

Playing with Race in Transnational Space: Rethinking *Mestizaje*

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Los Cárabes vinieron de España, los primeros como detectives...El rey de España los mandó a buscar los restos de un sacerdote o un..fraile que había muerto aquí. Le dijeron a dos personas Cárabes, >Tú vas..a esa parte, aquí está el mapa, consigues dónde enterraron esosBel cuerpo de aquella persona y me traes los huesos.'

Tenian que investigar >ónde había sido, >ónde lo..posiblemente lo haigan matado o se murió, pero allí lo enterraron. Y el rey..o la reina quería los huesos de ese fraile allá. Duraron parece que nueve o once años. Pero lo llevaron, uno, y otro se quedó. Y el que lo llevó allá duró, cuando pudo..regresó, pero regresó a Michoacán. Le gustó aquí la tierra, la..las güares {laughs}.

Y los mandaron a ellos porque eran hombres muy vivos. Ya tenían misiones cumplidas en ese ramo...Salieron de España, llegaron a México...se quedaron en Michoacán..y tuvieron familia con la Malinche si tú quieres {laughs} y y así se fue el apelativo..siguiendo. Y de esa manera se extendieron los Cárabes. {Chuckle}. D' ese es la...descendencia de los Cárabes.

The Cárabes came from Spain, the first ones as detectives. The king of Spain ordered them to look for the remains of a priest or a..friar who had died here. They told two Cárabes men, >You go..to that part, here is the map, find out where they buried thoseBthe body of that person and bring me the bones.'

They had to investigate where it had been, where it, possibly they had killed him or he died, but there they buried him. And the king.. or the queen wanted the bones of that friar there. It seems they lasted nine or eleven years. But they took [the body back], one [of them], and the other stayed. And the one who took it back, stayed there, [and] when he could, he returned, but he returned to Michoacán. He liked the land here, the, the güares [indigenousⁱ women]. {laughs}

And they sent them because they were very quick-witted men. They already had completed missions in that line [of work]...They left Spain...they arrived in Mexico...they stayed in Michoacán..and had family with La Malinche, if you want {laughs}, and, and so the surname continued. And in that way the Cárabes spread out {chuckle}. That is the...ancestry of the Cárabes.@

These words were spoken to me by a man at the kitchen table in his house in the rancho. He was the first from the rancho to travel to Chicago to work, coming as a contract worker in 1964, during the last year of the U.S. Bracero Program. He is now retired and living back in the rancho where his forebears have lived for centuries. He, like many other adults in this social network of families, carries on his life both in the rancho, where he now spends most of his time, and in Chicago, where (at this writing) four of his six children live, most of them raising families themselves. (One daughter lives with her husband and son in California, and another daughter, with her husband and two children, recently returned to live once again in the rancho, after over 12 years in Chicago.) This man and/or his wife frequently visit Chicago, sometimes staying for months at a time (e.g., around the birth of a child), and their children's families in the U.S.regularly return to the rancho, for several weeks' vacation, or even for

several months to work on special projects (constructing their own houses, helping in the family avocado orchards at crucial times of the year, attending weddings and other fiestas). These visits, of course, are constrained by work and school schedules in Chicago. Construction workers, for example, who sometimes are laid off in Chicago's harsh winter weather, have the flexibility, which comes with no paycheck, to extend their stays in Mexico. Those women and men who work in factories usually don't have such flexibility, unless they too are laid off, or they quit their jobs, intending to find new ones when they return to Chicago. Sometimes, however, relatives work temporarily in the place of those who go to Mexico for an extended visit, especially when employers want to retain valued employees. Children enrolled in Chicago Public (or sometimes Catholic parochial) schools generally are restricted to Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations for their returns to the rancho. Preschool children, however, unconstrained as yet by school schedules, are sometimes sent to be with their grandparents for extended periods. Moreover, many children even into the third generation still are socialized partly in the rancho. This pattern, of course, varies, as some children go to school entirely in Chicago, and grow up and begin to work in Chicago, making acquaintances and friends outside the social network in the process. Nevertheless, there is a tie to the rancho that extends into the third generation for most families in the network.

This tie is not surprising, considering the fact that this family can be traced back at least three centuries in this micro-region in northwest Michoacán. The story related above is the oral tradition that traces the family's origins to Spain, an oral tradition that was told to this man, the eldest brother in his natal family, by his father, who presumably learned it from his own father. According to González Méndez and Ortiz Ybarra (1980), some of this man's male ancestors migrated from an area near Cotija, a town in the western part of this micro-region, to found a rancho just up the road from this one. Cotija was, in turn, the destination of rancho families from Los Altos of Jalisco (Cochet, 1991), which Barragán (1997) terms the distant cradle of rancho society. Thus the rancho identity evident in these families can be traced to their own family histories. Many rancho families from this area, in fact, trace their ancestry back to Spain (and one prosperous family in the rancho, with professional members in Guadalajara, has a Spanish coat of arms on the wall of their architect-designed house), although most people readily acknowledge that their ancestors (and those only a few generations back, after the Revolution of 1910-20) *mixed the blood* with indigenous Mexicans. In a conversation among several women the morning after we had all spent the night in the *female* bedroom of her homeⁱⁱ, a young woman whom I know well remarked that *mestizaje* in the rancho is reputed to be relatively recent, having occurred primarily since the Revolution. Others outside of the rancho also have indicated that this rancho was known for being populated by whites.ⁱⁱⁱ Although most people in the rancho acknowledge a partially indigenous heritage and thus would be categorized as *mestizo* (racially mixed), many individuals and even entire families in this rancho are perceived as *white* in the United States, until they speak Spanish or Spanish-accented English. That is, many people have blue or green eyes, blond or light brown hair, and light skin (with freckles) that turns red, not brown, in the sun. Others look more evidently *mestizo*, with tan skin and some features (e.g., turned up rather than straight and narrow noses) that are characteristically indigenous in this region.

Archival references date this man's family name to the 18th century in this micro-region, and oral history interviews have linked his father through kinship to a wealthy ranchero (with the same name) in the early part of this century.^{iv} Photos show this family forebear to have light eyes, skin, and hair. Several different people, both within and outside of this family, have traced recent mestizaje (race mixture) in this family to a grandmother and a great grandfather of the man who told the story quoted above; one of these forebears had both Spanish and Indian ancestry and the other had Spanish, Indian, and African ancestry^v. This "origins" story, however, illustrates an intensely felt non-Indian (and non-African) identity. During my fieldwork both in Chicago and in the rancho over a period of 10 years, this sense of identity emerged in countless conversations. Thus while easily acknowledging their mestizo heritage, the families from this rancho identify non-equivocally as non-indigenous, a claim that is supported by the physical appearance of many individuals and families. People here sometimes refer to themselves as blancos (whites); for example, one man said to me, in reference to distant relatives from another rancho, *Son blancos como nosotros* (They are whites like us). The fact that many of these rancheros are light-skinned and light-eyed, even blond (*güero/a*), attests to the presence of Spanish, French, and possibly other Europeans in these parts in the past. French troops, for example, were stationed contiguous to the rancho for several years during the French Intervention in Mexico (1862-67), and, among other French influences on Mexico, the nearby municipio (county seat) produces *pan blanco* (white bread), also called *pan de vapor* (steamed bread), that closely resembles what is called French bread in the United States.

While the Spanish of this network is lightly sprinkled with Purhépecha (the indigenous language in northwest Michoacán) words, especially words for various types of soil and place names, such borrowing of vocabulary is not unusual in language-contact situations. Beyond vocabulary items, some individuals can sing particular songs in Purhépecha, especially the well-known *Flor de Canela* (Flower of Cinnamon; note the Spanish title), but this knowledge is framed as Other and kept separate, which only confirms a primarily non-indigenous identity. Thus these rancheros, like others in pockets all over western Mexico, construct themselves as non-indigenous, even while acknowledging their mestizaje. Knight argues that such claims are particularly vocal in contexts (especially "Indian zones" like northwest Michoacán) in which a lower-class mestizos...cleave...to their eroding ethnic privilege as Indians begin to compete with them economically and socially (Knight, 1990: 99). Though Knight offers a plausible explanation from a research perspective, when this racial ideology is explored for emic meanings at the local level, it is revealed as more than a simple claim to higher social status. It calls into question the category mestizo itself. Although this term is widely used in the research literature on Mexico, it is not a category that is emically derived, at least not for all so-called mestizo communities. Rather, it is a term created from outside such communities that is closely tied to colonial racial ideology, and, as such, evokes that ideology when used.

