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## Migration Across Institutions of Race: How Immigrant Women from Latin America Construct Ethnoracial Self-Identities in Sending and Receiving Societies

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MIGRATION ACROSS INSTITUTIONS OF RACE:  
HOW IMMIGRANT WOMEN FROM LATIN AMERICA CONSTRUCT ETHNORACIAL  
SELF-IDENTITIES IN SENDING AND RECEIVING SOCIETIES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

How does immigration affect perceptions of self? In this study, I explore the processes by which immigrants construct ethnoracial self-identities in sending societies, an individual's country of origin, and receiving societies, an individual's country of destination. For my exploration, I conduct eleven life history and cognitive interviews of immigrant women from Spanish-speaking countries located in Latin America. Mainly, I find that the women in my study construct ethnoracial self-identities throughout their lives informed by their socialization into myths of racial democracy present in both locations and contradicting interactions, which take place in local organizations such as families, schools, and workplaces. I also find that they contest ethnoracial self-identities during interactions with organizations such as the Census Bureau. Bridging transnational and organizational sociology, I argue that the women in my study construct ethnoracial self-identities in recursive relationships. These recursive relationships are comprised of institutions of race shaping individuals through interactions, which occur in organizations. Through interactions with organizations, individuals also shape institutions of race. By showing how immigration affects perceptions of self, this study improves our knowledge about how immigrants construct ethnoracial self-identities in the U.S., giving proper weight to how people give meaning to experiences of race in their countries of origin and destination.



## INTRODUCTION

Immigration literature is rich in studies that examine how immigrants have redefined and will keep redefining demographic dynamics in receiving and sending societies. But how does immigration affect perceptions of self? Social psychology literature examines how individuals construct identities and offers foundational insights into this question. For instance, scholars such as Mead, Cooley, and Goffman have described the relationship between society and self as mutually constitutive. Nevertheless, because this literature is primarily theoretical, it does not offer empirical examples that capture the processes by which participation in more than one society may affect said relationship. Similarly, studies bridging immigration, race, and ethnicity observe key patterns relevant to the question, suggesting that skin color, among other factors, explains immigrants' experiences of discrimination in the U.S. These experiences, in turn, influence how immigrants ethnoracially self-identify in census forms. Yet, as these studies use U.S. national level survey data, they neither capture how immigrants make sense of these experiences, nor do they account for how immigrants' experiences in their countries of origin may also shape how they ethnoracially self-identify.

Studies within social psychology describe the relationship between society and self as mutually constitutive. To begin with, scholars examining the relationship between society, self, and social behavior have advanced that individuals' personality is constituted by a sense of "I" and "me," with the "me" representing our awareness or assumption of others' attitudes, and the "I" representing our reaction toward that awareness in a given social situation (Mead 1934).

More recently, scholars looking to specify Mead's work have theorized that commitment to role relationships (society) shapes identity salience (self) which in turn shapes role choice behavior (social behavior) through cognitive processes of self-verification (Striker and Burke 2000). In addition, social identity scholars analyzing the circumstances under which people think of themselves in terms of "we" instead of "I" have presented the psychological processes of social categorization, social comparison, and social identification to explain how individuals actively define social reality and their own social position relative to others in that reality (Ellemers and Haslam 2011; Tajfel and Turner 1979). These scholars have also described strategies such as individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition that people can use to derive positive social identities and elaborated the cognitive processes through which individuals develop group-level conceptions of self (Ellemers and Haslam 2011; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner 1985). Still, as this literature is primarily theoretical, it does not offer empirical examples that capture the processes by which participation in more than one society may affect said relationship.

Studies bridging race and immigration research suggest that skin color, among other factors, explains immigrants' experiences of discrimination in the U.S.; experiences, which, in turn, influence how immigrants ethnoracially self-identify in census forms. First, scholars analyzing immigrants' trajectories and life outcomes in the U.S. have found that immigrants with darker skin colors are more penalized in their migration and adaptation processes than those with lighter skin colors (Han 2020; Painter, Holmes, and Bateman 2016). So too, scholars examining whether boundaries between ethnically and racially defined social groups in the U.S. will change again to accommodate new immigrants have found that although ethnoracial boundaries may be blurring to accommodate some new immigrants, they are not shifting at the same pace for those

racialized as Black (Alba and Nee 2005; Bonilla Silva 2002; Lee and Bean 2004) nor those racialized as Mexican (Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Telles and Ortiz 2008). Finally, scholars exploring how immigrants from Latin America ethnoracially self-identify in U.S. censuses have found that immigrants from Latin America with darker skin colors and those who report having experienced discrimination based on their racial or ethnic background are more likely to self-identify as Black or ‘other’ than as white (Frank, Akresh, and Lu 2010; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008). Although most of these studies suggest that skin color affects how contemporary immigrants experience migration and life in the U.S., because they use U.S. national level survey data, they do not capture how immigrants make sense of these experiences nor do they account for how immigrants’ experiences in their countries of origin may also shape how they ethnoracially self-identify.

In this study, I address these gaps by conducting life history and cognitive interviews with immigrant women from Spanish-speaking countries located in Latin America to capture the processes by which they make sense of meanings of race and ethnicity in their countries of origin and in the U.S and how that sensemaking shapes their construction of ethnoracial self-identities. In my analysis, I build on gender scholars’ arguments for framing gender as a social institution and present an empirical example of how framing race as such can help us explain the processes by which immigrants construct ethnoracial identities in sending and receiving societies. Three main research questions guide the interpretation of my data: (1) How do immigrant women make sense of *institutions of race* in their countries of origin and in the U.S.? (2) As sensemaking stems from interaction, where and with whom do immigrant women interact in sending and receiving societies? (3) How do the meanings emerging from said interactions inform immigrant women’s ethnoracial self-identity construction in their countries origin and in the U.S.?

According to gender scholars, Martin and Risman, there are two key benefits to framing gender as a social institution or structure of which I seek to take advantage in my study about race and ethnicity. First, Martin (2004) has argued that framing gender as a social institution allows us to see more clearly the processes by which gender is constructed and how it may be deconstructed. Next, Risman (2018) has asserted that conceptualizing gender as a social structure operating simultaneously in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of a given society, allows us to make sense of the historical and geographic variation in how people experience gender and are affected by gender inequalities. In this study, I conceptualize race and ethnicity as social institutions to understand both the processes by which they are constructed and the historical and geographic variation in how people experience and are affected by them across transnational boundaries.

Problematizing the lack of consistency in how scholars apply the concept of institution, Martin (2004) identified twelve features of social institutions to then assess the potential for gender to be considered one. Briefly, according to Martin, social institutions are social, enduring, and constituted by embodied agents; they guide behavior through a legitimating ideology created by elites who have the power to organize social positions, relations, and expectations among members to their advantage; they are entwined with the state, interdependent, and continuously changing over time; finally, they entail recurring practices, some of which conflict with others, and are internalized by members as identities, resulting in the observation that institutions and individuals mutually constitute each other.

As the construct of race also meets Martin's criteria for defining social institutions, I approach the question in my opening paragraph considering how institutions of race and individuals mutually constitute each other via interaction within organizations. Using life history

and cognitive interviews, I found that the women in my study construct and reconstruct ethnoracial self-identities combining distinct meanings of race acquired through their life—namely, combining meanings internalized while being socialized into particular racial ideologies with meanings emerging from racializing interactions within local organizations in their countries of origin and destination. To take a case in point, Norma, an immigrant woman from Ensenada, Mexico, ethnoracially self-identified in her country of origin as *Mestiza*, combining meanings of race internalized while being socialized into a racial ideology purporting that all Mexicans are a mixture between Spanish, Indigenous, and African people, and meanings of race emerging from racializing interactions such as being made fun of by her family members for being the family member who looks the most indigenous. In the U.S., Norma ethnoracially self-identifies as Latina, combining meanings of race acquired in the country of origin with meanings of race emerging from racializing interactions such as being treated differently by her employers based on her racialized appearance.

