Historically-Rooted Transnationalism: Slightedness and the Experience of Racism in Mexican Families

Dr. Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology
Newcastle University

Full reference

Abstract
An interest in engaging with what emotions do, rather than what emotions are, and in the pervasiveness of everyday racism, guides this exploration of Mexican family life. Drawing on women’s life story interviews, and in particular on their discussions of childhood, I analyse notions of resemblance, slightedness and care within family life to develop the notion of ‘racist logics’. Attention is paid to historically-rooted transnational dimensions of family life as ‘ways of belonging’ to both family and nation. Resulting in private experiences of racism and the neglect of familial and public responsibilities, the discourses of belonging have been influenced by long-term effects of colonialism and migration from Spain.

Keywords: racism, mestizaje, emotions, slightedness, family, resemblance, care, Mexico

This article is concerned with the emotional experience of family life and the ways in which racism is lived and learned within it. By outlining the historical and social
processes that produce the ‘transnational dimensions’ (Haller and Landolt 2005) of Mexican families, I show how ‘racist logics’ permeate everyday lives. I consider the role emotions play in revealing the lived experience of racism: What does racism feel like? What sorts of emotions give us access to the experience of racism when it is socially denied and blurred in its everydayness? What social configurations, histories and stories make racism possible? To what extent do historical processes of migration influence present emotional dynamics and notions of self? Emotions are here understood as social and cultural practices, simultaneously creative and created, both intentional and relational (Ahmed 2004; Milton and Svašek 2005). I am interested in exploring what emotions do and how emotions work, rather than what emotions are.

My analysis is part of a larger research project about contemporary practices of racism in Mexico, initially focussing on women. In 2002, I conducted six focus groups in three Mexican cities: Huajuapan, Oaxaca; Leon, Guanajuato; and Mexico City, with a total of thirty-nine university-educated, working and middle class women between the ages of 18 and 55. We discussed the qualities of their experiences of racism, of mestizaje (racial mixing) and of national identity. Sixteen participants agreed to additional life story interviews where they brought personal/family photographs to guide not only their life stories, but also discussions of how they saw themselves and their experiences of discrimination and/or racism. Drawing from these life story interviews, and in particular participants’ discussions of childhood, I shall analyse notions of resemblance, slightedness and care within family life and their relationship to experiences of racism. Firstly, however, I shall consider emotions and racism more generally, introduce the notion of racist logics, and outline a history of the ‘transnational dimensions’ of Mexican family life.
Emotions that Stick

In her ‘sociality of emotions’ model, Ahmed (2004) proposes that emotions are relational in that they move us and attach us to others: ‘they involve (re)actions or relations of “towardness” or “awayness” in relation to such objects’ (2004: 8). Moreover, emotions are also intentional, being ‘about’ things and involving directionality towards objects. Emotions are neither located within subjects, as a possession of the self, or without, as something affecting them. Instead, emotions are located in movement, circulating between objects. Emotions are a response (we give to objects) which does not come from ‘inside’ us as ‘reaction’, but are produced in-between ourselves and others as ‘action’. Thus both relationality and intentionality characterise emotions in terms of the objects/bodies/imaginaries they ‘shape’ in their circulation. Thinking of emotions in this way allows us to contextualise and assess the contingency of emotions since ‘emotions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by the contact with objects’ (Ahmed 2004: 7). Ahmed poses the question ‘What sticks?’ in her discussion of ‘how we become invested in social norms’ (Ibid., 12). She argues that emotions are core for politics: ‘emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination (…) []; emotions show us how power shapes the very surfaces of bodies as well [as] worlds’ (Ibid.). If emotions shape and are shaped by experiences of racism as embodied cultural and social practices within Mexican family life, how does racism ‘stick’ to certain bodies through the work of emotions?
A key emotion that arose during the life-story interviews was the feeling of being slighted (desairada in Spanish). ‘Slighted’ refers to being ‘treated with indifference or disdain’\(^1\). Although a slight is quite close to an offence, its ability to move - its slipperiness - approximates it to the notion of being looked down on, spurned, rejected, disregarded and treated disdainfully or with contempt. The difference between slight and offence might seem minor, but it is crucial and it is this which makes the feeling of being slighted rather ambivalent and sticky. Is it intentional? If not, why does it stick? While we might feel unintentionally offended, it is also possible to identify with clarity the source of offence and who is the offender. Feeling slighted is altogether different: it is difficult to identify the source of the slight, we can only tell it has stuck to us. This intangibility increases the power of racism while detaching from social and historical processes. Before extrapolating how racism sticks, and how we can make sense of the relationships between emotions, racism and Mexican family life, I discuss how racist logics emerged and operate in Mexico. As we shall see, there is a strong connection between histories of migration and the experience of racism in Mexican families today.

