U.S. anti-Black discourse and media images of Blacks as inherently urban, poor, prone to violence, gang and criminal activity, drug abuse, aggressive and boisterous behavior, laziness and welfare dependence (Brown and Monahan 2005; Oliver 2003). While these discursive distinctions suggest that racialization “looks” differently across national contexts, they also reflect the mutual recognition of Blackness as occupying the bottom rung of the socio-racial hierarchy across the Americas, and the globalized nature of anti-Black ideologies more broadly.

In sum, respondents in Jalisco reported having very little exposure to Black people in their local neighborhood context, and in my observations, social interactions with Blacks were almost non-existent. Several respondents who had met or interacted with a Black person, it was

usually limited to a one-time encounter such as a relative introducing them to a Black spouse or friend, or cases where only a few words were exchanged with a Black tourist looking for directions. In cases where respondents had seen Blacks in their town, they usually could not identify the national origin of the person, yet they still assumed that he/she was a foreigner. It is therefore not surprising that most respondents stated that in their everyday lives, they rarely think about issues related to Black people. Blacks were not a salient part of respondent's daily lives, and remain a marginalized or invisible element in the national racial consciousness.

ETHNORACIAL IDENTITY: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE “MEXICAN RACE”

U.S. scholars of race have expressed much fascination with the fluid and ambiguous nature of systems of racial classification in Latin America. Similar to the historical changes we have seen in U.S. Census racial categorization, particularly in the case of Mexican populations who went from “white” to the current Hispanic category, the Mexican National Census has historically used different criteria to define and classify people into ethnic and racial groupings. A major difference between the two National Censuses, however, is that in 1930, Mexico eliminated any questions that could help determine the racial composition of its population. It would be another seventy years, in 2000, before a question asking about race was reintroduced (Telles and PERLA 2014).

Based on findings to the question, “What do you consider yourself to be?” the recent PERLA (2014) study found that more than 13% of a nationally representative sample of Mexicans identified as *White*, 11.9% as *indigenous* and about 3% as either *Black* or *mulatto*. What the survey reveals most strikingly is the predominance of mestizo identification among a nationally representative sample of Mexicans. 64.3% of Mexicans identified as *mestizo*. The study also shows that the wording of race questions and the categories provided have a large

effect on the reported size of each ethnic or racial population. As the following section illustrates, in my study, *mestizo* was the most popular identification, and was conceptualized by respondents as a mixture between Spaniards and the indigenous, albeit with a greater emphasis on the European element of that mixture.

Mexicans Are Mestizos: Racial Identity and Mestizaje Discourse

When asked, “what race are you?” Iris, a thirty-nine year old factory worker with medium brown skin, gives a rather messy reply that illustrates the ambiguity of the term race in Mexico, “Well, we’re of the Spanish race, you could say. How can I explain? We’re not of one...we’re a mix. A mix between Spaniards and...I don’t know how to explain!” She attempts to clarify after I asked, “a mix between Spaniards and what other group?” “The other group would be...we’re not straight out Indians, but we’re neither straight out Spaniards. Our race, we’re a mix. Do you understand?” Iris identifies the Spanish element as a predominant part of the mixture that makes up the Mexican race. However, she hesitates for a moment when trying to explain the additional components of that mixture. There appears to be an effort to distance herself from the Indian element, clarifying that Mexicans might not be purely Spanish, but neither are they purely indigenous.

Racial identity is an important element in scholarly assessments of dominant ideologies and discourses of race in a nation state. How respondents construct their identity as Mexicans is intimately tied to ideas about race, ethnicity, and national belonging. Racial identity can also tell us a lot about contemporary racial dynamics. Because several respondents seemed a bit puzzled by the question “what race are you?” and tended to answer with “Mexican” or “a mixture,” I had to follow up with some probing about what they meant by “Mexican race” or “a mixture of

racas.” Upon being probed, race came to be defined by many in almost exclusively *mestizaje* terms. Findings in this section illustrate how Mexican-ness is largely understood as a racial mixture in which the indigenous element was marginalized, European ancestry was emphasized, and Blackness was completely overlooked.

Unlike Puerto Ricans, who include the African element in their construction of race (Roth 2012:37), the majority of Mexicans emphasized the European element of *mestizaje*. Pablo describes the Mexican race in the following way:

Well, one thing that with the whole Conquista the Spaniards and all that, we come from the Indian race, I suppose, right? That the Spaniards came and there were mixtures, no? And from that derives our race.

Ricardo, who describes his skin color as *moreno*, exemplifies well the popular understanding of *mestizaje*:

Pablo: I say we are all *criollos*, *mestizos*, part of the *mestizaje* here in Mexico. We're not what they call a pure race, not anymore. We know now that the Spanish came and did their thing.

Sylvia: You say *criollo*? What does *criollo* mean?

Pablo: *Criollo*, or *mestizaje*, is the mixture between the Spaniard and Indigenous.

Sylvia: So, you would explain to a foreigner that you are...?

Pablo: *Mestizo*. We are part of *mestizaje*.

The above quotes reflect the powerful influence of *mestizaje* ideology in constructions of Mexican racial identity, as these responses described their race as a mixture resulting from Spanish colonization in the Americas. Several respondents discussed their racial identity in explicitly *mestizaje* discourse that defines Mexican as a mixture of Spanish and indigenous ancestry.

Racialized Nationhood: Constructing Racial Identity in Nationalist Terms

Many respondents simply answered the race question by declaring that they are of “La Raza Mexicana [the Mexican race].” To use national identity as a stand in for race, as many Mexicans do, might be unfamiliar to some in North America. Although U.S. nationhood is constructed in racialized terms as White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, “the American race” is less commonly used among Americans – of any race – when answering the race question. On the other hand, references to national races, such as the “*Raza Mexicana*,” have been common since the nation-building period throughout much of Latin America (Appelbaum et al 2003). Studies have also observed this practice in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (Roth 2012). As Roth (2012:34) explains, many of her respondents adopted what she calls a nationality racial schema in which race is conceptualized in terms of nationhood, or “cultural traditions and a sense of descent that is tied to a physical location or the people who populate it.” Among Mexicans, popular understandings of race reflect nationalistic ideologies of nationhood (i.e. Mexican-ness) that is rooted in *mestizaje*.

The joining of national and racial identities into “*La Raza Mexicana*” was most evident in the short demographic survey I administered at the end of each interview. Study respondents were asked to fill in their answer to the question, “How do you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?” and also check off a box from a list of different categories such as “*mestizo, indio, multatto, moreno, blanco/a.*” This open-ended question was intended to allow respondents to fill in any answer, without being probed or primed. In addition to filling in their answer at the end of the interview, respondents were also asked “what race are you?” during the in-depth interview. The intention here was to assess how individuals described their race qualitatively, and whether this differed from survey question about racial identity. Results from the short survey show that

over half of respondents used their national identity as a stand in for racial identity. In this instance, the answer given was simply “Mexican.” The second most common answer was “*mestizo/a*” followed by less frequently used color terms such as *moreno*, *blanco/a*, *moreno claro*, and *trigueno*. Only one respondent identified as “*criolla*” and another two as “*raza Latina/Hispana*.” Yet, as discussed above, when probed further about what “*La Raza Mexicana*” meant to them, respondents drew on *mestizaje* discourse to explain that the Mexican race is comprised of a mixture between Spaniards and indigenous people. Not one included African ancestry as part of their mestizo or Mexican ethnoracial identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: ACKNOWLEDGING RACISM IN A MESTIZO NATION?

In this chapter, I argued that contrary to the belief that Mexicans deny racism in their country, there is a growing awareness of the centrality of racial and ethnic difference and inequality in the way individuals perceive discrimination and social hierarchies. The first part illustrated that Mexicans have flexible understandings of racial discrimination but overall, most respondents framed discrimination as unequal treatment based primarily on “economic” differences due to social class and, secondly, skin color. Definitions of racism and class or skin color discrimination were at times contradicting and demonstrate the range of perceptions on what constitutes “racism,” from state-sanctioned institutionalized forms (often understood as a U.S. brand of racism such as Jim Crow Laws), to informal social exclusion and marginalization of poor and dark skinned Mexicans, particularly the indigenous.

The second section of the chapter examined race relations between the mainstream mestizo population, indigenous Mexicans, and Blacks. Findings showcased how indigenous people are constructed outside of dominant notions of Mexican-ness, yet are simultaneously

glorified as the “pure” Mexican race. Blacks, on the other hand, are viewed as foreign to the nation and often assumed to be tourists or Cubans, and basically anything but Mexican. Moreover, social interactions with Afro-Mexicans were uncommon, as their numbers are small and they tend to be concentrated along the coasts of Mexico. Lastly, I turned my focus to constructions of ethnoracial identity and ended with findings illustrating that Mexican racial and national identity is firmly rooted in ideological constructions of *mestizaje* that define “*La Raza Mexicana*” as a racial mixture of Spanish and Indigenous groups, effectively erasing blackness from the racial imaginary.

Mexico is an incredibly diverse society comprising many different races and ethnicities. Unlike U.S. racial discourse on diversity that recognizes that Americans can be of any race – at least in official discourse, Mexico for the most part views itself as a racially homogenized nation of mestizos. Although as of late the Mexican State has increased efforts to promote the multiculturalist nature of its population, much of its diversity is framed and presented as multi-ethnic and rarely multi-racial. During my time in the field, for example, I attended a State-sponsored event in Guadalajara promoted as a celebration of Mexico’s multiculturalism. Based on the description of the dance performances, it soon became apparent that multiculturalism in this context meant a celebration of indigenous culture and traditions from various parts of the country. Not one dance featured an Afro-Mexican, or any other group for that matter.⁷

Discussions of racism continue to be taboo, even among Mexican scholars. In a recent conference I attended on Ethnicity, Race, and Indigenous People in Latin America held during October 2013 in Oaxaca, Mexico, several panelists from academic and NGO circles argued that the severe discrimination and “othering” experienced by indigenous people should not merely be

⁷ One notable exception are the Guelaguetza festival performances in Oaxaca, which often feature a “sanitized” mainstream version of Afro-Mexican Chilena dances (Gonzalez 2010).

characterized as ethnic marginalization but should be recognized for what it is: racism. They argued that Mexico's reluctance to identify the structural and individual discrimination faced by indigenous and Afro-descendant Mexicans *racism* is antithetical to social progress because it only serves to reproduce the ideology of *mestizaje*, which further masks racial discrimination. While some may express concern that highlighting the existence of racism reifies racial difference and promotes racial division, this position is rather misguided. As this chapter illustrates, Mexicans are aware of the drastic social and economic inequality in their country, and many are beginning to recognize that the disadvantage and barriers to upward mobility that racialized groups encounter is rooted in racist notions that only certain populations are worthy of full inclusion to Mexican nationhood. We have yet to see whether recent efforts to promote multiculturalism and activist struggles to put Indigenous and Afro-Mexican rights on the national consciousness will transform Mexican society from a nation that has traditionally denied the existence of racism to one that confronts it head on.

CHAPTER 3

RACIAL REMITTANCES: THE TRANSMISSION OF U.S. RACIAL IDEOLOGIES TO MEXICO

The fact is that racism—and anti-black racism in particular—is a pervasive and historically entrenched reality of life in Latin America and the Caribbean...it should not be surprising that migrants from Mexico and other areas of Latin America and the Caribbean arrive in the U.S. carrying the baggage of racism.

The above statement, from a 2007 *L.A. Times* editorial reporting on the trend of increasing “Latino on black violence” in Los Angeles, is illustrative of a common perception that Latino immigrants bring with them to the United States a particular brand of anti-Black racism originating in their countries of origin. Although the existence of anti-Black racism in Latin America has been widely acknowledged by scholars (Bonilla Silva 2008; Sue 2010; Telles 2004; Wade 1997), some posit that immigrants may learn anti-black attitudes upon migrating to the U.S. (Marrow 2009; Mindiola, Niemann, and Rodriguez 2002). Evidence shows that Latino immigrants are engaging in social and racial distancing from Black Americans (Marrow 2009; McClain et al. 2006). However, it remains unclear whether these attitudes and behaviors originate in the country of origin, after migration, or some combination of sending and receiving society.

While many scholars have examined immigrant conceptions of race using a U.S.-centered framework, we have a limited understanding of how ideas about race ‘travel’ with migrants across borders, in both directions (Kim 2008). In our era of globalized racial dynamics, it is possible that Mexicans’ racial conceptions are also influenced by dominant U.S. racial ideologies (Joseph 2011; Levitt 2001; Roth 2012). Transnational ties between migrants and non-migrants – those who remain in the home country – can serve to facilitate the transmission of

new values and ideas to the sending society (Levitt 1998). Thus, in this chapter I ask: do transnational ties between immigrants and non-migrants in Mexico facilitate the transmission of U.S. racial conceptions to the sending society; what do these racial remittances look like; and how do they influence racial conceptions of Black Americans in Mexico?

Specifically, this chapter examines how individuals in Mexico who have never visited the U.S. construct racialized conceptions of Black Americans that reflect dominant U.S. racial discourse. As immigrants become increasingly exposed to U.S. racial hierarchies, they communicate this “racial knowledge” to friends and relatives who remain in the sending society. I argue that racial remittances, particularly those transmitted inter-personally, have a powerful influence on Mexicans’ perceptions of African Americans, even in the absence of actual encounters with U.S. Blacks. These findings are important for how potential new immigrants navigate the U.S. racial system. If newly arriving immigrants come forewarned about Black Americans, having been advised to maintain social distance in order to avoid racial conflict, this will have tremendous implications for Mexican immigrant social and racial incorporation to U.S. society, as well as the U.S.’ evolving racial order.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnationalism and Racial Remittances

Transnational social fields provide a useful framework for analyzing not only how Mexican immigrant conceptions of race are being transformed in the U.S., but also how its impact extends transnationally to influence the racial views of those who never left their home society. In investigating the transnational transmission of racial conceptions of Blackness, I follow the tradition of Levitt (2001), Kim (2008), and more recently, Roth (2012), who suggest

that social ties between immigrants and those who remain in the home society transcend political and geographical boundaries to create societies whose ideas and practices are shaped by both locations. Whether one engages in these transnational social interactions directly or symbolically, few are left untouched by their influence (Itzigsohn et al. 2008).