Based on these findings, I conclude that immigration shapes perceptions of self by exposing individuals to nuanced institutions of race that complicate notions of ethnoracial self-identity developed within organizations in the country of origin. In the country of destination, immigrants make sense of how the new institution of race operates via interactions within organizations. These meanings then inform how immigrants ethnoracially self-identify in the country of destination both in structured situations, such as filling out a census form, and in non-structured situations, such as casual conversation. Drawing on the theoretical argument for framing social institutions as “inhabited” (Hallett 2010; Hallett and Hawbaker 2019, 2021), I argue that the women in my study construct ethnoracial self-identities in recursive relationships. These recursive relationships are comprised of institutions of race shaping individuals through

interactions, which occur in organizations. Through interactions with organizations, individuals also shape institutions of race.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The central question of this study is how does immigration affect perceptions of self? In this literature review, I examine studies within the subfield of global and transnational sociology that have advocated for particular frameworks to examine immigrants' sensemaking, paying close attention to the strengths of taking a transnational, cognitive, and feminist approach. Discovering that the processes, by which immigration affects perceptions of self, have yet to be described in a way that connects institutions, organizations, and the self, I continue by reviewing theories explaining how institutions and individuals mutually constitute each other via interaction. Finally, I also review race and ethnicity scholarship on Latin America and the U.S. to understand how institutional myths that dominate racial discourse in each location compare to how individuals experience race and ethnicity. Drawing on the theoretical argument for framing social institutions as "inhabited" (Hallett 2010; Hallett and Hawbaker 2019, 2021), I argue that immigration shapes perceptions of self via the recursive relationships among institutions of race, interactions, and organizations in immigrants' countries of origin and destination.

### *Frameworks to study immigrants' sensemaking*

Empirical studies within global and transnational sociology put forth beneficial approaches to studying how immigration shapes people's understandings of reality and self. First, scholars have found that taking a transnational approach is vital to our explorations of how immigration impacts dynamics, interactions, and sensemaking in receiving and sending societies.

In the study of immigrants' racial attitudes, for example, taking a transnational approach has meant a consideration of the cross-border processes by which individuals develop class attitudes (Parreñas 2000) and racial attitudes in their countries of origin and destination (Roth 2012; Roth and Kim 2013; Zamora 2016). As an illustration, Roth and Kim (2013) take a transnational approach to examine the racial attitudes of Dominican and South Korean immigrants, showing how racial attitudes travel across national boundaries through immigration. Arguing that immigrants' racial attitudes are constituted by the racial context and dynamics in the sending society, the globalized media, the racial context and dynamics in the receiving society and the transnational exchange of racial attitudes between immigrants and non-migrants in the country of origin, Roth and Kim (2013) advocate for an inclusion of the racial formation in immigrants' countries of origin within immigration scholarship.

In addition to recommending a transnational approach to examine how immigration shapes people's understandings of reality and self, global and transnational scholars have also shown the value of taking a cognition or cultural approach. In the study of how immigrants give meaning to the race and ethnicity constructs, taking a cognition or cultural approach has meant treating race, ethnicity, and nation not as markers of fixed and bounded groups but as schemas or culturally shared mental structures that individuals rely on to organize knowledge, interpret reality, and engage in action (Brubaker 2002; Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004). To take a case in point, Roth (2012) takes a cultural approach to examine how immigration affects the ways in which Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants think about race and classify themselves and others, revealing how immigration changes the racial schemas<sup>1</sup> that individuals use to make

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<sup>1</sup> Roth (2012) defines racial schemas as "the bundle of racial categories and the set of rules for what they mean, how they are ordered, and how to oneself and others." (P. 12)



sense of their surroundings. Arguing that upon arrival immigrants begin to pick up aspects of new racial schemas operating in their country of destination, Roth (2012) encourages a view of race and ethnicity as aspects of culture within immigration scholarship.

Finally, global and transnational scholars have demonstrated the importance of taking a feminist approach to examine how immigration shapes people's understandings of reality and self. In feminist migration scholarship, taking a feminist approach has meant accounting for three dynamics in migrant women's lives: how gender inequalities shape their experiences of migration, how gender inequalities intersect with other inequalities, and how the social relations in which they participate define their experiences (Parreñas 2000, 2009; Quiñones-Rivera 2006). For example, Parreñas (2000) takes a feminist approach to examine how migrant Filipina domestic workers experience the international division of reproductive labor, revealing that they undergo a *conflicting class mobility*. By conflicting class mobility, Parreñas means that the women in her study rely on social status gains in their sending society to make sense of their social status losses in the receiving one. Arguing that women as individuals practice agency in giving meaning to their experiences, Parreñas recommends a consideration of the qualitatively different ways in which women experience migration within immigration scholarship.

In this study of how immigration affects perceptions of self, I bridge aspects from the transnational, cognitive, and feminist approaches described above. First, I account for the cross-border processes by which individuals develop understandings of race and ethnicity in their countries of origin and destination. Next, I explore the relationship between immigrants' exposure to distinct racial schemas and their subjective construction of ethnoracial identities throughout the life course. Finally, I pay close attention to the social relations defining migrant women's experiences. Discovering that the processes by which immigration affects perceptions

of self have yet to be described in a way that connects institutions, organizations, and the self, I continue by reviewing scholarship that has put forth theories explaining how institutions and individuals mutually constitute each other via interaction.

*Theories connecting institutions, organizations, and the self via interaction*

Scholarship on organizations, particularly inhabited institutionalism literature, connects institutions, organizations, and the self via interaction. Inhabited institutionalism (II) is a theoretical framework that bridges institutional and interactionist sociology to study the reproduction and challenge of institutional meanings within organizations (Hallett and Ventresca 2006). Starting from the premise that institutions are “inhabited” by people who do things together, II advances that there are “recursive relationships among institutions, interactions, and organizations” (Hallett and Hawbaker 2019:326). That is, institutional logics shape local meanings via interactions within organizations while, through these same interactions, people respond to institutional logics shaping them as well. As meanings emerging from interaction become internalized by organizational members, inhabited institutionalist theorist conclude that identities are constructed through interaction taking place in and across organizations.

As stability and change are central concerns of organizational theory, inhabited institutionalism has been commonly used to examine cases of decoupling and recoupling between institutional guidelines of action, also referred as institutional myths, and action taking place within local organizations. As adopting institutional rules allows organizations to gain legitimacy, resources, and stability, when said institutional rules conflict with organizations’ efficiency criteria, organizations build gaps between their structure and actual activities to maintain ceremonial conformity. Institutional theorists have used the concept of decoupling to

describe a purposive strategy that some organizations implement to buffer the contradictions between institutional rules and day-to-day activities (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

In contrast to the concept of decoupling, inhabited institutionalism theorists have developed the concept of recoupling to describe the processes by which institutional rules and organizational action once decoupled become tightly coupled again (Hallett 2010). Framed as a local response to institutional pressures, recoupling occurs when organizational members become invested in making institutional guidelines of action consistent with organizational action. As an illustration, Hallett (2010) found evidence of recoupling at an elementary school where the institutional myth of accountability was given tangible flesh by a newly hired principal appointed to improve the school's performance. Understanding accountability as a guideline of action, the new principal recoupled institutional logics and organizational action through her surveillance of classroom and student management, among other tasks.

Building on II, scholars have also examined how organizational formation and the everyday functioning of organizations are affected by their embeddedness within the institution of race and its institutional logics (Ewing 2018; Ray 2019). To take a case in point, sociologist Victor Ray developed a theory of racialized organizations, arguing that to understand how racialization processes traverse macro-, meso-, and micro-social levels, we must pay attention to organizations. After all, for Ray, the racial order is reproduced or challenged within organizations. Ray (2019) states, "racialized organizations are meso-level racial structures central to contestation over racial meaning, the social construction of race, and stability and change in the racial order." (p. 46). Speaking about the mechanisms reproducing racial inequality within organizations, Ray advances that racialized organizations often decouple institutional

rules around racial equity from everyday practices in ways that reinforce, or at least do not challenge, the existing racial order.

Although most inhabited institutionalism work has been done using ethnographic methods or a combination of ethnographic and in-depth interviews, in my study I used life history and cognitive interviews. Speaking with the women in my study revealed that they construct ethnoracial self-identities in recursive relationships. These recursive relationships are comprised of institutions of race shaping individuals through interactions, which occur in organizations. Through interactions with organizations, individuals also shape institutions of race. Discovering how inhabited institutionalism has yet to be applied to how immigrants construct ethnoracial identities throughout their lives, I conclude this literature review by examining race and ethnicity scholarship on Latin America and the U.S. to understand the ideologies that dominate racial discourse and how people experience race and ethnicity in each location. After all, mestizaje and color-blind racism operate appear to operate as institutional myths in Latin America and the U.S., respectively

*Studies Describing Institutions of Race Operating in Latin America and The U.S.*

*Institution of race in Latin America and mestizaje as institutional myth of race.*

Scholarship on the institutions of race and ethnicity in Latin America shows the prevalence of nation-building ideologies purporting a belief that racial mixture in the region has led to fully mixed societies in which there are no “pure” races (Dulitzky 2005; Hernández 2013; Paschel 2016). Problematically, this notion has been used to subsequently argue that because everyone in the region is mixed, racial discrimination does not exist. According to Hernández (2013), “the denial of racism [in Latin America] is rooted in what many scholars have critiqued as the ‘myth of racial democracy’—the notion that racial mixture and the absence of Jim Crow racial

segregation are such marked contrast to the U.S. racial history that the region vies itself as ‘racially innocent’” (p. 2). Hernández’s point is that mestizaje is nothing but a myth of a racial utopia that has been used to erase the systemic and symbolic violence through which Blackness and indigeneity are punished and whiteness rewarded in the region.

