Wealth and whiteness in Latin America

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Is there such a thing as *humble skin color*? In her study of perceptions of the African diaspora among elementary school students in the city of Guadalajara, Mexico, doctoral student Marleys Meléndez Moré found that children who possessed a phenotype similar to that attributed to Africanness do not self-identify as members of this community in any sense.[1] Instead, the students used the term "humble color" to refer to their dark skin tone. This description was made in the context of working-class students in a public state school in the urban area of Guadalajara, Mexico. The adjective "humble" can be understood as an attitude of modesty in the face of greatness. However, in the setting in which Meléndez Moré recorded it, humility instead suggests a situation lacking material wealth or class distinction. The link between skin color and class position seems out of place in a country that has situated *mestizaje* (i.e., mixed race) at the center of the modern Mexican identity, both in terms of culture and phenotype. Under a mestizo logic, the national character is defined by the celebration of racial mixture, and, therefore, there is no place for ethnic-racial hierarchies in this country.

The comment appears even more absurd if it is considered that the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos ([1925] 1958) was one of the two most prominent figures in the region (alongside Brazilian scholar Gilberto Freyre, [1933] 2010) promoting the idea that a long period of miscegenation (i.e., racial mixture) represents the most important and valuable cultural trait of Latin America. Moreover, the ruling party that governed Mexico (Partido Revolucionario Institutional, PRI) during most of the 20th century built its social, cultural, and political projects on Vasconcelos' arguments. Further, the celebration of the indigenous and African past of the nation was materialized in a vast body of art produced by some of the most prominent Mexican artists of the 20th century, such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. In this context, why do students in a working-class school associate dark skin tones with *humility*? Likewise, in a relational sense, we could ask, what is the equivalent opposite of *humble skin color*?

In opposition to Latin America, the United States has long maintained what sociologist W. E. B DuBois terms "the color line" ([1903] 2015). This is an economic, political, and social hierarchical division based on racialized perceptions, which originated in colonial times. This more rigid division has permitted to extensively document the relationship between wealth and racial/ethnic categories in the United States. For instance, in today's US, a white family has an average accumulated wealth per household of $171,000, while a Latino family has economic reserves of $20,700, while a black household has only $17,600 (U.S. Federal Reserve 2017). Likewise, we know that the type of employment, the value of a home, and the level of education, among other socioeconomic indicators, vary considerably according to the ethnic and racial affiliation of the communities studied (Emir-

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bayer and Desmond 2021; Korver-Glenn 2021). Racial and ethnic categories so profoundly influence the distribution of material resources that the former are often a close proxy for determining class positions in this country (Gans 2005).

Latin America has seen itself as a radically different model. To paraphrase Enrique Krauze, one of Mexico's most prominent public intellectuals, this region possesses a model of racialized tolerance in which the main social problems are not of an ethnic-racial – and therefore racist – nature but rather of class inequalities (Krauze 2014). In this region, the argument goes, ethnic-racial ascription is not a determinant of class position. Mestizaje made it possible to overcome this colonial atavism by creating a model in which it is possible to move easily through various racialized symbolic categories (i.e., mestizo or indigenous, for

the Mexican case). Therefore, according to the benevolent reading above, phenotypical perceptions do not organize the distribution of material resources in Latin America as in the United States.

Latin American miscegenation

The origin of the argument that ethno-racial ideas play a minor role in social organization in Latin America goes back to the beginning of the 20th century. At this time, modern Latin American states sought new ways to leave behind the colonial model and legislative structures that had continued to drag colonial categories with them throughout the 19th century. To this end, the works of the intellectuals José Vasconcelos ([1925] 1958) in Mexico and Gilberto Freyre ([1933] 2010) in Brazil were of enormous influence. Incorporating some national and historical differences, Vasconcelos and Freyre advocated variants of the idea that ethno-racial notions in Latin America produced a model of tolerance. According to these views, the cultural and marital mixing of multiple ethnic-racial groups over long historical periods in this region shaped "racial democracies" that operate based on social inclusion (Moreno Figueroa 2022). This argument contrasted with what happened in the United States, where exclusion and violence of colonial origin did not disappear in the modern and independent version of this country.

