

Living the Double Bind: Relational Privilege and Distributed Intensity in Mexico's Racial Landscape

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Abstract. This article explores how racism in Mexico is lived and felt in everyday practices where its effects are simultaneously negated yet silently reproduced. Drawing on the work of Mónica Moreno Figueroa and her concepts of distributed intensity and relational privilege, I develop the notion of a double bind of mestizaje—a sense of racial belonging that is both affirmed and denied within Mexico's national identity. Based on critical ethnography and three in-depth interviews, this study analyzes how racism circulates through humor, silence, and suspicion in daily interactions, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others. It argues that these daily practices not only normalize exclusion but also sustain affective hierarchies tied to color and class, adding “another brick” to the social structure of pigmentocracy. By situating these dynamics within the longer history of colonial legacies and national myths of mixture, this article contributes to broader debates on race, embodiment and belonging in Latin American postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: racism, mestizaje, whiteness, distributed intensity, ethnography

1. Introduction

This research takes as its starting point a deceptively simple question: how does racism endure in a society that insists it has overcome it? Drawing on everyday interactions and affective practices, it traces the subtle ways through which racial hierarchy becomes ordinary—felt in gestures, humor, language, and social distance rather than open exclusion. Through a series of ethnographic reflections, the study highlights how mestizo Mexicans navigate privilege, belonging, and moral discomfort in daily life, focusing on the double bind of mestizaje: the tension of being told that “we are all the same” while living in a world that says otherwise.

2. Theoretical framework: relational whiteness, distributed intensity, and the double bind

2.1. Whiteness in mestizaje

Firstly framed as an anti-colonial idea, mestizaje never really achieved inclusion [1]. In practice, proximity to whiteness plays the role of social capital—using different signals such as appearance, language, and comportment [2]. The unstable, situational and ambiguous nature of Whiteness means

that racial privilege is also a fluid concept: one can “pass” (pasar in Spanish) and access privilege in some contexts, yet remain discriminated in others. I call this conditional inclusion a double bind, a tension that I will return to later in the paper.

2.2. Distributed intensity: making racism bearable and invisible

If mestizaje constitutes the ideological core of racism, distributed intensity explains its function. Moreno Figueroa uses this concept to describe how racism in Mexico is felt through fragments rather than open confrontations. A joke about mejorar la raza (“improving the race” in English), or a deferential glance toward lighter skin—all can be felt in flesh and bones as racial affect without being recognized as racism. This dispersed nature of racism makes it bearable and even invisible.

As Foucault argues, power is most effective when it shapes what people want rather than what they are explicitly prohibited from doing [3]. Distributed intensity works in exactly this way: it takes deeply entrenched inequality and gives it an affective twist. In that way, racism is no longer a passive action that must to be reported, but a social choreography to be learnt.

Some might argue that distributed intensity is easily confused with other concepts such as everyday racism and racial microaggressions [4,5]. Yet this paper argues that these are three intrinsically different concepts. Everyday racism and microaggressions arose from Euro-American contexts, and describe respectively interpersonal slights or systemic oppression. Distributed intensity, by contrast, sheds light on how racial violence in Mexico operates in instances that are collectively justified and rarely lead to accountability [6]. In other words, these brief yet telling moments, instead of leading to immediate reaction, simply dissolve back into the familiar narratives of mestizaje, where the intensity of racism can be distributed, and rarely seen. Individuals thus feel the pain of exclusion, but are told not to take it “seriously”. As a result, they unconsciously reproduce the exclusion via silence, humor, or strategic distancing— patterns I return to in the interview analysis later in the thesis when I explain how people come to live this distributed intensity emotionally and bodily.

2.3. The double bind of mestizaje

Borrowing from Bateson’s notion of the double bind as a communicative paradox that cannot be resolved without violating its premises [7], I adapt it and develop the term of double bind of mestizaje to capture how mestizo individuals are caught in a confusing tension: to deny racism while helping its reproduction.

In Mexico’s racial discourse, if you recognize yourself as a mestizo, you are then facing a tremendous puzzle in which you are expected to affirm equality (“we are all mixed”) while noticing that certain physical characteristics are more desirable than others. You are caught in this situation where to name racism is to betray the ideal of unity; to stay silent is to perpetuate it. Thus, mestizo subjects are constantly feeling emotional suspension, oscillating between belonging and suspicion.

2.4. From habitus Clivé to the unsettled habitus

Building on these earlier ideas, I started wondering about something more personal: how does this double bind of mestizaje actually live in people’s minds and bodies?

To think through this, I turned to Bourdieu’s idea of habitus—his way of explaining how social structures seep into our emotions and everyday sense of what feels “normal.”

Later, I came across a related term, *habitus clivé*, from Burns, Andrews, and James [8]. It describes Indigenous academics in Australia who have to move between two different worlds.