To understand how the mestizaje ideology that dominates racial discourse in Latin America has produced a sense of racial innocence, it is important to review why the construct was created in the first place. As explained by Paschel (2016), narratives celebrating racial mixture in the region were created by political elites and intellectuals in response to external pressures to demonstrate modernity and progress; concepts which were, and continue to be, linked with whiteness. After efforts to “breed away the Black” through immigration from Europe were abandoned, Latin American countries transitioned to a construction of mestizaje ideologies, following the racist eugenic logic that racial mixture would eventually result in a culturally and biologically homogenous group stronger than any “pure” race (Kelly-Cabrera 2021). Still, as the driving force to develop mestizaje ideologies was to demonstrate modernity and progress as measured by whiteness, within this new discourse proximity to whiteness became celebrated by representing the *mestizo*, a mixed individual with a light skin color, as quintessential of people from Latin America. In doing so, the ideology also strategically invisibilized “pure” Blackness and indigeneity in the region. This reality has pushed Dominican scholar, Kelly-Cabrera (2021) to contend that as white supremacy operates in the U.S. mestizo supremacy operates in Latin America. Today, mestizaje is still the dominant racial ideology operating in most countries of Latin America, regardless of scholarship and social movements arguing that far from the truth, Latin American nations are deeply race-conscious.

Quiñones Rivera (2006) examines the distinct racialization processes that have shaped her life in Puerto Rico and in the U.S. Speaking about Puerto Rico's racialization process of *mestizaje*, Quiñones Rivera writes, "[mestizaje] is an ideology that purports a state of harmonious race relations in which discrimination supposedly does not exist." (p. 162). Applying inhabited institutionalism concepts to Quiñones Rivera's accounts suggests that the institutional myth of race on the island is that everyone is equal because the racial mixture has eradicated pure races, especially pure Blackness, and therefore there is no need to speak about racial discrimination. Still, as institutional myths may be true or false depending on local action, Quiñones Rivera confronts the myth of *mestizaje* by asserting that within interactions in her household she has realized that race does matter in Puerto Rico and that there is an implicit message within *mestizaje* that frames Blackness as undesirable. Observing that not only her but most Black Puerto Ricans tend to be disproportionately located at the bottom of the social hierarchy on the island, Quiñones Rivera goes on to say that *mestizaje* is promoting a culture of racial silence as it is a discursive tool used to "erase Blackness from the systematic project of nation-building." (2006:164).

The sense that *mestizaje*, as an institutional myth about race in Latin America, is false is also found in scholarship about Mexico. Anthropologist, Bobby Vaughn, analyzes the meanings of Blackness in Mexico comparing racial discourses in Costa Chica, a predominantly Afro-Mexican region, and central Mexico, where there are few Black Mexicans. Consistent with Quiñones Rivera's observations of Puerto Rico, Vaughn found evidence of an internalized privileging of racial mixture over purity in people's understandings of Blackness across Mexico; albeit those in central Mexico take pride on the idea that the country is a "mestizo nation," while Afro-Mexicans in the coast reject that claim as they are made race conscious in interactions with

others. Arguing that these understandings are rooted in Mexico's *mestizaje*, which has silenced Blackness and racial discrimination on a national scale, Vaughn (2005) writes, "To the extent that they constantly discern a difference between a negro, a moreno, an indio, and a mestizo, and that these differences fashion how they live their lives, the homogenizing project of *mestizaje* has surely fallen short of its mark." (p. 55). After all, Afro-Mexicans, relative to the dominant mestizos, continue to live in poverty despite the myth of Mexico being a post-racial society.

Patterns of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity observed in Puerto Rico and Mexico are seen elsewhere in the region. For instance, Telles, Flores, and Giraldo-Urrea (2015) examined ethnoracial inequalities related to educational attainment in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru, using two measures of race: ethnoracial self-identification in censuses and skin color. Regarding the relationship between the two measures, they found that skin color is better to examine inequality as self-identified race poorly captures racial inequality. Concerning educational attainment, they found that progressively, individuals with darker skin colors consistently exhibit greater educational penalties.

*Institution of race in the U.S. and color-blindness as the institutional myth of race.*

Scholarship on race and ethnicity in the U.S. similarly shows the prevalence of a color-blind racial ideology purporting a belief that everyone is treated equally, regardless of race. Examining the endurance of racial inequality in the U.S., Bonilla-Silva finds that color-blindness has masked anti-Blackness in the country by "explaining racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics" (Bonilla-Silva 2003:2). The essence of Bonilla-Silva's argument is that in contemporary U.S. a subtle form of the same anti-Black racism that has operated in the country

since its inception has risen; one, in which people proudly claim not to be racists as they claim that racial disparities in life outcomes have nothing to do with processes of racialization.

Omi and Winant, scholars who have developed a transformative theory of racial formation in the U.S., have demonstrated the social and historical forces that give race its changing meaning over time and place. One of Omi and Winant's key contributions to the study of racial formation is their claim that race needs to be understood as a category of inequality, of identity, and of individual and collective agency. They argue that, only after those realizations, we will be able to recognize race as a category of disempowerment that remains central in the organization of political life in the U.S. against the dominant ideology of colorblindness. Chiefly, Omi and Winant (2015) contend that far from being colorblind, the U.S. has always been an extremely race-conscious nation living under a normalized cognitive dissonance.

Examples of how race-conscious nation the U.S. is, are found in Johnson's (2020) report "Understanding Systemic Racism." Examining the experiences of Black people in healthcare, criminal justice, and education, Johnson found evidence of the ways in which these systems consistently produce negative outcomes for Black people. To take a case in point, Johnson found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black people were contracting and dying from the virus at higher rates than white people.

### *The Present Study*

In what follows, I show how the women in my study construct ethnoracial self-identities in their countries of origin and the U.S., informed by their socialization into myths of racial democracy present in both locations and contradicting interactions, which take place in local organizations such as families, schools, and workplaces. I also show how they contest ethnoracial self-identities during interactions with organizations such as the Census Bureau.



Drawing on insights covered in this literature review, I argue that the women in my study construct ethnoracial self-identities in recursive relationships. These recursive relationships are comprised of institutions of race shaping individuals through interactions, which occur in organizations. Through interactions with organizations, individuals also shape institutions of race.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Design*

Bringing insights from transnational and organizational literature together, I conducted life history interviews with eleven immigrant women from Spanish-speaking countries located in Latin America. During these interviews, I examined the processes by which they give meanings to the concept of race and construct ethnoracial self-identities before and after migration. Immigrant women from Spanish-speaking countries located in Latin America living in the U.S. are promising cases to study this social phenomenon for various reasons. First, according to researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau, among people who self-identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino in the 2020 Census, 26.2 million people (42.2%) self-identified their race as Some Other Race alone (Jones, Marks, Ramirez, and Rios-Vargas 2021), showing how individuals who identify as Hispanic or Latino do not see themselves represented by the racial categories operating in the U.S. Additionally, I specifically speak with immigrants who identify as women because studies within migration, race, and ethnicity scholarship have documented that women experience processes of migration and racialization in qualitatively different ways than men.

Interviews are suitable for when we are interested in understanding what is in our respondents' minds and past events that are impossible to replicate. Patton (2015) states, "We interview people to find out from them those things that we cannot directly observe... We cannot

observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things” (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell 2015:108). In this case, because I am interested in understanding the sensemaking resulting from the meaningful interactions that the women in my study engaged in both in their country of origin and in the U.S. and how that sensemaking informs their ethnoracial self-identification in the U.S., process which happened, at least in part, in the past, it was vital for me to speak with other immigrant women.

Life history interviews allowed me to do so. Life history interviews follow the life course of a person and usually have a few main questions that are divided into the stages of life about which researchers are interested (Rubin and Rubin 2012). In this case, I asked my respondents about a pre-migratory stage to contextualize their lives and networks of social relations in their country of origin. Then, I ask about a during-migration stage to understand how they made the decision to come to the U.S., who was involved, and details about how the process went. Finally, I ask about a post-migration stage to again contextualize my respondents’ lives and networks of social relations now in the U.S. Because I identify as an immigrant woman from a Spanish-speaking country in Latin America, I started the project with an initial sense of some of the life history interview questions that, for me, would be crucial to ask my participants. I further refined my questions, drawing on insights found during my literature review. (See supplemental files for the life history interview protocol).