Although a race has been shown to be a social construct rather than a genetically determined category (AAA Statement on Race, 1998; AAPA Statement on Biological Aspects of Race, 1996), conventional thinking continues late 19th century notions of "races" (e.g., in U.S. Census forms^{vi}), and the terms mestizaje (race mixture) and mestizos (those who are "mixed" racially) invoke this ideology when used. In this sense, it is difficult to "think outside the language" that is, as long as we use these terms, we perpetuate the assumption that separate races exist, and

that they have “mixed.” Research literature on Mexico often specifies whether the site of a particular study is an “Indian” or a “mestizo” community, for example. I have rarely, however, heard the word *mestizo* used by the *rancheros* of this study to refer to themselves. When asked about *mestizo* communities, they refer to formerly indigenous communities that have gradually become hispanicized over time, through the “crossing” of Spaniards and Indians. Such distancing from *mestizaje*, even while acknowledging some indigenous heritage themselves, clearly reveals ambiguities and locally-perceived differences around racial identity among what are lumped together and generically referred to as *mestizo* communities. After all, communities can become *mestizo* from a primarily Spanish, as well as Indian, base, and these two types of *mestizo* communities can differ sharply on a variety of linguistic and cultural dimensions. As Guillermo de la Peña (1980) has noted, Mexican villages that are physically quite close to one other often contain populations that contrast sharply as social groups and categories within the larger society, and this is especially true in this part of western Mexico. These complexities of identity can be understood more fully by looking at *mestizaje* in Mexican history, to which I turn in the next section.

Mestizaje in Mexican History

Race and ethnicity have a complex history in the New World, in the confrontation of Europeans, and Africans, with Indians. After the Spanish conquest of Mexico, a hierarchical society based on caste, or “race,” was established, with Spaniards at the top, followed by *castas* (mixed bloods of various types), then Indians, and then Africans. Although this caste hierarchy evolved toward a more class-based system, especially during the 19th century, colonial racial ideology endured, and it continues to underlie Mexican society even today (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992). Most studies of Mexico and Mexicans have assumed that *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, has been so thorough that the two resulting social categories, the (remaining) indigenous Indians and *mestizos*, are generally indistinguishable from one another physically. That is, there has been so much genetic, and cultural, mixing in both groups that one cannot tell who is Indian and who is *mestizo* by physical characteristics alone. For example, Foster’s (1967/1979/1988) statement that one cannot distinguish racially between indigenous and *mestizo* communities in this region of northwest Michoacán is common in the ethnographic literature on rural Mexicans. Foster, however, carried out his study in Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, a very old indigenous site that was the seat of power in the pre-conquest Purépecha kingdom. Presumably most *mestizos* in Tzintzuntzan would have heavily indigenous familial histories, unlike those from the rancho in the present study, which seems to have experienced and is experiencing *mestizaje* from a heavily Spanish and other European familial history. The fact that Tzintzuntzan is only a few hours drive from the rancho in this study points out how much (unstudied) variation exists within the northwest portion of this state, let alone in the rest of Mexico, or among Mexicans in the United States.

Another widespread assumption made in most studies of Mexico that is problematic in this region is that *mestizo* communities have been, in Bonfil Batalla’s term, “de-Indianized” historically. That is, they were originally indigenous communities which, through mixture with Spaniards and/or acculturation to “Spanish” culture, gradually lost their indigenous identities. Frye’s (1996) study of a village in the central Mexican state of San Luis Potosi, for example,

documents the Indian past of this community and its transition to a mestizo rather than indigenous identity. On a national level, state ideology since the Revolution of 1910 has promoted Mexico as a mestizo nation, valorizing, at least officially, Mexico's indigenous past, but working to incorporate non-acculturated Indians into the mestizo state (Knight, 1990; Lomnitz-Adler, 1992). Statistical studies also have placed Mexico second in Latin America (Paraguay being first) for frequency of racial mixture (Esteva-Fabregat, 1995), adding to the public representation of Mexico as a mestizo nation. In spite of both the official representation and higher-level statistical accuracy, however, a more complex variety of identities has endured at the local level, especially in rural western Mexico.

According to Esteva-Fabregat (1995), mestizaje in Mexico, as in all of Ibero-America, occurred rapidly and thoroughly after the Conquest for several reasons. First of all, because of what he terms the "unbridled sexual tendencies" of the Spanish, the conquistadors mated freely and frequently with Indian women. In the early stages of the Conquest, Spanish women were rare, and when they did exist, they usually lived in urban centers, so mestizaje was more intense in the countryside. Although Esteva-Fabregat discounts the possibility of Indian women being taken by force, this undoubtedly occurred, along with the practice of some Indian groups, including the Purhépecha in northwest Michoacan, offering their daughters to the high-status Spaniards in order to establish kinship ties with them (Warren, 1985). The gathering of recalcitrant Indians into settlements called congregaciones (congregations) furthered contact, and thus mixing, between Indians and non-elite Spaniards who lived in the towns. The municipal township center in this study, in fact, was created as just such a congregación in 1601 (Del Paso y Troncoso, 1944), so we can assume that rapid mixing took place in this micro-region as well, at least early in the Conquest.

Another reason that Esteva-Fabregat gives for the rapid mixing was that many of the Spanish who migrated to Mexico for conquest and colonization were already "Euro-mestizos" who, because they had "mixed" in southern Spain with those of north African origin (Moors and Jews), had a more flexible and positive attitude toward mestizaje. Whatever the reasons, racial mixing seems to have been so extensive that mestizos relatively quickly overtook Spaniards in number. According to Borah (1954), by the late eighteenth century in Mexico, there were few people of unmixed blood. These official numbers may even be an undercount of mestizos, since illegitimate offspring of Spanish fathers who were not recognized by them were raised in indigenous communities by their mothers and thus were counted as Indians.

The assumption of relatively complete mestizaje, then, is quite taken for granted by most researchers. Nevertheless, several studies of isolated rancheros in western Mexico who identify strongly with the Spanish side of their heritage (Taylor, 1933; González y González, 1974; Barragán L.:pez, 1990) contradict this widely-held assumption. Esteva-Fabregat accounts for this by arguing that, when "racial mixing...[fails] to appear phenotypically," it could be because many generations have occurred since the first instance of mixing and subsequent endogamy has reestablished "genetic predominance" (1995: 14). Given the racial ideology of many rancheros (discussed later in this chapter), and the prevalence of endogamy within ranchero groups (Barragán L.:pez, 1990; Lomnitz-Adler, 1992), including this one, this seems a plausible explanation. An alternative explanation, however, traces Spanish orientation in the rancho to the

beginning of the 18th century, when there was increased immigration from Spain, especially from northern provinces (González y González, 1995). Oral tradition traces this particular family to one of these northern provinces, Asturias^{vii}. Oral tradition in this region also indicates that mestizaje primarily has occurred in recent generations, since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20, and some families in the rancho are experiencing mestizaje now, through the marriage of güeros (people with light skin, sometimes blond and blue-eyed) with prietos (people with darker skin, sometimes described as swarthy) or morenos (people with tan or brown skin). There is marked endogamy, with many people marrying others from the rancho, or at least others from this micro-region, whether the courtship developed in Mexico or in Chicago. Given this restriction in partners, one would expect the mestizaje to become more shared, even though the racial ideology remains. Whatever the historical trajectory of individual ranchos and rancho families, however, studies of rancho groups in this region document significant differences from other studies of so-called mestizo societies, especially in terms of self-perceived identities and individualist ideologies (Farr, 2000).

In contrast to the widely accepted representation of Mexico as a mestizo nation, Bonfil Batalla (1996) argues that mestizaje in Mexico has not been complete, at least in cultural terms. He critiques the official representation of Mexico (calling it “the imaginary Mexico”) as the synthesis of two different cultures, that of Spain and that of indigenous, pre-conquest Mexico. He argues instead that two world views and civilizational bases simply co-exist (though they interpenetrate) in modern Mexico. Instead of a true transformation in culture, what has occurred, he claims, is only a transformation in ideology. The official government ideology promotes images of racial and cultural mixture and integration, but in reality Spanish, or more generally Western, culture has only been superimposed upon a Mesoamerican indigenous base which still underlies most of Mexico, and is what he calls *México profundo* (deep Mexico):

The colonial origin of Mexican society has meant that the dominant groups and classes are also those who foment the project of westernization, the creators of the imaginary Mexico. At the base of the social pyramid are the peoples resisting, those who embody Mesoamerican civilization, who sustain the *México profundo*. Power and western civilization coincide, on one pole, and subjugation and Mesoamerican civilization coincide on the other...