Traditionally, transnationalism has been conceptualized as the processes by which immigrants maintain “social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994:7). Though cross-border ties encompass all aspects of social life, few scholars have systematically examined the impact of *sociocultural* transnational exchanges on immigrant racial conceptions. Yet, social remittances - ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that circulate to and from immigrant sending and receiving societies - are key to the development of transnational social fields, as the messages that immigrants transmit to friends and relatives back home may become a reference point for those who never migrated (Itzigsohn et al. 2008; Levitt 1998:927).

Social remittances are influential because they operate at both micro and macro levels. Micro exchanges take place through interpersonal contact between migrants and non-migrants via return migration, family visits, phone calls, letters and emails, whereas macro-level transmissions are facilitated by institutions such as economic and political entities, governments, and media (Levitt 2001:55). When individuals receive similar messages from multiple sources, their impact can be particularly powerful. In her study of the transnational lives of Dominicans, Levitt (2001) shows how social remittances on gender equality, political activism, and religious practices were relayed to the Dominican Republic through civic organizations and immigrant networks in New York City, and influenced the views of those in the sending region. Many adapted these “Americanized” ideals into their own lives, despite never having lived in the U.S.

Like gender and political ideologies, transnational ties can also facilitate the cross-border transmission of racial ideologies (Duany 1998; Kim 2008; Oboler and Dzidzienyo 2005; Roth 2012). These social remittances on race, or *racial remittances*, are characterized by the movement of racial ideologies, schemas, discourses, stereotypes, and practices across national boundaries. They are a key mechanism of global cultural diffusion that impacts the racial formation process (i.e. the development and maintenance of racial attitudes, categorizations, and identities) within transnational social fields (Kim 2008; Omi and Winant 1994).

Roth (2012) draws on theories of cognitive science and cultural sociology to advance the concept of racial schemas for the study of transnational racialization. She defines racial schemas as: “a bundle of racial categories and the set of rules for what they mean, how they are ordered, and how to apply them to oneself and others.” Racial schema is a useful conceptual device for assessing how racial ideas are transferred and adapted across transnational contexts. However, it has been applied mostly to studies of Caribbean Latino’s racial *self-identification* and *classification*, including decisions about which categories are embraced and how the meanings of these categories change in different circumstances (Roth 2012; Telles and Paschel 2012). Less is known about how anti-black racial schemas in Mexico intersect with those in the U.S. to influence Mexican’s racial attitudes of Black Americans.

Exploring the Origins of Latino Immigrants’ Anti-Black Perceptions

Latino immigrants in general have been found to show a preference for maintaining social and racial distance from blacks (Dzidzienyo and Oboler 2005; Marrow 2009; McClain et al. 2006). For example, Mindiola, Niemann, and Rodriguez’s (2002) study of Black and Latino relations found that foreign-born Latinos hold more negative views of African Americans than

their U.S.-born counterparts. There are two general explanations for this. The first, what I call the post-migration hypothesis, suggests that immigrants learn negative attitudes and behaviors toward blacks both by following the example of white Americans and through their own experiences with blacks in the U.S., where many come to perceive discrimination from blacks against Latinos (Marrow 2009; Mindiola, Niemann, and Rodriguez 2002). Newly arrived Latino immigrants have been found to perceive relations with whites more favorably than with blacks, thus reinforcing the black/non-black racial divide (Marrow 2009). Given that Mexican immigrants occupy a tenuous position in the U.S. socio-racial hierarchy, the adoption of these boundary-making strategies may reveal efforts to elevate their own social position in the process of incorporation in to a highly stratified society. In other words, the post-migration hypothesis posits that the adoption of anti-Black attitudes and behaviors is a *product* of migration and implies that increasing exposure to whites' racial attitudes and U.S. racial hierarchies will reinforce anti-black prejudice among immigrants.

The second, the pre-migration hypothesis, suggests that anti-Black prejudice is rooted in Latin America's colonial legacy of Spanish conquest, and therefore Latino immigrants merely import these racial ideologies to the U.S. (Hernandez 2007; McClain et al. 2006). For example, in their analysis of U.S. survey data, McClain et al. (2006) found that Latino immigrants hold more negative attitudes toward Blacks than do Whites. From this, scholars conclude that Latinos bring with them anti-Black sentiment originating in their countries of origin. This argument holds much weight, as immigrants tend to retain aspects of their culture of origin and its values upon migration. However, it is possible that through immigration and other global processes of cultural diffusion, Latin Americans are increasingly exposed to U.S. anti-Black racial schemas before they even set foot in the U.S. Moreover, pre-migration understandings of race are not

static; they are negotiated and often transformed in the process of incorporation to the host society, rendering such conclusions questionable.

Scholarly analysis of Latino immigrants' racial constructions remains limited in important ways. First, many studies rely on a U.S.-centered framework in which data collection is undertaken *after* immigrants have migrated, thus obscuring any transnational processes at work. Similarly, although there are increasingly more systematic studies of race and ethnicity in Latin America (see for example the PERLA project, 2014), these have insufficient transnational analysis. Second, many U.S.-based studies tend to treat Latinos as a homogenous group, yet racial ideologies and practices can vary significantly by nation (e.g., Mexico vs. Dominican Republic) and region (e.g., Northern vs. Southern). Most studies of Mexican immigrants and race relations have also not accounted for the notion that racial ideologies and schemas may 'travel' with migrants to the U.S., become transformed, and transmitted back to the sending society. In sum, the question of whether immigrants' perceptions of African Americans originate in their country of origin, in the post-migration experience, or some combination of both remains severely under-theorized in the literature.

This chapter, therefore, aims to uncover the effects of migration to the U.S. on racial perceptions of African Americans in Mexican society. I examine how non-migrants become acquainted with the U.S. racial system via racial remittances communicated by immigrant contacts, and the implications of this for immigrant and native Black relations in the U.S. By accounting for the racial context and discourses in both immigrant sending and receiving societies, this study contributes to existing knowledge and theorizing about how migration alters conceptions of race and more specifically, Mexican immigrants' perceptions of African Americans and U.S. race relations. Findings also inform emerging debates about the impact of

immigration on the U.S. color line (Bonilla-Silva 2008; Frank, Akresh and Lu 2010; Marrow 2009; Murguia and Saenz 2002).

FINDINGS

Conceptions of Blackness in the Sending Society

As discussed in the previous chapter, interactions with Blacks are almost non-existent for most Mexicans in Mexico (Gonzalez 2010; Sue 2010). Because many Afro-Mexicans tend to be concentrated along the coasts of Veracruz and the Costa Chica, it is not uncommon for Mexicans in other regions to come into very little, if any, contact with them. In fact, as previous studies show, most Mexicans in central and western states are not aware of the Afro-Mexican coast (Vaughn 2005). The case is similar in Veracruz, where even among those who display Afro phenotype, such as black tight curly hair, the narrative of “Black as foreign to Mexico” is reinforced (Sue 2010).

As expected, the “Blacks as foreign to Mexico” narrative was common among immigrant respondents in the U.S. When asked if he had ever met a Black person in Mexico prior to migrating to the U.S., Edward, a warehouse worker living in Los Angeles for twenty one years, replied:

In the extreme like here in the U.S., no. Yes, there are *mulattos*, what one calls *mulattos*, like, lets say someone who is *moreno* but more like toasty from the sun. But, as in, of color, like dark, dark? No.

When asked the same question, Carmina, a Tupperware saleswoman who migrated to the U.S. fifteen years ago, recalls family stories speculating about her dark-skinned paternal grandmother’s racial mixture:

I don't know if [my grandmother] was close to the black race because her daughter, my aunt, was very *morenita morenita*. [My grandmother] could have been mixed because the way she wore her hair, in very large braids. I'm not sure, but she was something *different*.

In mere speculation that Carmina's grandmother might be Afro-descendant, she was 'othered' from dominant constructions of Mexican-ness. Moreover, Blacks as a group are nearly invisible in most regions of Mexico. In light of this, most non-migrant respondents reported that they spent very little time, if any, thinking about Blacks - or issues related to them. Blacks as a racial group appeared to have relatively little salience in the day-to-day lives of Mexicans. It is precisely this racial context in the Mexican sending society that renders racial remittances from the U.S. highly influential. In the absence of their own personal encounters with Blacks, I argue that immigrant narratives become a key reference point from which non-migrants attribute meaning to Black Americans.

Transnational Racialization: Racial Remittances from Receiving to Sending Society

What do immigrants in the U.S. communicate about African Americans back to friends and relatives in Mexico? When asked about their familiarity with Black Americans, most non-migrant respondents were able to draw extensively from the stories and experiences that immigrant contacts in the U.S. had shared with them. This was common among respondents, most of who had at least one contact in the U.S.

Martin, a 28-year-old administrative assistant, has never visited the U.S. His best friend Juan migrated to Sacramento, California seven years earlier. The two friends managed to maintain regular contact for a number of years, although they recently lost touch. As we entered a discussion of race in the U.S., Martin quickly referenced a conversation he had with Juan regarding Juan's first experience with Black people, saying, "he told me 'I ran into a little group

of Blacks when I was walking down this street and they beat me.” Martin was sure to point out that this happened to Juan soon after his arrival to the U.S., remarking sarcastically, “They gave him a nice welcome.” He commented that Juan had previously mentioned having frequent conflict with his Black neighbors:

One day the neighbors even broke into [Juan’s] place to rob them and that’s why they had to move location...I had that conversation with him and he told me that it was too many problems living with Blacks because they look at you as if they don’t like you.

Although Martin, like the majority of non-migrant respondents, has not visited the U.S., he is able to draw from these transnational exchanges to paint a portrait of what living among Black Americans must look like. From the personal exchanges with his friend, Martin is also exposed to stereotypes about blacks as conflict-ridden and aggressive toward immigrants. Given that this was the first example Martin pointed to when referencing race relations in the U.S., it is clear that Juan’s experience with racial ‘others’ has left a deep impression on Martin.

When non-migrants discussed the information they had received from immigrants regarding black Americans, the most common theme was that of aggression, criminality and instilling fear in others. Alicia, a housewife in her late thirties with family in Atlanta, stated:

From the people who have come [back to Mexico] who talk about Atlanta, I have heard them say that [Blacks] were very aggressive, that you couldn’t even turn to look at them because they were already sending you negative vibes and that they had to be very careful because, well, yeah, they were kind of afraid of them.

Although the above quote is in reference to Atlanta, respondents with immigrant contacts in various regions of the U.S. shared similar narratives about African Americans. Underlying this stereotypical portrayal of Blacks as aggressive is the notion that immigrants are, or should be, cautious of Black people. These racial remittances also serve as warnings for potential migrants. As Julio, a non-migrant custodial worker in his twenties reveals, several return-migrants who lived in Black neighborhoods during their time in the U.S., advised him to “stay out of their

way” because Blacks “pull out knives or guns at you and are highly dangerous.” The three quotes above illustrate quite clearly that dominant U.S. stereotypes of Blacks as violent and criminal are being transmitted to Mexico transnationally via interpersonal ties between non-migrants and those who have ventured into U.S. society.

Racial remittances about Black Americans are also transmitted to Mexico via non-migrants who visit relatives in the U.S. Samuel, a twenty-nine year old sub-director of a small manufacturing company in Guadalajara, visited his cousin in Sacramento for three-weeks during which he had a memorable encounter with a black person. He recalls the experience in detail:

It was five days after I got there. My cousin had told me “don’t go out because there are lots of Blacks in the area” but I was out of cigarettes and he was at work so I said ‘let me go to the supermarket’ and as I was crossing the street three Black guys were coming toward me and kept looking at me...when I turned back I saw they had turned around and were following me...they looked like they were going to beat me up. My cousin got upset with me for leaving the house but I told him “well, that’s part of what you have to live through in another country.

Although only two of the thirty non-migrant respondents interviewed had visited family in the U.S., their personal experiences with race relations left a deep impression on them. Samuel’s quote highlights the way some immigrants view their relationship to Blacks: as a volatile one where measures must be taken so as to avoid potential conflict. At the same time, it should be noted that Samuel views these types of racial encounters as a necessary part of the U.S. immigrant experience, perhaps as a result of prior exposure to immigrant narratives about Blacks. Samuel has a fiancé and other family in Guadalajara, to whom he relayed these experiences upon his return to Mexico.

Very few respondents’ contacts in the U.S. had actually experienced a negative encounter with a Black person resulting in some form of violence or threat of violence. In fact, many of the stories non-migrants recounted during interviews seemed to derive from second-hand narratives

circulating within the immigrant community. Karla, a housewife in Guadalajara, illustrates this point well. She revealed that family members in the U.S. had never mentioned a personal incident involving a Black person:

But the people would say we need to be very careful with Blacks because they're dangerous and like to fight, and everything! Did [my relatives] tell me [Blacks] did something to them? No, nothing. But among them [immigrants] it was said to 'be careful with them.' It was a warning, perhaps.

Despite the fact that Karla's family had not experienced negative encounters with Blacks in the host society, they commonly shared stories with Karla and other relatives about how Blacks there can be dangerous.

Alejandro is a young factory worker in Guadalajara with relatives in Atlanta, including male cousins with whom he regularly communicates over the phone. Like most respondents, Alejandro's relatives described Black Americans as aggressive. However, they somewhat dispelled the dominant narrative of Blacks as inherently aggressive, providing Alejandro with an alternative explanation based on the historical legacy of white enslavement of Blacks:

From what my cousins told me...that an African American gets along better with a Latino than with a *gringo* American. Because they told me that I think before there was more slavery of Blacks by whites and I think that's why they are resentful or angry, with the *gringos*...African Americans don't have anything against Mexicans, they just want to be treated fairly by the *gringos*, so they have problems with them.