Before concluding the pre-migratory and post-migratory interview questions, I also conducted cognitive interviews using census forms from my respondents’ countries of origin and the U.S. respectively to examine their sensemaking when answering questions about their ethnoracial self-identity in sending and receiving societies. Cognitive interviews ask participants

to answer a given survey question—in this case, census question(s) about race/ethnicity—then describe what they think they are being asked and how they go about answering the question. This activity allowed me to see how my participants react, interpret, and answer official ethnoracial self-identification questions and how they come to their answers. (See supplemental files for the censuses that were used in the study).

As part of my protocol, I also measured my respondents skin color using the PERLA color palette (see Figure 1). Given that skin color and experiences of discrimination have been shown to shape immigrants' ethnoracial self-identification in census forms (Frank, Akresh, and Lu 2010; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008), and that ethnoracial self-identification alone may poorly capture racial inequality (Telles, Flores, and Urrea-Giraldo 2015), The PERLA color palette was developed by scholars at Princeton University interested in measuring the relationship between ethnoracial categories and skin color in Latin America. It includes eleven skin tones, with “1” being the lightest and “11” being the darkest and was pre-tested in several countries in Latin America to see if it covered the range of skin colors found in the region. Considering how my participants see themselves and how others see them, I asked my participants to select what they perceived as their matching tone using the palette. Discreetly, I did the same exercise of matching their skin colors using the palette. Given that some of the women wore make-up to our interview, skin colors were assessed looking inside the wrist. In some cases, both my respondent and I selected the same skin color, in other cases, they chose more than one.

Figure 1. PERLA Color Palette



### *Recruitment and Sample*

I recruited participants using snowball sampling. Mainly, I looked for people who identified as women, identified as immigrants, emigrated from a Spanish speaking country located in Latin America, and had lived in the U.S. for more than six months. All interviews were conducted in person. The interviews were scheduled in my respondent's restaurant of choice that served food from their country of origin. There was only one interview that did not take place at a restaurant because the respondent invited me to have lunch at her house. Regardless, with all participants we met to eat and engage in dialogue about their lives in general, focusing on meaningful interactions where sensemaking took place in both countries.

Interviews lasted within 50mins to 3hrs, totaling over 23hrs of recorded audio. Initially, I was planning on doing half of the interviews in English and half in Spanish. But as I will show later, most of my participants did not know how to speak English or felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish. As such, all but two interviews were conducted only in Spanish. I worked with a person that similarly identifies a Latine on the transcriptions of the audios.

Table 1 reports the sociodemographic characteristics of the women in my study. As seen, most of my respondents were born in Mexico and most of them are or arrived undocumented. Additionally, most of them hold service jobs such as cleaning houses or hotel rooms, being nannies, or taking care of elderly people. Finally, most of them have a B.A. degree or more, with some completing their university at home and others coming to study here (See Table 1).

The basic structure for Table 2 follows Campbell, Bratter, and Roth's (2016) argument that people experience race and ethnicity in multiple dimensions. These include how people self-identify in casual conversation, how they respond when asked "what is your race" in a questionnaire, and how they believe others classify them. In this table, I report how the women in my study experience these dimensions in both their countries of origin and destination. I also report how they perceived their skin color as well as how I perceived it, using the corresponding numbers on the PERLA color palette. Finally, I also include their racial ancestry, according to how they described it in the interview<sup>1</sup>. As seen, Table 2 demonstrates that each woman thinks about her race and ethnicity in various ways, depending on her location and the situation in which she is asked to ethnoracially self-identify (See Table 2).

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<sup>1</sup> For the respondent from the Dominican Republic where there is not a race question included in the census, I reported N/A. Similarly, for respondents from Mexico and Colombia where the censuses do not have a category to self-identify if the person is neither indigenous nor Black, I reported N/A. I also reported N/A in the column of how they believe others classify them for respondents who, for various reasons, were unsure of their answers. Finally, for those who did not have awareness of their racial ancestry, I reported N/A.

Table 1. Respondents' Sociodemographic Characteristics

Name	Place of origin	Occupation at place of origin	Age at migration	Immigration status	Occupation at place of destination	Highest level of education	Current age
Laura	Bogotá, Colombia	Student	18	Permanent resident	Financial wealth consultant	B.A. or more	30
Carmen	Toa Baja, Puerto Rico	Student	24	Citizen	Art teacher	B.A. or more	49
Maria	Pachuca, Mexico	Nurse at hospital	29	Undocumented	Caregiver	B.A. or more	58
Ana	León, Mexico	Homemaker	20	Undocumented	Nanny	HS or less	51
Roberta	Ciudad de Hidalgo, Mexico	Seamstress	25	Undocumented	Seamstress	HS or less	51
Gloria	Mazatenango, Guatemala	Secretary at lawyer's office	39	Asylee	Nanny (sometimes house cleaner)	Some college or associate degree	70
Leticia	Iguala, Mexico	House cleaner	16	Undocumented	Hotel room cleaner	HS or less	47
Rosa	Cotui, Dominican Republic	Student	14	Citizen	Senior manager	B.A. or more	32
Norma	Ensenada, Mexico	Student	7	Citizen	HR manager	B.A. or more	42
Claudia	Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala	Beverage promoter	23	Undocumented	House cleaner	Some college associate degree	32
Leonor	Ecatepec, Mexico	Manager at bank	30	Undocumented	Restaurant manager	Some college associate degree	54

Table 2. Multiple dimensions of respondents' experience of race and ethnicity through the life course.

Name	How she self-identifies		How she responds when asked "what is your race?" in a questionnaire		How she believes others classify her		A range of racialized physical characteristics that may shape how people treat her		Her racial ancestry
	Country of origin	Country of destination	Country of origin	Country of destination	Country of origin	Country of destination	Skin color (Respondent)	Skin color (Interviewer)	
Laura	Mestiza	Colombian, Latina	N/A	Some other race: "Mestizo"	Morena, Rola	Latina, Mexican	6	6	N/A
Carmen	Indigenous Taina	Native, Puerto Rican	Some other race: "Taíno"	Some other race: "Puerto Rican"	Trigueña	Latina, Mexican, Brown	6 or 7	6	75% Spanish
Maria	Mexican	Mexican	Indigenous	Some other race: "Mexican"	N/A	N/A	5	5	N/A
Ana	Mexican	Latina	N/A	Some other race: "Latina"	N/A	Hispanic, Latina	5	5	N/A
Roberta	Latina	Nonwhite	Indigenous	White	Prieta	Mexican	5 or 6	5	Spanish and Indigenous
Gloria	Hispanic, Guatemalan	Hispanic, Guatemalan	Ladina	Some other race: "Hispanic"	Guatemalan	Mexican	6	5	Spanish and German



Table 2. Multiple dimensions of respondents' experience of race and ethnicity through the life course.

Name	How she self-identifies		How she responds when asked "what is your race?" in a questionnaire		How she believes others classify her		A range of racialized physical characteristics that may shape how people treat her		Her racial ancestry
	Country of origin	Country of destination	Country of origin	Country of destination	Country of origin	Country of destination	Skin color (Respondent)	Skin color (Interviewer)	
Leticia	Mexican	Mexican, Latina	Indigenous	American Indian	Mexican	Mexican, Latina	7	6	Indigenous and Spanish
Rosa	Morena	Latina	N/A	Some other race: "Mixed"	Morena	Indian, Black, Colombian, Latina	7	7	N/A
Norma	Mexican, Mestiza	Latina, Hispanic	N/A	Some other race: "Hispanic"	Mexican	Nonwhite	4	4	African, Indigenous, and Spanish
Claudia	Guatemalan	Guatemalan Latina	Ladina	American Indian	Ladina	White, Filipina	5	4	Indigenous and German
Leonor	Mexican	Mexican, Latina	N/A	Some other race: "Mexican"	Mexican	Mexican, Latina	5	5	N/A

### *Analytical Strategy*

The lens through which I interpret the data reflect both constructivist and critical epistemological assumptions. I focus on how people make meaning and consider how power is involved in my social phenomenon of interest. To be sure, I assume that there are multiple realities situated in political, social, and cultural contexts. My interpretation also reflects assumptions affected by the larger knowledge system into which I have been socialized and my positionality.

Sweet (2020) argues that we must engage in a reflexivity practice that grants *epistemic privilege* to marginal standpoints. Developed as a key concept in Feminist Standpoint Theory, *epistemic privilege* refers to the idea that more accurate knowledge is likely to be produced from marginal social positions, which are disinvested from the ideologies of the powerful. To grant *epistemic privilege* means then to integrate alternative knowledge as an object of study and account for the larger knowledge system in which standpoints are taken up. Interestingly, although my respondents embody marginal social positions as many of them are undocumented working-class women who do not speak English in the U.S., because of their socialization into mestizaje in their country of origin, most of them are invested in some ideologies of the powerful. After all, people who identify with or study the construction of Blackness in Latin America advance that mestizaje was and is a violent project as its aim was “not simply to whiten the population but, more fundamentally, to deblacken and/or deindigenize them.” (Paschel 2016:29).

