

Welcome to the Front Seat: Racial Identity and Mesoamerican Immigrants

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In this article, I argue that mestizo immigrants from the Mesoamerica region experience a low socioeconomic tracking compounded by a racialized subordinating discourse in the United States. These immigrants come over to the United States from a region where social stratification and racial prejudice are based more on cultural and linguistic differentiation than on pigmentation. Once in their new surroundings, mestizo immigrants live a reversal of power relations as well as a new cultural regime that places them in a secondary social role.

Key words: diasporic studies, race theory, identity formation theory, identity and education, immigration, Latina/Latino/Chicano culture, people of color and socialization

I'd marry a black guy immediately, just like that. But not even dead I'd marry an indian.

—A Guatemalan ladino woman.¹

Comments like the preceding one are not out of the ordinary in today's identity politics of Guatemala. Such comments indeed reflect the torturous and sad terrain of postcolonial racial discourse in which gender, race, and class constructs appear profoundly linked and expressed in daily interaction among Guatemalans. How-

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¹*Ladino* is the ethnic identifier for those of mixed ancestry and/or who have adopted urban and westernized cultural traits. Indian, the opposite to ladino, is the ethnic identifier for people who claim Mayan ancestry and/or exhibit cultural traits associated with the Mayan culture (clothing, language, etc.). *Ladino* and *mestizo* are used in this article as interchangeable names.

ever, perhaps the expression that best summarizes that country's racially charged discursive practices is one that goes like this: "I'm poor but not Indian." This expression is the chief social commentary of those who define their identity as ladinos. This commentary is so normalized, though, that it frequently appears even in the vocabulary of people who define their identity as Mayan.

As a person born and educated in Guatemala, I too have been contaminated by these discourses and have always been intrigued by the visceral and belligerent tone of racial politics in that country. Thus, I have paid careful attention to identity politics there as part of my research agenda. I have found that the issue of race permeates all discourses and nonverbal behaviors and is intrinsically connected to the very definition of what it means to be Guatemalan. These discursive practices can easily be extended to the rest of Central America and Mexico and to the Andean nations of South America, especially those with a strong indigenous presence; the difference among these societies might be a matter of degrees. Racist discourses and practices in Guatemala suggest some fundamental differences to those in the United States. This is the topic of this article.

Building on an analysis of the Mesoamerican² community's immigration experience, in this article, I seek to bring to the front seat of racial theory the complexities of identity politics for mestizo immigrants largely ignored in contemporary diasporic studies. The central argument here is that mestizo immigrants from Mesoamerica experience a low socioeconomic tracking compounded by a racialized subordinating discourse, for the issue of race and its ramifications is extremely complicated because these immigrants come from a region where social stratification and racial prejudice are based more on cultural and linguistic differentiation than on pigmentation.

Moreover, the complicated nature of identity politics for these immigrants stems from two possible sources: (a) they use to be part of the hegemonic group in their place of origin, and becoming members of the Latino subordinated group in the United States involves a power reversal, and (b) the U.S. cultural regime identifies them as the undesirable stock for a society founded on European migration that historically excluded Native Americans and marginalized African Americans. Understanding these complex issues might aid to understanding how the mestizo community negotiates its relations with important public institutions such as schools, political parties, trade unions, and government.

In the first section of this article, I frame the negotiation of identity among Mesoamerican immigrants. In the second section, I look at the dynamics of language and social adjustments; in the third section, I examine the tensions embed-

²Mesoamerica here means the territory where Nahuatl and Mayan cultures flourished before the Spanish conquest, which roughly included the present central and southern area of the Republic of Mexico and the republics of Central America.

ded in a culture demanding national loyalties. I offer the conclusions in the last part of this article.

IDENTITY AND IMMIGRATION

As it may be the case for other immigrants, the specificity of the Mesoamericans' racial experience hinges on the fact that they face a double track of social and cultural readjustment in the United States. One line deals with a progressive distancing from the culture of origin, and another describes a tense process of identity reinvention.

