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‘The Difference that “One Drop” Makes: Mixedness and Mexican and African Americans as Racial Subjects

Abstract:

Using archival materials, I will examine how the mixed ancestry of African and Mexican Americans was treated, both in law and discourse, in distinctly contrasting ways in the early 20th century. I will argue that black and Mexican subjects were positioned in qualitatively different ways in relation to whiteness. Furthermore, the singular treatment of ‘black blood’ as a social toxin, a construction emerging within the specific circumstances of American slavery, also informed the subjective positioning of Mexicans, as well as shaping some Mexican Americans’ responses to racism.

Keywords: Mixedness, hybridity, Mexican-Americans, African-Americans

In 1930, Max Handman, a Texan sociologist writing about the increasingly unpopular presence of Mexican immigrants in his home state, made an observation that would frequently be quoted by later scholars:

The problem...is the inability of the American community to control the situation because it has no technique for handling partly colored races. We have a place for the Negro and a place for the white man: the Mexican is not a Negro, and the white man refuses him equal status. What will result from this I am not a

prophet enough to foretell, but I know that it may mean
trouble. (1930 p. 609-610)

Handman's reading of Mexicans as a 'partly-colored' and therefore liminal and potentially troubling presence within the country's binary racial order is one that continues to reverberate in modern scholarship. Gregory Rodriguez, for example, writes that Mexicans 'def[ied] the American racial system,' as they could 'never fit neatly into a hierarchical racial order based on purity' (2007 p. 97). However, assertions that Mexican mixedness has frustrated attempts to fix them firmly into a racial order are considerably problematised when considered alongside the manner in which African Americans were racially classified in the early 20th century. That Americans often characterised Mexicans as 'mongrels', 'hybrids' or 'partly-colored' contrasts sharply with discursive and legal constructions of blackness. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the so-called 'one-drop rule' was used to determine who was black, defining in practice and often in law any person with known African descent, or 'one-drop' of 'black blood,' as Negro.

I will argue that while white Americans considered both African and Mexican Americans to be 'racial problems', the subjective boundaries they drew around whiteness in relation to blackness, on the one hand, and Mexicanness, on the other, were often qualitatively different. Whereas blackness was conceived of as wholly separate and socially, even physically, incompatible with whiteness, the relationship between Mexicanness and whiteness was more flexible and varied. This is readily apparent in the manner in which each group's mixed ancestry was imagined and managed. While different American racialised subjectivities must be understood in their distinct historical terms, they have been forged in ways that are inextricably relational. I will thus argue that the discourses and practices through which 'black

blood' was constructed as a potent social toxin shaped the American social landscape in ways that have also been deeply consequential for Mexican Americans. In many instances, both white and Mexican Americans discursively employed the construct of racial blackness to decipher the Mexican subject and the group's relationship to white Americans.

I thus hope to illuminate some of the contrasting constructions of Mexican and African American mixedness in this historical period, examining how their distinctions informed the subjective positioning of Mexican Americans and their own responses to American racism. Approaching these issues through an examination of historical materials I aim to contribute to and extend current discussions of mixedness. The examination of such materials also helps us to understand the lived experiences of racial categorisation and hierarchy, elucidating the manifold ways in which individuals have both imposed and inhabited such boundaries.

Scholars considering the Mexican experience in the United States have not been alone in examining the relationship of the 'mongrel,' the 'in-between' and the 'hybrid' to regimes of power premised upon racial claims. Handman's anxiety over the neither-one-nor-the-other presence of the Mexican, his foreboding sense that the 'partly colored' Mexican would bring a 'trouble' that he could not articulate, could well be read within Homi Bhabha's influential conceptualisation of hybridity as a disruptive, disorienting and thus transgressive force. 'The paranoid threat of the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside' (1994 p. 165). In his examination of 19th century discourses of hybridity, Robert C. Young writes that the idea of race 'only works when defined against potential intermixture, which also threatens to undo its calculations altogether' (1995 p.18). At the end of this article, I will return to consider what the

empirical ground examined here can tell us about the relationship between mixedness and racism, as well as what Young and others have seen as the fundamental tension between the doctrine of race and the fact of mixture.