Regarding my personal experience, in Colombia my most salient identity was that of being a middle-class girl. As a mestiza in a society dominated by white and mestizo people, I had the privilege of taking my racial and ethnic identity for granted. Being born and growing up in a

multigenerational household where all adults had to work and contribute to the family allowed me to take for granted privileges in my life such as having access to education and having the choice to migrate, while making me aware of the struggles associated with being born in a third world country. Having access to private education was crucial to my lived experiences. After all, I came to the U.S. because I was awarded a scholarship to study in a U.S. university by my Colombian high school, where I also learned English since I was five years old. As such, I came to the U.S. as a Colombian immigrant with a student visa and already knowing the language; a new unique location in the matrix of domination<sup>2</sup>. In the U.S., I earned my B.A. in a liberal arts school in Iowa where I was almost always one of the only immigrant students in my classes. From the very beginning, I felt like I didn't belong. Speaking with white students, made me feel like we had little to nothing in common. Thankfully, I was able to find meaningful friendships with the few immigrant and Black students who similarly felt like they had little in common with our white classmates.

In the next section of the paper, I synthesize the findings of my study looking at the different organizations, and the interactions within, that my respondents speak about when describing their sense of what race and ethnicity mean in the sending and receiving societies. I first cover countries of origin, following with an interpretation of how said interactions informed my respondents construction of an ethnoracial self-identity. Then, I present meaningful interactions taking place at local organizations in the country of destination, offering my

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<sup>2</sup> Collins (2000) develops the term matrix of domination to describe how intersecting structures such as gender, race, and class shape individuals' experiences of power and oppression. Importantly, Collins contends that because domination is historically specific, multiple matrices of domination exist across time and from society to society. In my case, the matrix of domination that shaped my reality in Colombia was different from the one shaping my reality in the U.S.

interpretation of how interactions within new organizations shape my respondents'  
reconstruction of ethnoracial self-identity.

## FINDINGS

### *The Institutional Myth of Mestizaje Decoupled from Everyday Interactions Within Families in Latin America*

The decoupling between the institutional myth of mestizaje and everyday local interaction within the family is evidenced by racializing remarks and “jokes” that people often write off as inconsequential. Several of my respondents shared meaningful interactions between family members during which someone was made fun of for appearing Black or indigenous, implicitly suggesting that there is something negative, embarrassing about Blackness or indigeneity. By “making fun” of the racial appearance of others, features are given racial meaning and the concept of race is given relevancy within the family. This, regardless of the myth that race is inconsequential in Latin American countries.

For instance, Carmen, an immigrant woman from Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, with a medium to dark skin color (“My husband says that I am olive green... I think [that I am] a 6, 6 or 7 [in the PERLA color palette]”) comments, “We were always taught that we were a mixture of three...,” “To me were all equal... we were all Puerto Ricans...” at different points of our conversation. Still, when asked about how she was similar or different to people around her growing up, Carmen shares,

C: How was I similar and how was I different... I never thought about that because to me we were all equal. Physically... to me we were all Puerto Ricans. I did not think about people's appearance... my dad did... my dad was not even white, but he swore... he was darker than me (*el era más trigueño que yo*), and was like... "look, she has this type of hair..." (*mira, este tiene el pelo así*)... I never thought about that... that I remember, because my sister says that once when we were at school, during recess, we were holding hands with other girls for a game, and I did not want to hold the hand of one of her friends because she was Black. I do not remember that... I would have been like 7 or 8 years old. I do not remember that, but she still brings it up...

I: Your dad was lighter than you... how about your sister?

C: No, my dad was darker than me, but he swore he was lighter... He had straight hair... My sister came out with straight hair and white (*blanca*), I mean whiter than me (*mas blanca que yo*)... my brother... I was the darkest (*yo era la mas trigueña*)... he was a little lighter than me, and I came out like my mom. Something that I don't know if it matters or not, but my sister always made fun of me saying that I was the Black one in the family (*la negra de la familia*), because I was the only one with curly hair (*la única que tenía el pelo rizo*). And when I would catch the sun, up on the roof, when I would come down, she would say 'here comes the Black girl' (*ahí viene la negrita tun tun*)... I don't know if it bothered me or not...

Carmen's case is a clear example of how the institutional myth of racial democracy in Latin America is decoupled from everyday interactions within local organizations. First, she demonstrates being socialized into *mestizaje* by sharing that she did not think about how she was similar or different to others in the island because to her everyone was Puerto Rican. Importantly, this is also an example of how *mestizaje* operates as a nation-building ideology. Next, she also describes being part of interactions during which skin color and features are given particular meanings that emphasize differences among Puerto Ricans. In other words, despite claiming that for her everyone in Puerto Rico was equal, Carmen's memory of her dad's attention to people's features and her description of the moment when she did not want to hold hands with a Black girl in her school may indicate an acute awareness of skin color distinctions and their hierarchical significance. Moreover, Carmen's comment that she does not remember this moment, but her sister reminds her of it also shows how she unconsciously employed a

particular anti-Black racial schema that understands dark skin color as undesirable at a young age.

We get a glimpse of where and with whom Carmen learned these particular racial meanings when she speaks about the dynamics within her family. Carmen shares how the concept of race was part of many interactions within her household in the form of racializing comments or jokes deemed inconsequential. First, we see this in her memory of her dad making a point to speak about people's hair texture. After all, if everyone was equal in the island, there would be no point in differentiating between people's hair textures in a way that gives racial meaning to them. Additionally, we see this in her memory of her sister making fun of her by calling her the Black one of the family for being the darkest family member. Again, if discrimination did not exist on the island, there would be no point in mocking or ridiculing someone for appearing Black.

Interestingly, it appears that lessons learned during racializing interactions within the family shape people's understandings of what the concepts of race and ethnicity mean in their country of origin. For example, speaking about what race and ethnicity mean in Puerto Rico, Carmen shares,

C: In Puerto Rico... For example, my dad, I am going to say this again, he thought that he was white. I mean... if someone were to tell him that he had some Black ancestry he would have been like what? But... I never thought... they always taught us that we were a mix... of three... that we were a mix... I never thought about it much until before coming here. I did not think about it... truly, I didn't think about it...

I: So, what is taught in Puerto Rico, let's say at school, is "We are all a mix of indigenous Taínos, Africans, and Spanish... and that is Puerto Rico"?

C: Yes... but I find that... from the experiences that I had... it was not like... I did not see a lot of pride in saying "I am mixed with Black..." It was more like "I am indigenous Taíno..." That is what I felt like... and I do not know... maybe it was because of the skin color... but people did not identify as Black...

By sharing that she never thought about race and ethnicity in Puerto Rico because she was taught that everyone was mixed while also describing her awareness that being mixed with Black ancestry was not something of which people felt proud, Carmen demonstrates the decoupling between the institutional myth of *mestizaje* and everyday interactions within local organizations in her country of origin.

New meanings about race learned during racializing interactions within the family also seem to shape people's perception of self. Speaking about how often she thought about her race and ethnicity in Puerto Rico, Carmen shares,

C: I do not think it was a... Always with the jokes, the ones I am telling you my sister used to make... but I never thought that I was inferior to another Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico. It was never an issue for me. I believe that if you say how often... I do not think that I thought about my race or ethnicity...

I: So how did you self-identify there?

C: There I self-identified with the indigenous Taínos... To me, I was not Spanish. I could be Black... but as I said before, in Puerto Rico, if you know Puerto Ricans who love the island, you will see they identify more with the Taínos... because they were the first ones to live there... the natives... that is why I thought I would be Taína. But they were exterminated quickly. Still, those who consider themselves from the island, always identify as indigenous Taínos, the natives...

Finally, new meanings about race learned during racializing interactions within the family also inform people's ethnoracial self-identification in census forms. Given that Puerto Rico is an unincorporated U.S. territory, the census forms used on the island are the same as the ones used on the mainland. Still, as part of the structure of my interview protocol, the census forms from the country of origin are filled out while speaking about people's lives in their countries of origin so Carmen answered the census as she would if she were in Puerto Rico. Carmen commented, "I...would put indigenous...I would select Some Other Race and write in 'indigenous Taíno'."



That Carmen self-identifies in Puerto Rico as indigenous Taíno may be seen as a reflection of the various processes that influence ethnoracial self-identity construction. First, it evidences her socialization into a nation-building racial mixture ideology which advances that on the island there is a little bit of African, Indigenous Taino, and Spanish. Moreover, it also reflects a sense that she cannot be Spanish or privileging from a proximity to whiteness because of how she was othered via racializing interactions within her household. Finally, it shows her understanding that, regardless of the institutional myth of race in Puerto Rico, Blackness is not something of which people take pride on the island.