The inclusive nature of the mestizaje/mestiçagem model was further enhanced in the work of a wide range of leading intellectuals. For example, the famed Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova asserted in the mid-20th century that in Mexico there was no racial discrimination but rather class exclusion ([1965] 2003). In his words, "A man of indigenous race with national culture does not resent the slightest discrimination because of his race: he may resent it because of his economic status, his occupational or political role. Nothing more" ([1965] 2003, 103). From this line of argument, it follows that racialized notions are irrelevant in the organization of social inequalities. Therefore, it is in the class structures where the great Latin American problems lie.

Despite this consensus, some critical voices raised doubts about such an idea. This was the case for the Brazilian sociologist Guerreiro Ramos (1957), who since the late 1950s had highlighted the role that racialized ideas played in the legitimacy of analyses of social reality. This researcher questioned the insistence – in his opinion pathological – of the Brazilian intelligentsia to study blackness, an act that simultaneously ignored the white racialized identity of the researchers themselves. Guerreiro Ramos argued that the desire to study black communities while ignoring white communities materialized the former identity while obfuscating the latter. This process ended up transforming white identity into a neutral, almost non-existent category. This line of research went unnoticed in the general Latin American context. The question of who is white in Latin America and how this racialized identity is articulated with other power dynamics was not taken as a serious line of analysis because this questioning has been associated with the United States.

Despite the consensus on the limited importance of ethnic-racial categories within the Latin American mestizo universe, the link between class and racialized categories never ceased to emanate in fieldwork. For example, in his famous study of Nicaragua in the 1990s, the US anthropologist Roger Lancaster noted a unique relationship between ethnic-racial and socioeconomic variables (1991). Nicaraguans tended to refer to poor neighborhoods as "black" areas while also describing wealthy neighborhoods as "white" areas. The association went beyond simple geographic references. According to the author, Nicaraguans seemed to understand wealth and whiteness as goods of extraordinary value, although of great scarcity in this nation, while poverty and blackness were understood as elements of no value but of great abundance in this Central American country. Bringing back the initial question, the link between class structures and racialized hierarchies seems nonsensical in a region representing itself in terms of mestizaje/mestiçagem and where ethnic-racial inclusion is seen – at least discursively – as the source of its cultural richness.

In a region where mestizaje/mestiçagem is the prevailing model, how is it possible that poverty is seen as a black or indigenous characteristic while an abundance of goods is seen as a white characteristic? Lancaster's work brings us back to the initial query, does *humble skin color* exist in Latin America?

Studying up

At the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, a small group of US intellectuals proposed to stop studying only subaltern groups and start looking at groups with economic, political, and social power (Mills [1956] 1981; Domhoff 1967). Anthropologist Laura Nader called this perspective which invited researchers to inquire into the way the wealthier sectors of society reproduce their positions of privilege "studying up" (1972). In the case of the United States, this perspective sought to generate interest in the class dynamics among the powerful. In Latin America, the qualitative social scientists following this line of re-

search have commonly addressed the link between class structures and ethnic-racial notions, particularly those related to whiteness and whitening (*blancura* and *branquitude*). For example, anthropologist Hugo Nutini devoted most of his academic work to studying the Mexican "aristocracy" (2008).