**Racist Logics and the Transnational Dimensions of Family Life**

It is important to distinguish between notions of ‘race’ and practices of racism, since these are often disconnected in Mexico while the existence of racism is contested in official discourse and amongst the majority mestizo population. Racism is a set of diverse practices of discrimination and exclusion that, while tightly linked to particular understandings of ‘race’, have also acquired dynamics of their own. I call
these dynamics ‘racist logics’. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 187; italics mine) argue that ‘[t]here is logic to practices. There is a push towards a strategic objective but no one is pushing. The objective emerged historically, taking particular forms and encountering specific obstacles, conditions and resistances. The overall effect, however, escaped the actor’s intentions, as well as those of anybody else’. It is in this sense that we can understand how, in Mexico, contemporary racist practices are rooted in the past, and may actively pervade people’s lives without the need for explicit and coherent notions of ‘race’. The effectiveness of these practices of racism, or we could say ‘racisms’, relies on their capacity to normalise certain social conditions as well as ways of thinking and acting. Thus, this capacity of normalisation effectively reproduces practices detached from their specific social configurations, their processes of formation, history, context, temporality and even foundational ideas, such as race.

The specific social configurations underpinning contemporary practices of racism in Mexico are located in its colonial and nation-building histories. I refer to these configurations as the ‘transnational dimensions’ of Mexican family life to extend discourses of belonging in Mexico to wider contemporary debates on identity and processes of globalisation. It is the complex continuities and plurality of Mexico’s histories which are traced in its ‘transnational dimensions’: the interactions and collisions, both imposed and adopted, between different social groups, within the colonial enterprises, and those that developed thereafter. Haller and Landolt (2005) distinguish between two approaches to transnational studies: transnational ‘ways of being’ and the more ambiguous transnational ‘ways of belonging’. Transnational ‘ways of being’ studies are concerned with ‘identifying material border-crossing
practices of the individual and/or capturing the patterns of resource circulation of a set of relevant institutions in which the individual is embedded’ (Ibid., 1189). In transnational ‘ways of belonging’ studies it is ‘difficult to discern when ethnic or national identities are also transnational, or when diasporic ties converge with or become pan-ethnic identities’ (Ibid.). Rather than clarifying this ambiguity, I incorporate it in my discussion of the ‘transnational dimensions’ of Mexican family life and map what it does in relation to practices of racism. Notions of mestizaje are key to approaching the ambivalent and emotional ‘ways of belonging’ to the family and to the nation in the context of Mexico.

**Mestizaje**

Mestizaje refers to discourses of ‘racial mixing’ that have been applied to both biological and cultural ‘mixing’ of Spanish and Latin American indigenous peoples. The term is heavily invested with racial ideologies and discourses of miscegenation. Moreover, in the Mexican context, mestizaje refers to a historical process that has created the subject of Mexican national identity: the mestiza. This category is a direct consequence of the ways in which racial discourses developed in Mexico, then called New Spain, within the frame of the Spanish colonial empire (1521-1810). The extent of ‘racial’ mixing that occurred in Latin America with the arrival of the Spanish is beyond compare. Basave Benítez (2001[1991]: 17) affirms that one of the main causes of the ‘impressive’ *racial* mestizaje process was that very few Spanish women came to ‘make America’ (Aguirre Beltrán 1975). For Vieira Powers (2002), the shortage of Spanish women during the first half of the sixteenth century was an...
important factor in eventually disrupting the neat political and spatial segregation the Spanish wanted to establish in order to facilitate colonial exploitation. In such social organisation, Spaniards and the *indígenas* lived within delimited ‘republics’, while the Africans were regarded as slaves with no right to form communities of their own. ‘The consequent intensification of interracial sexual unions led to accelerated mestizaje, eventually turning the dual republics concept on its head and throwing the original three-tiered caste system into disarray’ (2002: 15).