Comparing how Carmen understands and applies the concepts of race and ethnicity with how Puerto Rican scholar, Quiñones-Rivera, (“a *trigueñita* on the island”), does further illustrates how the institution of race is inhabited in Puerto Rico. Particularly, it shows how the institutional myth of mestizaje is decoupled via racializing interactions taking place within local organizations such as the family. In her autoethnography, Quiñones-Rivera (2006) herself writes,

Too many times, I have heard in my own family and among friends the injunction, “*Hay que mejorar la raza*” and other painful and derogatory terms directed at darker-skinned members of the family. The implicit message is that phenotypically, the dark-skinned body is defective, unattractive, undesirable, but sexually enticing and therefore, a social embarrassment. I recall when I dated a young Black man from Loíza, a prominently African-descent municipality in Puerto Rico, my grandmother was greatly disappointed. Her words continue to resonate in my ears even today... “*Esa gente que viven despues del puente de Carolina hacia Loíza, eso todo es un atraso*” (anything passing the border [bridge] between these cities [Carolina and Loíza] is a step backward). When I brought home my first White boyfriend, everybody in the family worshiped him. (P. 164).

According to Quiñones-Rivera, racializing interactions are common within the family, regardless of the institutional myth of mestizaje present on the island. Similar to the message behind the jokes that Carmen speaks about, Quiñones-Rivera also describes the implicit message

delivered during racializing interactions within her Puerto Rican family: that Blackness is undesirable.

Finally, comparing how Carmen understands and applies the concepts of race and ethnicity with how Quiñones-Rivera does also showcases how their contexts are shaped by their unique social location in the Puerto Rican matrix of domination. Quiñones-Rivera (2006) shares,

*La trigueñita* is a wheat-hued color Puerto Rican woman, slightly toasted by the Caribbean sun. The *trigueñita* possesses traces of European phenotypes: hair, lips, or nose that make some of us distant from the darker-skinned women on the island. Yet, we are still not close enough to the European-looking women. Depending on spatial, social, cultural, and public or private spaces, we become visibly Black... For example, I am from a predominantly Black municipality, Carolina. Those living in such areas are perceived as inferior, indecent, or lacking the same sociocultural status as the inhabitants of the capital city, San Juan, or the isla verde (municipality). (P. 165,169)

Based on Quiñones-Rivera perception that women categorized as *trigueñita* become visibly Black depending on spatial, social, and cultural spaces, it appears that Carmen's class and the fact that she is from Toa Baja, a town which is part of the San Juan metropolitan area, shielded her from bearing the punishment that comes from being racialized as Black on the island. As such, she accepted the notion that the racist remarks and jokes that she heard via interactions within her household were inconsequential. I also found the institutional myth of racial harmony being decoupled via interactions within the family in the life histories of Laura from Bogotá, Colombia, Gloria from Mazatenango, Guatemala, Norma from Ensenada, Mexico and Claudia from Guatemala City, Guatemala.

*The Institutional Myth of Mestizaje Decoupled from Everyday Interactions Within Schools in Latin America*

The decoupling between the institutional myth of mestizaje and everyday local interaction also occurs within schools. Several of my respondents shared meaningful interactions

with classmates and teachers during which someone was singled out, or identified as “them,” because of their racial appearance. As we saw within the family, my respondents report racializing interactions within the school during which features are given racial meaning and the concept of race is given relevancy. This, again, regardless of the institutional myth that race is inconsequential in Latin American countries.

For instance, Roberta, an immigrant woman from Ciudad de Hidalgo, Mexico, with a medium to dark skin color (“They used to call me *prietita*...” “I think [that I am] between the 5 and the 6... more the 6 [in the PERLA color palette]”) comments, “In school they always told us that we were mestizos...” “To me everyone in Mexico, the majority, we are a mixture...I would consider that we are all the same races...” at different points of our conversation. Still, when asked about how she was similar or different to her classmates, Roberta shares

R: Let's say, in my house I am one of the darkest ones, in my class too, but there were others... there were two darker boys, and they did call them... they called one *Memín Pingüin*. I don't know if you know who he is. *Memín Pingüin* was a caricature of a little Black boy, but he never took that as ‘oh, poor me’... it was more like ‘it is what it is, I'm dark, what do I care’... He wasn't offended or anything.

I: Was there a term that you used to speak about people with lighter skin colors?

R: The ones that are more white (*los que son mas blancos*) and their hair is less dark (*menos oscuro*) are *güeritos*.

I: And that was used in school as well?

R: Yes. Well... it was not like they would literally call you *güerita* it was more like I would say something like “oh which girl did this?” and people would say “oh the *güerita*,” it is a way of identifying people.

Roberta's case is a great example of how the institutional myth of racial democracy in Latin America is also decoupled from everyday interactions within other local organizations such as a school in Mexico. As Carmen from Puerto Rico, Roberta too demonstrates being socialized

into *mestizaje* by sharing that at school she was taught that everyone in Mexico was *mestizo*. Still, she also describes being part of *racializing interactions* within her school during which skin color and features are given particular meanings that emphasize differences among Mexicans.

Despite claiming that for in Mexico everyone was equal, Roberta's description of how a Black boy in her school was singled out because of his skin color and called *Memín Pingüin* demonstrates an acute awareness of color distinctions and their hierarchical significance. Importantly, the fact that Roberta claims that referring to others using racializing terms was simply a habit and that the Black boy who was called *Memín Pingüin* never took offense to it but accepted it as part of his reality, also reveals how racializing remarks are often written-off as inconsequential in the supposedly racially harmonious nation of Mexico. After all, while Roberta describes *Memín Pingüin* simply as a caricature of a little Black boy, Afro-Indigenous Mexican scholar, Alan Pelaez Lopez, shares on his Instagram story,

In Mexico 'nobody is racist' but sculptures, stickers, lunch boxes, first edition comics, and clothes about *Memín Pingüin* are still distributed in the country... A supposed Mexican child illustrated as a monkey with a Black mother wearing a turbón [head wrap]. Many of her presentations are similar to what is named the 'mammy' slave figure in slavery literature.

In making this comment, Pelaez Lopez urges us to realize how the understanding of *Memín Pingüin* simply as a Black boy is part of the process by which harmful stereotypes that portray Afro-Mexican people as not human exist at the same time as the myth of racial harmony in the country.

Writing off racist remarks used during racializing interactions within local organizations as inconsequential is, again, seen to affect the meaning that people give to the concept of race in their country of origin. When speaking the meaning of race in Mexico, Roberta comments,

R: Well, we do not talk about race. There were people that used to come [to my town] to sell products from outside and they were indigenous. So, as I did not know “*moreno*,” I would have thought about them when you speak about race.

I: So, there are indigenous people and us, who are not indigenous?

R: Those of us who are no longer 100% indigenous. Because to me, everyone in Mexico, the majority we are mixed... I would consider that we are all the same race.

As seen, regardless of skin color distinctions being part of everyday racializing interactions at school, when asked what race means in her country of origin, Roberta still references *mestizaje* and the notion that in Mexico everyone is the same race. Interestingly, as seen in Puerto Rico with Carmen’s comment that people feel more comfortable accepting an indigenous heritage than an African one, we see that for Roberta everyone in Mexico has indigenous heritage. This, even when in her own classroom Roberta frequently interacted with Black students.

In addition to affecting how people understand what race means in their country of origin, new meanings about race learned during racializing interactions within the school also seem to shape people’s perception of self. Speaking about how often she thought about her own race and ethnicity in Mexico, Roberta shares, “I did not...I never saw difference among people, in Mexico. But we did use to make like a difference to refer to people from the U.S. because we used to think the *morenos* over, they really are Black...” Still, when I asked her whether being called *prietita* had affected her in any way, Roberta responded,

I do not think it affects me anymore. Before, it affected me a little because for example I stopped wearing white clothes because I felt that I was going to look even more dark (*todavía mas morena*)... and I did not want to look like that.

With these comments, we see how Roberta makes sense of new meanings of race stemming from the decoupling between the institutional myth of *mestizaje* and everyday

interactions in her school. Particularly, it seems that by writing off racists remarks as inconsequential and highlighting the notion that there are no “pure” races, more specifically no pure Blackness in Mexico as there are in the U.S., Roberta is able to claim that she never saw difference among people in Mexico while acknowledging not wanting to be seen as Black.