Immigrants in general experience the corrosive effects of physical distance and time, for the longer they reside abroad the weaker their cultural memory, even when ethnic enclaves feed language and the globalization of markets allows them to consume in the United States foods they grew up with in their cultures of origin (Nolin, 2002). An inevitable "filling" in of cultural gaps takes place and hybridization settles in. As much as immigrants might claim a preference for everything identifying the motherland (i.e., taste, fashion, language), cultural authenticity becomes an illusion over time. In fact, when they go back "home," they usually find themselves in the ambiguous role of privileged tourists; the memories thus forged leave a new and different narrative to the one prior to the immigration experience.

These narratives give Mesoamerican immigrants a unique framework for identity development in that they navigate a mutating social and cultural environment that simultaneously resembles origin, nostalgia, and new social and cultural positions. As a result, on the one hand, a new social location characterized by subordination emerges and, on the other hand, a hybrid cultural identity made up of residues from the former culture and elements of the new U.S. experience including language, taste, and imagination (Bourdieu, 1982; Garcia Canclini, 1989; Rotheram & Phinney, 1987; Young, 1995) converge. I conducted a series of informal and formal interviews among immigrants from Mesoamerica in California. The following statement by an interviewee of Mexican origin captures this dramatic process:

I sometimes talk Spanish like a Nicaraguan, but then I talk like a Cuban, and even when I don't do it consciously, I easily jump from Mexican accent and colloquialisms to Guatemalan's, Salvadorian's, and so forth. I no longer know which one I prefer.

Bakhtin's (1981) theory of "dialogism" provides a useful lens to examine this experience. The author asserted that to understand a culture, living in it would not be sufficient because it would be a mere duplication of one's experience and that this would not entail something new or enriching. Immigration offers an important framework for this experience. Moving out and away from the society of origin

only provides, however, the physical frame for repeating one's prior experience; understanding it though only happens if reflection and critique do occur.

Language is essential to understanding one's culture of origin. Coming in contact with other languages forces people to "see" one's own in ways impossible when immersed in it. Bakhtin (1981), for instance, conceived dialogism through the deprivileging process of a language during its encounter with other languages. He pointed out that such deprivileging takes place in the form of a dying myth, "a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified" (p. 68). Elaborating on dialogism, Arias (1994) noted

The idea that one must be outside of a culture in order to understand it is essential [to dialogism]. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding because how we present ourselves can only be perceived by those located outside of us in space. (pp. 16–17)

Arias's (1994) assertion on identity as a localized experience captures the simultaneity of planes mestizo immigrants experience in their social and cultural negotiations with the host society. One plane is social subordination. Mesoamericans immigrate into a host culture that places them in subordinated roles, marginal to both the sources of cultural production as well as the centers of political and economic power. The new subordinated role of these immigrants results from a variety of reasons that range from linguistic identifiers to primordial markers such as religious affiliations (i.e., the Catholic church), Spanish accented English, and last names.

Another plane is the clash between their new subordinated social condition and the understandings around the issue of race they carry with them. At the root of this conflictive relation resides the mestizos' experience as members of the hegemonic group back in their places of origin. Regardless of their social class status or gender, mestizos indeed associate themselves with the ruling elites for at least two reasons. First, they tend to share cultural patterns based on a common identification with Europe. Second, mestizos distance themselves from the poverty and subordination of the indigenous peoples (Balsells, 2001) by stressing a presumed European extraction, thus denying and rejecting their indigenous heritage. As Mires (1991) stated, the "indian" construct emerges "not as the affirmation of himself, but as the negation of what is European" (p. 11)³

A third crucial plane of experience is the type of social conflict mestizos fall into in the host society. They migrate to the United States steeped in an experience in which the inequitable power relations between the hegemonic mestizo and the

³My translation from original "*El indio surgía no como afirmación de si mismo sino como negación de lo europeo.*"

subordinated indigenous peoples define the axis of social conflict. Mestizos do not necessarily perceive themselves as a racially subordinated group because the individuals in power mirror them culturally; but when they encounter the social conflict of the United States—one in which the historical White and Black dichotomy defines the inequitable power relations and the character of the nation—their notions of racial identity, patriotism, and ethnicity are profoundly challenged.