The decolonization of Mexico was incomplete. Independence from Spain was achieved, but the internal colonial structure was not eliminated. The groups that have held power since 1821 have never abandoned the civilizational project of the West and have never overcome the distorted view of the country that is the essence of the colonizers’ viewpoint. Thus, the diverse national visions used to organize Mexican society during different periods since independence have all been created within a Western framework. In none of them has the reality of the *México profundo* had a place. Instead, it has been viewed only as a symbol of backwardness and an obstacle to be overcome. (Bonfil Batalla, 1996: xvi-xvii)

From colonial times to the present, then (and even Bonfil Batalla doesn’t question this), a dichotomy has dominated perceptions of Mexico: urban/Spanish/elite vs. rural/Indian/peasant.

Since much of Mexico's population is rural, Bonfil Batalla claims the predominance of a Mesoamerican (rural) base in Mexican society. According to Bonfil Batalla, although the urban elite disdain what is rural/Indian/ peasant, even they have, over time, appropriated some

Mesoamerican cultural traits.^{viii} He further argues that mestizos who claim to be non-Indian, especially those who are rural peasants, actually have only been "de-Indianized" superficially, by having had a Western ideology imposed on a basically Mesoamerican civilization. The process of "de-Indianization," according to Bonfil Batalla, is "the loss of these groups original collective identity as a result of the process of colonial domination" (Bonfil Batalla, 1996: xviii). He supports his argument with examples of cultural traits of such mestizos that he claims are Indian in origin. Ultimately, Bonfil Batalla contends that to move into a better future, Mexico must build from the strengths of this base, rather than marginalize it, as is presently the case.

Although Bonfil Batalla in some respects accurately describes the Mexico I have experienced (a "first world" country on top of a "third world" country), he unfortunately essentializes rural campesinos (peasants) as basically "Indian." His description of "the peasant world" (Bonfil Batalla, 1996: 44-47) identifies cultural traits that non-indigenous peasants supposedly share with what he terms Indian culture (generalized as Mesoamerican civilization). At ground-level reality, however, there are a variety of what would be called mestizo communities here, some of which could be accurately described as "de-Indianized," but others of which would more accurately be characterized as "mestizo-ized Spaniards." Some of the cultural traits that Bonfil Batalla attributes to Mesoamerican culture, e.g., communal land tenure and a lack of enthusiasm for capitalist agriculture, are definitely not characteristic of the *rancheros* in this study. Others, however, e.g., an emphasis on social relationships based in reciprocity, are characteristic. Yet after five hundred years of cultural contact, it is impossible to determine which cultural traits originated with whom, which were appropriated by one group from the other, and which emerged as new solutions to lived problems. Moreover, many counter-examples to Bonfil Batalla's generalizations could no doubt be found in both indigenous and non-indigenous rural communities. In spite of these problems, however, Bonfil Battalla does call into question the false picture of "the imaginary [mestizo] Mexico," even as he "Indianizes" all rural peasants.

In stark contrast to both the imaginary Mexico and Mexico profundo, the *rancheros* in this study represent yet another alternative. That is, they, like others in western Mexico, emphasize, and many physically reflect, their Spanish and/or other European heritage. Yet most anthropological research on this region to date has focused either on the indigenous Purhépecha (e.g., Friedrich, 1977, 1986) or on mestizo groups that are presumed to be "de-Indianized" campesinos (e.g., Foster, 1967/1979/1988; Dinerman, 1983). This may reflect a preoccupation with what is presumed to be more "authentic," or a desire to study, and identify with, the most politically and economically oppressed groups, i.e., the indigenous. Fields, for example, argues that mestizos have been understudied and not well understood because they are seen as lacking in cultural authenticity:

The pejorative view of mestizaje displayed by Bonfil Batalla characterizes much of the post World War II literature, both among North American and Latin American social scientists. Among North American anthropologists a near total neglect of mestizos in countries with large indigenous populations...made clear which population was most interesting, complex, and indeed Acultural,@ for ethnographers. Guatemalan scholar Carlos Guzmán-Bockler (1975) used the term ningunidad (Anobody-ness@) to describe mestizos, who, having been stripped of Indian somebody-ness, must be empty and undefined. (Fields, 1998: 436)

Mestizos, then, either are considered (by most anthropologists) uninteresting because they are not Indians, or they are interesting only because they have an indigenous past. Either way, of course, there is an Othering of Indian-ness, even when positively valorized (and romanticized), that generally ignores communities that are not indigenous or at least “de-Indianized.”

In spite of this dominant trend, however, a few studies have documented relatively isolated rancho communities, primarily in western Mexico, that disrupt the stereotype of rural Mexicans as either Indians or de-Indianized mestizos. All of the communities in these studies are “mestizo,” at least to some extent, but they could not be accurately described as “de-Indianized” ones that have “retained” Indian values. Taylor’s (1933) early study, for example, describes the “Spanish Mexican” peasant community of Arandas, Jalisco, located in Los Altos of Jalisco, a region directly northwest of northwestern Michoacán and considered, as noted previously, the distant cradle of la sociedad ranchera (ranchero society). Western Los Altos, including Arandas, was colonized by Spaniards at the end of the 16th century, and ranchos were created there primarily for pasturing sheep, cattle, and horses. Taylor describes the people of Arandas:

The people of Arandas are generally regarded, and they so regard themselves, as of Spanish stock. The great majority are white in color, often with blue eyes, and in general Spanish rather than Indian in their physical characteristics...Many are tall and well built. There are some Indian and mestizo (white-Indian mixture) types, with strong Indian characteristics, but these are a minority. Sometimes one sees a combination of Indian pigmentation or other Indian characteristics, and blue eyes. Occasionally, but less often, one sees Negro characteristics (Taylor, 1930: 14).

Thus the people of Arandas experienced some mestizaje with Indians and Africans (the latter brought to the region as slaves), but the non-Spanish contribution to the mixture was slight. Taylor, tracing archival records from the 18th and 19th centuries, shows a rapid absorption of mestizos and mulattoes by dominant whites, both through marriage and through “irregular liaisons.”

The work of González y González (1974/1991), Barragán L.:pez (1990; 1997; Barragán L.:pez et al, 1994), Cochet, (1991), and others similarly describe rural communities that are neither indigenous nor de-Indianized, documenting the Mexican saying, la güera del rancho (the

white/blond of the rancho). The present study continues in this tradition, providing a contemporary ethnography of rancheros similar in identity to those studied by Taylor, González y González and Barragán López, but it departs from this earlier work by focusing on rancheros who are less isolated from regional indigenous communities and, moreover, who live within a transnational context.

The Local Setting, Michoacán: Nosotros y Los Otros (Ourselves and The Others)

The rancho is nestled amid rolling hills on the edge of what is called the Meseta Tarasca (the Tarascan Tableland, or highland plateau) in northwest Michoacán. Tarascans, or in their own language the Purhépecha, in the meseta primarily live in villages or towns recognized as indigenous. Many adult women wear distinctive skirts, belts, embroidered blouses, and, most significantly, a particular type of rebozo, or large woven shawl, which is black with thin bright blue lengthwise stripes and complexly knotted ends. Even girls of five or six wear this rebozo, although the custom (and the rebozo) is gradually being discarded, especially among those who have migrated to the United States. Nevertheless, the distinctive clothing, along with a distinct language, Purhépecha, are markers of an indigenous identity in this part of Mexico. Ethnic boundaries between the Purhépecha (referred to in Spanish as Tarascos, or Tarascans) and rancheros are scrupulously maintained here. One rarely sees an indigenous rebozo in the rancho, for example, indexing as it does an indigenous identity; instead, married ranchera women generally wear tightly-woven rebozos of solid colors, often black or navy, and sometimes beige or white (but always black for widows and sisters in mourning).^{ix}

The status hierarchy of this region of northwest Michoacán places the indigenous Purhépecha at the bottom, rancheros in the middle, and the urban elite at the top. Rancheros mostly live in rural hamlets and make occasional excursions to nearby cities, although increasingly they live in small towns and cities as well. Although people who index a noticeably ranchero identity with their clothing, their dialect of Spanish (with archaic rural usage), or other behavior sometimes suffer disdain in the cities, they show disdain for catrines, or “citified” people, as well (Farr, 2000). Yet except when doing business (e.g., receiving medical services) in cities that have an urban elite population, rancheros can avoid most contacts with those above them in the regional status hierarchy with whom they might feel uncomfortable. Primarily they interact with other rancheros or with indígenas. When interacting with other rancheros, their demeanor and language is relatively egalitarian. In interactions with the indigenous, in contrast, rancheros expect, and often receive, deference, at least publicly. Friedrich (1977) notes the extreme hostility toward these “outsiders” on the part of the indigenous Purhépecha of this region, which suggests that such public deference may be a form of resistance, a “weapon of the weak” (Scott, 1990). An interview with the indigenous woman who sells bread and other corn and wheat products daily in the rancho, walking door to door, confirmed this resentment of the rancheros, whom she said were “the same as us,” except for the fact that “they look down on us.”^x

Identities are clearest in their contrast with others; in fact, identities are constructed against these others: “we” are not “them.” Within northwest Michoacán rancheros and Purhépecha distinguish themselves from each other, sometimes fiercely. As Barth noted, it is

“the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth, 1969: 15). Otherwise, over time ethnic groups in interaction, as *rancheros* and *indigenas* have been for centuries in Mexico (Barragán Lopez, 1997), would tend to exchange “cultural stuff.” In fact, such exchange has occurred here in both directions, including the movement of individual people, and yet the boundary between these two groups has remained distinct.