Although the term might suggest sarcasm to describe socially pretentious groups, Nutini details the social and cultural milieu of a small upper-middle-class sector that traces its lineage and family distinction to the indigenous nobility and the Spanish conquistadors of colonial times. Since the mid-20th century, some members of this group have lost the financial capacity to match Mexico's most powerful economic groups. However, their lineage and social distinction have allowed this "noble" community to maintain an important position among the upper classes. Thus, despite the lack of legal recognition as a noble class or the limited popular awareness about them, the Mexican "nobility" is part of the elite in this country. Nutini shows how the group frequently uses perceptions about phenotype to draw the social boundaries of the community. For example, in addition to material wealth passed down intergenerationally and a set of blood ties, most group members possess bodily traits that bring them closer to what in Mexico is considered white, particularly Spanish (such as an aquiline nose, light skin and eyes, as well as curly light-color hair). Nutini indicates that those members of the group who show phenotypic variations of this pattern (either because they have light brown skin tones or a wider nose than the rest of the group) often began interviews to talk about the community by explaining their direct connection to a member of the colonial indigenous nobility. This did not happen with other members of the group. The need to explain physical traits through direct connections to distinguished indigenous personages of the past seemed a form of phenotypical self-consciousness, almost as if the person aimed to justify "defective physical traits" through noble/class origins. This fact highlights the relationship between belonging to an elite group and the need to possess certain phenotypic traits associated with whiteness. Nutini's work offers clues to answering the initial question about the existence of the opposite equivalent to *humble skin color* in contemporary Mexico.

The work of Carmen Martínez Novo offers a different way to observe how racial notions operate among privileged sectors in Ecuador (2021). This author examines the sociopolitical transformations that the Andean country has experienced between the neoliberal period of the 1990s and the two subsequent (self-described leftist) regimes. During the neoliberal period, indigenous communities paradoxically ac-

quired some recognition and inclusion. The latter allowed them to gain control of some educational projects and to advance their presence in the political sphere. These achievements were gradually diluted under leftist governments, particularly during the regime of Rafael Correa. The Ecuadorian political elites implemented various mechanisms to recover the small political spaces and material resources that the indigenous sectors had managed to obtain in recent decades. What is relevant for the present text is to note how the political elite easily resorted to old discourses that presented indigenous people who resisted state control as uncivilized subjects who wanted to stop progress. Through what Martínez Novo calls ventriloquism (2018), white political actors assigned themselves the legitimate representation of excluded communities, even making decisions for them. However, in relation to the 2010 census, Ecuadorians intensely debated the term "white" and who could be considered under that ascription. The author narrates that, among the upper middle classes, a significant percentage of men felt comfortable with the ascription of white. Women of the same stratum preferred the term "mestizo." The difference in gender opinions is based on how "white" is associated with connotations of arrogance and a certain degree of foreignness, notions that most women dislike but that some men find acceptable.[2] Ultimately, the percentage of individuals who self-identified as white declined from 10.46% in 2001 to 6.1% in 2010 (Martínez Novo 2021, 81).

The Ecuadorian case shows the Latin American complexity in understanding the link between wealth and phenotype. On the one hand, a sector of the Ecuadorian upper classes rejected the category "white" because of its association with conceit and foreignness, preferring the term "mestizo" as a social sector. However, considering the process of subjugation and exclusion experienced by Ecuador's indigenous populations at the hands of a regime led by members of the white/mestizo group, it is worth asking whether the discussion of who is legally white has not caused us to lose sight of more subtle but more efficient ways in which whiteness operates in everyday life. Despite the Latin American lack of clarity in determining who is white and who is not, relations of power, distinction, and prestige are strongly linked to notions of "whiteness" in this region. Moreover, the latter category becomes more accessible to those who can demonstrate it corporeally, understanding it in terms of both physical appearance and attitudes, worldviews, and habits (Ramos-Zayas 2020).

The work of Mara Viveros Vigoya on upwardly mobile black professionals in Colombia further shows the complexity and urgency of understanding the relationship between whiteness and wealth in the region

(2021). Like the above cases, Colombia has a racialized class system in which poverty is strongly associated with blackness and indigeneity, while wealth is profoundly linked with whiteness. In this context, upward-mobile black professionals are in a liminal social position that requires a set of strategies to maintain their comfortable class position. Among their affluent white(r) peers, for example, these black professionals must distance themselves from habitual, geographical, aesthetic, or linguistic indicators that suggest any association between them and the larger poor black Colombian population. For instance, their accent should not denote a Pacific Coast origin, where a large Afro-Colombian community resides; their fashion style must not include "ethnic" patterns because it suggests a strong black upbringing; women must wear make-up to look of a brown-skinned tone and straighten their hair to appear "professional" (Viveros Vigoya 2015; 2021). These social strategies aim to prevent the awkward social interactions that emanate from racist comments and stereotypes, which, subsequently, could hinder the careers and professional opportunities of these black middle-class individuals.