Mestizo immigrants are thrown in the United States into a cultural narrative centered on skin pigmentation in which they (now as colored people) no longer embody the hegemonic privilege they were used to in their place of origin. This perception exists even if this privilege was limited to the imagination, given the high concentration of wealth in a minority made up of a few families and the bleak poverty of the Mesoamerican mestizo and overwhelming Indian majority. Such assumed privilege cuts across gender, social class status, sexual orientation, and language, for mestizos exhibiting markers associated to European cultural traits have always been located above those who exhibit Mayan cultural traits (Adams, 1989; Böckler & Herbert, 1970; Casaus, 1995).

Certainly one source of the mestizo immigrant struggle with issues of subordination comes from history. In Mesoamerica, European supremacy was established throughout the colonial experience using the symbol of the conquistador as the point of reference of an aesthetic discourse equating power and beauty to him and civilization to Europeanization (Bate, 1993; Mires, 1991; Nandy, 1985). Given generations of intermixing (beginning with the original Spanish rape of Indigenous women during the conquest), mestizos occupy all points of the racial spectrum, which aids the prevailing identity confusion and ambiguity which leads them to claim a false European membership (Adams, 1995; Casaus, 1995; Garcia Canclini, 1999). In other words, the closer the resemblance and the cultural traits associated to the conquered Mayan culture, the more the racial discrimination. As Todorov (1984) argued, nobody wants to be associated with “the defeated ones” (pp. 146–148).

Ambiguity stems from the fact that mestizos did not necessarily incorporate themselves into the two parts of their identity—the Indian and the European (Paz, 1987). They hardly developed a true understanding of both. As Paz stated, becoming mestizo meant recognizing and privileging only one side of the syncretism they live in—the Spaniard, the conqueror, the *hacendado* (landowner), the dominant. Ghidinelli (1993) emphasized that mestizos think of themselves as Whites regardless of context. In reality, Ghidinelli pointed out, there is no such thing as the Indian issue in the Mesoamerica region because Maya and Nahuatl descents know who they are. The real issue, Ghidinelli added, is the mestizo’s confused identity; as much as they might claim membership into the dominant Europeanized culture, the Maya and Nahuatl cultures manifest themselves through every pore of those societies.

Bhabba’s (1994) cultural analysis revisits and further amplifies the hybridization issue. Bhabba did not necessarily separate the elements of one’s origin from the colonial experience. Bhabba saw the native and the Western elements tightly

braided and argued that the intricate nature of identity makes it a messy endeavor in which what is assumed as native selfhood is inscribed in resemblance, and it is always speaking deep “from within Western culture” (pp. 49–50), hence, the hybrid nature of postcolonialism and the impact of today’s globalization.

The mestizo immigration to the United States over the last three decades, particularly immediately after the Johnson administration’s open door policy was enacted in the late 1960s, underscores Bhabba’s (1994) assertions. The mestizo journey from a position of imagined membership in the hegemonic culture (as the one in control of local and national government and its claim to Spaniard lineage) to a position of subordination as members of the Latino group defines the contours of their quest for an identity. Key in this process has been their involvement in the United States as a nation and the politics of patriotism.

ILLUMINATING FROM OUTSIDE

In this section, I use first-person narrative as a focal point to illustrate the contours of the larger identity and political issues of the mestizo migration to the United States unleashed during the late 1970s and that went on throughout the 1980s.