Throughout the colonial period (1521-1810), and after the independence (1810-1910) periods, the perception of the mestiza as a ‘bastard’ prevailed, marked within the structure of the caste system. This lasted until the period around the Revolution of 1910 when, according to González Navarro, indigenous cultures were ‘rehabilitated’ (1970: 145). In the seventeenth century, however, the mestiza population grew enormously; ‘with all the practical disadvantages of the castes and none of the legal advantages of the *indígenas*, the new illegitimate hybrids took the worst part of the crash of the two worlds’ (Basave Benítez 2002[1991]: 19). Significantly, during the colonial period the Spanish attempted to ‘reconstruct an accentuated version of the corporate society of their homeland and to superimpose it upon a multiracial, colonial situation’ (Vieira Powers 2002: 15), emphasising the importance of hierarchy and caste with lasting effects in the emerging social order. Their efforts were complemented by Spain’s genealogical conceptualisation of nation, which held that belonging was determined by sharing the same blood. So throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ‘Spaniards, Indians and Africans were incorporated into a race-based social hierarchy – a legal caste system conceived in Iberian organicism, informed by its intersection with pre-existing, indigenous socio-political organization,
and exacerbated by the relations of European colonialism’ (Ibid., 15). The mixed race category of mestizo undermined the myth of a ‘same-blood-nation’, and unveiled the transnational dimension of colonial life.

Relationships between colonial social actors were not clear cut. Yet three characteristics of this social organisation are key to understanding the transnational dimension of contemporary Mexican family life: i) the instability of the three main categories – Spaniards, indígenas and African slaves – and the castas since the beginning of the colony; ii) the weakness of the laws and/or social regulations that maintained the separation of each group; and iii) the possibility of passing and acculturation. The colonial social system was completely unstable and it was possible to move up or down in a transgenerational fashion; and with enough vision and resources anybody could become ‘closer to the white, black or indígena poles in few generations through marriage strategies’ (Lomnitz 1993: 271). In other words, with enough planning and know-how, people could negotiate their racial belonging to their advantage. For Lomnitz, ‘according to the dominant ideologies of the colonial period, the Indígena’s race was inferior to the Spanish one, but it was also redeemable, not only through Christian faith, but also through procreation with the Spanish race: there was a very well known formula according to which the offspring of Spanish and Indígena was a Mestizo; of Mestizo and Spanish, a Castizo; and of Castizo and Spanish, a Spanish. That is, that the Indígenas’ origins of an individual could be “erased” after a couple of generations of marriages with Europeans’ (Ibid., 363). In this way, throughout the colonial period it was possible for the mestiza to gradually become a highly flexible social identity within a caste-like system of social organisation (Knight 1990; Chance 1979).
Knight suggests that after the War of Independence in 1810 a transformation of the racial status of mestiza identity began and that, in a complementary fashion rather than in opposition, mestiza identity became ‘an achieved as well as an ascribed status’ (Knight 1990: 73). People could acquire by effort the status of mestiza; they could work on it as a personal project which was both socially accepted and expected. At the same time, they could claim they belonged to such a category because they were ‘born’ into it. During this period, instability and imprecision become the characteristics by which the complexity of identity formation acquires sense and meaning. Then and now, everyday family life has not been exempt from participating in this contradictory and uncertain characterisation. Moreover such framing of social relations is precisely what makes the negotiation of belonging (to the nation and the family) possible and confronts any sense of fixity, limitation and essential definition, thereby pointing toward what I describe as the transnational dimensions of family life and its emotional experience.

