

That Little Mexican Part of Me: Race, Place and Transnationalism among U.S. African-descent Mexicans

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ABSTRACT

This article uses semi-structured interviews and participant observation to examine transnationalism and notions of race among first- and second-generation young adult Afro-descended Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States. I suggest that transnationally inflected understandings of race encourage both generations to privilege place-based over ancestry-based racial identities. For the first generation, which is mostly undocumented, place is part of their socialization as Mexicans and a way to forge a more secure sense of belonging in the United States. For members of the second generation, place resolves their position as an anomalous “race” not recognized in the United States.

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Several years ago, I received an email from Dylan,¹ a 20-year-old Colorado undergraduate and U.S. citizen who had read an article of mine about his parents’ hometown of San Nicolás Tolentino, Guerrero, Mexico, the historically black agricultural village in Mexico’s Southern Pacific Costa Chica region where I had long conducted fieldwork (Lewis 2012). Dylan did not know me, but he wanted to express his feelings: “I love San Nicolás,” he said, “I enjoy going there to visit family. I want to live there when I’m older.” He always felt at a “disadvantage,” he said, “because no one understands where I come from or what it is like to grow up and be considered an outsider from your

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own [U.S. American] people.” This second-generation immigrant thus linked his parents’ hometown to his own social identity.

Like Dylan’s parents, Amelia was born in San Nicolás. At Dylan’s age, she had been married for several years and migrated with her husband to the United States, where they now live as undocumented immigrants with their five young U.S. citizen children in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.² In ways different from Dylan, whom she does not know, Amelia is also an outsider in the United States. She too considers San Nicolás home and desperately wants to visit her mother and grandmother there, but her undocumented status means she would not be able to return.

Dylan and Amelia are part of a small group of young adult U.S.-based Afro-descended Mexican participants in this interpretive study of transnational sensibilities and race constructs. All participants are connected to San Nicolás as either a first or a second generation.³ Both generations belong to minority groups not legally or socially recognized at the national level in their countries of birth. For Amelia’s immigrant generation, this is due to the erasure of blackness in Mexico, a country with a slavery history but little Diasporic or black consciousness (Banks 2006; Lewis 2012; Hoffmann 2006, 2014; Sue 2012; Vaugh and Vinson 2007). For Dylan’s second generation, this is due to limited knowledge about Afro-Latinos in the United States, where “black” and “Hispanic” are assumed to be mutually exclusive (Dzidzienyo and Oboler 2005; Román and Flores 2010). Here I locate Mexican and U.S. race logics within transnational “ways of belonging” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1010) to arrive at an understanding of how they combine to shape identities (also Norris 2013; Smith 2006). While my participants’ experiences and subject positions varied, for instance by gender and legal status, their

narratives indicate that both generations define themselves with reference to *place*: for the first generation, racial identities are already ethnospatial or emplaced, as I discuss below, while for the second generation, transnational ties in part solve the “problem” of being black and Mexican in the United States.

Although the Mexican government will include an “afro-descendent” (*afrodecendiente*) category for the first time in its 2020 census,⁴ no broad “black” or “Afro” classification exists in Mexican national identity or consciousness (Lewis 2001; Hoffmann 2014; Sue 2012). Mexicans instead emphasize the Spanish and indigenous “roots” of the majority Mexican *mestizo* through a racialized national ideology most fully developed by José Vasconcelos (1924), whose version of *mestizaje* became the template for a range of similar Latin American ideas (Miller 2004). For Vasconcelos the fusion of white, black, and Indian produced a superior “race,” but through a kind of aesthetic eugenics he believed the “black race” would vanish and the Indian one be diluted as ongoing mixture privileged whitening (*blanqueamiento*), as a sign of both progress and a preferred aesthetic. Mexican *mestizaje* thus excludes blackness from the mestizo national type while romanticizing Indianness as a fossilized relic of the past.

San Nicoladenses emphasize mixture as in the national model but refer to themselves as *moreno* instead of as mestizo. *Moreno* broadly translates as dark-skinned and can be used euphemistically for “black” (Lewis 2012:62).⁵ Yet while outsiders do describe them as black or use an “Afro” prefix such as in Afromexican, San Nicoladenses associate these with exclusion due to racism or to an “Africa” orientation that conflicts with their nationalist sensibilities by linking them to an unfamiliar place (Hoffmann 2014; Lara 2014; Lewis 2012: Ch 4-5). They instead understand *moreno* to mean black-

Indian, a mixing that began in the late sixteenth century when Spanish conquistadors brought black and mulatto slaves and servants to the Costa Chica to work cattle ranches (Lewis 2012:Ch 1-2). *Moreno* “reflects the mixture people actually have,” Andreas told me during my Mexican fieldwork (Lewis 2012:58-59). Today it sits as a primary local racial category alongside *indio* (Indian) and *blanco* (white), a reference to majority mestizos.