Indeed, only few respondents had been exposed to this nuanced representation of U.S. race relations, in which Mexican immigrants attempt to explain Blacks' so-called aggressive behavior as an outcome of racial conflict between Blacks and Whites, not Mexicans. This quote further illustrates how Alejandro came to understand U.S. racial dynamics through his cousin's interpretation of the effect of slavery on African Americans, which problematizes the essentialist view that blacks are inherently aggressive.

Non-migrants were also exposed to positive racial remittances of Black Americans as hospitable and friendly, which further served to dispel negative stereotypes of Blacks. Carmen is a housewife in her late thirties who has several family members throughout the U.S., including a mother and sister in Wisconsin. She explains that her mother used to say to her, “there are lots of Blacks where [your] sister lives...more Blacks than whites it seems... yeah, we greet each other, they are very friendly and charming.” Carmen also made note of the fact that her family has not had any problems with Black people and that “on the contrary, they’ve told me that they are very kind in Wisconsin.” Carmen has brothers in Dallas and other regions, and has heard conflicting stories from them about Blacks. Perhaps this is why she is clear in specifying that Blacks are kind *in Wisconsin*. That non-migrants are familiar with regional differences in U.S. racial dynamics illustrates how extensive their racial knowledge of the U.S. can become when transnational ties are maintained.

In a similar vein, when asked whether he believes there is any conflict between Blacks and Mexicans in Atlanta, Alejandro responds that he does not believe so, and quickly references a good experience his cousin Leonardo had involving a Black police officer:

One time Leo told me, because he worked in construction, and I think an African American man who was a police officer went over to watch them build houses and I think he brought out food to give the Mexican [workers]. He brought them soft drinks, juices, water and all that. I remember my cousin even told me that the Black man would say that he liked Mexican music, he liked *Los Tigres del Norte* and all that. My cousin was pleased by that and, well, he thought the man was good people.

Like Alejandro and Carmen, some non-migrants were exposed to a greater range of stories from their immigrant networks that served to disconfirm negative stereotypes of Black Americans. Although positive experiences were communicated abroad in the same way that other racial remittances were, they typically did not resonate with non-migrants as strongly as the negative stereotypes.

As racial schema theory holds, even when immigrants experienced friendly relations with Blacks, they more readily adopted negative views because the racial schema of Blacks in the U.S. so powerfully overrides the positive ones. The emphasis on negative stereotypes was often subconscious and reflects larger socio-cultural understandings of race and difference. Although some immigrants indeed communicated stories about positive encounters to non-migrants, these experiences were easily dismissed or forgotten in lieu of overgeneralized stereotypes about Blacks that confirm pre-existing racial schemas. These views are further reinforced when racial remittances tend to relay immigrants' experiences and interactions with Blacks far more consistently than those with Whites. As one respondent noted, his relative living in Los Angeles "never got around to saying much about Whites. Usually, it was always about Blacks." While this observation could likely be the consequence of residential segregation and immigrants' closer proximity to Blacks than Whites in Los Angeles neighborhoods, the findings illustrate that "bad" inter-racial experiences were remitted to the sending society most often, reinforcing the transnational racialization of Blacks.

Racializing Black Americans in Mexico

To what extent did the racial remittances transmitted to Mexico influence non-migrants' attitudes of black Americans? The narratives communicated transnationally had a powerful effect on non-migrants' views of African Americans, mainly because non-migrants often took the experiences of their immigrant relatives and friends as valid and accurate portrayals of U.S. life. These racial conceptions were reinforced by macro-level racial remittances imported by U.S. media to Mexico. Together, these forms of transnational racialization allow Mexicans who have never visited the U.S. to develop their own understandings of how race operates in U.S. society. This

racial knowledge acquired in the sending society becomes the basis of anti-black prejudice that potential new migrants bring with them upon migration to the U.S.

Carmen has been exposed to a wide range of racial remittances concerning African Americans. As discussed earlier in the paper, her mother in Wisconsin has shared with her that Black people are very friendly and kind. Her aunt, who cared for three young black girls, frequently commented about how charming the girls were. Carmen's brothers in Dallas, Texas, however, have expressed more stereotypical views about Blacks in their neighborhood. According to her brothers, black people have a "strong character" and fight a lot among themselves. This was based on their opinions of a family living next door, which they say were "always yelling and having big fights among themselves." In addition to the variety of racial remittances sent by her family, Carmen was one of the few non-migrant respondents who was familiar with the 1992 L.A. unrest from which she recalls, "I saw on the news there was a war between Blacks and whites and that also [whites] don't like Blacks...on the news here in Mexico it comes out that [Blacks] fight and burn cars."

Mainstream U.S. media is increasingly accessible to Mexicans in the form of cable television and the abundance of pirated Hollywood films. In addition to immigrants' stories about Blacks, non-migrants learn what it means to be African American through black actors playing stereotypical roles and movie images of plighted black communities. Although it may come as no surprise that negative media portrayals of Blacks influence Mexicans' perceptions, exposure to U.S. media also serves the purpose of exposing non-migrants to white racism in American society, thus mediating their perceptions of Blacks from aggressors to justified in their so-called resentment toward mainstream America.

Some Mexicans were very knowledgeable of Hollywood films and Black actors such as Will Smith. Others could only generally recall Black characters playing gang members, drug addicts, or criminals. One respondent commented that when a Black character is introduced in a movie, she assumes he will be the “bad guy.” When asked how he perceives African Americans, Mario, a forty-five year old construction worker in Guadalajara, reveals stereotypical views that are characteristic of Hollywood’s portrayal of Blacks, stating, “I have never met a Black American but I have an idea about how they are from the movies. Truthfully, well, they’re worse than whites. They’re more violent...I think that whites are afraid of them.” Mario admitted he had never met a Black person, illustrating the powerful influence of anti-Black media images.

Negative perceptions shaped by media stereotypes are further solidified when they resonate with the stories remitted by friends and relatives in the U.S. For example, Carmen explains that in the beginning, her views of African Americans were influenced by U.S. news and films portraying Blacks as “more impulsive, more furious than whites,” who she described as “more pacified.” It was not until her brothers shared their experiences with their Black neighbors in Texas that her initial sentiments about black Americans were “proven.” She explains,

First I would see it in movies, well, one thinks that they’re like that, right? But it was proven to me that they do have strong personalities because I would see in the movies that they’d scream at each other and were very impulsive and would throw things and fight, and from what my brother tells me about how they fight over there...proved to me that what I was seeing on TV was also reality.

Carmen’s quote highlights the powerful impact that racial remittances have on non-migrants’ conceptions of race in the U.S., especially when similar messages are communicated simultaneously from micro and macro-level sources. Although Carmen had been exposed to various stories about Black Americans, these were not typically taken as “reality” until

communicated directly by immigrant friends and relatives. In other words, racial remittances transmitted interpersonally had a greater impact than those received through more impersonal, macro-level means such as Hollywood films.

Others had a more critical view of the media, and refused to believe everything they saw on television. For example, Manuel, a non-migrant in his twenties who watches American movies regularly, expressed:

Manuel: I see in the movies that the Blacks live in poor neighborhoods and there is a lot of crime and shooting.

Interviewer: Do you think that's the way African Americans really are?

Manuel: Well, no I don't. Because movies just exaggerate things and I've never seen them in person so I really can't say that that is how they are.

Another respondent, Alejandro, further explains that gang problems exist all over the world and consist mostly of troubled youth who fall into the "wrong path." Contrary to common perceptions of Blacks as aggressive, he believes that they are good people and just as "tranquil as the next guy." For respondents like Manuel and Alejandro, it is precisely the fact that they have never visited a Black neighborhood or traveled to the U.S. that serves as a reason to question what they see on television. As discussed earlier, Alejandro's cousin also had a particularly positive encounter with a Black police officer. In this case, the media is called into question when its portrayal of Blacks seems to contradict the personal experience of immigrant contacts.

Although non-migrants may question the validity of the media, they are more reluctant to question the racial remittances transmitted interpersonally by their immigrant contacts, which are taken as accurate and reliable. This is also the case for non-migrants whose immigrant contacts have had very little to no personal encounters with blacks, and who seem to rely entirely on cultural narratives about Blacks that circulate within the immigrant community. This, in addition

to the fact that very few respondents have visited the U.S., helps explain why the majority of non-migrants' views toward African Americans tend to mirror those of their immigrant relatives and friends. Moreover, a select few hesitated to make an explicit statement regarding their own opinion of African Americans, saying, "well, I've never been to the U.S. so I can't really say" or "I've heard about Blacks but I am not sure if it's all true." What is clear from the data is that in the face of having very little to no personal experience with U.S. racial hierarchies, most non-migrants rely on racial remittances – communicated both from immigrant contacts and U.S. television and media - to make sense of this particular aspect of the American racial landscape.

In some cases, non-migrants inquired directly to their immigrant relatives about African Americans. For example, Julia, who migrated to Los Angeles over thirteen years ago and was unemployed at the time of the interview, calls her family in Mexico as often as several times a week. When asked whether she discusses racial matters with her contacts abroad, she recalls relatives asking, "is it true that there are a lot of Black people over there?" Perhaps curious to learn more about racial dynamics in the U.S., or seeking to validate media portrayals, several immigrant respondents noted that friends and family in Mexico have asked questions about U.S. race relations, and Blacks specifically. Most noteworthy about these transnational exchanges are the responses given by those in the U.S. When asked how she replied to her family's question, Julia answered, "No, well [I tell them] that we have to be very careful with [Blacks] and make the least possible contact with them." Later in the interview, Julia expressed stereotypical views of African Americans as lazy welfare recipients who "try to steal, because they don't want to work." This U.S. anti-Black schema is effectively transmitted to Mexico, influencing how individuals there come to make sense of the U.S. racial order.

New racial concepts acquired in the U.S. and transmitted to Mexico may also impact race relations in the sending society. In the occasion that a native Mexican encounters a Black American in Mexico, it is possible that this encounter will be mediated by the racial remittances carried over from the U.S. As Martin, a non-migrant factory worker, points out:

...there are Mexican people who migrate to the U.S. and something happens to them there and they come back with negative ideas about Blacks and when they see Blacks they discriminate against them even here [in Mexico]...they see a Black person and get scared and now they're in their own country and feel like 'if they did that to me in their country, well I'm going to do it to them in my country.'

Martin's quote illustrates the development of what Levitt (2001) calls a transnational social field, in which social interactions in the receiving society transcend national boundaries to become a reference point for those in the sending community. Here, a Black person can easily become a target of discrimination in Mexico based on experiences acquired by immigrants in the U.S.

In sum, findings show that racial remittances operate as a key mechanism for the extension of U.S. racial dynamics into the immigrant sending society. In the U.S., negative stereotypes enter into immigrant discourse on Blackness *even in cases where individuals report positive, neutral, or relatively limited interactions with Black Americans*. In this case, racial remittances operate primarily as racialized narratives that, circulating within a transnational social field, become a point of reference about Black Americans that Mexicans, at home and abroad, draw on to make sense of new racial encounters. To the extent that non-migrants become new immigrants to the U.S., the transmission of racialized discourse of Blacks to sending communities can have a direct impact on the maintenance of social boundaries and immigrants' desire to distance themselves from African Americans in the receiving society.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN AND IMMIGRANT RELATIONS IN THE U.S.

My data show that U.S.-based anti-Black ideologies are transmitted transnationally to influence the racial conceptions of Mexicans who have never left their home society. Although non-migrants are highly exposed to U.S. culture and racial ideologies via globalized media, I argue that racial remittances communicated interpersonally between U.S. immigrants and their contacts in Mexico highly influential in shaping non-migrants' racialized views about Black Americans, and U.S. racial hierarchies more generally. This is due primarily to the personal nature of this form of cultural diffusion as opposed to the impersonal nature of mainstream media and other macro level mechanisms. Whereas non-migrants often challenged dominant media portrayals of U.S. race relations, they rarely challenged immigrant accounts of race, taking them as accurate and reliable sources of information about the host society.

This article makes it clear that in the absence of meaningful interactions with Blacks in the Mexican context, and the marginalization of the African element in Mexican nationalist ideologies of race (Hernandez-Cuevas 2004; Vaughn 2005; Sue 2010), Mexicans' racialized views of Blacks are largely informed by racial remittances. The stories relayed back to Mexico transmit dominant U.S. racial schemas of Blacks as boisterous, aggressive, and prone to violence, which signal to Mexicans how they ought to relate to African Americans once in the U.S. Whereas existing studies on Latino and African American relations have documented immigrants' negative perceptions of Blacks in the U.S. (Marrow 2009; McClain et al 2006; Mindiola et al 2002), my findings challenge both assumptions that these attitudes are a product of the U.S. incorporation process, or merely a reflection of Latin American anti-Black racism. Rather, my research suggests that immigrants begin to engage with U.S. anti-Black discourse and

schemas long before migration, and that this has consequences for immigrant and African American inter-group relations in the U.S.

My data also help explain why upon arriving to the U.S., immigrants may display patterns of social distancing from African Americans. It is well known that immigrants do not arrive to the U.S. as clean slates, they bring with them long-entrenched values, ideas, and practices from their countries of origin. These pre-migration cultural constructs help immigrants adapt to the host society and navigate new racial terrain. As immigrants become acquainted with the U.S. racial system in a process of racial acculturation, their pre-migration constructs are negotiated to accommodate new knowledge and experiences with racialization. When direct ties to the sending community are maintained, as is the case in my study, U.S. stereotypes of Blacks can be easily remitted to the home country. As I show, immigrants, often subconsciously, draw on anti-Black racial schemas to interpret the actions and behaviors of African Americans, reflecting a cognitive process of remembering incidents that are most consistent with dominant stereotypes, even in the face of positive experiences (Roth 2012). This confirms Kim (2008) and Roth's (2012) findings that new immigrants arrive with extensive knowledge of U.S. racial groups that can ultimately determine the persistence of social boundaries.

CHAPTER 4

NAVIGATING “NEW” RACIAL ENCOUNTERS: IMMIGRATION, LEGAL STATUS, AND RACIALIZATION IN THE U.S.