My work on golf clubs in Mexico City offers another example to think about the connection between material privilege and racialized ideas, particularly whiteness (Ceron-Anaya 2019). In this nation, golf is a sport that is only played in private clubs. In Mexico City, the average cost of a one-time membership is around US$35,000; it does not include other expenses, such as minimum food consumption, annuities, equipment purchase, classes, and tournament registration, among others. The high cost of the sport makes it only accessible to the wealthy. The world of golf in Mexico is not new; the sport arrived in this nation more than 100 years ago. The first clubs were founded in the last years of the 19th century by wealthy English immigrants who came to exploit oil and mining deposits in various parts of the country. By the 1930s, the sport had grown considerably thanks to American immigrants who ran several economic enclaves dedicated to extracting natural resources. This was the case of the world's largest cotton complex in the north of Mexico, which gave rise to the creation of the Laguna Country Club. At this time, golf clubs highly restricted the type of people who could join the community. For example, the Mexico City Country Club (one of the most distinguished clubs) stipulated in its rules that at least 75% of the members had to be US citizens or Englishmen "of good moral standing" (Wright 1938, 45). The list of Mexican club members at that time allows us to understand that only the most prominent members of the local upper class had access to such spaces. World War II transformed the Anglo-American enclave pattern of these clubs. The pre-carious economic situation in Great Britain and the US economic recovery led the golf clubs to open their doors to local dominant groups, who until the previous decade could only enter in minimal numbers. These clubs promoted a white identity by rooting their aesthetic culture in European or Anglo-American elements, from the architecture of the club houses all the way to the grasses used on the course. The white connotation of these sites is visible in the objects produced for their own consumption, such as such as tournament promotional posters, headed paper, trophies, and some institutional histories produced by distinguished clubs (Cerón-Anaya 2019).

In the present, I did not find any club that explicitly articulated ethnic-racial notions to determine the admission of new members.[3] This fact could support the thesis that the Mexican and Latin American problem is not of an ethnic-racial nature (and, hence, racist) but rather based on class inequalities. However, I found that the class privilege of the community was constantly intertwined with ethnic-racial references in which whiteness is never clearly spelled out but conveyed through constant comparisons and references to those who represent the universe of the non-white. The case of the caddies illustrates the point. Caddies are the workers who assist players during a golf match and take care of any inconvenience, from carrying messages between groups of players, finding lost balls, offering suggestions on strategy, and easing the anxiety of a bad playing day. Some of these workers are extraordinary golfers who by way of watching others play have learned about technique and strategy (in many clubs, caddies are allowed to play as many rounds as they want on Mondays, the day most clubs are closed for maintenance). Despite the remarkable ability of several of these workers, the club members I interviewed never considered them golfers. Instead, club members talk about caddies as the opposite of what a true golfer is.

The explanations of the members to justify the difference between golfers and caddies were extensive but can be summarized in phrases such as caddies "do not understand the strategy of the game," "are people who lack education," "do not know how to hit the ball, no one has taught them," "unfortunately they do not have a good diet, they just watch what they eat," "they have no work ethic," "no matter how much you help them, sooner or later they start drinking [alcohol]," "caddies are the ones who bring drugs into the clubs," "they don't know how to dress," or, "even if you put together the best caddies, you wouldn't have a player who could compete in the best leagues in the world." In short, caddies lacked the understanding, shrewdness, nurture, morality, determination, aesthetic perceptions, and character to succeed in the sport and

therefore could not be considered golfers. These arguments were articulated in a context in which almost all club members were white (many of them even by US standards), while the overwhelming majority of caddies possessed brown skin tones (which in Mexico is referred to as *moreno*).