San Nicoladenses’ racial notions map onto Mexican towns, cities, regions and their associated peoples. They are expressed through temporal processes and territorial boundaries that emphasize location and relationality more than phenotype or ancestry. For instance, where you are from indicates what “race” you are, and those perceived as more rural and are also seen as “more” Indian or black (Lewis 2004:482-484; 2012:70-72, 309-310; also Godreau 2002; de la Cadena 1991). Identities are additionally formed around dress, language, rituals, food preferences, and a host of other things that connect an individual to a place and a collectivity (Hoffmann 2006, 2014).

The cultural logic of San Nicoladenses’ emplaced *moreno* identity is also expressed through “tools of memory construction” (de Vidas and Hoffmann 2012:1611) around foundational myths and fiestas connecting Indians and blacks while mirroring Mexican ideologies that maintain national roots as Indian. Thus, on Independence Day the fiesta performance known as La América takes place on community streets and ends at town hall, the political center where residents commemorates “Indians” defeating “Spaniards” to give birth to Mexico. San Nicoladenses also believe that the 18th century Indian noblewoman Doña María Ambrosia de Vargas bequeathed land to them (Lewis 2012:29-31). Most tellingly, the territorial networks of the village’s patron and

patronymic saint extend to the indigenous Nahua village of Zitlala, 300 kilometers away. “Stolen” from his own community by a white priest, the saint – a *moreno* with an Indian mother and a black father – “decided” to stay in Zitlala, where he made himself so “heavy” that the priest could no longer lift him. Each year, San Nicoladenses travel to Zitlala to celebrate “Papa Nico,” who returns on his saint’s day to his birthplace, where his *moreno* “children” live in the only town in the Costa Chica named for him (Lewis 2001, 2012, 2016). If you are *moreno* “you are from San Nicolás,” Margarita told me while we were sitting and chatting one day in San Nicolás. San Nicolás the village, San Nicolás the saint, and San Nicolás’s *morenos* are thus mutually referential.

Historical intermixture largely with the region’s indigenous Amuzgos, continues with Mixtecs, who have lived in what San Nicoladenses refer to as the town’s “Indian” barrio since their arrival from the Costa Chica’s uplands in the 1970s. Inter-marriage between Indians and *morenos* is therefore ongoing, and no simple Indian-black dichotomy exists in local genealogical and descriptive accounts. Even local racial tensions are expressed through idioms of territory and space. Thus, for instance, *morenos* believe “Indians” from high in the sierra are more “rustic” or unrefined and more powerful witches, while Indians might view “blacks” as interlopers who arrived from “Cuba,” from Africa, from “over there” (Lewis 2012: Ch 2; also Hoffmann 2006, 2014).

San Nicolás’s racial notions therefore differ from the ancestry-based Anglo system anchored by the social rule of hypodescent that classifies individuals by ancestry, especially with respect to a minority parent of African descent. That is how “an Anglo-Saxon thinks about race,” Andreas further told me (Lewis 2012:58-59). In the Anglo model, phenotype visually distinguishes “races,” while phenotypical similarities mark

kinship. For San Nicoladenses, however, phenotype does not indicate kinship, while *moreno*, because it is “mixed,” conflicts with the dominant U.S. black/white binary, as does being both black and Mexican.

Transnational Flows

Transnational theory emphasizes that immigrants live “simultaneously in two countries” (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001:3; Vertovec 2004), or multi-locally through “transnational migrant circuits” (Rouse 1991) and “social fields” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1008-9; Levitt and Waters 2002:8). Negotiations of place and borders thus complicate how we think about locations and their inhabitants, as scholars of Latin America have long noted (e.g. Rouse 1991). These negotiations also offer an opportunity, to examine what happens when migration causes place-based and mixed racial identities to fall into the pseudo-biological and binary categories that surround them. How do transnational understandings of place and belonging intersect with racial identities and strategies?