Due to the armed conflict during those years, thousands of people from Guatemala and the other Central American countries were dispersed to other areas, the United States being one of the main recipients. That was the region’s first diaspora. Although many studies have been conducted following the trajectory of this diaspora as it affected the Maya population (e.g., Burns, 1993; Loucky & Moors, 2000; Montejo, 1999), little has been done around the mestizo experience, their education challenges (e.g., Wortham & Contreras, 2002) or adjustment to the urban experience (e.g., Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). The literature, nonetheless, appears more abundant on the cultural, economic, and social impact of the Mexican diaspora on both sides of the border (e.g., Hernández-León & Zúñiga, 2002; Monto, 1994; Shain, 1999).

Given that I (and the thousands of other Central Americans) was not fleeing from persecution from a communist regime but from a military dictatorship supported by the Reagan administration in 1982, political exile status was out of consideration. I obtained documentation through a civil strategy: I married a U.S. citizen. This fact is important to mention here because not having to deal with migratory status, as was the norm, I only needed to pay attention to cultural negotiations and adjustments. I did not know the English language and was ignorant of the ways of the host culture. It was not until then that I was placed in a subordinated racial category for the first time in my life. Until that moment, subordinating experiences were associated to low socioeconomic status and ideology but not to racial or ethnic affiliations.

I found myself ascribed to a group I had heard of and knew about from the literature—Latin American. Indeed, only the power of the United States' culture was capable of creating, paradoxically, a Pan-American subjectivity that was forged more as an ideological stance than as an actual social and political reality during the wars of independence in the 19th century, most notably by Simon Bolivar.

Embracing the new Latino identity took time, and still after 20 years, this process continues unfolding, in flux. Instead of immediately accepting and blending into the new denomination, I first felt a pull toward my cultural roots, which I needed to discover. Instead of distancing me from the war-torn country I had left behind, my migration to the United States made Guatemala emerge as a new denominator, an actual cultural beacon, in my struggle against invisibility and oblivion. Not even in Guatemala had I felt more Guatemalan than I felt in California. I found a sorely needed refuge in a growing pride for what I had began to imagine was Guatemalan culture, hence the simultaneous discovery of cultural roots and the opening of the U.S. culture. Prior to this period, being Guatemalan just was "it," never observed from outside and rarely questioned in terms of cultural makeup.

The host culture, through its institutions and legal procedures (including formal education), infiltrated all spheres of life unambiguously. Among other things, legalizing my status, reducing the use of Spanish to my home and my immediate friendship circles, and not seeing people of Latin American heritage in leadership positions on the media's front page and prime-time TV or the movies let me know who enjoyed cultural privilege. Over time, the host culture pushed me into a larger group of a colored population—brown. I resisted this erasing of my Guatemalanness, yet I suspected that after a while, I could end up appropriating the ascribed values, whatever they were, of being Latino. I only hoped that I would eventually have the time and the space to define these values in my own terms and not those designated by the host culture.

I slowly came to the realization that I was being placed on the same social stratum that Guatemala's indigenous people have lived on for centuries in that society. The physical distance from that country allowed me to see what was not illuminated from inside.

Throughout these readjustments, language has remained a vital force, both as a source of cultural identity and as a social marker. In the next sections, I discuss the ways language plays a central role in identity formation processes and politics, particularly around national loyalties.

Language and Social Adjustments

Language, indeed (the first language and English) adds a distressing dimension to the dailiness of identity (Brass, 1991). This is so because in addition to framing people into categories, language easily becomes an effective tool in materializing

differentiation (i.e., from categorizing regional accents into appropriate and inappropriate pronunciations and syntax to identifying structures of the first language behind the second language) and resistance to homogeneity (Bourdieu, 1982).

Wrestling with the host language and sustaining the first leaves a deep imprint on the immigrant's perceptions of location and selfhood (Crawford, 1992; Fernandez-Relly & Schaufler, 1995; Merino, 1983), for the role of language, as Bakhtin (1981) theorized, has been one of the most vital disputed arenas in the history of the United States (Grosjean, 1982; Hakuta, 1986). For instance, the debate on language rights took a sharp turn in California during the 1990s when new legislation (Proposition 227) virtually eliminated bilingual education along with other voter initiatives (Proposition 187) that dismantled aid to immigrant children and other social services for immigrants in general. The California experience shows the pressing role that assimilation and racialization play in contemporary social politics (Mohl, 1981; Omi & Winant, 1994; Rosaldo, 1993).