One night in Atlanta

To begin to mark the very different ways in which African and Mexican American subjectivities were both constituted and inhabited, it is useful to consider an anecdote in the autobiography of Walter White, the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from 1931 until 1955. During what became known as the Atlanta Race Riots of 1906, 13 year-old White crouched in the dark with his father underneath an open window, clutching a rifle. The mob of angry white men outside had decided their house was too nice for black people to live in and thus to burn it down. 'In the flickering light the mob swayed, paused, and began to flow toward us,' White writes. 'In that instant there opened up within me a great awareness; I knew then who I was. I was a Negro' (1949 p. 11). Thousands of children have doubtlessly experienced such moments when they learn what it means, in the light of day or the darkness of night, to be marked as belonging to a particular group. A seemingly incongruent element in this story is that the father and son crouching in the dark shared the same phenotype as the men shouting, 'Let's go get the nigger' (p. 12). Named like a character out of heavy-handed fiction, Walter White was black and was, like his pale Negro father and blue-eyed, blonde-haired Negro mother, entirely European in physical appearance. It has been approximated that he was of sixty-three sixty-fourths European ancestry (Davis 1991 p. 7).

In light of this anecdote, consider Linda Alcoff's claim that Latinos 'simply don't fit' into the dominant categories of American race:

Racialized identities in the North have long connoted homogeneity and easily visible identifying features, but this doesn't apply to Latinos in the United States... We have no homogeneous culture, we come in every conceivable color, and identities such as "mestizo" signify the very absence of boundaries. (2006 p.229)

Yet as we have just seen, America's most salient racialised identity did not always correspond with 'easily visible features.' Walter White was not physically black but still a Negro, both in 'the depths of his soul', and in the reckoning of those bearing torches (the two phenomena, of course, intimately bound). If his appearance could afford him the option of escape across caste lines, he still found himself fully interpellated and subject to the consequences of being racially marked. White's blackness points to the fact that though the 'place for the Negro,' as Handman described it, was regulated through a monolithic racial classification, enforced at various times by both the courts and the mob, the individuals assigned to that place were of 'every conceivable color,' diverse in class, culture and experience. Like Mexicans, African Americans are also a group of vastly mixed ancestry. At least three-fourths of African Americans, and possibly as many as 90%, have European ancestry, and as many as a quarter have Native American ancestry (Davis 1991 p.21).

The assumption, then, that Latino or Mexican heterogeneity 'confounds' traditional American racialisation risks implicitly reinforcing the idea that the supposedly racial distinctiveness of blackness is inherent, self-evident and elemental. The perceived ambiguity of Mexican race and the asserted naturalness of black race

each derive from specific historical circumstances rather than physical features or ancestry or mixtures thereof. That African Americans' status as a distinct race is so readily accepted as an unambiguous fact can only be understood as a product of American slavery. In what Barbara Fields has described as the essential asymmetry of race ideology in the United States, blackness has been marked, scrutinized, legislated, defined and confined with a longevity and severity unparalleled in the experiences of other American ethnic groups (2001 p.51). As I will now begin to explore, the manner in which Mexicans and blacks were positioned as mixed and *mixing* subjects highlights the very different social boundaries that were erected around each group.

Passing and Infragroup Difference

'Mexicans are Mexicans, just as all blacks are Negroes.'

An author in 1921 commented, '[T]he word Mexican is used to indicate race, not a citizen or subject of that country...Mexicans...are "Mexicans" just as all blacks are Negroes.' (Slayden 1921 p. 125) The term 'Mexican' came to be used throughout the Southwest not simply as a racial designation but as a racial slur (McWilliams 1948 p. 222). However, the significance of 'Mexican' as a term of nationality could never be completely submerged. Even in anti-Mexican discourse, the term was often understood to encompass a population of different racial and economic elements. Restrictionists and eugenicists regularly made such delineations between 'types' of Mexicans, keen to establish that it was the 'peon' type, rather than the 'white ruling class' Mexican, flooding across the border (Congress 1928 p. 43).

Indeed, middle and upper class Mexican immigrants had considerably different experiences than their working class counterparts. Importantly, Mexican ancestry could be alluded to without social damage. In the 1940s, Carey McWilliams

noted that the Los Angeles Sheriff, Eugene Biscaluz, who had wholeheartedly participated in the relentless wartime vilification of Mexican youth by the city's law enforcement, 'made much fuss over his Latin blood,' and ostentatiously identified himself with the city's Mexican community on Cinco de Mayo and the Sixteenth of September (McWilliams 1948 p.234). This starkly contrasts with the anecdote that W.E.B. DuBois relates of a prominent white man in Louisiana who, when 'accused' of having Negro blood, burned the courthouse down, 'with all its vital records' (1992 p.453). Biscaluz could celebrate his 'Latin blood' when it suited him; recognition of 'Negro blood', on the other hand, could mean a permanent descent into racial caste.