How do immigrant newcomers, particularly those who arrive to the U.S. as undocumented migrant laborers, construct meaning about their new social, political and economic realities? Specifically, how do Mexican immigrants make sense of new racial hierarchies, and their own position within the racial order? Prior to migrating, immigrants experience a life that is shaped by a social, political and racial context quite distinct from that in the U.S. As discussed in Chapter 2, Mexico is a pigmentocratic society in which skin color and socioeconomic hierarchies are seen the most prominent features of the racial order. The most visible “color line” is that between the mainstream mestizo population and the indigenous, as Afro-Mexicans remain nearly invisible in the national racial imaginary. As such, mestizos, particularly those on the medium brown to lighter end of the spectrum, occupy a position of certain privilege within Mexican society⁸ that is rarely the case once they arrive to the U.S. Perhaps most notable among their new social position in U.S. society is that which is determined by immigrant status, or in the case of many respondents in this study, the illegality of their undocumented status. As persons born in Mexico, immigrants once enjoyed the benefits granted by citizenship status in their origin country. Migration to the U.S., thus, marks the moment in which the immigrants’ daily lives become structured not only by their immigrant status, but also by their presumed illegality. How, then, does migration to the U.S. alter the way Mexicans make sense of race, identity, and their own position within the U.S. racial order? And, how is the

⁸ Of course, lighter skinned “White” Mexicans occupy the top of the racial hierarchy, and enjoy most of the social, political, and economic benefits of this position (Villareal 2010). Whites in Mexico, however, are not a numerically dominant group as they are in the U.S.

growing presence of the Mexican-origin population in the U.S. changing the way scholars conceptualize race relations?

Over the last decade, scholars of race and immigration have given considerable attention to examining the social and racial trajectory of Latino immigrants in U.S. society, motivated in part by efforts to predict the future of U.S. race relations (Gans 1999; Yancey 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Lee and Bean 2010; Marrow 2009). Much of the literature thus far has centered on questions concerning the White racial category, namely whether its boundaries it will expand to absorb Latino immigrants much like it did for previous European immigrants. Indeed, some have cited Latino's overwhelming propensity to select the "White" or "Other" racial category in the U.S. Census as indication that the group is moving toward whiteness (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Lee and Bean 2010). Many of these assumptions are misleading, as many factors account for why Latinos may choose "White" in Census forms, including the actual wording of the questions or limited options, national origin, region, and historical context.

However, newer evidence documenting the increasing anti-immigrant social and political climate suggests that Latino immigrants are neither strategizing to become White, nor are they being absorbed into Whiteness. Studies have found that when immigrants perceive or experience discrimination, they are more likely to assume a separate "Latino" racial identity (Zepeda-Millan and Wallace 2013; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Frank, Akresh and Lu 2010; Massey and Sanchez 2010; Jones 2012). For example, Zepeda-Millan and Wallace (2013) examine the formation of Latino racial identity during and after the 2006 immigrant rights protests and find that perceptions of escalating anti-immigrant sentiment across the nation impacted the degree to which Latinos identified as a distinct race. Golash-Boza and Darity (2008) find that Latinos with

darker skin who have experienced discrimination are more likely than those with lighter skin color to promote a separate Latino identity.

Although studies assessing where Latinos will fit into the racial order have made significant theoretical and empirical contributions, less has been theorized about the role of anti-immigrant discrimination and legal status in shaping Latino immigrant conceptualizations of the racial hierarchy, particularly among Mexicans. For the most part, the existing literature has focused on individual and group characteristics including racial identification, national origin, education and income levels, skin color and phenotype, and racial attitudes, as well as larger social and political structures like immigration legislation and context of reception. Yet, how immigration status – specifically the racialization of Mexicans as “illegal” immigrants – shapes immigrant understandings of U.S. social and racial hierarchies can reveal important insights about immigrant incorporation and the future direction of U.S. race relations.

This chapter contributes to emerging scholarly inquiries about where Latino immigrants will fit into the U.S.’ evolving racial hierarchy by addressing the following research questions: How do Mexican immigrants view their social identity and racial position within the U.S. racial order? And what role do *social interactions* with Black and White Americans, perceptions of discrimination, and immigrant legal status play in shaping understandings about racial hierarchies? To answer these questions, I start with an analysis of Mexican immigrant’s experiences with “new” racial encounters in the host society. I then consider how social interactions with native Blacks and Whites, and observations of U.S. racial dynamics more broadly, shape the construction of a distinctly racialized immigrant identity.

I demonstrate that perceptions of anti-immigrant discrimination and its resulting unequal access to rights and resources is central to how Mexicans construct meaning about their position

in the U.S. racial order. The daily experiences of Mexican immigrants are structured by their simultaneously racialized minority status and presumed undocumented legal status.⁹ In turn, the racial inequality and discrimination believed to be faced by Mexican immigrants is framed in contrast to what immigrants perceive to be a more privileged life for both White and Black citizens. Immigrants perceived African Americans as privileged citizens and thus more upwardly mobile than Mexican immigrants, who expressed feelings of social exclusion and disadvantage due to anti-immigrant prejudice. These findings provide evidence to suggest that Mexican immigrants are neither moving closer to Whiteness, nor do they perceive their status as similar to Blacks, as some scholars have suggested. Instead, it appears that anti-immigrant racialization is an important force shaping the construction of a distinct Latino racial identity among Mexican immigrants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Are Latinos Moving Toward “Whiteness” “Blackness” or Something Else?

To theorize about the racial positioning of Mexican immigrants, it is important to understand how scholars have empirically assessed where Latinos as a group are positioning themselves in the U.S. racial order. Many have looked at the evolving nature of racial boundaries to suggest that the category of Whiteness is expanding to include Latinos. Lee and Bean (2010) have examined rates of intermarriage and mixed race status to argue that the increasing trend of multiracial identification among Latinos (and Asians) signals that U.S. society is undergoing a “loosening of racial boundaries,” and absorbing Latinos as “honorary whites.” Latinos, they

⁹ Only about half of my respondents were undocumented. However, a majority of legal residents and the few naturalized citizens expressed similar sentiments about how their lives have been shaped by anti-immigrant discrimination. Those who were documented were often perceived to be undocumented. The stigma is still attached to many former undocumented persons.

argue, are choosing a “White” identity, which according to them, relegates Blacks to the bottom of the racial hierarchy and thus reinforces the Black/non-Black racial divide.

How Latinos identify racially is largely influenced by **skin color** and **phenotype** (Frank, Akresh, and Lu 2010; Golash -Boza and Darity 2008; Massey and Sanchez 2010; Lee and Bean 2010; Telles and Paschel 2012). Drawing on insight from Latin American racial stratification systems, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004) was among the first to posit that the U.S. is undergoing a transition from a binary racial order into a “complex and loosely organized tri-racial stratification system.” Bonilla-Silva’s (2004) Latin Americanization thesis suggests, among other things, that Latinos with light skin, high education and income levels will be positioned as intermediary “honorary Whites.” Others, particularly those with dark skin and “illegal” immigrant status, he argues, will form part of a “collective Black” group along with native Blacks, and will be relegated to the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2004:938).

Much of the theorizing about Latinos being absorbed into the White category is premised on the notion that Whites will “allow” or accept Latinos as “honorary Whites.” However, it is just as important to understand how Latino immigrants subjectively view their identity and racial status. While honorary White status may grant some immigrants certain privileges, it does not imply full acceptance by the dominant White group. Whereas some scholars have argued that Latino immigrants perceive the social boundaries between themselves and Whites as more permeable than those with U.S. Blacks (McClain et al. 2006; Marrow 2009; Lee and Bean 2010), there is little evidence to suggest that Whites will treat Latino immigrants of any skin tone or education level as equals.

Moreover, patterns in Latino **racial identity** vary by national origin, making it difficult to theorize about the racial positioning of Latinos as if they were a unified, homogenous group. For

example, a recent analysis of the 2010 Census by Pulido and Pastor (2013) show that Cubans were the group most likely to identify as white (85.4 percent), with Dominicans as the least likely, at 29.6 percent. The groups with the highest percentage of individuals who identified as “Black” were Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. Mexicans fell somewhere in between. About half identified as “White,” at 52.8 percent, while almost 40 percent identified as “some other race.” Mexicans were also among the groups least likely to identify as Black.

As new immigrants adapt to U.S. society and observe the disparity that exists between White and Black Americans, many are quick to learn that disassociating from Blackness is key to upward mobility. Some scholars argue that the propensity of Latinos to identify as “White” (and in some cases, “Other”) is evidence of their move away from Blacks and toward Whites. Frank, Akresh and Lu (2010) maintain that Latinos identify as “Other” in an attempt to avoid the “discrimination reserved for [Black] racialized minorities.” While this may be part of the explanation, the relationship between Latino racial identification and feelings of closeness to Whites or Blacks has been overstated. Although seemingly counterintuitive, identification as “White” or “Other” on the Census is not proper evidence for claims that Latinos are “Whitening.” For example, Julie Dowling’s (2014) study of Mexican Americans in Texas (of which more than 80% marked “White” on the 2010 Census) found that many who mark “White” on the Census would not describe themselves as White in any other context. Instead, Dowling adds much needed nuance to understanding Latino racial identity by revealing that opting for a “White” identity was often in response to racial discrimination, and a way of exerting a sense of belonging as an American, particularly for those residing in border towns looking to distinguish themselves from Mexican nationals or immigrant newcomers. This contradicts Marrow (2009) and McClain et al (2006) who argue that Latinos identifying as “White” not only feel closer to

Whites, but also practice the greatest social distance from Blacks. Following such logic, we would expect Mexican immigrants in this study to express a sense of commonality with Whites. Yet, how Mexican immigrants perceive their relationship to Whites - and Blacks - is largely shaped by experiences with anti-immigrant discrimination *from Whites*, and the racialization of legal status that restricts their opportunities for social mobility.

Latino **racial attitudes** toward both Blacks and Whites can also reveal some interesting insights about where they view their position in the U.S. racial order (Marrow 2009; Forman et al. 2004; McClain et al 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2004). There is some consensus in the literature that Latinos generally view Blacks more negatively than they do Whites. Forman et al (2004) examined Latinos' social attitudes and while they show that these attitudes vary by national origin, they found that Mexicans' racial attitudes toward Blacks most closely resemble those of Whites.' Marrow (2009) and McClain et al (2006), both argue that not only do Latino immigrants view Blacks negatively, but also expressed more favorable views toward Whites (Marrow, 2009; McClain et al. 2006). While these findings suggest that immigrant perceptions of Blacks are intimately tied to their attitudes of Whites, my study shows that immigrant racial attitudes toward Blacks and Whites are not zero-sum. Negative views toward one group did not result in positive feelings for the other. Rather, immigrants had very complicated and nuanced understandings of race that depart from the Black/White paradigm toward a citizen/non-citizen binary of sorts. Put simply, the main social distinction that Mexican immigrants made between themselves and both Blacks and Whites was based on American *citizenship status*. U.S. Blacks and Whites alike were viewed as relatively privileged compared to Mexican immigrants, and perceived to have very little in common with the immigrant struggle.

Context of Reception, Discrimination, and Racialized Immigrant Identity

Although a majority of studies on Latinos and the U.S. color line look to patterns of racial classification, identification, and racial attitudes, **context of reception** arguably shapes most directly where Latinos will ultimately be positioned in the racial order. The U.S.' increasing anti-immigrant climate and the social and economic exclusion of Mexican immigrants in particular are working to solidify ethnic boundaries between immigrants and American citizens. As Massey and Sanchez (2010:25) argue, immigrant identity is developing within the context of an "exceptional degree of anti-immigrant framing and immigrant-isolating boundary work." As such, economic, political and social climates are important determinants of how immigrants experience life in the U.S., and therefore, view their position in the racial stratum.

How Mexican immigrants come to view their racial and social status in this society is determined not only by the treatment they receive from the White majority, but also from Black Americans. Indeed, Black Americans can exhibit xenophobic and nativist sentiment stemming from their unique marginalized position in the U.S. (Sandoval 2010). Studies have shown that some U.S. Blacks, feeling that the U.S. has yet to fulfill its promise of granting full citizenship status to the African American community, have strategically drawn on nativist discourse of citizenship when making claims about which groups are entitled to resources, jobs, etc., and to distinguish themselves from undocumented immigrants (Sandoval, 2010; Carter 2007). U.S. Blacks facing economic insecurity may especially feel threatened by immigrants perceived to be taking "their" jobs (Carter 2007). Indeed, in Marrow's (2009) study of Latino immigrants, many expressed the belief that Black Americans are prejudiced and discriminatory toward Latinos as a group. Some felt that Blacks treated immigrants negatively, noting, "the black race [did] not like Hispanics very much because they think [immigrants] are taking away their jobs" (Marrow

2009:1049). Marrow concludes that this “competition induced ‘discrimination’” facing Latino immigrants influences how they come to understand U.S. racial dynamics, and their position in the racial order.

White Americans, on the other hand, have historically made different claims about immigrants’ unworthiness of American citizenship, and have also occupied positions of power that enabled them to implement racist laws and erect institutions that reflect these views. Latino immigrants continue to be viewed as unassimilable foreigners who threaten the very social and cultural fabric of “American-ness,” a sentiment that has only increased due to recent demographic projections that Latinos are outnumbering Whites in some areas. Recent studies are finding that Latino immigrants perceive the greatest discrimination from the larger White society (Jones 2012; Zepeda-Millan and Wallace 2013). Others, still, argue that the U.S.’ increasingly hostile anti-immigrant climate is leading to the emergence of a “reactive ethnicity” among Latino immigrants and their children (Rumbaut 2008; Massy and Sanchez 2010). Under the current political climate, Latino immigrants, particularly Mexicans, are increasingly subjected to anti-immigrant policies that signal to immigrant communities that they are not accepted as part of American society. How immigrants are received in the host society and the opportunities they have to incorporate into civic, economic and political life, speaks volumes to how the racial boundary making process will unfold.