The linguistic and cultural history of the United States, indeed, mirrors that of nationalism and patriotism (Anderson, 1991; Brass, 1991; Wacker, 1979). Such history displays the imprints left by the struggles between immigrants' languages and English. At different historical junctures, the emphasis on certain language and its linguistic community changes according to the dominant political factors. As at some points in the past some languages (e.g., German, Yiddish) disputed the English language hegemony, Spanish is now perceived as the threat to such hegemonic power. Yet, as research has shown, the power of the English language and culture has over time been able to dominate, even when second languages (as is the case of Spanish) thrive in linguistic communities (Portes & Schaufler, 1996; Schaufler, 1994).

Once in the host culture, the pressure for immigrants to wrestle with a new identity (Quiles, 1989)—whether they understand, accept, modify, or even reject it—greet them from day one and mounts as time passes and their children begin school. Typically, European immigrants in three generations lost their languages and blended their cultures into the cauldron of what became the American ethos (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990).

Although the immigration experience has been similar for all peoples, immigrants from developing countries, however, live an added tension—a disadvantaged position in a new and highly racialized regime.

Furthermore, geography complicates the particular experience of mestizo Mesoamerican immigrants as well as for all immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Given the proximity they travel between the United States and their places of origin with some frequency (Arriaza, 1997; Baptiste, 1993; Chavez, 1990), even traveling by land is often used. This traveling locates them simultaneously in two overlapping planes. On one hand, when mestizos go back to visit their place of origin, they might be perceived as those who have made it in the big cities of the mysterious North (*el Norte*). Hence, they probably have money, speak

English, have American friends, and are able to access the ways the culture in the North operates. A cosmopolitan aura surrounds those who go over to the South to visit, which situates them above their peers in the villages, small towns, or working class neighborhoods in the cities from which they originally migrated.

On the other hand, when returning to the United States from their visits to the South, mestizo immigrants find themselves back in their position of social subordination and its clear message of unequivocal underrepresentation within the host culture. Nevertheless, the fact that mestizos experience racial discrimination in the United States, as clearly expressed in segregated housing, employment, and schools (Menchaca & Valencia, 1990), does not necessarily mean that when they visit their places of origin, mestizos automatically translate such lived experience into empathy and commitment to supporting indigenous people in their struggles for civil and human rights in Mesoamerica. It is very likely that instead—as a Maya leader expressed it in an interview conducted for this article—mestizos “cry racism, racism, once in the United States, but show racist practices while in their places of origin.” However important the embracing of indigenous identity among Mexican Americans might be—as it relates to the construction of notions such as Chicano, Aztlán, la Raza—the issue of translating their U.S. experience to Mexico remains an open question.

The continuous traveling to and from Mesoamerica and the United States (especially for those borderlands like the Southwest) raises some questions regarding patriotic and national loyalties. This physical proximity makes it very easy to go back and forth and also allows the possibility of going back forever (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Among first generation immigrants, this idea remains alive, even if it is never fulfilled, like a dream. As time passes, returning to the place of origin becomes a nostalgic romance, a desire that remains constant even when knowing that there is little or nothing to go back to; family and close friends have most likely followed the same immigration path, and the economic and social reasons for migration remain unchanged (e.g., unemployment, a rigid class system, a weak local economy, state and criminal violence). This fluctuating and ambivalent reality raises questions around immigrants’ loyalties, the labels applied to them, and their condition as a racialized and subordinated group.