Further complicating this question is the first generation’s mostly undocumented status, which prevents individuals from fully “living” in the United States, where everything from that status to conceptions of community conspires against cultural fluidity, bifocality, or simultaneity, descriptors that in transnational theory assume an equal sense of belonging in two locales (Smith 2006). To a large extent, however, transnationalism rests not on physical mobility or legal status but on the “flow” of regular contact between communities (Smith 2002:148). This flow is most significant to the first generation. While none have visited Mexico since they left due to the danger and expense

of re-crossing the border, contact is eased by the fact that San Nicolás now has internet and mobile coverage. Digital technologies have replaced the videotapes once sent back and forth, as well as phone calls to and from San Nicolás's single telephone kiosk, where long lines formed on Sundays through the early 2000s. Regional foods are now in Winston-Salem's Mexican grocery stores, including one called "Costa Chica," while first-generation leisure activities revolve around San Nicoladenses at church, soccer games, dances and birthday parties. For the past few years, a Facebook group has also encouraged participation in San Nicolás's fiestas, graduations and other events. This has also encouraged second-generation contact with Mexican kin networks, such as when Dylan used the group to find cousins he had never met (also Stewart 2013).⁶

Second-generation activities are less intensive and consistent than those of the first, but they are still "imagined" as transnational in a variety of ways (Levitt and Waters 2002:9). They depend on opportunities, such as access to higher education and visits to San Nicolás, levels of social integration and interest, communications with relatives in Mexico, and proximity to other San Nicoladenses in everyday life. Instead of the regular contact typical of the first generation, members of the second generation might go to San Nicolás for summer visits, speak to a grandparent occasionally on the phone, or conduct library research to learn about San Nicolás, as Dylan did.

Winston-Salem

When I began fieldwork in San Nicolás in the late 1990s, it was full of empty breeze-block houses built with migrant remittances. These houses signified a family's ongoing success in the United States, which locals refer to as "the other side" (*el otro*

lado). Houses also mark spots, ownership, attachments, and transnational ties for people on both sides of the border. They are largely, then, about place (Lewis 2006). Today, San Nicoladenses migrate to the United States generally in their late teens also “to build my house” in San Nicolás. Only now is the second generation reaching adulthood in the United States. While other Guerrerans have long-established U.S. communities (Vaughn 2005:130-131), the Costa Chica remained relatively isolated until the mid-1960s (Lewis 2012: Ch 1). Because coastal belt land is productive, migration from Afro-descendent communities only intensified with the globalization and restructuring marked by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the privatization of community-held (*ejido*) land in 1993-1994. While San Nicoladenses were already familiar with migration because a few went to the United States and women sometimes worked as domestics in Mexico City to supplement farming income, NAFTA put price pressures on small-holders like them and migration accelerated. Abandoning land, selling it to fund migration journeys, or enhancing its production with remittances are now common.

Pioneer cross-border migrants went to Santa Ana, California. Members of those families – such as Dylan’s - are now spread out in the western United States. But since the mid-1990s, Winston-Salem has been favored by recent arrivals and by some California families. It now has the largest concentration of San Nicoladenses outside of Mexico. Latin Americans were initially drawn there in the 1970s by local tobacco growers recruiting foreign workers to break heavily African American unions (Barnett 2011:17, 67-72). These early migrants might have included a Costa Chican who gained amnesty and permanent residency through the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) (Hoppenjans and Richardson 2002; Barnett 2011:56-57, 63-64; Vaughn and

Vinson 2007). Accelerated migration in the 1990s coincided not only with NAFTA but also with restructuring in the United States. This made many southern locales attractive migrant destinations offering plentiful work, cheaper housing relative to wages than California, and fewer Latinos with whom Mexicans, in particular, had to compete (Murphy et al 2001; Odem and Lacy 2009; Jackson et al 2008; Quiroz 2004). Between 1990 and 2006, North Carolina's agriculture (tobacco, fruit and vegetables) and manufacturing (steel, clothing, furniture and carpet) sectors were replaced with finance and healthcare attracted by highly ranked research universities, state subsidies, and low corporate taxes and labor costs. The Latino population quadrupled, with metropolitan Winston-Salem experiencing a 1000 percent increase (Odern and Lacy 2009:xii, xiv, xvii). First-generation San Nicoladenses mostly hold low wage non-unionized jobs with men typically working in construction or in restaurant kitchens, and women who work doing so in the light manufacturing and packaging remnants of the textile industry or as hotel maids.