Finally, new meanings about race learned during racializing interactions within the school also inform people’s ethnoracial self-identification in census forms. During my interview with Roberta, we discussed five ethnoracial questions asked in the 2020 Mexican census: (1) By your ancestors and according to your customs and traditions, does (name) consider themselves Afro-Mexican, Black, or Afro-descendent? (2) Does (name) speak any indigenous dialect or language? (3) Which indigenous dialect or language does (name) speak? (4) Does (name) understand any indigenous language? (5) According to (name)’s culture, does they consider themselves indigenous? Roberta responded question (1) by saying that she does not consider herself Afro-Mexican, Black, or Afro-descendent; questions (2), (3), and (4) by saying that she does not speak or understand any indigenous language; and question (5) by saying “that if I consider myself indigenous, half or whatever [percentage] I have left of indigenous, I would say yes.”

That Roberta self-identifies in the Mexican census as indigenous may be seen as a reflection of the various processes that influence ethnoracial self-identity construction. First, it evidences her socialization into a nation-building racial ideology which advances that on the country everyone is a mixed. Moreover, it also reflects an understanding acquired through racializing interactions in the school that, regardless of the institutional myth of race in Mexico, having African heritage is not something of which people take pride on the country. I also found

the institutional myth of racial harmony being decoupled via interactions within the school in the life histories of Gloria from Mazatenango, Guatemala, Norma from Ensenada, Mexico and Claudia from Guatemala City, Guatemala.

*The Institutional Myth of Colorblindness Decoupled from Everyday Interactions Within Universities in the U.S.*

The decoupling between the institutional myth of colorblindness from everyday local interaction within universities is evidenced by racializing remarks and “jokes” that people often write off as inconsequential. Several of my respondents shared meaningful interactions during which someone was treated differently based on aspects of their culture, implicitly suggesting that there is something negative, embarrassing about practicing a different culture to the dominant one in the U.S. By singling out people because of their culture, features such as language appear to be given racial meaning and the concept of race is given relevancy within organizations. This, regardless of the myth that people in the U.S. “do not see color”.

Returning to Carmen’s life history, we see that upon her arrival to the U.S., new practices and meanings of race enter in contact with old ones via interactions within organizations. Carmen shares that she immigrated to the U.S. with the goal of earning a degree in the country that would make it easier for her to get a job back in Puerto Rico. In her own words, her plan was to, “earn a master’s degree and go back to Puerto Rico and become a photography professor in the Universidad de Puerto Rico.” When asked about her experiences while working toward earning her degree, Carmen shares,

C: At the Art Institute they accepted my application to the master's degree in photography, but I didn't understand English that well... I recorded my classes all the time, and listened to them like 2 or 3 times in my apartment or in my bedroom trying to understand something... Some teachers, I think they felt sorry for me, and told me that I could take my exams in Spanish... Thinking back, I feel like I didn't have any friends while I was getting my degree because I didn't speak much English... I imagine that a lot of people in my classes thought that I was stupid, that I was dumb, that I didn't know... and my problem was the language...but I graduated...I did...it was very hard... very different...

I: While at the Art Institute, did you live at the dorms?

C: Yes... I lived at one of the dorms for like... a month or two months... it was a very short time... and I remember that I was talking about something that was cheap... and I said that something was cheap. But obviously I said it like it was 'sheep,' and they said 'ahh... sheep...baaa' and it was... I felt very confident about myself until that moment... and it was like wow... what's going on? I almost didn't dare to speak anymore...I was embarrassed...

As seen, for Carmen the myth that in the U.S. people are treated equally becomes intangible because she does not speak English. Specifically, as she shares feeling embarrassed to the extent of not wanting to speak anymore, we see how these interactions make Carmen feel like an outsider. Importantly, as Hernández (2003) argues that “persistent perceptions of being foreign are an aspect of the racialization process” (P. 152), although in Puerto Rico Carmen does not consider her race and ethnicity to be relevant, in the U.S. she becomes highly aware of her racial appearance to others. By extension, she gives new meanings to the construct of race.

Carmen's sense that she “does not belong in the U.S.” is corroborated when she experiences other racializing interactions during which she is reminded that she is no longer in Puerto Rico. For instance, Carmen describes the following experience as the first time that she experienced racism in the U.S. Carmen shares,



C: While I studied at the art institute, my dad paid by check... he paid with checks from his bank in Puerto Rico... He would send me the checks, and they were always written in Spanish because they were his checks... my dad didn't even speak English... but it was money and so they always took it... they always took it... And once I went to pay, and the clerks... the ones that were collecting the money, they were Black. And she.... look... that was the first time I experienced racism like that... she told me "I can't accept this" and I told her "Why? It is not the first time that I do this... I always pay with these checks and there has never been any problem" She said, "this is in Spanish" and I say "yes, but that has always been the case because my dad is sending them from Puerto Rico" She responded, "We are in the United States and in the United States we speak English" I felt so small, but at that moment I didn't know enough English to answer her something...

There are two key insights in Carmen's comment. First, the fact that Carmen continues to feel like she does not belong in the U.S. as she is reminded during interactions with and in organizations, in this case a bank, that in the U.S. people speak English, and those who do not need to assimilate if they want to be able to navigate the country. Next, the fact that she remembers this event as her first experience with racism in the U.S. This is important because we start to see how Carmen makes sense of racializing interactions in the country of destination by reconstructing her understanding of what race means to include a language component.

New meanings about race learned during racializing interactions within organizations in the U.S. also seem to shape people's perception of self. Speaking about how often she thinks about her race and ethnicity in the U.S., Carmen shares,

C: Very often...here so much more than back in Puerto Rico...because there I thought "we are all Puerto Ricans"... but here there are Mexicans, Ecuadorians, Guatemalans, Colombians...

I: How do you self-identify here?

C: Here I identify as Puerto Rican although people often say that I am Latina. They generalize with Latinos, for them, we are all Mexican... What I perceive is that they do not see me as a professional, they see me as brown.

Finally, new meanings about race learned during racializing interactions with and in organizations such as universities also inform people's ethnoracial self-identification in census

forms. Answering the 2020 U.S. census form, Carmen reports her ethnicity as Latina, and her race as Puerto Rican. That Carmen self identifies her race as Puerto Rican evidences how she combines meanings internalized while being socialized into a nation-building mestizaje ideology with meanings emerging from racializing interactions within local organizations in their countries of origin and destination meanings. I also found the institutional myth of colorblindness being decoupled via interactions within schools in the U.S. in the life histories of Laura from Bogotá, Colombia, and Norma from Ensenada, Mexico, the only other two participants who were members of educational organizations in the U.S.

*The Institutional Myth of Colorblindness Decoupled from Everyday Interactions Within Workplaces in the U.S.*

The decoupling between the institutional myth of colorblindness from everyday local interaction within workplaces is evidenced by racializing interactions during which new meanings of race emerge. Several of my respondents shared meaningful interactions during which someone was treated differently based on their skin color, implicitly suggesting that there is something negative, embarrassing about not being white. By singling out people because of their skin color, features appear to be given racial meaning and the concept of race is given relevancy within organizations. This, regardless of the myth that people in the U.S. “do not see color”.

Returning to Roberta’s life history, we see that upon her arrival to the U.S., new practices and meanings of race enter in contact with old ones via interactions within organizations. When asked about her current work, Roberta shares,

R: Right now, I work as a seamstress.

I: Who do you work with?

R: I work with Black women only...before the pandemic there were other Mexicans working there... but after the pandemic only I stayed.

I: You shared before that you frequently speak with your coworkers about race. Could you please expand?

R: Yes. We speak about their traditions and customs. For instance, they have told me that it is very common for Black men to visit with friends in street corners. So, if you see a group of Black men in a corner, it is not that they are a gang or that they are looking for trouble; that tradition comes from Africa. There, men usually meet at corners, like us, when men meet their friends at the cantina... Other things that they have told me are that they do not like when white people call them "girl," that is a word that they use when speaking to other Black women... and that they do not like white people speaking about their hair...

As seen in Roberta's case, new meanings about race emerge from interactions within organizations such as workplaces in the U.S., particularly new meanings about Blackness in her case. In Mexico, Roberta did not consider imagery such as the *Memín Pingüin* as racist; for her it was inconsequential. In the U.S. via interactions in her workplace, she becomes more aware of the experiences of Black people.

New meanings about race learned during racializing interactions within the workplace in the U.S. also seem to shape people's understanding of race. Speaking about what race means in the U.S., Roberta shares,

R: [Race in the U.S.] is very important, and it is very delicate. We as Hispanics suffer... they look down upon us on the bus, or whatever... But listening to Black women whom I work with, I realize that we don't suffer at all... My boss tells me that she, as an adult Black woman, prefers not to drive alone at night, because she doesn't want to run into a police officer... And I feel bad, because how is it possible that she has to live with that degree of fear... and that's why I say... I'm not justifying vandalism... but I understand the anger... I understand the anger... I understand the fear she has when she says 'as a Black woman, I don't want to be driving at night and run into a police officer where there is no one around me'

In making this comment, Roberta shows a new meaning of race acquired through interactions at her workplace. Particularly, it appears that after listening to the Black women whom she works with, she learns what it means to be Black in the U.S. Importantly, she concludes that Hispanics do not suffer at all as she compares the experiences of her boss with her personal experiences as a Hispanic in the U.S.