In Mexico, though, the situation feels different. Rather than jumping back and forth between two fragmented worlds, Mexican mestizo individuals find themselves trapped in the illusion that there is only one world. The pain they are facing is not in rupture but in repetition—the silent fatigue of constantly adjusting, performing, and normalizing.

3. Methodology: critical ethnography

For this research I adopted critical ethnography as methodology to trace how racial tension feels in Mexican mestizos' lives.

3.1. Research design and sample size

I chose my three interviewees with care — Caro, Antuan, and Iker — all friends from my time studying in Mexico City. Each of them sits somewhere different along the mestizo spectrum.

Caro describes herself as “in the middle,” neither white nor dark; Antuan thinks of himself as white, while Iker's darker skin has shaped many of his experiences.

What struck me, though, was how their stories eventually echoed the same feeling — a kind of quiet, shared racial discomfort that everyone seems to accept as normal.

Following Silva, I decided to keep the group small. As Silva suggests, a limited number of participants can give space for richer, more textured accounts, rather than aiming for general conclusions [9].

3.2. Reflexivity and ethics

The double bind of *mestizaje* not only serves as the conceptual lens of this article, but also shapes my positionality as a researcher.

As a Chinese and female researcher who once studied and lived in Mexico City, I navigate the space between racialized insider and outsider—a positionality marked by both boundary and release.

On one level, having lived similar social settings, I could relate closely to how my participants made sense of their worlds. Thanks to this proximity, I am able to listen to them and make sense of what their experiences revealed.

On another level, I discovered that my harmless, feminized foreignness unexpectedly helped me create a confessional space where participants felt relatively safe to dig into this uncomfortable topic with me. I assume that my body of *la chinita tierna* (“the gentle Chinese chick” in English) locates me outside of Mexico's racial hierarchy and grants me what I term pastoral racial privilege.

However, I am also aware of the limits of this pastoral racial privilege. I am here, yet not fully here; present, but never constitutive of their world. Participants often began their stories with phrases like, “You wouldn't understand this, but...”—at once marking my distance and trusting me with their truth.

4. The double bind of *mestizaje*: relational racism and the making of mestizo identity

I organize the findings into three micro-settings, each representing a layer of racial choreography in Mexico:

Relational Privilege in Action: Discrimination as Semiotic Practice
Navigating the Double-Bind: *Mestizaje* Moments in Everyday Life

Making the Self: Processes of Identity Formation within Mestizaje

4.1. Relational privilege in action: discrimination as semiotic practice

My first participant is Iker, a young entrepreneur of Indigenous descent. We first met in college, when he was an exchange student in Beijing. Our Chinese classmates saw him diligent and intelligent. In Mexico, however, as he notes, people often saw him as someone easy to tease because of his skin tone.

This is one of the stories that he told me.

Ten minutes, we were standing there for ten minutes, to get a table. I'm sure the waiter saw us but he doesn't make a move. "It's happening again." I told myself. I knew this trick. The ignorance tasted bitter the first time, but I am getting used to it. So I took out my phone—the Samsung Flip—and pretended to make a business call. I said something about an important client, about a deadline. I raised my voice a little so the waiter could hear. It worked instantly and then we were served a table. It's not even an expensive phone. But it looks expensive enough to make that image, you know? That's all that matters.

Honestly, it wasn't about the phone itself—it was about what it signified. With that flip phone in hand, Iker stopped being just a dark-skinned guy waiting for a table; suddenly, he was read as someone important, maybe a businessman, someone who had things to do and shouldn't be kept waiting. The phone didn't change his skin, of course, but it shifted how people saw him. It carried weight. It spoke money—and here, money easily slides into a kind of symbolic whiteness.

Race in Mexico, I realized, isn't fixed or even stable. It's constantly negotiated through how people present themselves, through small performances that signal worth or mask insecurity.

However, this constant recalibration is exhausting. Iker told me quietly:

I didn't feel proud. I felt like I had tricked them. But also... like I had to.

That line stayed with me. Racism, in this form, isn't about open hatred; it's about the constant pressure to manage how you appear, to stay one step ahead of judgment. And it made me wonder—what happens when this endless performance stops feeling like a strategy and starts feeling like survival?

4.2. Navigating the double-bind: mestizaje moments in everyday life

Reminiscing about Iker's story, I can't help thinking that, the flip phone made him visible in a new way, but that kind of visibility always comes at a cost. For every moment of recognition, there's also something pushed into silence.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot once wrote, history isn't just made by what we remember, but also by what gets left out [10]. Listening to Professor Miriam Melton-Villanueva's seminar *Banned Histories: Indigenous Life in Death Records*, c.1815 Mexico, I was struck by how she extended that idea. She showed that archives don't just store knowledge; they also decide what counts as worth keeping. And that decision isn't neutral—it's shaped by power, time, and the small, practical limits of research. Her point stayed with me: silence isn't only something we inherit; it's something we keep making, often without meaning to.