Now with its own young second-generation children, the first generation helped transform Winston-Salem's schools, commerce, labor market, religious institutions, and media (Jackson et al 2008:5). It also displaced the African American working class through employment discrimination favoring Latinos, while transforming formerly African American neighborhoods (Bennett 2011; Vaughn and Vinson 2007; Lewis 2012:Ch 9). Typical is Waughtown, where San Nicoladenses live alongside African Americans.⁷ Because of their relative youth, first-generation households are joint with siblings or cousins rather than extended with the several generations more typical of San Nicolás. Amelia and her husband thus pooled resources with two of his cousins to buy a

house for cash in Waughtown. Amelia's older brother Fernando rents around the corner with his wife, the sister of the wife of one of Amelia's husband's cousins. Amelia's younger brother Daniel lives across the street. Fernando's wife spends most days at Amelia's, where the women cook and look after the children, in part recreating the life they would have had in San Nicolás.

As another example, first-generation Julieta lived with her husband and children in a rented townhouse. Her husband's sister Paula lives around the corner with her own family. Julieta watches the children while Paula works. They spend so much time together that they carved a dirt path through the bushes behind Julieta's townhouse, so they could visit without walking around the block. When they showed it to me, they giggled "it's just like San Nicolás," where they would also create a shortcut. Like Amelia and her brothers, Julieta and Paula formed a modified familial compound - typical of the way San Nicoladenses still live in Mexico - and they shape their built environment to fit their transnational habitus.

Two Lives

While many second-generation Californians can access higher education and begin professional careers, they have also spread out in the western United States, isolated from extended family and a community of San Nicoladenses. For instance, Dylan was born in Santa Ana but his parents – early migrants who gained permanent residence through IRCA -- moved the family to a smaller Colorado city, leaving aunts, uncles and cousins behind in California. Dylan therefore felt "alone" as he entered middle school. No one "looked like me," he said. "I had a hard time growing up trying to find my place.

I mean things were great when I was around my family but [otherwise] I felt like an outsider. Even within a group of Mexicans I was always ‘the black kid’ to them. And when I was in a group of African Americans I was culturally not like them.” He was the black kid “with the accent.” (Indeed, even in English, Dylan has a Mexican accent – an identifiably Costa Chican one.⁸) For “a long time” Dylan said, he was “almost embarrassed” about his “race.” Later he came to “embrace it.” “I am black,” he explained. “But not African American - not BET [Black Entertainment Television] black.”

Like most San Nicoladenses, Dylan’s parents did not identify as Afro-descended, so his questions about his background went unanswered. His identity was instead primarily shaped by an *absence* because his race did not fit the U.S. categories – “Mexican” or “black” -- that even his Mexican American and African American friends considered natural. As his younger self struggled with these issues, he did not want to “look black,” because it made him *less Mexican*. “I felt I had to validate myself all the time,” he explained. Unable to satisfy his friends’ curiosity about his dark skin and curly hair, Dylan had no “race” until he found my work. “No one can imagine there are Mexicans that look like me!” he exclaimed.

Given that race anchors Dylan’s social identity, raises his self-awareness, and invites questions about where he fits, he is very American, including in using a hyphenated identity - Afro-Mexican.⁹ Yet he felt like a “foreigner,” he said, because he did not “look Mexican” and was “questioned all the time,” including by other Mexicans and Mexican Americans (also Hernández 2003). Because of his “foreignness” in his birthplace and because his parents “refuse to die in the U.S.,” he considers San Nicolás

his home and wants to settle there. It is a sanctuary because he blends in. “I wasn’t the black kid there,” he recalled of a visit during his adolescence, “the black kid who speaks Spanish or the black kid with the accent. I felt like an equal there and that’s why I love it.” For Dylan, then, place and race are intertwined: identifying with San Nicolás was linked to uncertainties about his race in the United States.

Dylan’s determination to define “who” he was racially, struck me as quite different from the concerns of similarly aged San Nicoladenses, many of whom I have known since they were children. Amelia married in San Nicolás at seventeen, dropped out of high school shortly before graduating, and soon migrated with her husband. Dylan’s second cousin Juana migrated at sixteen also having left high school in Mexico. But Juana studied English in the United States and obtained her GED (General [High School] Equivalency Diploma). A slight age difference at migration along with different levels of educational achievement meant that Juana acquired Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA or “Dreamer”) status while Amelia did not.¹⁰ Amelia is a housewife with no driver’s license because of North Carolina’s licensing laws, a problem that men also face, though they have to drive for work. She does not speak English. Like many first-generation young adults who left school or were poorly educated, she is also only semi-literate in Spanish. Despite Winston-Salem’s extensive Spanish-language resources, she limits her community involvement to San Nicoladenses.