'Let me see your fingernails'

While they were legally and often practically assigned to the same racial category, differences between 'Mulattoes' and 'Negros' were also often contemplated. Though 'black' and 'white' certainly formed the unambiguously binary poles in which many Americans understood race, this is not to say that white Americans were unaware that many black people had 'white blood.' Indeed the 'one drop rule' would have been inconceivable had it not been for the acknowledgement of mixing, its very stringency reflecting the vast extent of mixture. In a key point of contrast, while even explicitly racist anti-Mexican discourse could recognize some Mexicans as white, anti-black doctrine posited that black people could be 'white-looking' but not 'really' white. It is the construction of this mutually exclusive relationship of subjectivity- that one could not be subjectively white and also black- in which the practice of passing must be understood. Passing, in the African American context, represented an exchange of racial designation that was necessarily total - in presenting oneself as white, one necessarily had to deny one's blackness.

Illustrating the rigidity of these designations is the fact that white people wishing to marry or maintain other social relations with black people also sometimes passed as black, either to evade legal restrictions or social reprobation. In his memoirs, bandleader Johnny Otis describes passing as 'Louisiana Creole' in order to marry his black wife after they were initially denied a marriage license. He also relates an incident in which he passed as black in order to enter a 'Colored Only' Count Basie performance during the 1939 San Francisco World Fair. After telling the policeman at the door that he was 'colored', the officer called over his partner who happened to be from Mississippi. Otis describes the exchange:

“Let me see your fingernails, boy.”

He examined my nails with a professional, almost scientific, authority.

“Yeah, he’s a nigra...let him in.” (2009 p. 16-17)

In addition to those individuals who consciously violated the colour-line, others found themselves misidentified. A Northern woman interviewed by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in the 1940s recounted being directed to the white car of a train by a porter when travelling in the South. She uneasily took her seat but was later approached by a conductor. Weighing up the potential shame of the other black passengers seeing her led into the 'colored' car by the conductor as if she had been trying to pass, the woman feigned indignation and claimed to be a 'Jewess.' 'The conductor flushed and was very much embarrassed,' she told her interviewers.

I just know how he must have felt. He apologized again and then walked away. I was scared. I didn't enjoy the ride at all, and but for the company of a little eight-year-old

white child, I talked to no one. (Drake & Cayton 1993
p.161)

As this woman's experience suggests, while offering a means of escaping segregation, one's racial ambiguity could also be the source of anxiety, embarrassment and reprobation. In any case, we should tread carefully in supposing that passing threatened the maintenance of race. Discussing the discourse which conceptualises passing as 'a radical and transgressive practice' serving 'to destabilize and traverse', Sarah Ahmed observes that relations of power can be secured, 'paradoxically, *through this very process of destabilization*' (1999 88-89). Whatever benefits passing may have offered, the practice fundamentally reasserted the racial terms it covertly crossed. Passing as white (or as Jewish or another not-black ethnic group) required the denial of one's blackness, either permanently or temporarily, and thus ultimately maintained the supposed mutual exclusivity of black and white.

Accordingly, Drake and Cayton noted that the white community in the North did not fear or resent passing as much as intermarriage, although passing was much more common and involved many more people, precisely because 'passing leaves intact the fundamental principle of segregation' (1993 p. 129-130). The fact that passing enabled many more sexual and even marital relationships between white and black people but open intermarriage was viewed as more problematic suggests that the outward maintenance of *social* separation of the two groups was fundamentally more important than the covert sexual crossing of racial lines or the biological purity of white blood. Drake and Cayton found that in the North some white people were 'willing to overlook a small infusion of Negro blood provided the person who is passing has no social ties with Negroes...In one case, everybody, including the suspect, saved face by saying it was perhaps *Indian* blood' (p.159-160).

'What are you...Spanish?'

The term 'passing' has sometimes been used to describe the efforts of some Mexican Americans to present their heritage as 'Spanish' in order to escape prejudice, but this process had some important distinctions. When Mexicans called themselves Spanish, or when others referred to them as such, the act was often not one of complete substitution, so much as euphemism. Whereas known black ancestry negated whiteness, in both legal and social terms, the relationship between 'Spanish' and 'Mexican' was quite different. The former was often treated as a more palatable version of the latter. Social worker and author Beatrice Griffith commented that even when Mexican Americans identified as Mexican, 'well-meaning' white Americans might insist upon their 'Spanishness': "Mexican? Oh, but you're so smart and all...you're not like those other Mexicans." Or, "Come on, you know you're Spanish. I'm going to call you that anyway" (1948 p. 236-237).