But I started to wonder—if silence structures the archive, what about daily life? What happens in the moments when we feel something shift, but don't say anything? That's where Mónica Moreno Figueroa's idea of mestizaje moments helps me think [11]. She describes them as short, emotional flashes when Mexico's convenient narrative of "we're all mixed" starts to crack, when a gesture, a

laugh, or even a quick glance makes difference suddenly visible again. And then, almost as quickly, everyone smooths it over. The moment disappears, but not before revealing something real.

When I first read Moreno Figueroa, I thought of her work as describing something distant or theoretical. But after doing my own interviews, I started noticing how often these moments appear—in classrooms, in friendships, in passing jokes. They're tiny, almost invisible, yet they tell you where power sits in the room. If Trouillot and Melton-Villanueva help us see how silence shapes the official record, Moreno Figueroa helps us see how it moves through the everyday: subtle, relational, and often disguised as normal life.

4.2.1. Caro's story: the joke that always lands

In Mexico's racial landscape, mestizo individuals often find themselves switching roles—one day they are the target, another day the one initiating the joke, or the person who laughs along, or the one who ends up being laughed at. The roles change fast, sometimes in the span of a single conversation.

Caro was my classmate during my studies at UNAM. I have always admired her seriousness—both in and out of academic life. I personally believe that same academic rigor spills into her daily life, making her very careful, even a little suspicious, in most social settings. Still, even someone as deliberate as Caro finds it hard to recognize racism when it happens.

Outside of academia, everything is so fleeting. You only realize the violence after it's already happened.

She once told me about something that happened in class: a light-skinned student walked in, and immediately, the rest of the group turned to look at him and started laughing. No one said anything explicitly offensive. But it was the timing, the glances, the sudden shared amusement. Caro smiled too. But later, walking home, she felt an uncomfortable sting.

This anecdote from Caro's class made me rethink how whiteness, a word often associated with privilege, in some contexts can turn into a marker of difference—of being too white to belong. The laughter of the class group functions as a social signal and a boundary check [12]. This is not a reversal of racism (*racismo al revés* in Spanish), but rather a reflection of how racialized humor has the power to turn any visible deviation from the norm into a target. No one is safe from the racializing gaze, even those who might otherwise benefit from relational privilege.

If read through the lens of distributed intensity, Caro's experience becomes a textbook *mestizaje* moment. The laughter that targets “too much whiteness” or “too much darkness” is itself a *mestizaje* moment. Once you notice it, you see how *mestizaje* doesn't dismantle hierarchy—it simply spreads its force across social interactions, letting it appear and disappear in these fleeting, almost forgettable moments.

4.2.2. Antuan's story: the equal opportunity offender

Antuan and I were in the same street dance crew back in Mexico. We went through lots of battles, rehearsals, random shows together, and after a while I just end up knowing him better, not only the stage version of him. Beyond his impressive dance skills, what always struck me more was how fast he is socially: he is the kind of person who can turn any tense moment into a joke. He calls himself “neutral.” I'd call him strategic.

We call blond and rich people 'fresa'—snobby, or too polished. But we also call dark-skinned people 'naco'—vulgar or unrefined. It's just how we talk. Sometimes I think we're just repeating what we heard growing up. But if you don't laugh, you're the weird one.

It is intriguing to observe how Antuan moves fluidly between circles, adjusting tone, target, and timing. He is so fluent in the subtle codes that decide whose difference can be named and whose cannot.

Instead of saying Antuan's humor is cruelty, I'd like to describe it as calibration. It protects him from being mocked by mocking first. It allows him to belong by keeping others out. He continues saying

We laugh at everyone. That way no one feels left out.

But someone always does. The joke is never neutral. Every punchline draws a boundary, assigns value, and reinforces hierarchies by deciding who counts as witty, who counts as sensitive, who's in and who's out. Humor, in this sense, becomes a practice of double-bind of mestizaje navigation—to refuse is to risk isolation; to participate is to reinforce the same hierarchies you wish to escape.

4.2.3. Iker's story: the mirror of suspicion

Iker's another story helps us understand mestizaje moments better...This isn't overt discrimination. It's something much quieter, almost embarrassingly intimate: the way a social script becomes instinct, the way hierarchy settles into the body before thought has time to intervene [13]. Here is what he said.

One time I went out alone at night and saw someone dark-skinned like me approaching. I crossed the street... and so did he. Apparently, we both thought the other was a thief.