When Amelia first arrived, she needed her mother’s help with her cooking. She still needs help because of her children, with whom her mother communicates through FaceTime. Dylan does not need such support, but he also has limited access to extended family. Indeed, he wanted to discuss with me his great aunts and great grandfather, the

man who – as it happened - told me about San Nicolás during the 1910-1920 Mexican Revolution, when the village with its thatched roof round houses (*redondos*) burned down.

While Dylan and Amelia are both cut off from family, and neither feels “integrated” into their American community, Amelia does not question her identity the way Dylan does his. Instead, unlike for Dylan, Amelia’s transnationalism shapes her American experience. Even in winter, she wears shorts and flip flops as if she never left San Nicolás; she cooks with her sister-in-law the food she ate growing up; her brothers live nearby; children run in and out; and family members always join in virtually from San Nicolás, where Amelia and her husband own two houses, which is not uncommon in their age group. In contrast to the isolation Dylan felt growing up because of his race, Amelia’s everyday transnationalism helps her to maintain a strong sense of place.

Hispanic: That Little Mexican Part of Me

Amelia’s close-knit immigrant community and access to digital technologies do not substitute for the sounds and smells of San Nicolás or for her mother’s presence. Moreover, her Winston-Salem social integration is limited. Yet first-generation San Nicoladenses do not attribute exclusion in the United States to *racial* discrimination and are largely unaware of and untroubled by the ill-fitting racial logic with which Dylan wrestles. When I asked about experiences of discrimination, the first generation mentioned only their undocumented status and lack of English. The second generation discussed customers who rejected their help in stores, people who did not believe they were “Mexican,” and other micro-aggressions because they were perceived as black.

Both generations linked race to the United States while denying that it existed or mattered in Mexico. For instance, in response to a question about what his racial identity would be in Mexico, Dylan said, “Mexico abolished the idea of race.” Second-generation Gloria said, “I didn’t know they had races in Mexico.” Like Dylan’s parents, Gloria’s never mentioned her African heritage, which she learned about from a sister-in-law. “It surprises me to know,” she said, “but it doesn’t change the way I think of myself.” She simply finds it annoying to have to “check a little box” when she fills out forms. Second-generation Yolanda, who has also been to San Nicolás, said that people in Mexico do not ask about race. Rosa said, “In Mexico they wouldn’t ask. I don’t pay much attention to race.”

First-generation participants responded similarly: “In Mexico, they wouldn’t ask about race,” said Modesto, who left San Nicolás at seventeen and had spent half his life in the United States at the time of our interview. Similar to Rosa, he did not “pay much attention to race.” Juana exclaimed, “here in the United States one comes to know everything about race! It’s how people think. But my race doesn’t matter to me. I hadn’t thought much about it. In Mexico, almost no one talks about race. We’re all equal there.” Javier responded similarly: “In Mexico no one would ask about race. We’re all human beings – it doesn’t matter to me.” Paula said the same: “In Mexico, people don’t talk about it so much.” Fernando, who at thirty-five, had also spent half his life in the United States at the time of our interview, said that “in Mexico race doesn’t matter” despite being stopped by police in Mexico City and at the border because he did not “look” Mexican.

Especially the first generation but also the second, racially identified as “Hispanic” or “Mexican.” Both terms had place-based connotations. When I asked first-generation Julieta, who migrated at twenty-six to join her husband, for her racial descriptor, she said Mexican. “Here people want to know where I am *from* (*de dónde soy*),” she said, associating “race” with place. Paula identified herself as “Hispanic Mexican” “because there are different kinds of Hispanics. Americans are white or black,” she insisted, referencing the binary that prevents Hispanics of any shade from “fitting” the U.S. racial model. For Amelia, Hispanic and Mexican meant the same thing; when I asked about her children’s race she said that if there is no Mexican category on the forms she has to fill out, she ticks Hispanic. She understood these as *national identities* indicating where one *was from* rather than racial identities. She really had no term for her race. “It doesn’t matter to me,” she said dismissively.

Like other first-generation participants, Javier indicated that his race was place-based when he answered “Mexican.” “In the U.S.,” he explained, “there are lots of different races. Everyone asks your race and whether you’re Mexican.” His U.S.-born children, he said, combining place with descent, are also Mexican. Modesto identifies his race as Hispanic or Mexican, depending on who asks, but his daughter’s race is Hispanic American or American, he said, because she was born in the United States. Other U.S.-based Mexicans often think he is African American or from the Dominican Republic because “we are darker than Mexicans from other Mexican states. In Mexico, no one would ask,” he said, in keeping with participants’ insistence that race does not exist or matter in Mexico.