Manuel de la Raza, the editor of a 1940s student newspaper called the *Mexican Voice*, described the relationship between the two terms, citing what he called the 'discouraging' trend in which both Mexicans and others referred to successful Mexicans as 'Spanish.' 'Oft-times when people who are curious of our national descent because of our complexion or our name ask us, "Are you Spanish?" They really mean to ask us, "Are you Mexican?" They are afraid to do so because they think it is not polite or that they are paying us a compliment.' (1943 p. 8) He noted that the distinction was meant to mark differences in phenotype, but only among other qualities, in particular, class:

The inference is that only the talented, the law-abiding, the part-Mexican, the fair-complexioned, the professionals

and the tradesmen are “Spanish.” The drunkards, the delinquents, the very dark, the manual laborers, the pachucos, the criminals and those in the lower socio-economic scale are the Mexicans. If you don’t consider this an insult, then you don’t have any pride in your background! (p. 8)

The use of the distinction, he noted, was made generally by white people and Mexicans alike and often in a bid on behalf of politicians or the press to show deference to the ‘better group’ of Mexicans.

Here it is important to note how enmeshed were the class and perceived racial difference of Mexican Americans. Unlike the caste line between white and black, which politically and spatially tied upper class black people to the black poor, as noted, upper-class Mexicans were far more able to assimilate into American society. De la Raza lamented the lost leadership of those who ‘have broken away from our group and who call themselves “Spanish-American or assorted other Latin nomenclatures”’: ‘For all they know, if they were poor, regardless of how many generations they had been here they would be just “plain Mexican”’ (p. 8). Unlike the passing of black people, which depended upon the complete concealment of blackness, the transformation of Mexican into Spanish or ‘other Latin nomenclatures’ did not entirely obliterate the Mexican identity but coyly ameliorated it, distancing the individual from the connotations of exploitation, delinquency and racial difference associated with the Mexican group as a whole. In contrast to the draconian hypodescent of the one-drop rule, the ‘Spanish’ mechanism was one of discursive hyper-descent, elevating the mixed individual to the status of their ‘higher’ elements. This situation reflects that while Mexican Americans could attempt, with varying

degrees of success, to define their subjectivity in terms of culture or nationality, the positioning of the black subject, once identified as such, was determined always in terms of race, and thus, distinction. The contrast in these subject positions is perhaps best illustrated in the fact that, in some instances, black people who could not pass as white chose to pass as Mexican instead. (Garcilazo 2012, pp. 107-8; Smith 2006, p. 226)

‘Beyond the Reach of Mixture’: Blacks, Indians and Mexicans and ‘the American bloodstream’

As I will now begin to explore, the unequivocal social distinction imposed upon black people often served as a reference point from which white people and Mexicans alike attempted to assess Mexicans’ place in the United States. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Congress held a series of hearings on various bills put forth to restrict Mexican immigration. A steady stream of labour leaders, industrialists, agriculturists and eugenicists came before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization to offer their views on the perceived dangers or benefits of Mexican labour. Speakers on both sides of the debate frequently used the so-called ‘Negro problem’ to structure arguments about the purported racial qualities of Mexican immigrants and their impact on American society. This is readily apparent in discussions around intermarriage. In a section of his report to the committee entitled ‘Intermarriage between Whites and Mexicans, and Mexicans and Negroes’, Texas Senator John Box, a rabidly anti-Mexican advocate for immigration restriction, described the threat Mexicans presented:

No other alien people entering America have created
freer channels for blood intermixture through inter-

marriage than do these Mexicans with whom black and white races intermarry to a limited extent. White and negro race stocks can not be kept separate when both intermarry, even to the limited extent of a few thousand instances, with some hundreds of thousands or millions and increasing numbers of Mexican immigrants. (p.410)

Box reasoned that Mexicans' 'Caucasian blood' (of Spanish and 'other stocks') facilitated their liaisons with whites. Meanwhile, the 'humbler classes of the Mexicans' were 'basically Indian' with a 'strain of negro blood', which facilitated their intermarriage with Negroes. 'Such a situation,' he concluded, 'will make the blood of all three races flow back and forth between them in a distressing process of mongrelization' (p.410).

The confusion that Handman claimed racially indeterminate Mexicans wreaked on the American order, with its 'place for the white man' and its 'place for the Negro', is here imagined in blood - the confusion, in Box's eyes, disordering the physical essence of the white and black races. Box thus construed the threat of Mexican hybridity as not simply polluting the white race but of corroding the isolation of the black. Interestingly throughout the hearings, Box asserted that Mexicans were a greater menace to the country than African Americans, lamenting at one point that 'the negro....identified...with the cotton fields and the watermelon patches of the South and Southwest' was being supplanted 'by the sinister, silent flood of Mexican immigration' (p.419). Yet his formulation of tripartite mongrelisation reveals the salience of 'blackness' as a social division and reference point in the lives of white Americans. His warnings that Mexicans could erode the

biological barrier between whites and blacks reflects the manner in which ‘black blood’ was continually constructed in racist discourse as an elemental agent of social disintegration.