When I asked more particularly about her own experiences of race in the U.S., Roberta spoke about two interactions. First, she shared experiencing poor treatment at a local Department of Human Services. Roberta comments, “They treat me poorly when I go to get public assistance for my children. They get upset and treat me with indignity because of how I look and because I am undocumented... it’s the way they speak to me...” Next, she commented that during the Trump administration, she was yelled by a white man in a bus who said that she should go back to where she came from.

Finally, new meanings about race learned during racializing interactions within workplaces also inform people’s ethnoracial self-identification in census forms. Answering the 2020 U.S. census form, Roberta reports her ethnicity as Latina, and without much thought reports her race as white. When asked why she self-identified her race as white, Roberta says, “they have told us that in questionnaires, we need to put that our race is white... I cannot remember who said this, but all Mexicans know that we have to put white.” That Roberta self-identifies her race as white similarly demonstrates how she combines meanings internalized while being socialized into a nation-building mestizaje ideology with meanings emerging from racializing interactions within local organizations in her countries of origin and destination meanings. I also found the institutional myth of colorblindness being decoupled via interactions within workplaces in the U.S. in the life histories of Leticia from Iguala, Mexico, Rosa from

Cotui, Dominican Republic, Norma from Ensenada, Mexico, Claudia from Guatemala City, Guatemala, and Leonor from Ecatepec, Mexico.

## DISCUSSION

Mestizaje, the narrative that histories of racial mixing among European, African, and indigenous peoples have given birth to fully mixed nations where there are no pure races, was repeatedly referenced by my respondents when speaking about race in their countries of origin. To be specific, ten out of my eleven interviewees shared statements that reflected having been socialized into a nation-building racial mixture mestizaje ideology. For instance, Carmen from Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, shared, “You know that in Puerto Rico it is a little bit of everything, there is Black, Indigenous, and Spanish...but we are all Puerto Ricans.” In a similar manner, Gloria from Mazatenango, Guatemala, noted, “I do not know if you have ever heard that we are a *carnavalito*, that is how one of my friends used to call it, we are a mixture between Spanish and Indigenous.” Finally, Laura from Bogotá, Colombia, also commented, “I remember that in school they used to tell us that there were Black, Indigenous, and Spanish people and now we are all practically mestizos in Colombia.”

The notion that due to said histories of racial mixture discrimination supposedly does not exist in the region was also common among my participants, especially those from Mexico. For example, Leticia from Iguala, Mexico, claimed, “It is not about people’s skin color, because there we are all Mexican, in the U.S. people differentiate based on skin color, there we do not... we are all equal.” Similarly, Leonor from Ecatepec, Mexico, shared, “In Mexico we do not discriminate... we do not reject people because of their skin color or where they come from.”

Operating as an institutional myth, I found that the idea that people in Latin America do not discriminate because the historical racial mixing of people in these countries has led to post racial societies is both reproduced and challenged in everyday interactions within local organizations such as families, schools, and workplaces. In seven of the eleven interviews, I found evidence of the institutional myth of mestizaje being decoupled from local organizations via *racializing interactions* between organizational members. That is, more than half of my respondents reported being taught by their parents or teachers that everyone is racially mixed and thus equal in their countries of origin, while also sharing meaningful interactions taking place at home, at school, even at church, during which they were socialized into a hierarchy of races organized according to people's proximity to whiteness and distance from indigeneity and Blackness.

Upon arriving to the U.S. old meanings come into contact with new ones emerging from everyday interactions within local organizations such as schools, workplaces, and departments of human services. Operating as an institutional myth, in seven of the eleven interviews, I found evidence of the institutional myth of colorblindness being decoupled from local organizations via *racializing interactions* between organizational members. These racializing interactions included humiliation, exploitation, infantilization, exoticization, sexualization, and tokenism due to women's ability to speak English, their appearance, or documentation status. Like Carmen, five other women reported that being humiliated for not speaking English or for having a strong accent shaped how they self-identify in terms of race and ethnicity in the U.S. For instance, Claudia from Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala, shared, "Where I used to do cleaning, there were two other women working as nannies. They were treated better because they were white

and spoke English. One time, the six-year-old said to me, ‘you are stupid, you don’t speak English.’”

In addition to humiliating interactions, exploitative interactions also appear to shape how the women in my study self-identify in terms of race and ethnicity. In six of the eleven interviews, women reported being exploited by employers. To take a case in point, Norma from Ensenada, Mexico commented, “At United, most people were white. There was a lot of discrimination. You were judged if you were either Black or Latino. You could give them your 150% and still they would not consider you for a higher position. I was, in fact, demoted more than once.” Other women also shared experiencing employers who would take advantage of knowing that they did not speak English and/or they were undocumented. Employers would pay them less and not give them vacation time. In Claudia’s case, her employer also routinely threatened to call ICE and get her deported.

Experiencing infantilization, exoticization, sexualization, and tokenism in interactions within organizations also influenced how the women in my study understood meanings of race and ethnicity in the U.S. Four women reported experiencing infantilization. Particularly, they described interactions during which friends and employers acted in paternalistic ways, reflecting a belief that Latina women do not have full capacity to reason. For example, Gloria from Mazatenango, Guatemala, shared a moment when she was congratulated by her employer for wearing a seat belt at her forties. She recalls her employer stating, “Gloria, how well educated are you with the use of the seat belt.” Three women reported experiencing exoticization and sexualization. To take a case in point, Laura from Bogotá, Colombia, commented that stereotypes of how Colombian women look and act based on celebrities such as Sofia Vergara influenced how people saw and treated her. Finally, women also experienced tokenism. For



instance, Rosa from Cotui, Dominican Republic shared, “At Walmart, they started giving me opportunities because I am a Latina woman. I used to feel bad because I do not want to be given opportunities simply because of how I look. I want to be given opportunities because I am capable and prepared.”

In four of the eleven interviews, I did not find evidence of women experiencing a contradiction or inconsistency between ideologies of racial equality and everyday interactions. I believe that this may be explained by the fact that those respondents reported interacting mainly with people with similar skin colors to them within local organizations. When I asked these respondents how they were ethn racially similar or different to family members, classmates, or coworkers in their country of origin, they reported that they were very similar as almost all of them had skin colors between the 4, 5, and 6 in the PERLA color palette. As such, it appears that respondents who are members of organizations in which there are no indigenous members or members with dark skin colors do not experience racializing interactions during which the concept of race is given particular meanings that challenge the institutional myth of racial harmony operating in Latin America. In the U.S., these same people, except for one of them, worked independently as nannies and care givers, meaning that they did not become members of particular organizations in the country of destination during which interactions could shape meanings.

Notably, these were the same interviews during which respondents reported either not understanding what the concept of race meant or believing that race is not a concept that exists in their country of origin. For instance, Ana from Leon, Mexico, shares, “I do not understand well the meaning of race... or ethnicity...I did not have to experience that so I would not know what

to say.” Similarly, Maria from Pachuca, Mexico, comments, “I feel like there is no such thing as race in Mexico because we are all very similar.”

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I have shown examples of how immigrant women from Spanish-speaking countries located in Latin America construct ethnoracial self-identities throughout their life. Drawing on eleven life history and cognitive interviews, I have shown that the women in my study construct ethnoracial self-identities throughout their lives informed by their socialization into myths of racial democracy present in both locations and contradicting interactions, which take place in local organizations such as families, schools, and workplaces. I also find that they contest ethnoracial self-identities during interactions with organizations such as the Census Bureau.

Bridging transnational and organizational sociology, I have argued that the women in my study construct ethnoracial self-identities in recursive relationships. These recursive relationships are comprised of institutions of race shaping individuals through interactions, which occur in organizations. Through interactions with organizations, individuals also shape institutions of race. By showing how immigration affects perceptions of self, this study improves our knowledge about how immigrants construct ethnoracial self-identities in the U.S., giving proper weight to how people give meaning to experiences of race in their countries of origin and destination people give meaning to experiences of race in their countries of origin and destination.

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## VITA

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Inspired by her experiences as an immigrant, Vivas Bastidas's research examines how immigrants experience life in the U.S. and how those experiences inform how people build identities and solidarity across borders. Her fields of interest include Sociology of Immigration, Sociology of Identity, Global and Transnational Sociology, Sociology of Social Knowledge, and Political Sociology.

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