Rancheros, however, not only distinguish themselves from those who self-identify as indigenous *Purhépecha*; they also distinguish themselves from other (non-ranchero) *mestizos*. Comments refer to such *mestizos* as originally indigenous people who have acculturated to Spanish ways of living, e.g., by wearing “regular” clothes, in contrast to traditional Tarascan attire. As already noted, in nearby *Purhépecha* villages, many women (and even young girls) still wear distinctive blouses, skirts, belts, and shawls to indicate their indigenous identity, although most men no longer wear the traditional male Indian peasant garb of white pants and shirt. A local joke in the rancho tells of people in a nearby (heavily indigenous) *mestizo* town who are said to have learned to dance with their arms around each other, European style, and then announced, ok, now we’re Spanish. Sometimes such *mestizos* are equated with *agraristas* (those who agitate for agrarian reform), and these *rancheros* fiercely disdain both *ejidatarios* (co-owners of agricultural cooperatives that resulted from land reform after the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20) and the *agraristas* who worked to create such communal properties.

Instances recorded in my field notes further illustrate the racial ideology that values lighter skin with which these *rancheros* construct their identity. One afternoon when I was practicing making tortillas, the adolescent daughter of my teacher walked by the outdoor shed where we were patting out and cooking the tortillas over a wood fire. About 14 at the time, she looked at my then-darkened arms (after 10 months living at over 5,000 feet in that sunny Mexican climate), smiled, and said teasingly, with a sing-song intonation, (Mo-RE-na, Mo-RE-na! (You’re getting daBark!^{xi}) Her aunt laughed at this and remarked, (Morena afuera, güera al dentro! (Dark on the outside, light on the inside!), referring to the parts of my skin not exposed to the sun. On various occasions, people have pulled up their sleeves or pants legs to expose very white skin that contrasts sharply with the color of their sun-exposed skin. Frequently, people waiting for buses or talking outside of church after mass will deliberately stand in the shade, to avoid the heat, but, more importantly, to avoid darkening in the sun, and this is often explicitly commented upon.

Such a valuing of lighter skin is also evident when babies are born. When news about a new baby arrives, invariably the skin color of the child is mentioned, immediately after the gender, and sometimes before the name is even known. Once when a grandmother slid back into the front seat of a car after a telephone call to Chicago from her sister’s house in the municipio, or township center (the rancho did not then have telephones, but the municipio did), she said in a pleased tone, *Salió blanco!* (He came out white!), but she had forgotten to ask what her son and his wife had named the baby. Another time in Chicago, as we chatted around a kitchen table, a great aunt, herself somewhat *prietita* (dark-skinned), while passing on the news of the birth of the baby to another relative, commented into the telephone that they had been hoping she’d be *güera*, like her mother and aunt (and grandmother), but that she had

turned out prietita. Of course, the prietita baby nevertheless was chulisima! (darling, very cute) and well-loved, one of “us,” not “them.”

Talk that indexes a primarily non-indigenous racial identity, then, is frequent within these families, in both Mexico and Chicago, especially among the older generation. Among the younger, formally schooled generation, such talk, at least on some occasions, entails ambivalence and acknowledgment of their own (partial) indigenous heritage, since they are taught in federally supported schools the nationalist ideology that proclaims pride in Mexico’s indigenous heritage. In school they are taught that *todos somos indios* (we are all Indians) and *todos somos iguales* (we are all equal). Yet in their families, comments about the indigenous, whether positive or negative, always make it clear that they are different (and usually of lower status). Moreover, especially among those of the second generation living in the rancho, unequivocal expressions of non-indigenous identity are still frequent. My field notes and tapes are full of such comments by different men and women of various ages across a range of contexts. *Rancheros* maintain racial boundaries between themselves and the indigenous in both linguistic and non-linguistic ways. Language is used to distinguish the indigenous either through their use of *Purhépecha* or through the way they speak (their dialect of) Spanish. Boundaries are also maintained through clothing styles, visiting patterns, and the restriction of *ranchero* - indigenous interaction primarily to the commercial domain (e.g., hiring indigenous field workers or buying goods at Indian markets).

The Local Setting, Chicago: Racial Categories

Mexican ethnicity in the U.S. has historically been structured into a disadvantaged minority position; that is, Mexicans as a group have had a disproportionate share of low level jobs (Nelson and Tienda, 1997). Yet this historical legacy is changing: U.S. Mexicans are now principally located in urban areas which have a wider range of employment opportunities. Massey (1981) cites the declining isolation of the *barrio* and a degree of assimilation into Anglo society. For example, there is less residential segregation for Mexicans than for Puerto Ricans and others (Massey and Denton 1989, 1993). Nelson and Tienda (1997) predict that “class divisions could become more salient than ethnicity as Chicanos become more integrated into the nonsubordinate part of the labor force,” though this depends on the process of immigration and the vitality of the economy. Peñalosa (1995) also claims that “caste” is moving to class, as the Mexican-origin population in the U.S. becomes more and more class stratified.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the United States is moving from a “racial dictatorship” to a “racial democracy,” albeit slowly, painfully, and unevenly. They distinguish between race, a social and historical construct that fluctuates in meaning, and racism, the use of “essentialist categories of race” to structure domination. Although racism persists, it is, like all hegemonic projects, incompletely dominant, i.e., there are “cracks” in it that allow for challenge (Ortner, 1996). From an imagined community of whiteness (Basch et al p. 40) that was used to unite various European groups in a new nation against Others, then, we are moving toward an imagined community of cultural pluralism (Basch et al, 1994), and no doubt toward newer forms of *mestizaje*, mixtures of what are now considered different ethnic and/or racial groups.

Historically, however, racial categories in the U.S. developed according to a dichotomy between white and non-white, with race perceived as being biologically or genetically based (Denton and Massey, 1989; Omi and Winant, 1994; Rodriguez and Corder-Guzman, 1992). The white category itself, of course, emerged in response to the presence of non-whites, initially Africans and Native Americans, and then Asians and Hispanics/Latinos (Omi and Winant, 1994), and black or African American was defined, both socioculturally and legally, by the presence of any African blood (Denton and Massey, 1989; Omi and Winant, 1994). As Rodriguez (1997) has pointed out, only whites were included in the imagined community of the United States, and recent research by Flores-González (1999) has shown that this imagined community (“real Americans”) is still perceived of as white, even by Mexican and Puerto Rican college students in Chicago. Moreover, a categorical perception of race is still evident in the U.S. census item on race, which proceeds from white, to black, then to the rest of the non-white categories (Elias-Olivares and Farr, 1991), and it is evident as well in the coding procedures that have been used by the U.S. Census (Denton and Massey, 1989). Although the 2000 census allowed Americans to indicate more than one race, and put the item regarding Hispanic background before, rather than after, the race item, racial categories still remain.

When Mexicans, or other Hispanics/Latinos, migrate to the U.S., they confront a racial scheme that differs from the one they are familiar with in their countries of origin. In contrast to the categorical view of race in the United States, in Latin American countries, including Mexico, racial descriptors comprise a continuum, from white to black and/or Indian, depending on the predominant lower status population. For example, in Puerto Rico there has been a negligible presence of Indians and a substantial presence of Africans, as well as white Spaniards, whereas in Mexico, Indians outnumber Africans historically (Denton and Massey, 1989). In the U.S. scheme, with a persisting white/non-white dichotomy, Mexicans have had an ambiguous place, at times categorized as white and at other times categorized as a non-white minority, although regional differences have been significant in this regard. Texas, for example, “where Mexican Americans have come closest to being treated like a racial caste” (Skerry, 1993:20), is quite different from other parts of the Southwest, and the entire Southwest is strikingly different from the Midwest. In Chicago, for example, Mexicans are sometimes treated as yet another “white ethnic” population (especially politically), and Mexican, as well as Puerto Rican, politicians have strong ties to the Democratic machine in the city.