**Emotional Families**

How can we link this historical production of racialised subjects to the emotional experience of family life? Gilroy (1987) suggests that family life is an institution where ‘race’ differences are reproduced and displayed. He argues ‘families are therefore not only the nation in microcosm, its key components, but act as the means to turn social processes into natural, instinctive ones’ (Gilroy 1987: 43). This idea prompts two different sets of questions. On the one hand, the relation between
families and nations seems to position these entities as starting points, rather than looking at both the ways individuals become gathered and connected in what is commonly considered a family group, and at the historical processes and cultural roots and routes that make possible the ‘thinking’ and creation of conflated spaces called nations. On the other, Gilroy’s suggestion also questions how racial differences are displayed in family life and what sorts of racist practices are endured, especially in the contemporary Mexican context where there are no public debates and discourses about ‘race’, only confusing racial allusions within family conversations and everyday experiences. What happens if we intertwine these two sets of concerns: a) the dynamic and historical configuration of families which implies the transnational dimensions of family formations, with b) how families operate in terms of how they deal with difference and belonging? If families can be considered as nations in microcosm, what are the implications, for both families and nations, of exploring their inner logic? Are there lessons to be learned? If the family – whatever its configuration or mode of presentation – turns social processes into natural and instinctive ones, what other strategies does the experience of the family offer to its members to cope with its own logics of difference, inclusion and exclusion? How does the historical construction of the nation, expressed through daily cultural practices, become imprinted in family life? These questions are explored in the following three sections. Firstly, I discuss the relevance of physical resemblance between family members and its effect on their sense of belonging to the family group. In highlighting notions of resemblance, I ask if families engage with ‘logics’ of racial differentiation, that is ‘racist logics’, to create and organise a sense of belonging. The second theme relates to emotions, specifically the feeling of being slighted, which was expressed by my interviewees as the enduring consequence
produced in the process of dealing with contradictory and incoherent family settings. I analyse the role emotions play in revealing the lived experience of racism and differentiation, as well as the ‘making’ of emotions through such experiences. Finally, I explore the quality of care given to children by adults within the family setting as a further example of how such quality is delineated by ‘racist logics’ that shape family practices. I examine the significance of practices of care and the ways in which the participants experience care as a racialised practice.

**Resemblance: The Ultimate Site of Family Belonging**

A pressing issue in Mexican family life is the idea of resemblance. In most of the families of the women I interviewed, there was a need for explicit evidence of belonging to their family groups. Physical resemblance is one of the main factors that can guarantee such belonging. Although this characteristic might not be exclusive to Mexican families, the ambivalence of the relationship between belonging and resemblance emerges through what I suggest is a series of implicit and elusive ‘racist logics’. The racist logics in operation here, which could be renamed as ‘mestizaje logics’ in the Mexican context, act as invisible regulators of family relations and expectations. But what are these racist logics and how they relate to mestizaje? As mentioned before, central to racist practices in Mexico has been the concept of racial mixture, or mestizaje, its cultural and historical ‘omnipresent dimension’ (Knight 1990), and the coexistence of its variety of understandings within miscegenation discourses, official nationalistic governmental policies and invisible and all-pervasive logics of prejudice. Although racial signifiers in Mexico have been transformed by
the perception of ‘mixing’ throughout time, as well as by the effect of social stratification along class lines, they remain part of more complex logics of discrimination. I call these complex logics racist and argue that it is through these that the negotiation of belonging to the nation takes place: they are strategies of racial differentiation that permeate Mexican social life. My analysis of the interviews suggests there is a racist logic in operation in relation to notions of mestizaje in Mexico. For example, the discourse towards improving one’s appearance and achieving fairer skin colour, which occurs without making explicit links to the notions of ‘race’ that underpin such a discourse or reference to how those understandings have come into being through history.

So implicitly, behind the question of resemblance there lies a double intention. On the one hand, it verifies the mother’s honour (there is a Mexican popular phrase: ‘my daughter’s children, my grandchildren; my son’s children, who knows?’), which points to recreated notions of honour and limpieza de sangre (purity of blood), echoing the sentiments of the Mexican colonial period. ‘Because honour was measured through the blood, biological paternity and maternity were critical, thus reinforcing the links between honour, control over virginity and women’s sexual fidelity after marriage’ (Lomnitz 2001: 43). On the other, the second intention, according to specific parameters of beauty and adequacy, is to draw attention to those aspects of an individual’s appearance which conform to the family’s perceptions of themselves as a group, thus ‘confirming’ belonging. Most of the women refer to their difficult relations with relatives in terms of criticisms of their general appearance, but also regarding who they look like, whether is a family resemblance, and in case of
doubt, to which side of the family they belong. In the absence of any kind of ‘acceptable’ resemblance, a mother’s reputation is called into question.