Second-generation Gloria says her race is Hispanic. If probed, however, she will say Mexican, though she grew up in North Carolina. Yolanda also said she was Hispanic while insisting that Hispanic was not a racial category. Indeed, she said she had no racial identity. Like first-generation Modesto and second-generation Rosa, she said “It doesn’t matter. I don’t pay much attention to race.” While she knew of her African ancestry and had faced discrimination, she does not consider herself black. People from San Nicolás “look black but they’re not blacks,” she said. “They’re Mexicans. Black and Mexican are different categories.”

Rosa, who was twenty when I interviewed her, claims “Mexican” as her race if it is an option. “I was born in the United States,” she said, “but I don’t feel like I’m *only* American” (also Levitt 2002:141). Rosa says she does not “look Mexican.” As with Dylan, Yolanda and Modesto, people often assume that she is African American because she is “darker.” When they learn that she speaks Spanish, they ask where she is from. Responding “California” does not end the questions. While Rosa recognized her African heritage, which her parents from San Nicolás never mentioned and did not believe when she told them, like other participants, she does not consider herself African American. “It’s different from African Americans,” she said. Although Rosa’s racial identity did not preoccupy her, like Dylan she “became” transnational in great part at university, where she developed an interest in Mexican culture (also Jones-Correa 2002:227).¹¹ “I was whitewashed until I went to college,” she giggled. “Now I cling to that little Mexican part of me.”

Race and Place: San Nicolás Defines Me

First-generation participants might live everyday transnationalism, but they are still separated from the context of their Mexican place. Just as Ginetta Candelario's participants in her study of Dominican racial identities were "Indio" *in the* Dominican Republic but "Hispanic" *in the* United States (2007), my participants did not identify as *moreno* *in the* U.S. context because *moreno* is not a U.S. American race category and does not "travel" across borders. In Candelario's study, *Indio* and Hispanic had similar "not-black" registers. For my participants, this might also be the case, with *moreno* prominent in the Mexican context and Hispanic in the U.S. one. But I also suggest that both are emplaced in two ways: first, they connect people to a place. In San Nicolás *moreno* roots people to their birthplace; in the United States, Hispanic roots them through their transnational sensibilities to Latin America/Mexico. Second, the terms are perspectival and depend on subject location: it makes as little sense to identify as *moreno* in the United States as it does to identify as Hispanic in San Nicolás.

My data therefore invite reflection on how "Hispanic" fits the U.S. racial calculus, again through an emphasis on place. While some argue that Hispanic (or Latino/a, which none of my participants used) is "anomalous" to that calculus (e.g. Hooker 2014:189), an explanation by self-identified *Hispanics* of what "Hispanic" means, suggests that *Hispanic becomes a U.S. race category through transnational Latin American inflected racial understandings*: Hispanic is therefore a U.S. American emplaced racial identity.

This interpretation was underscored by second-generation Yolanda. She did not use "Hispanic" to situate herself as a Mexican national in the U.S., as the others did, but to protect herself as a *U.S. American*. Her legal status is uncertain because she was brought to the United States as an infant but has no DACA status. Even though people

ask her “what” she is, she rarely reveals where she was born. She claims to be U.S. born and insists on Hispanic – a quintessentially U.S. American label, more generic than Mexican and more place-based than black or white - as a self-protective “racial” identity. She does not want to live in San Nicolás, yet she still identifies through abstract notions of place.

Like Modesto, Fernando had a lot to say about race, perhaps because both have spent so many years in the United States. And again, like Modesto, Fernando ultimately reinforced the importance of place. When I asked how he racially identified, he initially said, “Mexican” and went on to remark, “they say we are Afromexican, black.”

Sometimes when meeting other U.S.-based Mexicans, he has to explain where he is from and how blacks arrived to San Nicolás, things his grandparents told him. “Supposedly, we have the same blood as African Americans.” He thus expressed a partial diasporic consciousness.

Yet as we discussed what it meant to ask someone where they are from, he differentiated between where one *comes* from (*venir*) and where one *is* from (*ser*). He *comes* from Winston-Salem he said, a place he loves, but he *is* from San Nicolás. This distinction reminded me of one San Nicolás’s Mexican-based *morenos* make between *criollo* (from a locality) and *natural* (autochthonous). Both suggest “native” in English but in San Nicolás, *morenos* are *criollos* who come from San Nicolás, while Indians are *naturales* primordially of Mexico (Lewis 2012:83). Fernando’s use of *ser* suggests that from his positionality in the United States he is a primordial San Nicoladense, *of* the birthplace of his “Papa” saint.