Skerry (1993) claims Mexicans are an ambivalent minority, sometimes identifying as white and other times as a racial minority akin to African Americans. He cites census data from 1980 and 1990 to illustrate this split: in 1980, 53.2% of Mexican Americans self-identified as White, 1.8% as Black, and 45.0% as Other Race; in 1990, 50.6% self-identified as White, 1.2 percent as Black, and 48.2% as Other Race (Skerry, 1993: 17). Left out of his account of so-called ambivalent identity practices among Mexicans, however, are the ways in which identity categories are not chosen, but are imposed. More recent research has shown some second generation Mexicans and other Hispanics/Latinos in Chicago are beginning to view Latino/Hispanic as a racial category in itself, to which they belong (Flores-Gonzalez, 1999), and DeGenova (1998) indicates a similar kind of racializing of the Latino category among adult Mexicans in Chicago. All research indicates that few Hispanics/Latinos, even those with a partial

African heritage, identity themselves as black (Denton and Massey, 1989), possibly because they become aware rather quickly of the benefits of being white and the disadvantages of being black in the United States, and perhaps also because they are not African American culturally. Since the more limited African presence in Mexico was forced to blend into the general mestizo population (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992), and only recently have researchers begun to identify aspects of an African cultural heritage in Mexico, even fewer Mexicans than other Hispanics/Latinos would identify themselves as black in the U.S. Consequently, for most Mexicans in the U.S. the black category is irrelevant for them; only the white and Other race categories are potentially relevant.

In a study in Chicago that explored reasons for the undercount of Mexicans during census taking, Elías-Olivares and Farr (1991) found the race item the most problematic of all on the 1988 census form used in the study. Virtually all residents who participated in the study objected to the racial categories listed as choices; 34 out of 39 specifically stated that an option should have been included for their race. The majority of residents (21 out of 39), or 54%, chose Other race. Of the remainder, 10 residents chose white; four chose Indian; and none chose Black or Negro. Since virtually all participants in the study had lived in the U.S. for at least five years (and over half had lived in the U.S. for at least 15 years), we can assume that they were quite familiar with U.S. racial categories. Like respondents in other studies (Martin et al, 1990; Rodriguez, 1980), most participants in this study did not view themselves as either white or black; rather, they self-identified as Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc., and even (a few) as Hispanic or Latino, after using the Other race category. Statements such as "We're not here—we don't count!" were common responses to this item. One resident said, Pos blanco, quiere decir un americano, ¿no? Completamente a white person (Then white, that means an American, no? Completely a white person).

In the present study, both in Mexico and in Chicago people display an awareness of U.S. racial categories, due both to the heavily intertwined history of the U.S. and Mexico and to the extensive transnational flows of people, goods, and ideas during the last century. For example, I was referred to on some occasions in Mexico as güera güera (really white), to distinguish between me and the similarly complected güera women in the rancho. Other times, in Chicago, people made categorical references to groups in conversations, e.g., to gente mexicana (Mexican people), gente güera (white people), or los güeros (the whites). Similarly, the terms used for African Americans, negro (black) or the more polite moreno (brown), were used both in Mexico and Chicago. A woman who has long lived in Chicago once noted in a conversation with me about education that there had been much racism between Mexicans and blacks at Farragut High School in Chicago, but that (in 1995) things were better, since they had new directors at the school. Once in the rancho during a conversation, a man who had worked in Chicago for a few years before being deported compared the Indians in Mexico with lower class blacks in the U.S. in terms of social problems such as a high birth rate (certainly an ironic comparison, as this man has five children). In spite of such stereotypic generalizations, however, it is invariably the case that members of these families, when they meet individual African Americans, or U.S. Native Americans, treat them as individuals and even develop friendships with them, sometimes commenting explicitly on how important it is not to judge people on first appearances.

Sometimes generalizations about groups link them to specific characteristics, often in a way in which *ranchero* values and identities are affirmed by contrast with others. In two typical conversations in a kitchen in Chicago, people noted the differences between whites, blacks, and Mexicans in terms of the ability to do hard work. One woman recounted the number of white and black women who “leave the line” (quitting the factory job of painting mottos and other material onto plastic items like glasses) after only a few hours or days, implying that only Mexican women can endure the very hard work. Similarly, a man on another occasion in the same kitchen recounted that only Mexican men could endure the hard work on *el traque* (the railroad track): *Todos son mexicanos, es que los güeros no cpa’ el traque no...No pueden con el trabajo, es muy pesado* (All are Mexican, it’s that the whites, no on the track no...They can’t endure the work, it’s very hard).

These *rancheros*, then, are very aware of U.S. categories and use them to a certain extent, especially since they are not entirely different (in the racial order) from the colonial racial ideology that still persists in Mexico. Yet the preponderance of genotypic mixtures is much more evident in Mexico than it is in the U.S., for two reasons. First, Europeans have been more predominant demographically in the U.S. than in Mexico, and second, when racial mixture occurs in the U.S., subsequent generations have been considered either white or non-white depending on phenotype. Offspring of black-white unions have been treated as black, for example (Lazarre, 1996). Yet no doubt many white Americans with some non-white ancestry (e.g., slight Native American or African ancestry that they may or may not be aware of), are nevertheless treated as white, based on their phenotype. In Mexico, in contrast, like many other Latin American countries, one family will have members with a variety of racial characteristics.

Peñalosa, among other researchers, has noted this, as well as other kinds of diversity among people of Mexican descent, and has advised that, with regard to the study of Mexican Americans, researchers should stop “trying to find the >typical’ or >true,’ and seek rather to establish the range of variation” (Peñalosa, 1995: 411). He suggests first differentiating among the Mexican American regional subcultures of the Spanish-descent *Hispanos* of New Mexico/Colorado, the *tejanos* of Texas, and the *Chicanos* of southern California. The Midwest, especially urban areas like Chicago, are yet another regional subculture, one where the Mexican presence has been built entirely by immigration (AZo Nuevo Kerr, 1977) in the context of a predominantly immigrant milieu (Holli and Jones, 1997/1995; Farr, 2003). In addition to such diversity within the U.S., there is diversity among Mexicans in Mexico, including their various identities as *rancheros*, different groups of indigenous Mexicans, and urban Mexicans of all socioeconomic classes.

Given the diversity among Mexicans, especially phenotypic diversity, how are these varying Mexicans perceived in the U.S., with its historically dichotomous system and discrete racial categories? Gamio’s work in the 1920’s showed that white Mexicans were not segregated, especially if they spoke English. In contrast, darker Mexicans were not allowed into segregated facilities (Peñalosa, 1995). More recently, Telles and Murguía (1990) showed that income differences among Mexican Americans could be traced to discrimination based on phenotype; that is, light and medium complexioned Mexican Americans had significantly higher

incomes than dark-skinned Mexicans. Some members of the social network in this study have had experiences similar to those reported by Gamio in the 1920's; that is, the lighter-complexioned among them have been taken to be white, at least initially, in a variety of contexts. Several different people have joked, for example, about how easy it is for Mexican güeros to cross the border without papers. On one occasion when three members of one extended family were crossing into the U.S., the father handed the border officials some papers for himself and his daughter-in-law (who did not in fact yet have her own papers), but the son was not even asked for papers, "Because," he said with a broad smile, "I'm güero!" Another story recounts the crossing of a young blond woman from the rancho who was told to speak a few words of English in front of the officials (the only words she in fact knew at that point), and, as they had hoped, she successfully crossed into the U.S. without papers. On a less successful occasion, one young man, another güero, was caught by the INS right after he had crossed the border, but only after they discovered he did not speak English. His brother, similarly güero, had already successfully made it to Chicago without papers. When the brother who made it to Chicago found a construction job with the Chicago Transit Authority (another version of the predominant male employment on el traque, or the track), as part of job orientation he was sent into a room with English-speaking whites and blacks, while other Mexicans were sent into a room to see a video.