Employing this same construction for opposing purposes, the California Agricultural Legislative Committee, ardent defenders of Mexican labour, posited that Mexican immigration would prevent the ‘spread’ of the ‘Negro problem’ (p. 238). In a section of their report to the committee titled ‘No Race Problem Ethnically’, they took the argument to interesting lengths. They asserted that the Mexican ‘is not... a menace to the American bloodstream’ because ‘he’ had no ambition to marry white Americans. ‘However,’ the authors asserted, ‘any charge that a mixture of this kind is incompatible is not born out by the facts. We must remember that these Mexicans are Indians, and we have in our own Nation one outstanding example in the case of our Vice President, who is of Indian blood’ (Congress 1930 p.236). Such rhetoric certainly did not feature commonly in the debate; it is nevertheless revealing that in hearings explicitly informed by the racial logic of eugenicists, that such a line of argumentation – race mixing really isn’t so bad after all- could appear at all. The president of the *Los Angeles Times*, Harry Chandler, also took up this theme: ‘Every American knows, who is familiar with the Indian character, Indian blood has never degraded our citizenship. An American who has a little Indian blood in his veins is generally proud of it’ (p.61).

It is important to take a moment to contextualise the Indian discourse. As Nicholas De Genova argues, American racial theories were historically shaped by what white Americans understood as the distinct but definitive problems of the ‘savage’ Indian on their national periphery and the enslaved population within the nation itself. If anti-black discourse was often used to assess Mexicans, they were

explicitly linked to anti-Indian discourses. ‘The despised figure of the Indian savage,’ De Genova writes, ‘was routinely foregrounded as a crucial resource for [Mexicans]’ distinctive denigration as racial mongrels, the worst common denominator that remained as the debased refuse of their constituent parts’ (2006 p. 9). The denigration of the Mexicans as Indians proliferated during the Mexican American War as Americans prepared to expropriate vast quantities of Mexican land (Horsman 1981), and was still viable in the early 20th century vilification of Mexican immigrants. The term ‘peon’, frequently used by immigration restrictionists, indicated a racial as much as a class designation. In his 1927 work *Reforging our Nationhood*, eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard wrote: ‘The Mexican “peon” (Indian, or mixed-breed) is a poverty-stricken, ignorant, primitive creature.’ ‘Such a being,’ he concluded, ‘profoundly alien in blood, ideals, and outlook, can be only a destructive element in our national life’ (p. 214, 216).

As we have begun to see, however, the discursive treatment of Indian blood bequeathed a markedly ambivalent legacy. The taboo associated with mixture and ‘black blood’ extended to such literal extremes that during World War II the Surgeon General and the Red Cross insisted upon segregating the blood donations of black people, extracting, processing and storing African Americans’ blood (and theirs alone) separately from that of all other Americans (MacGregor & Nalty 1977 p.138). On the other hand, as David Hollinger has noted, white Americans have often ‘bragged’ about their ‘Indian blood’, frequently claiming, for example, to be ‘one-eighth Cherokee’ or proudly citing an indigenous great-grandmother. (2003, p. 1367) The writings of Thomas Jefferson capture this dichotomy and the distinct historical circumstances from which it arose. While contemplating the end of slavery, Jefferson insisted that the freed slaves should be ‘removed beyond the reach of mixture’ so as

not to 'stain' the blood of their former masters; while contemplating the expansion of the nation onto Indian lands he expressed the hope that Indians and whites would 'blend together, to intermix, and become one people' (1853, p. 155; Jordan 1968, p. 192).

That white Americans interpreted their experiences with African and Native Americans through often-antithetical constructions of black and Indian blood, as Patrick Wolfe has argued, lay not in the physical or cultural qualities of either group but the contrasting demands of slavery and land acquisition. Wolfe observes that in contrast to the construction of black difference as 'absolute, essential, and refractory,' 'the attributes of marriageability and cultural malleability provided for Indians' difference to be erased either physically, culturally, or both.' (2001 p.885) The comments of one upper-class Mexican immigrant, interviewed in the late 1920s about life in the United States capture this contrast: 'I consider the greatest problem which the United States has is the racial, the black peril...The Indians disappear or mix with other races but the Negro hardly ever disappears or at least not as easily, even when mixing takes place' (Gamio 1971 p.184). These figures stand in inverse but mutually unfortunate relation to the body of the white American subject. The Indian, whose blood never 'degraded our citizenship,' disappears; the Negro, who never disappears but remains marked even through mixing, becomes perilous. The variance of these constructions, as well as their ambivalent push and pull on the figure of the Mexican, illustrate the flexibility with which mixedness and mixture could be construed in racist discourse.