As Massey and Sanchez (2009) argue, some Latino immigrants may come to reject an “American” identity” in favor of a one that better reflects the groups’ experience with racialization. As immigrants continue to experience daily the harsh reality of life as second-class citizens and blocked opportunities for upward mobility, many grow disillusioned with the prospects of achieving the so-called “American Dream.” While both documented and

undocumented Mexican immigrants may have once viewed the U.S. as the land of opportunity, the barriers to upward mobility that many face is profoundly shaping understandings of the U.S. racial system. Jones' (2012:72) study of Mexican immigrants in North Carolina reflects this changing dynamic, stating that many immigrants "no longer believe in the promise of upward mobility through a prism of achievable whiteness...they no longer speak of the American Dream, but rather of the U.S. as a country with a history of racism, of which they are now the primary targets." Yet, Jones suggests that the racialization experiences of Mexican immigrants lead to a sense of closeness to, and shared minority status with, African Americans.

In this chapter, I argue that perceptions of anti-immigrant discrimination appear to foster a separate Latino racial identity that is independent of feelings of closeness to Blacks or Whites. I show how legal status and immigrant perceptions of unequal access to rights and resources stemming from broader anti-immigrant discrimination are central to how immigrants construct meaning about their position in the U.S. racial order. The daily experiences of many Mexican immigrants in this study are structured by their simultaneously racialized and undocumented status.¹⁰ In turn, the meanings that many associate with racial inequality and discrimination are framed in contrast to what immigrants perceive to be a more privileged life for citizens, whether Black or White. Immigrants do not readily associate perceptions of discrimination from Whites with greater identification with Blacks. This is in large part because immigrants perceive African Americans as privileged and more upwardly mobile than Latino immigrants, who, whether documented or not, express feelings of social exclusion and disadvantage due to anti-immigrant prejudice. Thus, although many immigrants in this study did not explicitly view Blacks as

¹⁰ Only about half of my respondents were undocumented. However, a majority of legal residents and the few naturalized citizens expressed similar sentiments about how their lives have been shaped by anti-immigrant discrimination. Those who were documented were often perceived to be undocumented. The stigma is still attached to many former undocumented persons.

discriminatory toward Latinos, neither did they view Blacks as being subject to the same barriers to upward mobility. On the other hand, whereas Whites were viewed as benevolent toward Latino immigrants in some cases, they were also identified as the main source of discrimination against Latinos, both individually and institutionally through anti-immigrant policies.

The Research Setting: Los Angeles As Prototype of the U.S.' Evolving Racial Order

As a traditional immigrant gateway, Los Angeles has already become a majority-minority society. California has undergone some of the major demographic transitions that are being projected for the entire nation, and therefore has implications for future national trends. Due to the long history of Mexican immigration to Los Angeles, there are unique features that allow for a more nuanced conceptual and empirical examination of Mexican immigrant and native group racial dynamics. Los Angeles has a steady replenishment of immigrants as well as a more established second and third generation. Moreover, the Mexican origin population can be found across various neighborhood contexts, from predominantly Latino immigrant, to mixed Black and Latino communities. Paying attention to any differences in these neighborhood dynamics can shed light on important factors shaping inter-group relations, such as physical proximity and group size.

Whereas studies of “new” Latino immigrant destinations, particularly the U.S. South, provide significant insight into the impact of immigration on the existing Black-White racial binary, the relative newness of these demographic trends in the Southern U.S. suggests that scholarly predictions about emerging U.S. racial hierarchies drawn from this region may be premature. Scholars interested in predicting the future of the U.S. racial order – and how it will be impacted by Latino immigrants – can draw important lessons from places like Los Angeles,

where Latinos are positioned prominently within the racial hierarchy and have long informed localized perceptions of race and discrimination beyond the Black-White binary.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Analysis for this chapter is limited to the 45 in-depth interviews with Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles. The sample includes long-term immigrants with more than ten years in the U.S. (n=30), and recent migrants with three years or less in the U.S. (n=15). Respondents were recruited in two Los Angeles regions: South Los Angeles – a mixed Black and predominantly Mexican neighborhood – and South East Los Angeles – a predominantly Mexican immigrant region that includes Huntington Park, South Gate, and Maywood, all neighborhoods with very few Black residents. These are low-income, working class communities with crime rates higher than the county average. This site selection aims to highlight the importance of local context and demographics in shaping immigrant understandings of localized racial hierarchies.

All interviews were semi-structured, in-person interviews that lasted anywhere from one to one and a half hours. All were conducted by the author in Spanish (with the exception of one respondent who preferred to be interviewed in English), and took place in public spaces such as café's or the home of respondents. Interview protocols sought to capture respondent's perceptions of race and racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination in the U.S. and Mexico, ethnoracial identity, and their racial encounters, if any, with Whites, Blacks, and Asians.

Respondents all originated from the central-western region of Mexico, and varied in skin color, legal status, gender, and occupation. The sample included roughly equal number of males and females, and equal number of respondents residing in predominantly Latino neighborhoods and mixed Black-Latino regions. Among the long-term respondents, sixteen were undocumented

and fourteen were documented (ranging from legal residents to naturalized citizens). Virtually all of the recent immigrants were undocumented. It is worth distinguishing recent newcomers from long-term immigrants, as individuals with longer stay in the U.S. had significantly more experience navigating the host country's institutions, neighborhoods, and social and racial dynamics. Recent migrants, on the other hand, were likely to be undocumented and the majority were struggling to find stable employment and housing. Some resided in temporary housing, including homeless shelters, and were actively looking for day laborer jobs in a local immigrant worker center at the time of the interview. Conceptually, analyzing the experiences of Mexican immigrants at varying degrees of the incorporation process can contribute important insight into how understandings of race and inequality may be shaped by length of stay, degree of incorporation, and exposure to U.S. society.

Lastly, this chapter places the experiences and observations of documented and undocumented adult Mexican immigrants as central to its analysis of racial dynamics. Mexicans have been historically – and continue to be - racialized by broader society as a low status group, due both to the large proportion of Mexican immigrants with undocumented status, and their position in the labor market as expendable, “low-skilled cheap” labor. The analysis for this study, then, is drawn from data documenting the racialized experiences of respondents whose membership in a highly stigmatized group shapes their interpretation of individual experiences. Thus, findings in this study, particularly those demonstrating respondents' views that they are positioned below Black Americans in the socio-racial hierarchy, should be interpreted within this context.

FINDINGS

Immigrant Adaptation To “New” Racial Landscape

Almost immediately upon arrival to the U.S., immigrant respondents began a process of adaptation to U.S. racial norms and practices. Initial encounters with different racial and ethnic groups in neighborhoods, workplaces and public spaces often became “teaching moments” from which respondents learned the rules of race in their new society. In this initial process of racial acculturation, respondents received a racial “crash course” that in some cases had lasting impact.

For example, one of the most noticeable features that respondents first noted about the U.S. racial system was residential segregation. Prior to migrating from Mexico, Pablo, a musician who arrived to the U.S. almost twenty years ago, had envisioned the U.S. as a primarily “Anglo nation, yet with a sizable Black population.” Traveling throughout Los Angeles with his band, Pablo made the observation that different neighborhoods were characterized by the racial and ethnic group living there. He recalls, “I noticed that each race had its own neighborhood...I would ask ‘where do all the Mexicans live?’ and everyone would say, ‘in East Los Angeles,’ and ‘where do Blacks live?’ South Los Angeles and ‘where do the Chinese live?’ North of the City. It was then that I realized all the races live in their own areas.” Pablo always believed that his first performance in the U.S. would draw a racially mixed audience, exclaiming, “I thought it was going to be like Carlos Santanas’ concerts where he played for all races.” Instead, “I quickly learned that I was wrong...there were nothing but Latinos, my own people, and it appeared that we were only here to play for them.” Pablo’s observation was a striking one for several reasons. First, he, like many other long-term immigrants, had envisioned the U.S. (and Los Angeles) as a primarily Anglo society, and was surprised to find that immigrant groups from all over the world formed part of the racial landscape. Secondly, it illustrates that the lasting effects of residential

segregation in the U.S. are still visible today and become readily apparent to immigrants almost as soon as they set foot in the U.S.

First Encounters with Black Americans

In Mexico, respondents had limited contact, if any, with Americans, particularly Black Americans. For many, it was not until migration to the U.S. that they first encountered a Black person. This was true for most, regardless of whether they initially settled in a predominantly Black or Latino neighborhood. While first impressions either contradicted or reinforced pre-migration racial perceptions, some respondents described their “first” cross-racial experience in the U.S. as having a lasting impact on subsequent views and behaviors. Manuel, an undocumented immigrant who has lived in the U.S. over ten years, emphasized how newly arriving immigrants are often unfamiliar with the racial dynamics of their new society, saying:

Well sometimes you're among Whites and Blacks at work, and you do get scared, worried. Well, *los gabachos* [Whites] are racists and *los morenos* [Blacks] are gonna rob you or something. And you're not familiar when you first arrive.

Manuel's quote reveals how new immigrants, who are not yet familiar with life in the U.S. rely on preconceived racial stereotypes to navigate encounters with Blacks and Whites. As discussed in the previous chapter, these racial tropes are often communicated to respondents prior to migration in the form of racial remittances. However, in the U.S., these messages can be reinforced by more established immigrants who, in their role as cultural brokers attempting to teach newcomers “the ropes” of race relations, can be just as influential in shaping the views of newcomers.

When asked about their initial encounters with Blacks in the U.S., many respondents revealed that they had never been in such close proximity to Black Americans prior to migrating.

Elena, for example, is an undocumented immigrant who migrated to the U.S. over twenty years ago. Upon arriving to Los Angeles, she settled in South Los Angeles and remained there for ten years before moving to a Mexican neighborhood in the South East region. Elena claimed to have never seen a Black person before coming to the U.S. In fact, she commented that during her time in Mexico, she never gave much thought to Black people, “as if they didn’t exist.” Elena’s first encounter with African Americans occurred in a local Laundromat. One evening while doing her laundry, Elena witnessed two Black customers break into a fight. She became frightened and left the Laundromat before she could finish her last load of laundry. “When I first encountered Black people, they left a very bad impression on me. Now, I keep my distance from them,” she remarked. Although this experience occurred nearly twenty years ago, it is clear that it has left a lasting impression on Elena and her subsequent desire to distance herself from Blacks. Indeed, scholars have shown that individuals are more likely to remember negative cross-racial encounters that reflect dominant stereotypes and discourses when they resonate with pre-existing racial perceptions (Roth 2012).

In another example, Patricia recounted that on the very first evening she arrived to this country, her sister, who lives in Long Beach and with whom Patricia was staying, took her to eat at the local Jack n the Box. They pulled up to the fast food restaurant and noticed two Black males brawling in the parking lot. To avoid any potential conflict, they left and headed to the McDonalds across the street, when they heard gunshots coming from the Jack n the Box. Patricia’s sister nervously exclaimed, “No, no, no. Lets just go home. We’re not going out tonight.” These stories were not uncommon among respondents, most of whom initially settle – and in many cases, remain – in impoverished, high crime regions of Los Angeles in which they come into contact with Blacks far more frequently than with Whites. Despite the fact that Elena

and Patricia were never directly involved in a physical encounter with Black persons resulting in danger or violence, witnessing these acts, especially as recent immigrants, left a powerful imprint on their views of racial dynamics in their new society.

As they gain increasing exposure to U.S. society, immigrants learned appropriate etiquette for interacting with different racial groups in every day life. Sammy, for example, recalls that prior to migrating, his cousins who lived in Los Angeles made common references to African Americans as “*los mayates*,” a Spanish word for dung beetle applied as a derogatory term to people with dark skin. Sammy expressed curiosity when he first saw Black persons, saying, “I kept looking at them, it was very interesting to me.” As a newcomer, however, Sammy’s cousins specifically advised him to not look at Black people directly because “it bothers them and they’ll get angry and insult you.” One of Sammy’s first jobs was in construction, where he worked among some African Americans. Heeding the advice of his cousins, Sammy remembers that he would try not to turn and look at his Black co-workers, or quickly look away so they would not notice him looking at them. His cousin’s advice, he recalls, “stayed with him” for a long time and kept him from making any real attempts at befriending Black Americans.

As newcomers who are still learning about the norms and practices of a new society, immigrants tend to rely on the guidance and knowledge of more established immigrant peers to navigate their new surroundings. Similar to Sammy who was introduced to the racial slang “*mayates*” by his cousins, Patricia quickly learned to use the more politically correct term “*morenos*” to refer to African Americans. After the Jack n the Box incident, Patricia exclaimed to her sister, “Hey man, where do you live that you brought me to this area with all these *negros*

[Blacks]?” In that moment, her sister quickly warned her, “Shut up! Don’t say *negros*, say *morenos*, because here *negros* is a bad word, they [Black Americans] don’t like it.”

These examples highlight how the process of acquiring racial knowledge and “learning” how to interact with different racial groups on the job and in the neighborhood is a central feature of immigrant adaptation to their new society. In particular, these observations can have lasting effects, especially on new arrivals that have yet to be exposed to life outside of poor, inner city communities or segmented labor markets. Often, these understandings were formed in relation to immigrant perceptions of what it means to be Black in urban America.

A key difference regarding immigrant observations and racial encounters with Blacks versus Whites was that immigrants in this study had very limited physical proximity to Whites, and therefore shared fewer concrete examples of first encounters with Whites, especially negative ones. In fact, when asked about their first impressions of Whites in the U.S., several respondents made vague references to the group as either outright racist or benevolent and kind toward Mexican immigrants. In other cases, respondents related stories of very brief interactions with White employers or institutional agents such as schoolteachers or employers and business owners. Generally, first encounters with Whites were described as positive and involved a kind, giving, and friendly White actor. It appears that the lack of residential proximity to Whites resulted in fewer opportunities to observe day-to-day racial dynamics involving Whites in ways similar to those involving Blacks.

IMMIGRANT AND NATIVE GROUP INTERACTIONS: BLURRING OR MAINTAINING SOCIAL BOUNDARIES?