Further to this emphasis, Fernando first said his children's race was "American." "They are not Mexican-American because they were born in the United States." But he then elaborated that his children were "mestizo" rather than *moreno* like him because their mother was not from (*ser*) San Nicolás. He thus linked his children's and their mother's race to place: they were not *moreno* even though their father was, because they were not from San Nicolás.

When I asked second-generation Gloria whether place or race mattered more to her, she said place and defined herself as being *of* a place rather than *as* a race: "where I am from," she said, referring to Mexico even though she is American, "place is more important than race – it matters because every person should know where they and their family came from – it matters to me because it matters to my parents. That's all they know and that's all they talk about and their house is there. I want them to be proud of me and I want to know where I am from." She feels no connection to San Nicolás but – as for both generations - place mattered. Like Dylan, for Gloria this was partly because place mattered to her parents. Parental sacrifice through the "immigrant bargain" (Smith 2006:125-126) means that place might so influence the second generation that Rosa told me that while technically she is American, "my attachment is stronger to Mexico. It's ironic because I'm living here in America, but I don't care. Mexico is stronger. I care more about Mexican issues."

For the first generation, mostly undocumented or of uncertain legal status, place matters even more. Juana shows her young U.S. citizen son the Mexican flag and photos of San Nicolás, teaches him Mexican history and tells him stories. "He has a lot of curiosity about Mexico," she said. She refers to his "race" as Mexican-American but "he

says he's Mexican." Modesto put it this way: "I identify a lot with my village. More than with other people or with another place." For Paula, identity revolves around "place and not my race because it has to do with where I come from." Javier captured first-generation place-based identities: "Being from San Nicolás defines me," he said.

While Amelia did not quite grasp the concept of race, she says her children are Mexican even though they are U.S. citizens. For herself, she said, being from San Nicolás was most important – more important than being Mexican. Just as it did Javier, San Nicolás defined Amelia. As our interview wound down, however, she laughed and said that her then seven-year-old daughter, in a sign of her U.S. American socialization, had started coming home from school and telling Amelia that she does have a race -- that she is black (*negra*).

Conclusions

Dylan first made me curious about how the identities and orientations of San Nicoladenses raised in Mexico might be different from those of their U.S. counterparts, who could be cousins or even siblings, reside in the same locale, be the same "race," and have what appear as advantages (English language skills, citizenship), but who struggle with a system that emphasizes racial identities without offering one to them. My comparison of how members of the two groups define their social selves in terms of race and place invites deeper reflection on Mexican and U.S. processes of socialization: the Mexican-raised participants do not have a "race," while the U.S.-raised ones are told that they do but not what it is.

For both groups, transnational sensibilities counter dislocations. For the first generation, whose “race” concepts are already place-based, everyday transnationalism means they belong someplace. For the second, transnational imaginings help them to achieve a place-based identity that might resolve racial exclusion (also Jones-Correa 2002:236). Even second-generation Gloria, who finds Mexico “scary” and Yolanda, who does not identify with Mexico at all, link themselves strategically and sentimentally to a Mexican place. Rosa holds onto that “little Mexican part of me” to the exclusion of her “American” self, while Dylan identifies as “Mexican,” even to the surprise of other Mexicans. But that “still doesn’t feel quite right,” he said. “I have to say Guerrero or the Costa Chica,” the more specific, the better. He wants to be buried in San Nicolás’s cemetery, which San Nicoladenses jokingly refer to as *Carolina Chica* (Little Carolina) because, like the United States, it is “the other side.” Its tombs resemble the houses people live in and are also purchased with migrant remittances (Lewis 2006:824). But houses are considered “temporary” while tombs are “forever.” The cemetery is therefore where families fragmented by migration will be eternally reunited; one of Dylan’s sisters is already buried there.

First-generation attachment to San Nicolás might in part be due to legal status, language limitations and lack of U.S. community. But it also might be fed by the ways in which “race” intrudes into their lives in the United States - through the inquisitive anthropologist, the “little boxes” they have to check, or a U.S. racial model that has no category for *moreno* and only uneasily includes Hispanics (also Smith 2002; Soto 2012). For the second generation, attachment to place can resolve the difficulties with U.S. racial logics that cannot reconcile black and Mexican. Transnational ties can therefore offer

belonging to those who have to convince even their Mexican friends that they are Mexican too (also Jones-Correa 2002:226).