Patriotism and Loyalties

Bill Moyer’s *NOW* program (Moyer, 2002) aired on January 18, 2002 on California’s Bay Area PBS TV station, provided insightful data on the shifting terrain of national loyalties. Interviewees were asked, “What comes first, your religion or being American?” Every single person responded that they were first Christians, Mormons, or Muslims for that matter and second Americans. Asking national identity questions might be an extraordinary occurrence for the general public, but not for first generation immigrants. Somehow, questioning loyalties appears as a

constant marker in these immigrants' journey into the host culture (Glazer, 1990). Loyalty to the nation state tends to be questioned when numbers of immigrants grow and appear as a threat to the mainstream. This questioning, combined with the racialization process, can accelerate and even take a violent turn when dramatic events (e.g., increase in actual numbers as revealed by census data) or when the attribution of acts of violence throws the spotlight on formerly invisible groups as has recently happened to Americans of Arab descent.

"Welcome to the front seat of racism," an unidentified African American commentator said in a national radio program debate, thus dramatizing the treatment Arab Americans were receiving in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Even though Americans of Arab ancestries have been part of the "other" hyphenated members of society, prior to that date, prejudice and open racist actions against their communities had not so frequently been on the front page of the media. The racializing of these communities accelerated from the day of the attacks on at an increasing pace.

The Latino communities' racialization has followed a different path. These communities' accelerated racialization has to do both with numbers and, as Rosaldo (1993) put it, with "cultural domination [and] brute facts of poverty" (p. 149). By the time the figures of the 1990 census revealed Latinos as the fastest growing population and the projected second largest group over the next two decades nationwide, numerous anti-immigrant bills were already being promoted in California. These bills multiplied throughout the 1990s and in some cases were approved by voters. These actions took place when the same census showed the Latino community's dismal economic, educational, and health conditions.

The perceived labor competition and its impact on domestic and foreign policies (Borjas, 1996; Borjas & Fisher, 2001; Cornelius & Martin, 1993; Rodriguez, 1996) adds up to the notion that immigration shapes local politics and the economy. Yet, if such influence ever materializes, it takes quite a long time and is played out within the context of a highly racialized culture. Tucker (1990) posited that the potential influence of Latinos and Asians on foreign policy, for instance, might be more complicated than the one Germans and Irish exerted before WWI. Germans and Irish immigrants combined made up about 14.7% of the U.S. total population during that era, a proportion equal to the numbers Latinos and Asians together will have by 2020. The latter groups, nonetheless, are extremely diverse, as I have argued in this article, and much less cohesive than the Germans and Irish were at the turn of the 19th century.

Additionally, assimilation plays a key role in the incorporation process of immigrant communities. Some authors have argued (e.g., Kennedy, 1996; Rumbaut, 1994) that in spite of the apparent numbers of the current immigration wave, no single immigrant group has historically been statistically strong enough to both preserve its own language and culture or concentrated enough in areas where they could challenge the local political system. Although labor and local and foreign

politics are never a simple matter, national loyalty certainly muddles things around for diasporic communities. Although anecdotal, Univision and Telefutera, two Spanish language TV channels, on June 15, 2002 aired the results of an informal polling of Latino fans in several states of the United States prior to the match between the teams of the United States and Mexico during the 2002 Soccer World Cup. They were asked, "Which team do you support?" Practically all participants expressed at least ambivalent feelings, if not outright support, for the U.S. team. The exception tended to be Mexican born immigrants who stated their full support for the Mexican team and expressed at the same time unequivocal appreciation and respect for the U.S. team.

If Mesoamerican immigrants build their notions of national loyalty in terms of nostalgic desire, then their national and patriotic meanings might be more determined by their immediate experience than their past and lived as a constantly interrogated process. As an interviewee from the Maya country in Southern Mexico explained, "I dream of Mexico but my daily experience takes place in the U.S." In her study of patriotism from the Civil War up to the First World War, O'Leary (1999) offered a compelling historical account into the contested and ever shifting terrains of what patriotism and nationalism have meant. The historian showed how such notions have always been not the mere reflection of who is in power but rather the result of very active competition among different social groups and the government as well as within the same government. Thus, essential nationalistic meanings (for instance, the meaning of the national flag or the invention of social categories such as American) are contextual and locally situated endeavors. In sum, in identity politics, nothing is fixed, and everything is subjected to the agency of individuals and groups.