What really struck me was that he had expected danger, and that the other man had expected the same of him. They have same skin tone however they both are carrying the same inherited story of who looks threatening and who looks afraid.

That fleeting moment — two men mirroring each other's suspicion — shows the internalization of racial hierarchy. It was a moment where mestizaje's narrative of "we're all mixed, we're all equal" simply dissolved—and in the absence of that comfort, what emerged was a hierarchy so naturalized that both men acted it out without a word exchanged.

During our sessions, Iker also spoke about being mistreated by his father's relatives due to his indigenous background. Yet in this extract, he distances himself from racialized categories such as *naco* (a derogatory term for someone seen as vulgar or lower-class) or *prieto* (a slang word for dark-skinned).

How can someone who has been discriminated against for his appearance so quickly dismiss race as irrelevant and locate himself outside of it? Iker is not an exception. There seems to be a more generalized inability of many Mexican people to critically engage with race, not because they are unaware of its effects, but because they are encouraged to see race as irrelevant, fluid, or "already resolved" [14].

4.3. Making the self: identity formation as an unsettled habitus

The stories of Iker, Caro and Antuan do not end with the mestizaje moments. They begin there. What stays with them—and with anyone who has lived these small collisions—is not a single event but the residue. A laugh that felt too quick. A silence you only understood hours later. A moment of fear that arrived before thought [15]. These fragments accumulate, sometimes without our permission, and eventually they shape something much larger: the making of the self.

In the context of mestizaje, habitus is not unified. It is an unsettled one: a field of constant recalibrations. As the previous discussion suggests, If habitus *clivé* exposes the pain of being

between worlds, the unsettled habitus of mestizaje describes the fatigue of pretending those worlds are one.

Together, these stories illustrate that identity formation among mestizo subjects is not about reconciling contradictions but about inhabiting them: to laugh along while feeling the sting, to adjust tones in order to belong, to fear a reflection that looks too much like oneself. The double bind of mestizaje produces an affective and unsettled habitus that is neither neatly divided nor comfortably unified: a choreography of concealment and calibration.

This is the embodied face of the double bind: to know that race “does not exist,” yet to live as though it always does. So the self that forms here is never fully settled. It’s a work-in-progress, shaped by the daily effort of living between what mestizaje says the world is and what the body knows it to be.

5. Conclusion

Building on Moreno Figueroa’s ideas, I came to see that what she calls distributed intensity is not only something that spreads quietly—it also folds back on itself. It repeats, like a loop you can’t quite step out of [16]. This is what I try to describe through the idea of the double bind of mestizaje: how denial doesn’t erase racism but becomes part of how it works.

Through the stories my participants shared, I began to see that racial hierarchies in Mexico are rarely expressed as open superiority. Instead, they show up in much smaller ways—in tone, in distance, in the quiet adjustments people make when deciding who belongs where [17]. If Moreno Figueroa helped us see how racism seeps into everyday life, the double bind helps explain why it stays there. It teaches people to live with tension as something normal, even comfortable.

This project also shows the transformative power of mestizaje moments. They are often tacit and unplanned, reminding us that racism is still there, shaping how people feel and relate to each other. They are exceptions that point to the rule and sighs of a deeper pattern, exposing how mestizaje fails to mask the persistent discomfort and inequality ingrained in racialized social life [18]. These moments allow us to track how individuals have learned to live with such intensity, switching sides between “we” and “they”.

Looking back, I can see that this project has some clear limits. Since all my interviews took place online, I could only see and hear parts of what people wanted to share. On a screen, people can explain what they think, but it’s much harder to sense what they feel. I realized that racism often hides in those tiny, emotional moments — in the things that happen between words — and that’s exactly what this format couldn’t really capture.

It makes me wonder: what would happen if I could actually be there? To watch, not just listen. To feel how people move through a room, how laughter changes a conversation, how someone’s voice lowers when race comes up. Maybe that’s what’s missing — not more answers, but better ways of paying attention.

And what if we compared these experiences across different generations or regions of Mexico? Would younger people talk about race differently than their parents? Would class or migration history change how mestizaje feels in daily life?

In the end, I think what’s still missing are not just more data points, but more ways of listening — to gestures, to emotions, to the ordinary. Future research will need to find those forms of attention that let us see not only how people live with racial discomfort, but also how, in small and quiet ways, they try to move beyond them. It is important to look beyond the vague idea of “pervasive racism.” [19] While the term captures the scale of the problem, it can also make racism seem almost abstract, everywhere and nowhere at once—so diffuse that it becomes invisible. A more grounded

approach means tracing how racism takes shape through concrete institutions, social norms, and everyday routines—especially in schools and universities, where privilege and exclusion are both quietly maintained and openly contested. Only by revealing these layers can we begin to challenge the ordinary mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality and make space for real, situated change.

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