Ultimately, exploring race and place through a transnational lens that intersects with structures of U.S. social incorporation -- both for the second generation, which lacks a racial place in the United States, and for the first generation, which lacks a place-based race in the United States -- suggests that San Nicoladenses' ways of thinking about race as emplaced, solves problems of "fit" by providing place-based identities for all participants. Due to their positionality within the United States, they substitute Hispanic for *moreno*. But this study indicates that when they expand on this, Hispanic becomes Mexican which becomes Guerreran which becomes San Nicolás which, ultimately, *is* moreno. Like the participants themselves, all of these categories are steeped in place.

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¹All names are pseudonyms

² Currently, fourteen percent of Winston-Salem's 242,000 residents are Hispanic (<https://statisticalatlas.com/place/North-Carolina/Winston-Salem/Race-and-Ethnicity> (accessed September 20, 2018). It is not known how many are from San Nicolás but about a third of San Nicolás's 3-4,000 members are in the United States at any given time.

³ "Immigrant replenishment" (Waters 2014:18; Jones-Correa 2002:230), produced my mixed generation age cohort (also Levitt and Waters 2002, Rumbaut 2004, Telles and Ortiz 2008:21). Primary data are from semi-structured interviews conducted individually and alone with six first- and four second-generation respondents aged twenty to thirty-five in person or by phone/Skype. Some knew each other, and others did not. Answers to my questions on transnational ties, and race and place were coded, cross-referenced and contextualized with data from informal correspondence and participant observation in Winston-Salem. Some participants I already knew. Others, like Dylan, found me and gave me referrals. Quotes indicate participants' exact English or my translations of their Spanish.

⁴ A recent Mexican survey identifies 1.6% of Mexicans as "afro-descendant" and concentrated mostly on the Costa Chica and in Veracruz (INEGI). The survey team could not use local racial terms due to the national breadth of the research. It therefore struggled to convey meanings to many respondents ((Emiko Saldivar and Christina Sue pers comm)mb

⁵Due to racism, state projects, national ideologies, aesthetic preferences, geopolitics and family histories, Afro-Latin Americans often deflect "blackness" (Candelario 2007; Pineda 2006; England 2010). Race in Latin America also has no fixed referent and must be understood in context (Wade 1997; Candelario 2007). The meaning of *moreno* therefore varies even within Mexico.

⁶ San Nicolás's Facebook group members are in Mexico and the United States. Both generations post pictures and videos, while the Mexican side also posts commercial offers (for instance, international package delivery) and progress on San Nicolás's public works projects. This platform, then, creates transnational social spaces that help individuals maintain kin and community ties and identities (Christiansen 2017; Stewart 2013). FaceTime and WhatsApp allow more private communications. Because many older San Nicoladenses are not text or digitally literate, intergenerational communications include emojis and pictures, and landlines instead of phone apps.

⁷ For extended discussion of African American/Afro-Mexican relations see Barnett 2011; Johnson and Kasarda 2009; Jones 2013; Lewis 2012:Ch 9; Vaughn 2005; Vaughn and Vinson 2007. Today in Winston-Salem, these are best described as distant. While many African Americans are curious about "black" Mexicans and reach out through church and academic initiatives, the Mexicans are indifferent or do not understand their curiosity (Uchenna Vasser pers comm).

⁸ Second-generation participants wanted interviews in English, much like second-generation Mexicans in other studies (Schneider et al. 2012:220; Christiansen 2017:143). This is likely about both status and fluency (Jones-Correa 2002:234).

⁹ "Afro-Mexican" mimics the hyphenated U.S. identities (e.g. Asian-American, African American etc.) that historically aided assimilation because, despite anti-immigrant rhetoric, it is not a contradiction to be immigrant and American (Schneider et al 2012:229-230). A hyphenated U.S. identity can also bring an "ethnic" bonus and interest group rights (Williams 1989), an overlooked issue in Waters' study of racial and ethnic identities and assimilation (2014).

¹⁰ The Obama administration established DACA in 2012 to allow many undocumented immigrant youths to work and defer deportation over two-year cycles. The future of the program is unclear but there are 30,000 DACA recipients, including some San Nicoladenses, in North Carolina (*Qué Pasa* 2017).

¹¹ Dylan and Rosa illustrate how second-generation young adulthood might intensify attachment to parents' places of origin (Levitt 2002:141; Jones-Correa 2002:227).