In the following extract, Consuelo talks about these concerns. She is at a point in her life when she feels she has physically changed and perceives herself in quite positive terms after having lived abroad for a year. She has lost weight and regards herself as attractive after years of feeling ‘ugly’. At the time of the interview, she talked about the relief she felt with this new perception, especially in relation to her family:

I’m happy with how much I’ve changed without changing. (...) Now we go to family reunions and people say such different things. (...) The same people, my cousins [who used to be rude to me] say: ‘Oh! You look so great, really beautiful. You’re so thin, you’ve got a great body’ and things like that (...) I’m delighted; I never thought this would happen to me. Nobody says: ‘no, she doesn’t look like us (...) who does she look like? She doesn’t look like she’s from this family’. They used to say things like that: ‘no, Consuelo is not a Perez, she must be a García’ and the García family would say, ‘no, her sister is a García, Consuelo’s not’. It’s not like that anymore. Now I do look like my mother, I even have some resemblance to my father (Consuelo; 29 years old; León, Guanajuato).

It is through the achievement of what Consuelo regards as a ‘favourable’ change that she is able to articulate her feelings of slightedness, which are produced in the interactions with her relatives’ comments. The now positive welcome reveals the logics of acceptance and rejection that run through her family and the possible sources of slightedness. Who does she look like? She is pleased her relatives don’t have those kinds of debates any more. Yet, for Consuelo, their new attitude does not
undermine their previous views, but further establishes their existence and validity. Proving resemblance through looks and appearance bring peace of mind. Consuelo’s view of her own past is also defined in relation to her understanding of her current life. Although the fact that she feels happy with herself can be seen as a positive achievement and she is able to recognise, as she says elsewhere, the ‘awful time’ she went through, this extract demonstrates a problematic logic. Her physical change and improved body image/self esteem does not prompt Consuelo to criticise her family’s way of thinking. On the contrary, she has adapted to the racist logic and made it stronger. It is reproduced and sustained, which suggests that people are made visible by their marked bodies to be judged by their appearance. Consuelo cannot escape the scrutiny of the gaze of the others, especially of her relatives who seem to hold the key to legitimacy and belonging. Later on, Consuelo says:

I’m not afraid of family parties any more, neither my mother’s nor my father’s family. For example the other day, we were going to a party and we were in the car, and my mother said: ‘Oh you look so beautiful’; and we were laughing and joking. She said: ‘you’re an exotic beautiful woman’. I was delighted, because before that same phrase would have sounded like I wasn’t her daughter. I mean, that word, ‘exotic’, was like being from another planet, like saying: ‘nobody knows who you look like, because you don’t look like us’ (Consuelo; 29 years old; León, Guanajuato).

In this extract two different sets of concerns are linked in an unproblematic way. The move Consuelo makes from being acknowledged as a woman with ‘exotic beauty’ to then confirming her belonging and the need for recognition through resemblance to her family is revealing. The anxiety of the possibility of not belonging is intertwined with the exchange of gazes and the ‘ways of seeing’ (Berger 1972) that are in play.
Phelan discusses how ‘the politics of the exchange of gaze’ (1972: 4) show there are different and unequal ways of accessing the visible world, especially when it comes to ‘the image of the other’ (Ibid., 18). Phelan is concerned with the desire and need of a ‘reciprocal gaze’ (Ibid.); that is, an emphasis on the double process of seeing and being seen – the exchange of gazes – and in that exchange, the position and possibilities of the subjects involved: who sees and who is seen. Hall (1999), commenting on Bhabha’s work, argues that both gender and racial differences are unique because of the core significance of ‘vision’ – of what is seen - to the legitimacy and reliability of discourses on ‘differences’ (1999: 314). Consuelo’s account demonstrates the significance of vision for belonging in the case of the family, as it is the first conduit in the quest for proving resemblance.

**Slightedness and Family Tensions**

How does slightedness become a key emotion that reveals the tension of establishing resemblance and belonging? Consuelo, as other interviewees, expressed a tension between the desire for recognition within the family group and the marked visibility of their bodies. I argue that this tension is what produces their feeling of being slighted by, and alienated from, their family group. Their feeling slighted is being made, through shifting and readjusting. It is moving and attaching itself according to the validation (or otherwise) of their belonging to the family group. This specific way of experiencing family life is bound up with underlying racist logics, which have rendered the notions of origin and progeny malleable and negotiable, achievable and ascribable, linked to the residual vestiges of the different histories through which
mestizaje was forged. In relation to Consuelo’s extracts above, the ambiguity of the terms of belonging provide a fertile ground for the feeling of slightedness. Consuelo’s fear of discovering she is not the daughter of her parents and a member of her extended family is a constant threat, which she perceives as being marked on her skin, in her features and in her degree of resemblance to her relatives.