'Good Melting Pot Material'

Importantly, fears of Mexican ‘mongrelisation’ expressed by Box and others were not heeded with legislation. In the mid-20th century, some 30 states had anti-miscegenation statutes. While black people were prohibited in all of them from marrying white people, Mexicans were not named in any of the statutes. (Murray 1997 p.18). Mexican absence from such laws is closely tied to their official racial classification. Despite being widely considered both racially distinct and inferior, Mexicans came to be *formally* categorized as ‘white’ in the 19th century not because they were perceived as such in ethnic terms but because the treaty which ended the Mexican American war made them eligible for the rights of citizenship. (Martinez 2000, p. 379) In contrast, a vast and intricate web of state laws emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century to identify Negroes, specifying in ever exacting detail precisely how much African ancestry qualified one as black.¹ Such laws, as one author noted in 1916, were ‘far from agreement as to what a so-called negro is’ (Jenks p. 670). If they differed in their calculations of blood fractions and generations, however, all of them relegated persons of primarily European ancestry to black caste. Thus, whereas individuals with a fraction of African ancestry were legally classed as black, even Mexicans with a predominance of indigenous ancestry were legally classified as white- a fact which vividly illustrates the wide gulf between the racial mark shaped by practical demands of territorial conquest and that imposed by slavery.

While folk belief and every day practice largely coincided with the legal specifications imposed upon African Americans, the legal acceptance of Mexicans as white largely deviated from every day practice. Segregation in residential and public spaces, police brutality, and economic exploitation all forcefully established a racialised subjugation that the law, formally, did not. If the Census counted Mexicans as white, in many localities school officials, homeowners, and swimming pool

managers made explicit efforts to mark them otherwise.² Illustrative of the distance that existed between legal classification and the lived experience of being Mexican is the fact that many Mexicans seemed to have been unaware that they were categorised as ‘white’ (De la Raza 1943 p.8). However, it would be a mistake to suppose that this legal status was of no practical consequence within Mexican American life. The absence of Mexicans from anti-miscegenation law is a tangible demonstration to the contrary. In fact, the case which challenged and subsequently overturned the miscegenation statute in California was brought to the state Supreme Court by a Mexican American woman and black man denied a marriage license on the grounds that whites could not marry Negroes (*Perez v Lippold* 1948). Furthermore, as Neil Foley and others have shown, Mexican American politics in the Southwest frequently involved insisting upon whiteness to escape segregation and discrimination, a strategy which also sometimes included distancing Mexicans from African Americans (1997; 2010).

These impacts can be clearly seen in the political maneuvering of Manual Ruiz, a prominent Los Angeles attorney who lobbied for the civil rights of Mexican Americans in California. Interestingly, for Ruiz, the effort to demonstrate Mexican whiteness included accentuating the mixability of Mexicans. ‘The unadjustment [sic] of the American of Mexican extraction is one of custom, culture and language,’ he wrote in 1945, asserting that, like the Irish, Italians or Poles, the Mexicans were ‘good melting pot material’ (1945 p.3). Downplaying recent tensions between Mexican and white Americans, he commented: ‘Handsome American lads go right on courting beautiful señoritas, and the result is that Conchita, Pepita and Claudito O’Toole, are in the offing to perpetuate our ever increasing close kinship’ (p.1). Discussing the ‘fundamentally unscientific approach’ of ‘promoters of group antagonisms’ who

might attempt to racially classify Mexican Americans, Ruiz wrote that in order to refute such efforts the Mexican simply needed to '[point] to the constant and commonplace intermarriage between families of Mexican extraction with families of Anglo-American background' (p.1).

Such discourse tellingly deviates from that which African American political leaders at the time were obliged to adopt. As Gunnar Myrdal observed, the white majority's deep and widespread objection to black and white 'amalgamation,' prompted black leaders to constantly reassure white people that their demands for civil rights were not motivated by a secret ambition to marry white people (2002 p. 62). While anti-miscegenation statutes reflected, as Myrdal put it, that the 'boundary between Negro and white' was 'erected with the intention of permanency' (p. 58), Ruiz was keen to portray Mexicans' social alienation as transitory. In stressing the Mexicans' problems of 'unadjustment' as being those of immigrant newcomers unfamiliar with American culture, Ruiz carefully implied a distinction with African Americans – a contrast he sometimes made outright. 'We do [have our problems],' he noted in one article, 'but they are not to be confused with those of our negro citizens' (Undated p.2). In emphasising Mexicans as both cultural newcomers and harmonious marriage material for white Americans, he seemingly hoped to prove that Mexicans were socially and biologically reconcilable with white people and thus that the prejudice experienced by Mexicans in America was not, as in the case of 'our negro citizens', the result of natural, permanent differences of racial type.