Immigrants and native groups are constantly engaged in an on-going process of boundary work. Daily encounters and interactions in workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and churches

can inform newcomers' understanding about where certain groups, including ones own, is situated in the localized racial hierarchy. Immigrant and native group interactions in the host society, particularly those that racialize immigrants as foreigners who don't belong, or cheap and exploitable labor, can have the effect of accentuating group differences. Social interactions with native Blacks and Whites, therefore can play a major role in shaping immigrant identity formation (Rumbaut 2009). By detailing the nature of these interactions, this section sheds light on how structural factors such as residential segregation, segmented labor markets, and gender, matter for immigrant understandings of their position in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

NEIGHBORHOOD INTERACTIONS

Immigrant "Newcomers" In A Historically Black Neighborhood

Initially, negative stereotypes and prejudices appear to be the dominant lens through which new immigrants viewed Black Americans. However, soon after, some began to develop nuanced understandings that were shaped by personal observations of residential segregation, economic inequality, and discrimination. This is particularly the case for immigrants who resided in the more racially diverse South L.A. region, for immigrant men, who are more likely to work in jobs outside of their immediate neighborhoods, and for those who generally experienced varied interactions with Black persons, and U.S. society more broadly.

Some respondents had purchased their own homes in South Los Angeles, where housing is relatively affordable compared with other areas of the city. The growing rate of Latino homeownership in the area has contributed to the demographic transition from what was once a predominantly Black neighborhood to a majority Latino community (Pastor et al 2011). Nonetheless, a few respondents noted that they lived in street blocks that remain majority Black.

In these cases, there seemed to be a negotiation between the “new” Latinos on the block, and long-term Black residents. While very few respondents reported that they had established neighborly relations with Black neighbors. Most respondents living in South L.A. expressed that they make an effort to keep things “cordial,” but rarely form intimate friendships.

Lucia, an undocumented immigrant who has lived in her Paramount neighborhood for over ten years, is one of the few respondents to establish a deeper relationship with her Black neighbors. She states in a matter of fact tone:

If I have a tool or something they need, they come and ask me for it. If I need something that I’ve seen that they have, I’ll also ask. It’s possible to live without the racism, without the fear and the things that people say about them... When they have parties they bring me a plate of food, like barbeque. And that’s how I got to know what kind of food they eat.

While increased interactions appeared to foster greater familiarity and trust among some respondents, very few seemed to engage in typical neighborly interactions, such as borrowing a cup of sugar or visiting for a friendly chat.

Most commonly, respondents in South L.A. were deliberate in their efforts to maintain friendly relations with their Black neighbors, but remained somewhat distant. Luz Maria, a native of Sinaloa, Mexico, migrated to the U.S. over twenty years ago. Upon arriving, she moved in with her sister, who lived in an apartment complex in what Luz Maria describes as “a Black area where Latinos could be counted with one hand.” As a new immigrant, Luz Maria did not leave her home much, except for the occasional trip to the corner liquor store. Her sister cautioned Luz Maria to be cordial but keep her distance from Blacks, saying, “If they say ‘hi’ to you, you reply with ‘hi’ and nothing more.” Luz Maria disliked that some Black people near her home “used a lot of drugs...and were always there, day and night, smoking [marijuana] outside the liquor store.” In her words, “they never disrespected” her, however, she did not like living in

a “Black neighborhood” because “they smoked marijuana all day.” Luz Maria eventually moved out of her sister’s apartment and rented a home in the same neighborhood, where she maintained a similarly cordial but distant relationship with her current Black neighbors.

In South Los Angeles, immigrants had the additional burden of negotiating their status, both as immigrant “foreigners” and as newcomers whose very presence has changed the character of what was once a majority Black neighborhood. Commenting on these dynamics, Pablo, a legal resident explains:

They [Black Americans] learn to accept us because we’re in their midst. Because us Mexicans, or Latinos, we forgot that we are buying our homes in what has been their grandparents’ for their entire lives. This block has always been theirs. This block is theirs. Even if I buy this house, I’m living in a Black neighborhood. I’m not buying in a Latino neighborhood. And we tend to forget that. I’ve known a lot of new [Latino] neighbors who don’t talk to Blacks. They may be standing outside and they don’t talk with them, don’t greet them. Or if a Black person greets them, some Mexicans won’t respond.

Pablo shared an example of a Central American woman who bought a property on the block and fought continuously with her Black neighbors, until they had had enough and one day “keyed her truck and slashed her tires.” Pablo’s perspective that Latino immigrants should be conscious of the fact that they are in someone else’s neighborhood was expressed by a few other respondents, who made references to South L.A. as a “*barrio negro*.” This illustrates the complicated nature of immigrant and native Black relations in an area undergoing major demographic transition, and reveals immigrants’ nuanced understandings of residential segregation. If despite being homeowners, immigrants feel that their neighborhood does not belong to them, or that Blacks have more claim to it because they have lived there longer and/or are citizens, this may affect how immigrants understand their position within the localized social and racial hierarchy. In other words, some immigrant homeowners in historically Black neighborhoods believed that they were viewed as outsiders and foreigners who had no real claim to their neighborhood.

The Relative Absence of White Neighbors in Black and Latino Immigrant Neighborhoods

White Americans, in contrast, were nearly invisible in the neighborhood context where most respondents lived. This explains why most respondents reported having limited interactions with Whites, and in scenarios where they did, the overwhelming majority involved unequal power relations between white employers and immigrant laborers. When asked about his opinion of White Americans, Martin, a long-term undocumented immigrant, noted the lack of contact:

What I've lived, I've never had a bad experience with [Whites] that's why I can say that they're good people. If you ask someone who has had a bad experience they're gonna tell you that they're bad people. Each person has a different story, depending on your way of living. I don't have anything to say about [Whites], even though I don't have much contact.

Although Martin pointed out that he had never had a bad experience with a White person, and that he believed them to be good people, he admitted that he rarely comes into contact with Whites.

Scholars have theorized that physical proximity leads to greater contact and is more likely to foster positive associations between different racial and ethnic groups (Oliver and Wong 2003). As the contact theory goes, Mexican immigrants who live close to Blacks in South Los Angeles should exhibit greater familiarity and trust than those who live in majority Latino neighborhoods. The theory would further support the notion that immigrant respondents, who have very limited physical proximity to Whites, would perceive Whites negatively. Yet, findings indicate that despite reporting few interactions, immigrants have developed far more varied perceptions of Whites than they have toward Blacks, ranging from the perception that Whites are friendly toward Mexican immigrants to vehemently anti-immigrant. I argue that it is precisely the lack of meaningful interactions with Whites that can explain why respondents reported far fewer instances of discrimination from Whites than Blacks. In other words, greater physical

proximity to Blacks in this case, merely provided more opportunities to experience encounters that immigrants interpreted as negative interactions with Blacks.

RACE AT WORK: INTERACTIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Immigrants and Black Americans

In their study of Black and Latino relations and stereotypes, Mindiola et al. (2002) found that Latino immigrants, particularly those who enter low wage jobs in the informal economy, had less contact with African Americans than did their U.S.-born counterparts. Whereas today Latino immigrants are more likely to work side-by-side Black Americans in meat and poultry plants in the South (Gordon and Lenhardt 2008), very few respondents in Los Angeles reported engaging in regular interactions with Blacks while on the job. This may be due to the racialized segmented labor market in which Mexican immigrant laborers are concentrated in low-wage employment such dishwashers and cooks, factory workers, and other jobs in the informal economy, including gardening, street vending and domestic work.

In the few instances where respondents reported having interactions with Blacks on the job, immigrants described the situation in ways that indicated that African Americans had a superior position to immigrant workers. For example, Patricia, the only respondent to report having worked for a Black employer, was hired temporarily as a domestic worker by a woman running a home cleaning service. Patricia was to assist the woman in cleaning a large home in Manhattan Beach, an upper class White neighborhood, for ten dollars an hour. Upon arriving to the home, Patricia was asked to clean the kitchen, bathrooms, and floors throughout the house. According to Patricia, she spent the next few hours cleaning, while the woman, who was supposed to do some of the cleaning herself, “spent the whole time on the phone” and then

proceeded to accuse Patricia of not working hard enough. Infuriated, Patricia demanded her pay for the hours she worked, exclaiming to the woman, “I don’t want to work with you anymore!” Although at first the employer appeared “polite and friendly,” Patricia felt that the woman exploited her labor by making her do all the work, while paying her a small portion of the profits. This experience reinforced the racial trope that Blacks are “lazy” and in this case, hire undocumented immigrants to do the hard work that they are not willing to do themselves.

The stereotype of the “lazy” Black worker also appeared in situations where immigrant laborers held a similar status to their fellow Black co-worker. Raul, a baker in a local Mexican bakery, works with primarily Latino co-workers. The last time an African American worked in the bakery, he did not last longer than a few weeks. Noting that baking bread is “is a tough job. You have to wake up very early, sometimes at 3am, and work with really hot ovens,” Raul commented that Black Americans cannot tolerate this kind of labor because “they don’t like to work hard.” Although Raul got along well with the Black man, who “did good work,” his observation that the overwhelming majority of co-workers are Latino immigrant and that his former Black co-worker “didn’t hang” reinforced the notion that American citizens have the privilege to refuse putting up with difficult working conditions. Several respondents expressed that hard labor is reserved for the largely undocumented immigrant population who face severe restrictions in the labor market and are therefore willing to tolerate these conditions.

In a different workplace scenario involving Black white-collar worker, Veronica, an undocumented immigrant who arrived to the U.S. over twenty years ago, found that her preconceived stereotype of Blacks as dangerous dissipated after she encountered what she describes as a charming businessman at her job:

‘One day when I was at work as I came downstairs to have some coffee there was *un morenito* well dressed in a suit and tie, really well dressed and very handsome for sure,

and his colored eyes, I said ‘a Black man with green, green eyes. Wow how pretty’ and then he started talking to me and I was young, I didn’t know English so I didn’t understand what he said to me. And ever since then I didn’t have any more fear.”

This excerpt highlights two important points. First, the quote illustrates the relevance of social status, gender and workplace dynamics in shaping the nature of inter-racial interactions.

Veronica was working in the warehouse of a shipping company when she came into contact with what might have been a businessman in a suit. Secondly, like Veronica, several respondents expressed some form of fear related to being a new immigrant and coming into contact with Blacks for the first time. This may very well be a fear of the unknown rather than the expression of anti-Black sentiment. That her fear subsided after her first interaction with a “charming” African American man indicates that the nature of social interactions with Blacks in the U.S. is important in determining the degree to which immigrants feel a sense of familiarity with Blacks. As indicated above, this is not always the case with Whites, with whom social interaction was not necessary for immigrants to view them positively.

While the examples above serve to illustrate different type of interactions between immigrants and Black Americans in the labor market, from cordial relations to exploitation, workplace interactions of any kind were far and few between. This may be due to the nature of low-wage undocumented labor, which tends to concentrate Mexican immigrants in jobs where the great majority of co-workers are immigrant co-ethnics, not Black Americans. Moreover, several respondents, particularly very recent migrants and some female homemakers, were unemployed and searching for work, or not in the labor market during the time of the interview.

Immigrant Laborers, White Employers

Given the relative absence of Whites in respondents' neighborhoods, the most common scenario where immigrants came into direct contact with Whites on a somewhat consistent basis was in the context of work and labor. Generally speaking, however, immigrants experienced very limited contact with Whites. In fact, a majority of respondents who work reported having non-Anglo employers¹¹. Rosario, a long-term immigrant, sums up the limited nature of inter-group relations with Whites quite astutely, saying:

Well, more than anything, Mexicans and Whites don't have relations with each other. Many times it's related to issues with work. Because supposedly Mexicans come to invade the United States, the White man's country. And that's a lie, because the United States has gained a lot from the immigrant...there are whites who, like I said, are friendly. And there are Whites who also help Mexicans. But its always, and only, when Mexicans are serving Whites.

Although several respondents felt that some Whites were racist and expressed anti-immigrant prejudice, these statements were usually qualified with the clarification that "not all Whites are bad people." In discussing personal interactions with Whites, some respondents noted that Whites who are racist are not representative of Whites as a group. It should be noted that this qualifier was not necessarily applied to discussions regarding perceptions of Black's discrimination toward Latino immigrants.

The degree to which immigrant respondents came into contact with different racial and ethnic groups outside the neighborhood appeared to be highly structured by the gendered dynamics of labor. The majority of men with jobs worked in the public sphere. Many held jobs that required them to travel longer distances from their neighborhoods and interact with a greater variety of people than did their female counterparts. In some cases, immigrant perceptions of

¹¹ Most commonly, respondents reported having employers of Asian, Jewish, or Arab and Middle Eastern backgrounds, who often operated as business owners.

White racial attitudes were just as much, if not more, influential in shaping their views on racial discrimination than did their experiences with Blacks.

To summarize, in this section, I examined how Mexican immigrants learn to navigate race upon arriving to the U.S. I detail how the nature of immigrants' first racial encounters with native groups in the U.S. "teaches" immigrants about U.S. social hierarchies related to race, residential segregation, and labor. I demonstrated how neighborhood context could structure the nature and frequency of inter-racial relations, such that immigrants who reside in South Los Angeles come into the most contact with Black Americans, and the majority of respondents experience few, if any, meaningful interactions with Whites in their neighborhoods. With respect to immigrants and their Black neighbors, I showed that although cordial relations are common, they tend to be more superficial than relations with other Latinos in the same neighborhood. Interactions with Whites tended to take place in the context of unequal power (labor) relations in which White employers benefit from the exploitation of immigrant laborers. Combined, these day to day experiences inform newcomers' understanding about where certain groups, including ones own, is situated in the localized racial hierarchy. These on-going processes of boundary work, particularly those that racialize immigrants as foreigners whose purpose is to serve the U.S. economy as a source of cheap and exploitable labor, can accentuate racial differences between immigrants and native groups.