What is slightedness about? In what ways does slightedness become a social and a cultural practice? How does slightedness direct Consuelo, Patricia and Verónica (whose cases will be discussed below) and towards what object? Slightedness becomes produced as an emotion that intends to keep these women in place, through the tension felt between the fragility of belonging and the burden of their marked mestiza bodies. At first, feeling slighted, as any other emotion, seems to come from an internal and personal space. In its link with racist logics and notions of belonging and resemblance, however, slightedness appears as an emotion circulating in the social space where individuals receive, accept and bounce back its effects. As mentioned above, when feeling slighted the problem is the difficulty of identifying with clarity the source of the slight; we can only tell it has stuck to us. Possible responses could be: maybe it is just her; maybe her mum or her relatives do not really intend to make her feel slighted; maybe if she learns how to deal with it, it will all be all right; maybe it is just how things are; maybe it is really nobody’s intention. Slightedness has the peculiarity of being constantly displaced and unfocused, and when entangled within family relations is even more difficult to pin down – or, rather, it evidences the impossibility of being pinned down, because of its continued doing and undoing; because of its lack of certainty and its in-between circulation: only it stickiness remains.
Families Taking Care: ‘looking after, dealing with, providing for, disposing of’

The exploration of the practice of caring, of looking after specific members of the family, notions of resemblance and feelings of slightedness, should be considered as a way of understanding contemporary practices of racism in Mexico and its relation to the transnational dimensions of family life. So, what is care about? Care implies a continuum that moves from a very positive connotation, as in having a liking for something or somebody, to a rather more pessimistic perception, as in worry and grief. From being a burden to providing attentive assistance, the word care generally implies an effort for the person undertaking its action. Care is related to liking, providing, regarding, having fondness for, but also to sorrow, grief, concern, trouble, and to worry. Care is synonymous with charge, custody, keeping, supervision, and trust. It is a fascinating word that, in this context, makes absolute sense in terms of containing the public–private tension produced within family relations, which reveals how, even in its vagueness, a contradictory experience of care and feeling slighted affects family life. In the following extract, Patricia talks about her relationships with her extended family on her father’s side and the ways in which relationships amongst them were marked by particular racist understandings and logics. Her father was born in Spain and came to Mexico with his family after 1939 as immigrants feeling the Spanish Civil War. According to Patricia, the family intermarried exclusively within the Spanish exile community in Mexico, with the exception of Patricia’s father, who married a Mexican mestiza woman.
Patricia: This is my little cousin… you might have noticed that I don’t have photographs of my cousins, because I’ve hardly ever seen them or done stuff with them. There were problems, I mean… She is the daughter of one of my dad’s brothers. She and I were the same age, maybe a month apart, but I never managed to make friends with her, because, well, the barrier… was our physical appearance. Not me, the colour… - I mean the power of all this is incredible - because my colour prevented me from having a relationship with my family. I don’t get on with them at all: zilch, nothing. I don’t get on with any of my cousins and when I’m with them, I feel very uncomfortable, I feel very inferior. It’s a very strong thing, too strong… I have cousins who are completely blond, yellow, güeros, with blue eyes and everything.

Mónica: Was it something the adults were more aware of?

Patricia: Of course, it wasn’t between us. The adults were the ones who made lots of remarks about being moreno, being dark. My mother used to talk and cry about it and complained that they were always patronising her because she is morena. I empathise with her because I am morena too. (…) I found the hardest thing was seeing my mother suffering so much, seeing how bad they made her feel.

Mónica: And your father, what did he do about it?

Patricia He took her to visit them as little as possible, because he didn’t like to see her suffering like that, so he wouldn’t take her…

Mónica Didn’t he talk to his family?