***Mestizaje* and Cosmic Racism**

In the 1960s, Chicano activists rejected Ruiz and other Mexican American activists' earlier focus on assimilation and conceptualised their *mestizaje* (mixedness)

as part of an definitively not-white subjectivity, often linking their experience, politically and esthetically, to black resistance. However it should be noted that the previous generations' sense of their racial whiteness did not necessarily abnegate their mixed ancestry. A 1932 article in a League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) newspaper in Texas, for example, told its readers:

Conditions have reached a point where your neighbors say “a white man and a Mexican.” Yet, in your veins races the hot blood of adventurous Castilian noblemen, the whitest blood in the world, and the blood of the cultured Aztecs and fierce Apaches, the reddest blood in the world! So why this disrespectful slap in the face? So you can hold your head up with the best, and you should do so in order to keep your ancestors from turning in their graves. (Grebler, Guzman & Moore 1970 p. 380)

For the speaker here the Mexican's mixture of 'the reddest blood in the world' and 'the whitest', establishes his high racial status and his equality with his white neighbour rather than their contradistinction.

Such framing of Mexican ancestry echoes the broader discourse of *mestizaje* developed by Mexican intellectuals in the early 20th century, a discourse interesting to consider here as it has also been a reference point more recent scholarly discussions on mixedness. Most notably, in *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa begins her discussion of a new *mestiza* consciousness with an appraisal of Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, a thinker at the forefront of *mestizaje* theorising in the early 20th century. In 1925, Vasconcelos asserted that Latin American mixture would produce a new and 'cosmic race.' Anzaldúa describes Vasconcelos's vision of 'a fifth race

embracing the four major races of the world,' writing: 'Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity' (1999 p. 99). Like Anzladua, historian Gary B. Nash also theorises mixedness as potentially transformative: 'Only through hybridity...can our nation break "the stranglehold that racist hermeneutics has over cultural identity"' (1995 p.962). He similarly describes Vasconcelos as a 'visionary' (p.958).

However, while Vasconcelos did disdain American racial practices, positioning his ideas as 'opposite to' American theories of race is misleading. As Nancy Stepan writes in her examination of eugenics in Latin America, the *mestizaje* doctrine was not a subversion of American-style race doctrine in a true sense but rather a disorientation of it, promoted by a Mexican elite who inverted 'the valuations built into European and North American racism to create a satisfactory myth of nationhood' (1991 p.147). As preoccupied with Mendelianism as eugenicists in the United States, Vasconcelos envisioned an 'aesthetic' rather than a 'scientific' eugenics. The so-called 'inclusivity' of his cosmic race had distinctly dark undertones. He wrote: '[I]n a few decades of aesthetic eugenics, the Black may disappear, together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signaling as fundamentally recessive and undeserving, for that reason, of perpetuation.' (1997 p. 32) Hence, Vasconcelos's cosmic race, like eugenics in the United States, marked out types of humanity, notably including 'the Black', as racially unfit. His vision of fusion, though it evoked harmony and regeneration also reified races as not only separate but, in the case of black race, as intrinsically *opposed*.

North Americans have held very firmly to their
resolution to maintain a pure stock, the reason being
that they are faced with the Blacks, who are like the

opposite pole, like the antithesis of the elements to be mixed. We have very few Blacks, and a large part of them is already becoming a mulatto population. (1997 p. 26)

Here we see that Vasconcelos in his optimistic take on mixture, precisely like 'Nordic' racists in their dread of it, placed the source of American racism in supposed black difference. In fact he seems to suggest that the success of Mexican mixture has been aided by the relative absence of 'antithetical' 'Blacks.' Conceptualising black and white as racial poles, Vasconcelos does not reject racial difference as biological truth, he merely poses mixture a novel 'solution' to the putative problem. While Anzaldúa imagines a queer and feminist *mestiza* consciousness which transcends oppressive binaries, her uncritical adoption of Vasconcelos's glorification of *mestizaje*, reminds us of the caution needed in assuming that advancements of mixing are necessarily free from the violent epistemological impulses of other race doctrines.