REARTICULATING THE U.S. RACIAL HIERARCHY: ILLEGALITY AND THE MAKING OF A RACIALIZED IMMIGRANT IDENTITY

Sociologists have long theorized that immigrant ethnic identity will be weakened over time, as groups experience gradual assimilation to U.S. society. Massey and Sanchez (2010), however, argue that groups with a history of disadvantage, particularly those with an enduring

stigma attached to their ethnoracial status such as the Mexican origin population, develop a strong immigrant identity that solidifies, rather than loosens, social boundaries. Legal status and immigrant perceptions of blocked social mobility stemming from anti-immigrant laws, policies, and prejudice are central to how immigrants construct meaning about their position in the U.S. racial order. Findings presented in this section provide support for the emergence of a racialized immigrant identity that rests on the view that anti-immigrant discrimination is a major social problem targeting Mexicans in the U.S. As I show, this leads to immigrant understandings of their racial position as disadvantaged *relative to both Blacks and Whites*, who are viewed as privileged due to their citizenship status. Immigrants believed that as “true” Americans, Whites, and Blacks similarly occupied a higher social status than documented and undocumented immigrants.

In the first part, I illustrate the ways in which immigrants construct meaning about their socioracial status in relation to Blacks in the U.S. Specifically, I analyze immigrant perceptions of discrimination from Blacks toward Latino immigrants, as well as any expressions of commonality or a shared minority status with Blacks. I demonstrate that although some immigrants view Blacks through the lens of stereotypical racial tropes characterizing Blacks as lazy, on welfare, aggressive, etc., many nonetheless position Black Americans above Mexican immigrants, as Blacks are perceived to occupy a distinct advantage due to their presumed citizenship status. As such, I argue that legal status shapes immigrants’ construction of native Blacks as occupying a distinctly privileged social status, and that this is an important factor influencing immigrants’ views that they do not share a common plight with Blacks as racial minorities. Moreover, while findings show some support for the construction of social boundaries between Mexican immigrants and African Americans, this appears to be partly

informed by immigrant experiences with social and economic barriers due to legal status, and resulting perceptions that Black Americans enjoy an entitlement to rights and resources that are systematically denied to immigrants. In other words, rather than merely a strategy to achieve social mobility by moving away from Blackness and closer to Whiteness, the social boundaries immigrants are constructing between themselves and Black Americans are largely constructed around a distinction between American citizens and immigrant foreigners.

In the second part of this section, I analyze how immigrants construct meaning about their social status in relation to White Americans. I further highlight some important differences in respondents' understandings of their social position vis-à-vis Whites, relative to Blacks. Lastly, I show how in contrast to studies suggesting that social boundaries between immigrants and Whites are blurring or perceived by immigrants as more permeable than boundaries between themselves as Blacks (Marrow 2009; McClain 2006), respondents in this study viewed Whites as the main perpetrators of anti-immigrant sentiment and discrimination, (both at the individual and institutional level).

Black Americans: The Privilege of Citizenship and Entitlement to Rights and Resources

Immigrant status emerged as a key social distinction that Mexican immigrants construct between themselves and Black Americans. For example, when discussing the inequalities faced by Latino immigrants, and whether there were any similarities to the injustices faced by Black Americans, Pablo states, "It's not the same because the majority of [African Americans] are American citizens, and the majority of us [Mexican immigrants] are not citizens. That is the main difference." In fact, Pablo is of the opinion that Black and White Americans share a greater commonality than do Blacks and Latinos, saying, "A Black American is North American in his

way of thinking. You see his North American-ness reflected. It could be a white person, a Black person, but it's a North American." By making such a stark contrast between a "North American way of thinking" and a Latino way of being, Pablo identifies Anglo culture – and the citizenship status inherent in it - as the very essence that distinguishes Black and White Americans from Mexican immigrants. This was further made evident by Pablo's expression of commonality with Afro-Latin American immigrants, who, despite differences in racial ancestry or phenotype, were nonetheless viewed as "fellow Latinos" and thus closer to mestizo Mexicans than are Black Americans.

A small minority of respondents reported that they had been targets of anti-immigrant discrimination from Blacks. Those who did tended to reference interactions with institutional actors such as government employees or bureaucratic agents in the Department of Motor Vehicles, their children's schools, hospitals, and insurance or social welfare agencies, to name a few. Although there were few concrete examples of African Americans discriminating against Latinos, Tomas, a long-term legal resident, described an encounter with a Black police officer that he interpreted as racial discrimination:

One time I had a car accident and the person who hit me was a Black lady. She hit me and damaged my car really badly and so we called the police and he came and wrote the report and there I saw that they play favorites with their own race. The cop was a Black man and supposedly he wrote the report but he favored her side more, his own race, and put them blame on me and she was the one who hit me.

According to Tomas, he was wrongfully accused of causing the car accident simply because he was Latino, and the police officer was "playing favorites with [his] own race." His opinion that the driver received favorable treatment because the police officer chose to "side with his race" was interpreted as an act of racial discrimination by Blacks against Latinos.

Elena, a long-term immigrant living in South Gate, believes that Blacks harbor anti-immigrant sentiment, particularly when immigrants are stereotypically viewed as taking resources that do not rightfully belong to them. Elena explains:

Supposedly '*los morenos*' say or are of the opinion that we Mexicans come [to this country] to live off of the government, on welfare and all that, and one sees that truthfully, they are the ones who live off of that. So I do feel that there is a huge barrier between the two races.

Elena reports having very little interaction with Blacks the entire fifteen years she has lived in the U.S. However, the relationship she describes is one rife with tension due to Blacks' perceptions of immigrants as a threat to their share of valuable resources. Elena's quote, however, also reveals how immigrants at times adapt stereotypes commonly used in anti-immigrant discourse to characterize Black Americans as lazy and on welfare. Most interestingly, when asked directly if she had ever been discriminated by Blacks, Elena replied, "no." This suggests that her opinion that Blacks express anti-immigrant sentiment does not easily translate into the belief that Blacks discriminate against immigrants. It is noteworthy that Elena also exemplifies what can best be described as an insulated immigrant experience, as she has relatively little exposure to the host society, limits her interactions to co-ethnics and spends the majority of her time within her ethnic enclave. As a housewife who makes a living caring for a small child in her home, Elena lacks the type of exposure and proximity that other immigrants have to different racial and ethnic groups, particularly Blacks.

Perceptions of anti-immigrant discrimination from Blacks commonly stemmed from observations or experiences of unequal treatment when attempting to access government resources. Carolina explains:

A lot of the times you can see the discrimination when you go ask for aid, like Medical and all that. You do see the discrimination. They simply deny Mexicans more often when it comes to help from the U.S. government...they deny helping Mexicans more than

gabachos, morenos, chinos, that's for sure! And one has to keep navigating for them to give you something.

Like Carolina, several respondents, particularly the undocumented, described scenarios where they felt they were disadvantaged in terms of their blocked access to resources and goods. In one example, William, who had migrated to the U.S. only one year ago, noted that Blacks in the U.S. are distinctly privileged due to the "help" they get from the government in the form of welfare. As an interesting take on the stereotype of the "lazy welfare recipient," William believes that African Americans no longer suffer any major injustices because as former slaves, they are tired of working hard, and a "law" was enacted by the government in order to compensate them for all the hard labor they were subjected to. While this perspective is grossly misinformed, taken together with the understanding that Mexican immigrants are allowed in the U.S. only when their labor is needed, suggests that immigrants construct their racial status in the U.S. as distinct not only from the dominant White group, but also from that of Black Americans.

A clear social boundary between immigrants and Black Americans was drawn around the notion that Blacks are distinctly advantaged due to their U.S. citizen status, which undocumented immigrants lack. This *relative privilege* is evidenced in Alonso's explanation of the main difference between the two groups, commenting that as citizens, Blacks "have all the power [they need] to accomplish many things, but they're lazy to do so, whereas for Mexicans, it's due to lack of opportunity." In this quote, Alonso appears to acknowledge the limited social and economic mobility facing both groups, yet attributes this to differences in the behavior of Blacks (laziness) versus the structural barriers (lack of opportunities due to legal status) that Mexicans experience. This further illustrates the centrality of legal status not only in structuring the lives of immigrants, but also in shaping respondents' understandings of their position in the U.S. racial hierarchy, and thus their construction of Latinos as a third, separate racial(ized) group.

White Americans, a Hostile Context of Reception, and Racializing Immigrant Status

In contrast to how they viewed Black Americans, many respondents described White Anglos as the “true” American people who view Mexican immigrants as a major threat to the social and cultural fabric of “their” country. Whites were clearly marked as the group occupying the top position in the U.S. racial hierarchy, and were commonly associated with positions of power including business ownership, employers, government officials and policymakers, and an array of other institutional agents. A majority of respondents expressed the opinion that Mexicans as a group were not welcomed in the U.S., and that Whites played a major role in creating a hostile context of reception. The association with Whites as the driving force behind the nation’s increasingly anti-immigrant climate can be further contrasted to respondent’s narratives about Black Americans. Examples of Blacks as anti-immigrant or discriminatory toward Latinos rarely, if ever, rested on the notion that this is “their country” or that Blacks as a group are the perpetrators of restrictionist immigration policy.

Spanish language media like Univision television largely influenced respondent’s views that conservative politicians, many of whom are White, are vehemently anti-immigrant. Mainstream news outlets regularly characterize Mexican immigrants as criminal “illegal aliens” invading the U.S. Many respondents were aware of recent developments in immigration law and local ordinances, such as the Sensenbrenner Bill HR4437 that would have criminalized immigrants or anyone “harboring” undocumented migrants. Referencing Arizona’s controversial immigration law of 2010, SB 1070, which mandated that all persons suspected of being undocumented provide proof of citizenship upon request from authorities, Carla, a recent immigrant from Mexico City, commented:

I've heard that, for example, how [immigrants] are treated in Arizona and in Texas. How they spend their time hunting people, shooting them down like they were animals...It's convenient that Mexicans come to do the work that they don't want to do. But there are others that are *really* racist.

Although Carla did not explicitly mention Whites during her discussion of the harsh immigration laws and violent treatment of Mexican immigrants at the U.S.-Texas border, it is apparent that she equates "*Americanos*" with Anglo Americans.¹² Moreover, she appears to make a distinction between Whites who look favorably upon Mexican laborers who fill jobs that are undesirable to Americans, and those that are outright racist. Similarly, when asked if she believes a particular group is most prejudice against Mexican immigrants, Monica, a long-term documented respondent states, "I say '*el gringo, el Americano.*' Because you see it in the news, the laws, that they put all the blame on Latinos. 'Something's wrong?' It was Latinos." Some discussions of U.S. racism were grounded on the fact that White Americans have historically discriminated against non-white groups based merely on Whites' desire to maintain dominance.

Immigrant respondents felt that anti-immigrant prejudice was a symptom of a broader culture of racism against the general Mexican-origin population. When asked whether they felt they had ever experienced discrimination of any kind since arriving to the U.S., some respondents brought up larger discussions of White racism targeted at Mexicans. Maura explained:

To me it's between '*el gringo*' with the Mexicans. How can I explain? I have never had a problem. I've never felt discriminated against. But I do believe that there is some racism from '*gringos*' against Mexicans.

As the interview progressed, Maura expressed the sentiment that White "racists" did not look down upon Black Americans the way they did Mexicans, suggesting that her understanding of

¹² Mexicans at times use the term "Americano" when referring to any person born in the United States, including Whites, Blacks, and co-ethnics. However, it's most common usage applies to White Americans, or "White/Anglo" culture.

racism in the U.S. stems from observations of Whites' treatment of Mexicans. Note that Maura reports having never been discriminated against personally. Rather, what shaped her belief that racism exists is her membership in the highly stigmatized Mexican immigrant category.

Mario, an undocumented long-term immigrant from South East Los Angeles, suggested that Latino immigrants are victims of racism primarily because of their racialized status as undocumented immigrants. He explains, "in the workplace, the simple fact that you're Latino they treat you poorly. And then...well, sometimes there are family members who are legalized and others are not, and there always exists that racism when people are not legal here. They take advantage of Latinos, they treat them poorly." In fact, an overwhelming majority of immigrant respondents felt that discrimination based on presumed (il)legal status is a major problem affecting their livelihoods and well-being. Mario's quote suggests that immigrants come to understand their group status as low in the racial hierarchy, and that issues of illegality construct Mexicans as a highly stigmatized group.

The sentiment that simply being Mexican was cause for poor treatment by Whites was a common theme among respondents, who were at times made to feel as if they did not belong in the country. Alonso migrated to the U.S. approximately one year prior to the time of the interview. As a very recent migrant, he found temporary work passing out flyers for a local business in what he described as White neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. As he canvassed the neighborhoods, he often felt that homeowners treated him as a public nuisance. A couple of times, Whites in the neighborhood would see him approaching their home, peer out their windows, and signal him to keep off their property:

Just the simple fact of being Latino, they don't like that you're in their neighborhoods, outside their homes. Or sometimes they don't even turn to look at you. I've experienced that...They look at us like we're invading their country. They yell it out in all directions,

that they pay higher taxes because of us immigrants, that we're the ones who are destroying this country.

When asked whether she believed racism exists in the U.S., Sandra, a long-term immigrant, quickly answered, "yes," explaining that she has noticed that when immigration raids occur, "they only take the people who are Latino. You don't see that they take other type of people more than Latinos, so yeah, there is discrimination." As I probed further by asking whether she believed that a particular racial group was the most discriminatory toward immigrants, Sandra did not hesitate to say "Whites."

In an explicit comparison between White and Black racism toward Mexican immigrants, Lucia, who resides in a mixed Black and Latino neighborhood, commented:

Here in this country you do see discrimination against the Mexican immigrant. Here I have seen that kind of racism. In Mexico, in reality, I haven't. But in this country, a majority of the time I think there is more racism from *el gabacho* than from *el moreno*.

Lucia was one of few respondents to explain a sense of linked fate with Black Americans as sharing the burnt of White racism. She continued saying, "it's the same thing...Blacks also are very discriminated against in this country." Lucia felt as though many Whites think lowly of Mexicans and Blacks, noting that the absence of Whites in her neighborhood is evidence that they want to remain segregated from Blacks and Latinos.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: IS EVIDENCE OF A RACIALIZED IMMIGRANT IDENTITY CREATING A THIRD RACIAL GROUP?