Patricia Well, (…) I don’t really know a lot about that. But he tried not to create many situations where my mother would feel bad. (…) But he wasn’t very confrontational with his family. (…) It was a difficult situation for him. (Patricia, 37 years old, Huajuapan)

Hans Wollny (1991) describes the Mexican enthusiastic welcome of Spanish refugees as unique and unparalleled in terms of the generous treatment they received. Such a
welcome was largely based on political sympathy with the Republicans, but it also considered the economic benefit of having part of the Spanish Treasury transferred to the Mexican government, and the opportunity to select refugees that could provide ‘an “injection of energies” (professionally) for the Mexican economy’ (1991: 222).

‘Spanish immigration was (…) preferable to all others: common language, common culture and not least common history, in the course of which the Spaniards had made their contribution to the “protoplasm of nationality”, would guarantee easier assimilation than in the case of other nationalities’ (Ibid.). According to Wollny’s research of the history of asylum, ‘in the Mexican post-revolutionary migration laws of the 1920’s, a strongly xenophobic tendency had broken through: the desire to prevent a “degeneration of the race”’ (Ibid., 223). The Mexican government engaged with miscegenation discourses that wanted to prohibit the entrance of ‘biologically undesirable’ aliens (Ibid.). So while Jewish refugees were largely denied entrance (only an estimated 2,250 between 1933 and 1945 were admitted), up to 40,000 Spanish nationals settled in Mexico during the Spanish Civil War. Although there are no precise breakdowns of figures, Alberto Ciria (1974), for example, estimated that a maximum of ‘fifteen thousand educated, upwardly mobile and mainly middle-class Spaniards crossed the Atlantic to settle in Mexico, once the Republic’s fate was sealed’ (1974: 188). Overall it was a ‘successfully realized immigration project’ (Wollny 1991:222) from which Patricia and her family undoubtedly benefited. But this example illustrates some of the dynamics generated from a project which included a notion of ‘improving the race’, and which, it seems, was not equally perceived by the refugees themselves. Skin colour is portrayed as providing an element of distinction, especially since it represented a source of valued differentiation. This extract highlights a particular type of care, which in this case is
played out between adults and children, but also between the father/husband and his
daughter and wife. A protective care that, precisely because of its protectiveness,
reveals the presence of something to be worried about, something to defend, that there
was something to be accountable for and that produced suffering and a sense of
inferiority. The position of Patricia’s father is noticeable, both for the courage
required to defy a certain set of rules of engagement that operated within his family
about who it is desirable to relate to –given that he was the only one who married a
Mexican woman– and also in the way he tried to sort out the conflict between his two
families: silence and absence, preventing confrontation and struggling, being in
charge of providing care both to his wife and children and, at the same time,
maintaining some sort of ‘balance’ with his family of origin.

The following and last extract brings together notions about prevailing racial and
racist discourses that circulate in Mexican families. It also shows how such
discourses were practically elaborated by adults’ attitudes to notions of care.
Verónica shows me an old colour photograph of her and her cousin, both standing in
the middle of an ordinary street in Mexico City facing the camera, and says:

Verónica: This is me and this is my cousin. Do you see what I mean? (…) I want
you to see, for example, our hair, our expression, what we are wearing,
our jewellery. I looked uncared-for, as opposed to her…
Mónica: Here there is a kind of confidence, I mean, the way she is standing…
Verónica: Of course, exactly. But from my point of view, this also shows you
something very crazy, which comes from the adults: it’s about how they
care for you differently and what this difference means. I mean, that
difference is not only physical. When I was thinking about meeting you
today, I thought about this photograph. Difference is created by the care
adults provide. Really, at this age, I’m sorry but neither of us could’ve
looked after ourselves. We’re cared for by adults, aren’t we?

Mónica: But, are you really saying that the güerita, because she is güerita, is the one who is looked after better?

Verónica: Of course, I’d say yes, for me it’s clear. We are both first daughters of two sisters, and the difference between us is about 4 or 5 years. She was in kindergarten and I was in 1st grade of primary school. But it’s very clear, I mean, when you see this photo, you see the values that the outside world puts on you - it fucks you up! Do you get me? Because in this photograph it’s obvious, it shows so many things: the look, the physical attitude - some of it personal and some of it coming from the outside world. Do you know what her name is? Blanca\textsuperscript{vii} (Verónica, 43 years old, Mexico City).