Furthermore, the creation of names and the transformation of meanings lay as open, questioned fields. To illuminate this point, the recent Jamaican and Mayan experiences lend themselves as powerful sources. Hall (1990) argued that the adoption of names must be "made historically available" (p. 30) to social groups. Hall described the process of reclaiming names for Jamaicans who, until the early 1970s, would not use the term *African* to define their identity. This term was not historically available until then. According to Hall, it was in the 1970s that Jamaicans began to identify themselves as Black and therefore the sons and daughters descendants of slaves. Hall (1990) asserted, "It could be only made through the impact on popular life of the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae" (pp. 30–31).

As in the Jamaican case, the political mobilization of Guatemala's Mayan people throughout the last two decades of the 20th century, particularly during the 1980s, made it possible for the term *Maya* to be slowly rescued from the arcane language of anthropology and to take hold in the imagination of that country's majority (Arriaza & Arias, 1998). Maya has been claimed as a substitute for the dominant, racially charged term *Indian*, primarily used as a descriptor. The

nominalization embedded in the word Maya clearly disarms the hurtful intentionality of the adjective Indian. Nominalization, in sum, transforms into a subject that which has been an object.

In closing, in the age of globalization, national loyalties and naming as contested and context driven arenas seem critical signs in contemporary identity politics. The efforts initiated in the United States during the second half of the 20th century to push the mainstream to accept its multicultural nature (Anderson, 1994; Banks, 1993; Lind, 1995; Winant, 1994) have continued unabated into the new century, and although it seems the road stretches with the passing of time, this goal appears both attainable and profoundly contested. Mesoamerican mestizos might find out that their collective, ambiguous biography could easily be the unscripted narrative of a nation forcing its way up, trying to be born.

CONCLUSION

Although the use of totalizing names helps categorize people in easily retrievable labels, this practice tends to hide rich and complex differences within social groups. The paradoxical nature of total names such as Latinos hinges on the double effect of the name. Latino provides a Pan-American identity platform for an imagined community unified under a common experience. On the other hand, Latino as a total name leads to erasing difference within the immigrant people coming to the United States from South of the border, as is the case of mestizo Mesoamericans.

Mestizo Mesoamericans, as a group within the Latino category, migrate to the United States with their baggage of social and cultural ties, most of which are out of sync with the host, dominant culture. As these immigrants settle into their new surroundings, they face a new social condition that remains as a source of tension the rest of their lives—they no longer form part of the hegemonic, dominant group. Although Mesoamerican mestizos hold on to an immediate past of imagined power—as opposed to the abhorrent conditions Mayan and other indigenous people are forced to live under—mestizos' external identity definitions are grounded on the dominant racial discourse of the host culture and clearly materialized on residential, schooling, and employment discriminatory practices. Such external racialization contradicts the mestizo's internal identity discourse (imaginary White), adding an extra layer of complexity to this community's identity politics. To what extent is such discourse infused into second and third generations and how this discourse impacts these generations' life chances remain open empirical questions.

That a mestizo woman prefers to marry a Black man to a Mayan might be hard to comprehend if one is imbued in the White–Black dichotomy of the United States, but it is normal in Guatemalan racial politics. Indeed, as I have shown in this article, mestizo Mesoamericans relate to issues of race in terms of their distancing from the native Mayan people. This is so in part because in that region, Af-

rican ancestry does not play a central role in the formation of national identity but particularly because whiteness takes on a cultural connotation (taste, fashion, language, urban lifestyle). This experience is transported to the host culture when mestizos migrate. Once in the United States, they become members of the larger Latino community.

Understanding the social and cultural dynamics mapped out in this article might be a useful strategy that could render positive results for the creation of educational, social, political, and economic policies for the full civic and economic involvement of this community in the larger host society. Moreover, alliances between this community and other communities of color to advance their negotiations with social institutions, such as schools, might also be possible only through the explicit engagement of the cultural ambiguities mestizos live in their daily experience.

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