Resisting Categories

Although Mexicans in the United States are often assumed (on various institutional forms) to be Hispanic or Latino, an ethnic category (with Other as race), the term Hispanic has never been used to my knowledge by the members of the social network in this study. The term Latino, in contrast, has been used, but only rarely and only by those who live or have lived in the U.S. As a category it is contested by these Mexicans both implicitly and explicitly. As Oboler (1995) points out, the terms Hispanic/Latino function as a two-edged sword. On one hand, they are a forced category imposed externally by the U.S. government starting in the 1980's; in the 1970 census, for example, Mexicans were coded as white, according to Denton and Massey (1989). On the other hand, however, even though there is resistance to these labels, their use has provided a platform from which various Latino subgroups have been able to organize to combat discrimination (Padilla, 1985). Ground level resistance to the labels has been shown in several studies which indicate that most immigrants of Latin American descent prefer to identify ethnically as their nationality, i.e., as Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, etc. (Elias-Olivares and Farr, 1991; Oboler, 1995), although this varies for second and third (or more) generation Latinos (Flores-González, 1999; Oboler, 1995). An exception to this may be (some) Mexicans, who find it especially easy, when speaking Spanish, to use the term mexicano regardless of generation.

Resistance to the terms Hispanic/Latino is, first of all, due to the way they homogenize a population that is extremely diverse in racial, socioeconomic, national, cultural, and historical terms. For example, these terms lump together first generation immigrants from various Latin American countries with citizens of Mexican descent whose ancestors were in what is now the southwestern U.S. before the Mexican-American War of 1848, and with citizens of Puerto Rican descent whose ancestors, as a colony, were transferred from Spain to the United States after

the Spanish-American War of 1898 (Oboler, 1995). Resistance to these terms is strengthened by the awareness among those with U.S. experience of the stereotypic and denigrating connotations of the terms in U.S. media and discourse that conjure up images of crime, gangs, drugs, high welfare use, and illiteracy. In short, the terms Hispanic/Latino not only homogenize a very diverse group of people who may not feel any natural allegiance to each other, but these labels place individuals in a racial hierarchy, with whites at the top, that defines them as non-white. The fact that this category includes Europeans of Spanish descent illuminates the ideology upon which the racial hierarchy is based: the assumed superiority of northern, as opposed to southern and eastern, Europeans. Although explicit statements of this assumed superiority that attribute it to genetic grounds are rarer now than a century ago, the ideology that underlies this categorizing persists in government forms and in the general populace, even among those who do not benefit from it.

Members of the social network in the present study contest the U.S. racial hierarchy in various ways. First, they implicitly question the discreteness of the categories with jokes about some of them being taken as white; their very phenotypic diversity essentially undermines the white/non-white dichotomy that is conventionally assumed in the U.S. Similarly, they deconstruct the white category by explicitly referring to Italian Americans as Latinos (those marriages within the social network that have been exogenous, i.e., not to other Mexicans, let alone to others from the rancho or its micro region, have been to Italian Americans). One man who was born in Kansas but who retired in the rancho, whose daughter married an Italian American she met in Chicago, said to me, Italianos, pues, son latinos! (Italians, well, they're Latinos!), referring to shared customs such as spicy food, a focus on the family, and Catholicism. Another man in the rancho who has never been to the U.S., in referring to the Italian American wife of another man from the rancho who lives and works near Chicago, told me that this woman is not pura güera (pure white) because she is Italian, in spite of the fact that Italians are clearly (now) considered white in the U.S. Such comments echo a belief which was in fact articulated historically in the U.S. to justify preferential treatment first of Anglo Saxons and then, more generally, of northern (non-Irish!) Europeans (Oboler, 1995). Both of these men, perhaps imposing the more finely graded Mexican racial hierarchy on U.S. dichotomous categories, undermine the white category by separating out Italians.

A second way in which members of this social network resist U.S. racial categories also involves the use of the term Latino. Several people have contested this homogenizing label (even though occasionally others have used it positively) by distinguishing themselves from other Latinos. One woman was critical of Puerto Ricans, for example, because, in her view, they did not have family values like Mexicans do, since their children leave home at 18 like los anglo sajonas (the Anglo Saxons). Others have criticized Latinos who don't speak Spanish, calling into question the lumping together of non-Spanish-speaking Chicanos with Spanish-speaking mexicanos: One man complained of people who "have a nopal [a Mexican cactus used for food] engraved on their forehead" (i.e., look very Mexican, perhaps with indigenous features) but don't speak Spanish! Another was critical of upwardly-mobile Cubans: Esos cubanos, aquí entró uno de de de quién sabe qué de barredor en la pinche CTA, y >orita es el mero jefe ya! (Those Cubans, one entered here as the, the, the, who knows what the sweeper in the damned

CTA, and now he's the boss!).

Neither Here nor There: Playing with Race in Transnational Space

The contesting of U.S. racial and ethnic categories of white and Latino by these *rancheros* is paralleled by their own resistance to being racialized as Indians, or as de-Indianized mestizos, in Mexico. As noted throughout this chapter, they disrupt the conflation of race and class (and rurality) in Mexico by continually affirming their non-Indian identity. When they are again categorized in the U.S. as a non-white Other (now as Latino/Hispanic), they also take issue with it. Given their familiarity with these two different racial hierarchies, and their ambiguous places in each, they sometimes play with the categories, enjoying the ambiguity, and perhaps their own dexterity in sliding from category to category, depending on the context. All such play, of course, deeply questions the validity of the categories themselves. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to an analysis of an instance of this verbal play, a tape-recorded excerpt of joking among women in a van traveling from Chicago to Mexico for the Christmas holidays one year.

This excerpt occurred during a longer joking session among women of various ages in the van. Partly to pass the time, and partly for the sheer pleasure of *echando relajo* (joking around; a way of speaking linked to disorder, pleasure, and verbal art; see Farr, 1994, 1998, forthcoming), these women were taking turns at being humorous, moving from topic to topic according to various contributions from the group. According to Reyna, quoted in Briggs (1988: 231), an “immense desire to be verbally adequate” is often realized through humor in *mexicano* culture. Although Reyna was referring to *mexicano* culture in the southwestern U.S., it is equally true within this social network of western Mexicans. Often people take the floor during *relajo* to tell narratives that pleasurably entertain and simultaneously function to draw the group together. As a Mexican language and cultural practice, *relajo* affirms group identity and solidarity, and it serves to socialize younger listeners into Mexican, and *ranchero*, ways of speaking and being. In this particular instance, the floor is predominantly shared; in other *relajos* women take turns telling humorous narratives. Here laughter is most notable in two places: first, when L uses Polish and then comments on the progress it signifies (lines 9-15), and second, after B and D play around with the ambivalence of Indian identity in lines 34 – 40. Following L’s suggestion that, being Mexican, they should know the indigenous language of their region of Mexico (Tarasco or Purhépecha) in line 35, both D and B utter comments that are “double-voiced” ---on the one hand, Oh, si, they should know Tarascan (lines 34 – 35), but on the other, the Indians are, to use a phrase common in the rancho, *pinche indios* (damn Indians), as Delia says while giggling in line 36. They end by acknowledging their partial Indian heritage: first B playfully insists that she herself is Indian, so don’t talk that way about them in front of her, and then D agrees, noting that all of them are Indian, really, for you can see the *nopal* (A Mexican cactus) coming out of their foreheads^{xii}. In the unstated background of this conversation are two nations, Mexico and the United States, specifically Chicago, and the different racial hierarchies bound up in their sense of nationhood. Their equivocal places in these two hierarchies, and the fact that they travel, and are traveling now, between two different nation-states and racial contexts, intensifies the ambiguity with which they joke. In this part of the transcript made in the traveling van, three women (B, D, and L) *echar relajo*.

That there is a larger audience, however, is clear from the fact that another woman comments on the entire topic (W) in line 41.