For Verónica, it is this particular photograph, and the work the image and her memory do in revealing her experience of not being cared for, that produces feelings of slightedness. The details she describes remind her of the ‘evidence’ of the differently valued care both girls received, which ultimately made the feeling of being slighted possible. Verónica is concerned with ‘how they [the adults] care for you differently and what this difference means’. The concern about such a differentiated care is marked on her skin and re-marked upon her through the care provided by her mother. Such a distinction is revealed in how they are dressed and presented. She relates this to the value given to these explicit perceptions of racial difference. As Patricia also noted it has nothing to do with the children but with how their mothers with similar upbringings (being sisters), resources, and sharing of geographical proximity, act upon their system of beliefs. In such a system of beliefs, a certain physical appearance – that of a güerita (blonde hair, ‘fine’ European-like features, pale skin colour) – is cherished, and another – that of a morena (dark hair, indígena-like features, darker skin colour) – is neglected and ultimately slighted. For Verónica
‘difference is created by the care adults provide’. She says that some of this is personal and some of it comes from the outside world. Such an outside world converges in the girls’ social presentation in a public space that is captured in a photograph, becoming a painful reminder of such distinctions. An ironic reflection of this situation is, as she puts it, her little cousin’s name: ‘Blanca’.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of the workings of emotions in Mexican family life – what emotions do while they are being made – has highlighted four themes: how racism and discrimination are lived and learned; how logics of differentiation and ways of belonging operate; how belonging then becomes racialised and marked on the body; and how the inner logics of families relate to the historical formation of nations.

In Mexican families, physical resemblance is core to ‘proving’ one’s belonging to the family unit. Resemblance is permeated by histories of mestizaje that have racialised the body, however these histories have been invisibilised and detached from everyday life. It is emotions that reveal racist logics. The very combination of feeling slighted, notions of belonging and the racialised body create these racist logics. Logics which, in the Mexican case, have rendered notions of origin and progeny malleable and negotiable, achievable and ascribable. The pervasiveness of everyday racism in Mexico can be accessed through the study of emotions. Specifically, this analysis shows that women know slightedness has stuck to them. But while they are aware that racism is at play, it is a much more complex and ambivalent process, most of the times unclear and certainly disconnected from its social and cultural rationale as well
as its historical configuration. Slightedness is experienced as personal and racism is normalised as a private problem. This personalisation allows pervasive racist logics to prevail which (re)create the experiences of racism as private. Both familial and ultimately public responsibilities are neglected. This cyclical process of racism has become detached from the social and historical formations which are so crucial in its (re)creation. And thus the ‘omnipresent dimension’ (Knight 1990) of racism is invisibilised in contemporary Mexico. Racist logics permeate everyday lives.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Hettie Malcomson for her generosity in discussing, (re)reading and questioning my arguments for this article. Thanks to Celia Lury, Rebecca Coleman and Christian Karner for their invaluable support at different stages of writing this piece, and to Maruska Svasek, editor of this special edition, and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments. I am ever so grateful to the women that shared their stories with me; I hope I am honouring their trust.

Bibliography


Notes

<br>http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50227560

ii For more detailed numbers on inhabitants in New Spain see for example the work of Kemper (1995), Aguirre Beltrán (1972) and Knight (2002).

iii I refer to the indigenous population of Mexico as indígenas rather than the term ‘Indian’ which has acquired pejorative connotations in contemporary Mexico. I have discussed the problems with both terms elsewhere Moreno Figueroa (2006).

iv For more on this interpretation of the slaves’ position during the colonial period in Mexico see Lomnitz (1992).

v Although the way censuses were conducted has been severely criticised Chance (1979), in a 1742 population census the estimates of population were: Spaniards: 11.94%; Mestizos: 20.14%; Mulattoes: 7.11%; Indígenas: 60.70%; Asians: 0.11%. Source: Peter Gerhard, Mexico en 1742 cited in Chance, 1979: 155)

vi ‘Morena’ and ‘güera’ are adjectives that refer to particular types of skin colour. ‘Morena’ refers to somebody with ‘brown’ or darker skin colour in comparison to others. ‘Güera’ refers to somebody considered to be white and/or blonde and/or with fair or lighter skin colour also in comparison to others.

vii Blanca literally means ‘white’. Although I have changed all names in an attempt to preserve confidentiality, I have chosen the name Blanca to give a sense of the racialised parallels to the original.