Record numbers of detention and deportations have plagued undocumented immigrants, causing individuals and entire communities to go further into the shadows of society (Golash-Boza 2006; Massey and Sanchez 2009). In this Chapter, I have argued that immigrant's experiences with, and perceptions of, anti-immigrant discrimination are central to how they construct meaning about their position in the U.S. racial order. Upon arrival to the U.S.,

immigrants begin the process of adaptation to the host society's racial system. Here, many learn the "rules of race" and appropriate etiquette for interacting with Blacks, Whites, and others. While for many, migration to the U.S. signals their first experience as a racial minority in a dominant White society, it also comes with the additional stigmatized status of ("illegal") immigrant.

The widespread national attention and controversy over immigration reform effectively places issues of legal status and social exclusion front and center in the lives of respondents. This in turn serves as a constant reminder to immigrants that they hold a uniquely disenfranchised position due to their simultaneously racialized minority and immigrant "foreigner" status. As the findings indicate, respondent's day-to-day experiences with the U.S. racial system were highly structured by their presumed illegality,¹³ regardless of their actual immigrant status. Naturalized citizens who are homeowners and have lived in the U.S. longer than Mexico expressed sentiments similar to undocumented respondents about how they believed their lives continue to be shaped by anti-immigrant discrimination. Those who were by all standards "incorporated" into the host society's institutions and social life nonetheless felt the brunt of the burden of belonging to a highly stigmatized group.

Anti-immigrant discrimination continues to be a major social issue restricting immigrant opportunities, both for undocumented and legalized immigrants. This leads to immigrant views of themselves as occupying a social position below that of Black and White U.S. citizens. Although immigrant perceptions of native Blacks varied somewhat from those of Whites, African Americans were viewed first and foremost as members of a privileged, upwardly mobile group precisely because they held the extremely coveted status of "American citizen."

¹³ Just over half of respondents reported being undocumented.

Whereas Jones (2012) has highlighted the importance of context in determining immigrant racial attitudes, she makes the case that Mexican immigrants express feelings of closeness with Black Americans, due to perceptions that the groups share similar experiences with racial discrimination by the dominant white majority. Marrow, (2009:1052), on the other hand, has argued that immigrants perceive African Americans as prejudiced against Latino immigrants, which can “foster resentment, stereotyping and social distancing [from immigrants] in return.” Together, these studies reveal the importance of localized racial and political contexts in shaping immigrant and native group relations.

My findings contribute to theorizing about the relationship between the growing Mexican immigrant population and native Blacks and Whites. I find that experiences with racialization and social exclusion – including immigrant awareness of the historical racial oppression of Blacks - does not, on its own, prove to be sufficient in fostering a sense of linked fate with Black Americans among Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles. Rather, it appears that the main distinction immigrants make between themselves and African Americans is their association of Blacks with an inherent “American-ness” that immigrants do not readily identify with. This foreigner-citizen distinction was central to immigrant’s beliefs that Blacks, although also discriminated by the White majority - are not subject to the same barriers to upward mobility facing immigrant groups. The extent to which immigrants are erecting social boundaries between themselves and Blacks (and Whites) may be more of a reactionary response to the rejection they experience from American society, rather than a lack of perceived commonality with Blacks, or a deliberate strategy to disassociate from Blackness to achieve upward mobility as some might suggest.

Respondents, whether documented or not, expressed feelings of social exclusion and disadvantage, which they attributed to a pervasive anti-immigrant social climate. Thus, although many immigrants in this study did not explicitly view Blacks as discriminatory toward Latinos, neither did they view Blacks as being subject to the same barriers to upward mobility. Situating Blacks on the “other side” of the citizenship boundary led to the placement of both Blacks and Whites above Mexican immigrants in the U.S. racial order. The construction of a citizen/foreign distinction was further shaped by immigrants’ opinion that White Americans exert their power and dominance by creating a hostile context of reception for Mexican immigrants. This context in turn creates the conditions that prevent many immigrants from achieving social mobility and incorporation in to U.S. society.

These findings suggest that respondents’ interpretation of discrimination stems from a sense of a collective identity based on a racialized immigrant status, as respondents expressed that immigrants as a group were subject to this form of discrimination, independent of having personally experienced discrimination, or regardless of immigration status. This reasoning is in line with scholars who suggest that increased perceptions of discrimination from mainstream (White) society are associated with greater identification as a separate Latino racial category (Zepeda-Millan and Wallace 2013; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008). Findings from the Mexican immigrant case may provide further evidence for the hypothesis that Latinos more generally are being incorporated as a third, separate nonwhite “racial” group. These trends are likely to continue in the face of increasing racialization of Mexican immigrants.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: RACE, IMMIGRATION AND THE U.S.' EVOLVING RACIAL ORDER

A central aim of this study has been to understand how Mexican immigrant constructions of race, racialization, identity, and inter-group relations with racial “others” change in the process of transnational migration and incorporation to U.S. society. Drawing on seventy-five in-depth interviews with non-migrant Mexicans in Jalisco, Mexico and recent and long-term immigrants in Los Angeles, California, I argue that understanding some of the key mechanisms affecting the choices immigrants make when negotiating racial encounters – and their social position in the U.S. racial hierarchy - requires a transnational framework that systematically examines racial conceptions “here and there.” With this work, I hope to impel scholars of race to reflect more on the consequences of circulatory migration flows for localized racial hierarchies in immigrant sending and receiving societies.

While scholars interested in Mexican immigrant experiences with racialization have tended to focus almost exclusively on the U.S., I maintain that some knowledge of Mexico’s racial system and social order is critical for any nuanced scholarly interpretations of how immigrants make sense of race in the receiving society. Mexican immigrants originate in a society where social class status is often deemed more important than racial and ethnic difference is determining one’s life chances. In a nation that actively sought to build a racially homogenous citizenry through nationalist racial ideologies of *mestizaje*, skin color factors in more prominently than “race” in how far one can climb the social and economic ladder in Mexico. The racial context in Western-Central Mexico, where respondents originated, is one in which meaningful interactions with Blacks are nearly non-existent and where Blackness is made

invisible in nationalist racial discourse. For many, migration to the U.S. marks the very first time they interact with Black Americans, with whom they come to share a racialized minority status. As immigrants look to lay down roots in their new society, they undergo a process of adaptation to U.S. social and racial norms and practices. As foreigners in a dominant White society, *mestizo* immigrants experience a shift from enjoying the privilege of being the numerically dominant ethnoracial group in their society, to confronting an increasingly hostile anti-immigrant nation that relegates Mexicans to an inferior and criminal “illegal alien” status.

Yet, a transnational approach, which requires that data be collected on multiple units, scales and scopes of analysis (Levitt 2010:2), has been missing in scholarly theorizing about immigrant experiences with the U.S. racialization process (Kim 2008:243). As our lives are embedded in an ever-increasing global system of interconnected communication and transportation networks, economic markets, social, cultural, and political elements, scholars of race and immigration will have to account for how transnationalism may be changing the way we study social phenomena. One of the most obvious aspects of how transnational migration is changing U.S. society in the last thirty years has been what some scholars have referred to as the “Browning” of America.

Increasingly, Latino cultural values, traditions, and indeed, racial ideologies and discourses, are influencing the lives of those in the U.S. Scholars interested in U.S. emerging racial and social hierarchies, therefore, must recognize the increasing necessity to understand localized race relations within a transnational context, as racial ideologies have long “traveled” with immigrants and have social, political, and cultural implications for the host society. While significant variations exist within as well as between nations, as different regions have distinct processes of racial formation, a *transnational racialization* framework would allow for the

possibility that conceptions of race originating in Latin America may have significant implications for contemporary race relations in the U.S., particularly between Latino immigrants and native Whites and Blacks.

Summary of Findings

Chapter 1 outlines the central aims of my project and situates it within the relevant literatures on comparative race and ethnicity, immigration, and transnationalism. I also detail my research methods and data. **Chapter 2** examines the research question: in a nation that prides itself as a unified mestizo nation, how do Mexicans understand, define, and experience discrimination based on race and skin color? It pays close attention to how Mexicans construct meaning about social hierarchies, skin color prejudice, social and economic disadvantage, and racism in contemporary Mexico. I compliment this analysis with respondents' observations and experiences with discrimination in Mexico in the context of localized racial and ethnic relations with indigenous and Black groups in Mexico. This chapter set the stage for understanding the racial "lens" through which Mexican immigrants to the U.S. view race in the receiving society, and thus laid the foundation for interpreting subsequent chapters examining the ways in which U.S. migration alters Mexicans' conceptions of race, inequality, and the formation of the U.S. racial order.

While findings illustrated that some respondents compare Mexico to U.S. understandings of racism as a way of explaining away discrimination in their home country (Sue 2013), I argue that this in and of itself does not lead to the outright denial of racism. Mexican's overwhelming perception that the most prevalent type of discrimination in society stems from socioeconomic status has indeed played a role in the country's limited social recognition of racial

discrimination. In this chapter, however, I found that respondents interpreted racial discrimination in many different ways, which often included overlapping structures of difference such as skin color, education level, and cultural markers such as dress and language. These understandings of “racism” in Mexico are more varied than dominant U.S. understandings, and suggest that many Mexicans are indeed aware of, and acknowledge, social discrimination in their country. Findings suggests that the contours of racialization in Mexico should be understood in the context of nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje* that promote racial harmony, yet serve to masks racist practices (of whitening).

Chapter 3 examined how racial ideologies in the United States are circulated back to the immigrant sending community via interpersonal contact between U.S. immigrants and non-migrants, individuals who have never left their home society. Findings show that the maintenance of transnational ties between immigrants and those remaining in the home country facilitate Mexicans’ engagement with U.S. racial ideologies prior to migration. As immigrants gain direct exposure to the U.S. racial system, they communicate their observations and experiences with racial encounters, discrimination, employment and residential segregation back to Mexico, a transnational process of racial remittances. Specifically, findings elucidated how U.S. immigrant perceptions and attitudes of African Americans are formed and relayed back to the sending community to influence the views of non-migrants – *even in the absence of direct contact with U.S. Blacks*. Whereas recent scholarship has documented immigrants’ preference to maintain social distance from Blacks upon migration to the U.S., my findings challenge assumptions that these attitudes are a product of the U.S. incorporation process. I end this chapter with a discussion of the findings’ implications for how new migrants to the U.S. will navigate the racial order upon arrival.

In **Chapter 4**, I turned my analytical focus to the immigrant experience in Los Angeles. Scholarly debates over the social positioning of Latino immigrants in the U.S.’ evolving racial order hinges on contradictory evidence that Latino immigrants either feel closer to Whites and are engaging in social distance from Blacks, or view themselves as a racialized minority group and thus closer to Blacks. Findings illustrated that immigrants often renegotiate their pre-migration constructions of race upon settling into their lives in the host society. In U.S. society, legal status and anti-immigrant discrimination, whether perceived or experienced directly, were important in shaping immigrant understandings of their position in the racial hierarchy. Contrary to recent studies suggesting that Latino immigrants are moving closer to Whiteness, findings in this study suggest that immigrants are moving neither closer to Blacks or Whites. Ultimately, with increased exposure to anti-immigrant prejudice and blocked opportunities for upward mobility, Mexican immigrants come to believe that they occupy a distinct racial status vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites, illustrating a clear departure from the U.S.’ White-Black binary.

Theoretical Implications of Study

As one of the few studies to systematically analyze Mexican non-migrants’ perceptions of U.S. racial dynamics, the implications of my findings are several. First, how Mexicans perceive racial ‘others’ in the U.S. is not just a product of being socialized into American racialization practices, as some scholars have suggested. Instead, U.S. racial conceptions are remitted to the sending society, forming part of a transnational social field in which the daily occurrences of immigrants in the U.S. also affect those who stayed behind, including how they might interact with U.S. racial groups who visit or reside in their home country.

Second, findings suggest that ideas about race do in fact ‘travel’ with migrants to the U.S. These racial ideas not only serve to reinforce particular stereotypes about certain groups, but also may have consequences for immigrant and native group relations and immigrant incorporation into the host society. Although immigrants’ pre-migration ideas and practices are either negotiated, transformed or in some cases, reinforced upon migration, in the absence of meaningful and positive interactions with Blacks, it is likely that migrants’ racial prejudices will be reinforced within the immigrant community. Given the extent of transnational ties among Mexicans in both locations, and the steady replenishment of Mexican immigrants and cultural ideas about ethnicity and race (Jimenez 2008), these anti-Black stereotypes are likely to extend transnationally, resulting in a continuous flow of transnational racialization.

The implications of this study extend beyond the case of Mexican non-migrants’ transnational understandings of race. Findings presented here raise important questions about the “Latin-Americanization” of race in the U.S., in which the existing Black-White racial binary is being challenged by large-scale immigration from Latin America (Waters 2001; Yancey 2003; Lee and Bean 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2008). Just as U.S. racial conceptions are exported abroad, so too are Latin American racial constructs being imported into the U.S. by migrants and globalized media. It remains to be seen how this will impact the future direction of the U.S. color line and the way groups position themselves within the racial hierarchy.

In moving the research agenda forward, future studies should compare different regions of Mexico and Latin America, particularly those with relatively small Black populations. Other studies may also expand this work by comparing the Mexican case to non indo-*mestizo* nations with significant rates of emigration to the U.S. and vastly different racial contexts and ideologies. Further research might also incorporate the experiences of U.S.-born Latino populations, as well

as an examination of different Black immigrant groups as a way of uncovering the complexities of Black and Latino relations in the U.S.

In our increasingly globalized world, social scientists are looking for new ways to think about the connections between “here” and “there.” Migrants of the day can communicate with friends and family back home with an ease not afforded to earlier waves of migrants, keeping them firmly connected in unprecedented ways. As such, future researchers of international migration and race would do well to explore further the mechanisms of transnational cultural diffusion and its consequences for the racialization of racial and ethnic minorities across national boundaries. This requires a reconceptualization of racial dynamics that extends beyond the local and national level to explore how racial ideas and practices ‘travel’ with migrants to new localities and have social, political, and cultural implications in sending and receiving societies.

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