The exclusion of caddies could be read as class-based segregation because affluent club members point out the lack of formal education of these workers to explain their inability to comprehend and, hence, competently play the sport. However, these narratives were constantly linked to ethnic-racial ideas by presenting caddies' limitations as innate characteristics shared homogeneously by all members of the group (who also possess a similar epidermal schema).[4] For example, complaints about a lack of work ethic, a propensity to alcoholism, or deficient dietary practices referred to all caddies without distinction. The argument about the flawed nutritional habits of these poor workers connects with long-standing considerations of the food of the popular classes as the source of their material backwardness, particularly as it is associated with ingredients of indigenous origin, such as corn and beans (Aguilar-Rodríguez 2011). The comment about caddies' lack of fashion taste was particularly relevant. The golfers I interviewed reported that they exclusively buy their golf equipment and clothing on their frequent travels to the United States (interestingly, one interviewee pointed out the absurdity but widespread condition of the practice among the golf community). Caddies, however, need to acquire their equipment and clothing via gifts or secondhand purchases from golfers or in big box retail stores that from time to time offer affordable golf products. In a racial fetishization way, the objects bought directly in the United States possess a true "white" nature, while those acquired in Mexico are of a swarthy condition. The incessant remarks golfers make to differentiate themselves from caddies appear to present a distinction that lay in inherent, almost biological, differences between the two groups.

As part of the fieldwork, I found the case of several caddies with an extraordinary level of play, which could put them on a solid trajectory toward professional golf (a sport that despite its limited number of followers globally is among the physical games with the highest economic rewards for professional players [Cerón-Anaya 2019]). However, caddies reported that this path was extremely difficult for them due to the lack of economic support from the clubs where they worked and the Mexican Golf Federation. I found the case of a caddie who had obtained access to play in the European Golf League based on his outstanding playing level. However, the golfer had missed the first two dates due to "abandonment" because he could not ob-tain funds that would allow him to travel to the tournament. I interviewed this caddie two weeks before the third date of the league, for which the caddie was still unable to obtain the funds to travel (when I looked for him again, the player had lost for the third consecutive time for "abandonment").

When asked about the lack of support for outstanding caddies by members of these clubs, some of whom were even members of the Federation's leadership, most interviewees resorted to various explanations. In these, the blame was shared partly by the institutions (which did not do enough to support workers) and partly by the caddies themselves (who were too lacking to succeed in the sport). However, on one occasion one of the interviewees articulated an overtly ethnic-racial argument about the problem. This interview took place in a coffee shop in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. Toward the end of the talk, the participant took a long pause, turned to look at the diners seated behind us (he seemed to want to make sure no acquaintances were in the establishment), and then continued:

Before, you asked me why the clubs or the federation do not support caddies [to become professional players], *off the record* I will answer you what I think. I think most golfers don't support caddies, even though some are very good players, because caddies look like their domestic workers. Caddies resemble their maids and chauffeurs, which golfers dislike.

Following this comment, the individual offered a multitude of examples in which the clubs or the federation either openly or covertly sabotage initiatives for outstanding caddies to approach the professional world. This was the only participant who explicitly linked the relationship between class and racial-ethnic perceptions to describe the marginalization of workers. For this person, the lack of institutional support is based on the phenotypic proximity of caddies to other workers, equally lacking prestige. In this case, social class ("maids and drivers") and phenotypic hierarchy ("they look alike") intermingle to form a common dynamic that explains the lack of opportunities and resources faced by the lower classes. In most cases, the link between these two structures was established through narratives about morality, work ethic, or intelligence, in which the upper classes possessed abundant amounts of these characteristics while the working sectors lacked them. These comments occurred in contexts where the former possessed a phenotype much closer to what is understood in the United States as white, while the latter possessed varying dark skin tones. Perhaps in this framework the interviewees did not need to articulate the argument explicitly; the social status of each spoke for itself.