D: <i>Yo no te veo delgada.</i>	D: I don't see you as slender.	1
B: <i>Pues no pero</i> ^B	B: Well, no, but ^C	2
L: <i>Pero ella quiere más</i> ^B	L: But she wants more ^C	3
B: <i>Estoy como la calidad del tordo al revés.</i>	B: I am like a bird, but in reverse.	4
D: {Laughs}	D: {Laughs}	5
L: <i>Ella quiere tener más...</i>	L: She wants to have more...	6
B: <i>Más piernas. Más</i> /?/.	B: More legs. More /?/.	7
W: <i>No, un poquito más pompis.</i>	W: No, a little more rear end.	8
L: <i>)Tú sabes qué es dupa?</i>	L: Do you know what <i>dupa</i> is?	9
B: <i>)Es qué?</i>	B: It's what?	10
L: <i>)En qué idioma te estoy hablando?</i>	L: In what language am I speaking to you?	11
B: <i>No, no sé.</i>	B: No, I don't know.	12
L: <i>Polaco.</i> {laughs}	L: Polish. {laughs}	13
B: <i>Ay, en polaco es todo</i> /?/.	B: Oh, in Polish it's all /?/.	14
L: <i>Fíjate nomás el progreso.</i> [ironic tone]	L: Just look at the progress. [ironic tone]	15
Women: {Laughter}	Women: {Laughter}	16
B: <i>Ya de lo que--)ya pasáste al qué?</i>	B: Now from that ^C now you've passed on to what?	17
L: <i>No, no todo.</i>	L: No, not really.	18
W: <i>)A cómo</i> /?/?	W: How /?/?	19
B: <i>)Cómo se dice en inglés pompi?</i>	B: How do you say in English <i>pompi</i> ?	20
D: Butt.	D: Butt.	21
B: <i>Ya de eso ya pasáste a polaco y todo. Para el próximo año ya vas a hablar chino y</i> {laughter} <i>chan chan chan.</i>	B: Now from that you've passed on to Polish and everything. Next year you're going to speak Chinese and {laughter} <i>chan chan chan.</i>	22
D: <i>Como el novio de V dice</i> <i>A</i> Yo sí se francés, yo sí sé frances [@] y le hace V bien callada, <i>A</i> Sí pero cuando se l--se le acaba el francés le entra el italiano. [@] {Laughter}	D: Like V's boyfriend says, <i>A</i> I can speak French, I can speak French, [@] and V says real quiet, <i>A</i> Yes, but when the French finishes, the Italian begins. [@]	23
B: <i>)Por qué?)De dónde es él?</i>	B: Why? Where is he from?	24
Young Women: <i>(Es mexicano!</i>	Young Women: He's Mexican!	25
D: <i>Pero es puras mentiras, no sabe.</i>	D: But it's just lies, he doesn't know.	26
B: <i>Mexicano, hasta las cachas.</i>	B: Mexican, to the hilt!	27
L: <i>No, el mexicano va saber pero tarasco.</i>	L: No, the Mexican is going to know Tarascan.	28
D: Oh sí.	D: Oh yes.	29
B: Oh sí.	B: Oh yes.	30
D: <i>Pinche indios.</i> {Gigging}	D: Damn Indians. {Gigging}	31
B: <i>Ehí, calmada con los indios, yo soy india.</i>	B: Hey, take it easy on the Indians, I am Indian.	32
D: <i>Todos nosotros, todos. No me ves el pinche nopal</i> /?/ <i>que me sale una tuna ahí.</i> {laughs}	D: All of us, all. Don't you see the damned nopal /?/ that the fruit comes out here {laughs}	33
B: <i>El nopal</i> {laughing}.	B: The nopal {laughing}.	34
W: <i>Ay ay ay.</i>	W: <i>Ay ay ay.</i>	35
B: <i>Ay, como son tremendas.</i>	B: Oh, how audacious you all are.	36

Synopsis and Interpretation. Immediately preceding this excerpt, the women were joking about comparing their own bodies to the idealized ones found in magazines and other public media. One woman (B) then states, at the beginning of this excerpt, how she would like to change her own body with more legs and rear end. This reminds another woman of the word for rear end in Polish, something she may have learned through contact with Polish immigrants, the next largest non-English-speaking group in Chicago after Mexicans. (Such contacts occur in neighborhoods, in English classes, or sometimes at work.) After using the Polish word *dupa* (rear end), she asks if anyone knows what this means, and, then, when no one does, tells them its meaning. She ironically links her learning of some Polish with progress, in line 15, by saying, *Fijate nomas el progreso* (Just look at the progress). Progress, in the sense of moving ahead in life, is an explicitly articulated value of *rancheros* (Farr, 2000), which they use to contrast themselves with indigenous Mexicans, who are seen as communal and not progressing. Moreover, progress is an expected benefit of going to Chicago to work. Cognizant of the fact that they are returning to Mexico from working in Chicago, L makes explicit what is perhaps in the back of everyone's mind and jokes about it, since the move to Chicago, while certainly resulting in material progress for virtually all of these *rancheros*, has not been without pain or difficulty. This disjuncture is, then, a ripe topic for joking, and the women reward her comment with much supportive laughter.

The topic of speaking other languages then brings to another young woman's mind the insistent claim of her sister's boyfriend that he can speak French (lines 25-26), which she says her sister quietly and sarcastically called into question by noting, *Sí pero cuando se l--se le acaba el francés le entra el italiano* (Yes, but when the French finishes, the Italian begins) in lines 26-27. This too is rewarded with much laughter, at someone who is trying to be more than he is. B, not knowing this young man, asks where he is from. When the others delightedly chorus, *¡He is Mexican!* (and Mexican, *hasta las cachas* or to the hilt), L comments that, really, a Mexican (from their region of the country), if s/he is to know another language, should know Tarascan (*Tarasco* or *Purhépecha*). D affirms this right away (Oh *sí* in line 34), since the official public discourse in Mexico, promoted by the government and federal schools, valorizes the indigenous languages and heritage of Mexico. B repeats and affirms D's Oh *sí*. Following a slight pause pregnant with meaning, D then utters a phrase common in the *ranchos*: [those] damn Indians! This phrase calls into question the nationalistic racial ideology that they had just affirmed with Oh *sí*. Moreover, it gives voice to their shared reality of *ranchero* attitudes toward Indians and their shared assumption of non-indigenous identity. Here the disjuncture is between a national official discourse that valorizes an Indian heritage and the local level reality of what it means to actually be Indian in Mexico. As rural *campesinas* who are often Indianized by the elite in Mexico, these *rancheras* are well aware of the disadvantages that this implies, and of their own family histories that disrupt the widespread imaginary dichotomy between Spanish/urban/elite and Indian/rural/poor.

D and B's use of the English *Oh* rather than the Spanish *Ay* in their Oh *sí* responses, while no doubt unconscious, may not be accidental. This code switch, though minor, indexes the transnational context in which they live and within which, at that very moment, they are traveling. Moving regularly between two nation-states, and two racial schemes, highlights the

differences between them and leads to a deepened sense of relativity. The “place” of these women and their *ranchero* families in a racial hierarchy depends entirely on context, and even then, who they actually are (and what some of them look like) disrupts the logic underlying the racial order in both the U.S. and Mexico.

Although B is phenotypically quite “white,” with brown wavy hair, light skin and blue eyes, her own racial identity is multifaceted, depending on context. On this tape from the traveling van, B seems to affirm Mexican nationalistic racial ideology (we are all Indians), but the fact that she plays with this topic suggests an ambivalence about it. For her part, D, in re-voicing a common *ranchero* put-down of Indians, clearly questions their automatic affirmation of the government ideology. Yet perhaps she also is critiquing the *ranchero* claim to a non-indigenous identity, making fun of the fact that, in spite of this claim, in this conversation they seem to be playing the Mexican government’s game (we should value our indigenous heritage and perhaps know Tarascan). B has mentioned on other tapes how people at work question her claim that she is actually indigenous. Because she is so white, they tell her, she can’t really be Indian. Her claim to those at work that she in fact is Indian can be interpreted as a response to the U.S. racial dichotomy of white/non-white. If she has any Indian blood, then according to this logic, she is not completely white, so she makes this claim herself rather than having this category imposed on her by others. She has told me that she is taken for white until she speaks (either Spanish, or English with a Spanish accent), and then has suffered job discrimination. Here, however, within the social network, she and D joke about these categories and invoke the shared knowledge that they are not truly indigenous according to the local logic of their micro

region within Mexico. There, the truly indigenous do speak *Purhépecha* and live in indigenous communities, excluding and being hostile to these “outsider” *rancheros*, who consider themselves to be of higher status. When, immediately after D’s counter-discursive *Pinche indios*, she playfully says, in line 37, *Ehi, calmada con los indios, yo soy india* (Hey, take it easy on the Indians, I am Indian), she ambiguously invokes both positions: first, in the U.S., she might as well be Indian since she is non-white (conveyed by the literal meaning of her words), yet second, in Mexico, she knows she is not Indian, in spite of the government’s official position (conveyed by the playful tone in which she expresses the words).