Conclusion: Racism and 'the naming of human mixture'

Again expounding on the problem of Mexican ambiguity, Handman wrote in 1926:

The Mexican presents shades of color ranging from that of the negro...to that of the white. The result is confusion. A Mexican girl enters a street car and sits down among whites and the conductor tells her to sit among the negroes. She refuses on the ground that she is "no nigger." A Mexican worker on a city job where both negroes and white men are employed refuses to

drink out of the negro drinking cup and the foreman beats him
up. (1926 p. 37)

This passage is interesting in both what it tells us about Mexican American subjectivity as well as the manner in which Americans more generally have mapped racial boundaries. Foley argues that Mexicans, like the Irish, learned that assimilation in America meant ‘becoming wedded to the notion that people of African descent were culturally and biologically inferior to Whites’ (1997 p. 63). Certainly the refusals of the girl on the streetcar and the man at the water cup reflect racism towards African Americans. These situations, however, are perhaps better read as evidence of Mexicans’ own tenuous positioning in the American social landscape rather than evidence of their faith in doctrines of white supremacy. If Manuel Ruiz and other middle class activists used more polite terminology than the girl on the streetcar, in each case their words and actions reveal an acute attunement to what it was to be racially marked in America, grounded in painful experience. Their actions also reflect an awareness that, as James Baldwin observed ‘the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star’ (1985, p. 336). Rejecting practices that would place them, in either physical or discursive terms, near blackness was to reject the permanency and the immobility which that positioning implied.

The very fixedness with which American discourse and practice imposed racial meaning on blackness, no doubt enhanced the sense that, in contrast, Mexicans were racially hybrid and socially ambiguous. Yet as White’s story cited at the outset illustrates, African Americans also ‘present[ed] shades of color ranging from that of the negro...to the white.’ If Mexicans were able to avoid finding themselves in a position defined, like that of black people, in monolithic, determinate racial terms, the reasons are not phenotypical or genetic but historical. While it is no doubt true that

the treatment of some people of mixed ancestry in the United States can highlight the inconsistencies of racist discourse, the idea that mixed people *necessarily* upset the functioning of regimes of racial classification assumes that such regimes require consistency to function. The related idea that Mexican mixture innately defied American racial logic assumes that the American schema of race truly operated on a principle of purity, responding to ‘natural’ facts, rather than fabricating them.

If not all instances of racial mixing required such rigid measures as the Jim Crow network of miscegenation and classification law, as many scholars have noted, mixedness has often seemed to conceptually unsettle race doctrine. Miri Song and David Parker write that ‘the notion of ‘mixed race’ thwarts the ideal of pristine, pure ‘races’ with the undeniable historical truth of mixture’ (17). Young places such notions within a specific historical trajectory in his examination of 19th century racial discourse:

[T]he naming of human mixture as ‘degeneracy’ both asserts the norm and subverts it, undoing its terms of distinction, and opening up the prospect of the evanescence of ‘race’ as such. Here, therefore, at the heart of racial theory...hybridity also maps out its most anxious, vulnerable site: a fulcrum at its edge and centre where its dialectics of injustice, hatred and oppression can find themselves effaced and expunged. (1995 p.17)

The question then arises, if mixedness *conceptually* threatens to thwart or undo race, why has it not done so in practice?

Mixedness, like any other perceived racial state or attribute, cannot be assumed to have any given impact and must be understood as contingent and

historically specific. The boundaries constructed between racial insides and outsides, between the 'pure' and the 'mongrel' are not constant or definitive but are themselves relational and defined in circumstance. As Ahmed notes: 'The traversing of racial distinctions...can easily be recuperated into the identificatory practices of the master discourse' (1999 p. 97). Certainly, the containment of one genetically diverse people into the caste of blackness, and the legal absorption of another into the supposedly 'pure' realm of whiteness suggests that American schemas of racial classification could respond, in multiple and distinct ways, to the fact of mixture. Though examining mixture can highlight the absurdity and inconsistency of racial doctrine, it surely also emphasises its tenacity and elasticity. It is thus unsurprising that, while hybridity or mixedness has been posited as an ideal political and cultural space from which to challenge racism, in the examination of historical experience we are reminded that social and political responses to racism that highlight mixture or mixability can remain trapped in racial idiom.

¹ The geopolitical aspect of this situation should not be ignored. When the federal government moved to create a separate 'Mexican' category on the US census in 1930, the Mexican government protested vociferously. Mexicans were returned to 'white' category in subsequent Census taking. Foley, "Becoming Hispanic: Mexican Americans and the Faustian Pact with Whiteness," 61.

² Carey McWilliams's *North From Mexico* gives a useful overview of the experiences and social positioning of Mexican Americans in California in the early 20th century. For more on Mexican Americans' struggle against segregation, see, for example: Michael A. Olivas, *"Colored men" and "hombres aquí" : Hernández v. Texas and the emergence of Mexican-American lawyering*, Arte Público Press, Houston, 2006.

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