Whiteness and capitalism

The above examples leave a broader question about the nature of the structural problem in a region ethnically and racially identified in terms of mestizaje/mestiçagem. How could white (as a racialized identity) and whiteness (as its related ideological construction) be connected with economic success, social distinction, and morality in a region that celebrates racial mixture as one of its greatest strengths? The answer to the question lies in the connection between whiteness and capitalism. In his influential book *Modernity and Whiteness* (2019), the Marxist philosopher Bolívar Echeverría proposes a new way to understand how capitalism, class, and whiteness are profoundly connected to one another. To shed light on this relationship, Echeverría uses Max Weber's interpretation of the origins of capitalism, reviving an overlooked racialized argument present in Weber's analysis. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1930] 2013), Weber argues that the origins of capitalism are tied to the cultural and social transformations that Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, introduced in northern Europe. This religious identity radically transformed how people perceived labor and time, turning hard work, rational productivity, and a thrifty lifestyle into powerful symbols of a righteous and pious existence. Over time, the frugal conduct and the fervent devotion to work gave birth to new understandings of social and economic relations. This in turn generated new habits, a novel social nature that compulsively sought to expand individual financial resources at all costs, first as a sign of god's call – almost as a form of direct communication with the divine world – and later as an integral part of the rationality of the modern capitalist subject. In short:

The "spirit of capitalism" consists of the demand or request made by modern practical life, based on the capitalist organization of the production of social wealth, for a special mode of human behavior and for a special kind of humanity, capable of adapting to the demands of increasingly improving the functioning of capitalist life (Weber [1930] 2013, 38)

This common interpretation of Weber's work is expanded upon in Echeverría's analysis. The latter notes that Weber hints at a connection between the racialized identity of those Northern European subjects who produced the new spirit and the economic system itself: "In the preliminary note to his *Sociology of Religion*, Weber suggests that the ability to correspond to the ethical request of capitalist modernity, the capacity to assume the ethical practice of Puritan Protestantism, may have had an ethnic foundation and been connected to certain racial characteristics" (Echeverría 2019, 39).

It is this argument that leads Echeverría to propose a new understanding of the origins and present condition of capitalism. The communities that created this economic system perceived themselves as constitutive of the system. In other words, capitalism could not genuinely thrive and expand without the white bodies that created it; the existence of each depends on the other. Over time, however, the strong ethnic-racial component of the relationship – the white epidermal scheme – was morphed into a spirit. Its racialized origins still overdetermined the latter, but its new ethereal condition opened the possibility for those subjects who lack a white epidermal schema to acquire it via modern capitalist practices, nevertheless. It is this process that transformed an overreliance on the white epidermal schema into an attainable cultural and social condition. "We can refer to 'whiteness' as the visible aspect of capitalist ethical identity insofar as it is overdetermined by racial whiteness—a racial whiteness that relativizes itself when exercising that overdetermination" (Echeverría 2019, 42). Whiteness hence became an obtainable social identity that allows nonwhite subjects to claim a modern capitalist existence.

Whiteness as a spirit is expressed in the practices, postures, dispositions, and worldviews that subjects internalize and naturally manifest in daily life. The spirit of whiteness follows the same limited democratic stance present in capitalism, in which if people accept the civilizing premises of the system, capitalism accepts everybody. The relativization of the importance of the white epidermal schema generates a degree of openness.

Notwithstanding, this is a tolerant racism, willing to (conditionally) accept a good number of racial and "cultural" alien, foreign, or "strange" features. However, no matter how "open" it may be, this identitarian-civilizational racism does not cease to be a kind of racism, and can easily readopt virulent radical or ethnic fundamental expressions. (Echeverría 2019, 42)

The intrinsic racism of whiteness operates not exclusively via the epidermal schema but rather via the attitudes, appearance, and worldviews that demonstrate an internalization of the spirit of capitalism. Echeverría argues that the intrinsic racism of whiteness is commonly subdued by its civilizing status. However, whiteness "is always willing to resume its protagonist role and tendency to discriminate and eliminate the Other […]. Mass media do not grow tired of reminding everyone in a slyly threatening way of the fact that whiteness [the white epidermal schema] lurks underneath whiteness." (Echeverría 2019, 44)