The joking on this topic begins to come to a close in lines 38-39 when D admits that they are all (ambiguously) Indian, like B, and then invokes the common metaphor for looking (very) Mexican: having a *nopal* cactus on one’s forehead. They laugh and L ends the episode with an evaluative comment on those who would joke about such things in line 42, *Ay, como son tremendas* (Oh, how audacious you all are). The word *tremenda* is often used positively, not pejoratively, by these women to refer to others who do not keep to “traditional” demure female behavior and are not afraid to speak up against such norms. B uses it here in that sense, showing her, and their, pleasure in this counterlanguage, so characteristic of *relajo*.

Verbal Play as Racial Critique. An extensive literature on joking reveals its capacity for social inversion (Bauman, 1986: 70-77; Briggs, 1988: 171-232), and I have argued (Farr, 1998) that Mexican *relajo* functions as a micro-fiesta in this regard, since the fiesta, or carnival, is similarly

an anti-structural process. In both verbal and non-verbal play such as *relajo* and *fiesta*, the usual norms and structures of society can be turned upside down, at least for the moment. Limón (1982), Bauman (1986), and Briggs (1988), among others, stress the creative and performative power of such play, especially verbal play, arguing for the transformative power of language, and that change is indeed facilitated by the critical perspectives engendered by joking (Farr, 1994). In the above excerpt, B and D express a Bakhtinian “double-voicedness.” One voice expresses the official Mexican ideology of pride in their Indian heritage, while the other voice is critical of this ideology, knowing full well the daily realities in the countryside that are linked to being Indian or *ranchero*. Their own movement back and forth across the Mexico-U.S. border and their familiarity with two different national ideologies that implicate race in different ways provides them with a perspective from which to critique these ideologies, a critique which is implicit in their joking. The ambiguity of their position in both national racial orders provides fertile resources for such humor. They consider themselves non-indigenous in Mexico, even as they are Indianized because they are rural peasants, and in the U.S. they are not easily placed in a single racial category. Although many of them are initially perceived to be white in the U.S., they know they are not *güera güera* (really white) because of their mixed heritage. Neither are they black, nor Asian, nor Native American. Here, however, in this excerpt of joking, these women play with the ambiguity inherent in their not fitting neatly into either country’s racial categories.

Conclusion: Race, *Rancheros* and Nations

I have described the racial ideology of *rancheros* in relation to colonial and post-colonial Mexican racial categories, as well as to U.S. racial categories and the place, or lack of it, of Mexicans within the traditional white/non-white dichotomy. Both Mexican and U.S. nation building have utilized the idea of shared descent and thus race in their imagined communities, Mexico with a new “mixed” race (*la raza cosmica*) and the U.S. with whiteness, ignoring differences in class, gender, and ethnicity in the attempt to essentialize national communities. According to Basch et al (1994), transnational migrants have the potential to disrupt these homogenizing forces of nationalism. The transmigrants studied by Basch et al, however, became very involved in political organizing in both the United States and their home countries; in contrast, *rancheros* traditionally avoid organizations and politics. Yet by resisting inclusion in either nation’s racial categories, as well as by resisting the impositions of both governments, *rancheros* such as these affirm their difference from both nation’s dominant identities. This in itself provides a space for counter hegemonic effects, as Basch et al have pointed out:

However, the issue of resistance is a complex one that must be contextualized within the always partial and unfinished construction of identities shaped by the pressures of national hegemonies. Subordinated populations may internalize many of the meanings and representations that pervade their daily surroundings, but that internalization remains partial and incomplete. Meanings are often subverted and there is always, at the level of daily practice, some opening for innovation. (Basch et al, 1994: 46).

These *rancheros*, and thousands of others, have “voted [in Mexico] with their feet” (Dinerman, 1983) in migrating to the U.S., where their increasing presence alone disturbs the traditional racial order. In their daily practices, which include *echando relajo* (joking around) as in the

excerpt above, they resist both Mexican and U.S. hegemonic constructions of identity, playing with their ambiguous places in the racial orders of both countries. In daily verbal practices such as *relajo* they perform identities somewhere between the “us” and the “them” in both countries, illuminating the ground-level nuances of identities that don’t easily fit discrete categories of a racial hierarchy.

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i. The term *indígena* (‘indigenous’) is used in Mexico to refer to those who are native to Mexico. ‘Indian’ (*indio*), although it is sometimes used in the *rancho*, is considered less polite. *Güare*, or the diminutive *güarecita*, is a name used in the *rancho* to refer to indigenous women.

ii. This house now has three bedrooms (the newer two bedrooms and bathroom having been built with money from Chicago). Like others of their generation, these parents, now in their fifties, had seven children now ranging in age from the late teens to the early 30’s. The parents use one bedroom (a luxury not shared by all in the *rancho*), the female offspring use another, and the male offspring use a third. When more people are ‘home’ from Chicago (including not only the two eldest daughters, but cousins and guests), females share the two double beds and extra mattresses put on the floor in the ‘female’ bedroom. The father has remarked that it is all right for women to sleep all over each other, but not for men, so he plans to build more rooms onto the house.

iii. Interview with Salvador Zambrano, 2/5/96.

iv. Interview with Aurora Carabes, 6/30/98.

v. Until recently, public representations and most studies ignored another complexity in the racial history of Mexico: the presence of Africans. Aguirre Beltrán (1972) pioneered the study of Africans in Mexico, but until recently, most have assumed that the presence of Africans was limited primarily to coastal areas. Highland Michoacán, however, including the micro-region of the present study, had significant numbers of Africans who were brought to Mexico as slaves to work in households, mines, and on sugar plantations (Chavez Carbajal, 1995; Esquivel Vega, 1985). This ‘third root’ of Mexico has not been studied until recent decades because the historical awareness of African presence was buried as Africans assimilated, as individuals, into the population. Lomnitz-Adler (1992) explains that, whereas colonial policy allowed Indians a group identity within a hierarchical ‘Indian nation,’ Africans were not allowed to form groups that promoted a separate African identity. Slavery was justified as a transitory condition that enabled the Spaniards to convert individuals whose nations of origin rejected the faith. Thus individual Africans, but Indian nations, were ‘redeemed’ as they converted to Catholicism.

vi. In the 2000 Census, people were able to identify either as one race or as more than one. Although this is more reflective of contemporary reality, it still perpetuates the notion that a ‘race’ is biologically real.

vii. During a visit with relatives of this family in Mexico City, I was told that an educated (late) uncle had traced their roots to a town in Asturias, which they showed me on a map. The family name is the same as the town’s.

viii. Elite urban Mexicans, for example, celebrate the Day of the Dead, an originally indigenous practice. *Rancheros*, however, generally do not celebrate this event, associating it with indigenous identity. Interestingly, some younger members of the families in the present study began to celebrate this event in Chicago, where it has come to represent Mexican, rather than indigenous, identity.

ix. On occasions when I inadvertently wore a patterned *rebozo* that resembled an indigenous one (I never wore the traditional *Purhépecha rebozo*, as I quickly learned that it indexed indigenous identity), it was remarked upon by women in the *rancho*: ‘(Ay, look at Márcia in the pretty *güare rebozo*! Once a man teased me about wearing such a *güare rebozo*, saying, ‘They’ll think you’re from Tarecuato with that *rebozo*!’ On that occasion I wore a turquoise *rebozo* striped with

navy blue, which I thought, wrongly, did not index indigenous identity. As Tarecuato is the closest indigenous *pueblo* to the *rancho* and the center of indigenous life in this micro-region, its use in discourse unequivocally indexes indigenous ethnic identity.

x. This interview was carried out by Teresa Fernández Aceves and me in June, 1998 in the home of the woman in a neighboring indigenous village.

xi. In fact, after almost a year living there I was much darker than I usually am in Chicago during its long winters with overcast skies, even though my exposure to the sun was only incidental, e.g., walking through the market in nearby Zamora, or through the *rancho* to visit friends or go to church. Because my skin tans easily and I have brown eyes, I was not immediately taken to be non-Mexican during my year there. (I was sometimes assumed to be from Guadalajara, where people are reputed to be tall and white or, once, asked if I was Italian. Actually my easily tanned skin and brown eyes probably are from Bavarian ancestors.) This is not unusual in parts of western Mexico, nor in this *rancho*, where many people's appearances tend toward more stereotypically Awhite North American@ones. This also points out that the tropical sun significantly affects the skin color of everyone, including those who are often treated as though they are genetically Abrown.@ Thus those who have darker skin in Mexico lighten considerably (if they work indoors) in Chicago's long relatively sunless winters. One young woman noted to me that people arrive from Chicago *muy palido* (very pale).

^{xii} This phrase is commonly used to mean that people appear to be native to Mexico, i.e. they look Indian.