The above analysis offers a powerful tool to understand how whiteness operates in everyday relations in Latin America. The modern spirit of racial capitalism allows everybody to "whiten" themselves via consumption practices and wealth accumulation. The possibilities of living in a more expensive neighborhood, attending a more costly school, wearing fancier clothes, traveling to more extravagant destinations, owning a pricey car, and eating in upscale restaurants, among many other habits, permit individuals to become whiter than other family members or peers. However, the spiritual condition of whiteness and the class dynamics that allow a degree of racialized fluidity among most class groups lose their ethereal condition at the top of the class system. Among these groups, the racial spirit of capitalism regains its overreliance on the epidermal schema. The upper classes based their privilege and deserving social identity on a system that works over class and racialized principles. Like the early capitalist communities in northern Europe that Weber describes in his work, economic elites in Latin America articulate a strong connection between their white epidermal schema and their privileged material condition, such as if one were the extension of the other. Thus, poverty is also viewed as the result of the lacking conditions of black and indigenous epidermal schemata.

Final thoughts

This text has used recent qualitative work on the study of elites to question the widespread notion that the Latin American mestizaje/mestiçagem model created a flexible and inclusive system where ethnic-racial notions do not influence the distribution of resources. My work does not seek to deny the possibility of a certain degree of racialized fluidity among sectors of the working or middle classes in the region. Nor does it seek to argue that the Latin American reality follows the same patterns as that of the United States, much less to suggest that the latter is better than the former or vice versa. Likewise, I do not wish to situate the study of ethnic-racial dynamics in isolation. Rather, this article sought to question the self-celebratory narrative of mestizaje, which erases any discussion of whiteness, racialized hierarchies, and their link to class structures.

Against the grain, the essay emphasizes the need, even the urgency, to study class inequalities and

ethnic-racial relations as a process that acts in tandem. When these two dynamics are analyzed in a *studying up* framework, we can see the *humble* and *privileged skin tone* that populate Latin American class hierarchies. The first is associated with the world of the popular, of the working classes, and of those who are commonly seen as non-white. The second is the world of the upper classes, who articulate their prestige through notions of morality, as well as their white ethnic-racial status; the higher up the class analysis goes, the more this relationship is consolidated. As mentioned above, Latin America is not the United States, and it is possible to find non-white subjects among the national elites. However, when these cases are followed for a long time, one can see the marriage strategies of whitening the offspring, who end up possessing both the economic resources and the whiter epidermal schema necessary to belong.

The discussion about who has a humble skin tone and who has a privileged one does not refer to a mere aesthetic element, as is commonly presented in the mass media. It is also not a discussion that is only pertinent to the racialized US reality, as many Latin American intellectuals commonly portray it. Instead, the great Latin American problem lies in how the symbolic and material universe of subjects with humble skin is associated with elements of little value and, consequently, with exploitable, contaminable, and expendable individuals and communities. Meanwhile, the white universe is a world that requires care and protection because it is a good of great value but scarce quantity. The extensive interest (pathological, according to Guerreiro Ramos, 1957) of researchers in non-white groups seems to have effectively hid the white racialized category and obscured the ideological effects that it generates on the distribution of material and symbolic resources. Examining the large class inequalities and wealth accumulation that most Latin American societies experience is an urgent task. However, doing so without paying attention to how class hierarchies are also intimately linked with racialized perceptions – particularly how a white racialized identity and its ideological reverberations operate in daily life – only generates an incomplete understanding of Latin American social inequalities. Without incorporating a racialized perspective into the analysis of material relations, our studies will remain stuck in the delusional world of mid-20th-century "racial democracy."

Endnotes

1 Interview with Marleys Meléndez Moré, Guadalajara, October 6, 2022.
2 Because of the limited space, I cannot address the relationship between class dynamics, gender, and ethnic-racial notions. On this topic, see Cerón-Anaya 2019.
3 However, I did hear accounts of tensions between affluent immigrant Asian communities and some clubs. This was never the case regarding European immigrants, who were accepted in all the clubs I heard of in Mexico City.
4 Frantz Fanon (2008, 84) coined the term epidermal schema to explain how skin and eye color, hair texture, the shape of the nose and lips, as well as body fat, are commonly used to organize subjects into groups that apparently have common long-term biological and social characteristics in common.

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