

# Family Formation in the Pigmentocracy: The Guarding of Whiteness and the “Transgression” of Interracial Relationships in Latin America and the Caribbean

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## I. Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is one of the most ethno-racially and culturally diverse regions of the world given its history of pre-colonial indigenous groups, European colonization, the transatlantic African slave trade, and immigrant communities that arrived in the past two centuries. However, the ethno-racial composition in this region can vary greatly from country to country. This can be seen when comparing Haiti's 95% black population with Argentina's 97% white and mixed European population. Other countries such as Guyana and Suriname have a vastly diverse population of Hindustani or East Indian, Maroon, Creole, and Javanese (The World Factbook).

Among all this diversity, two important points of convergence for most of this region is its history of extreme violence towards African and indigenous peoples, and its ideologies of racial mixedness which obscure the existing race and color inequalities. This goes against the myths of racial harmony that are said to homogenize the region's ethno-racial identity. In reality, racial discrimination in LAC has been reconstructed into a particular social hierarchy based on skin color also known as pigmentocracy. This concept was conceived in 1944 by Chilean anthropologist Alejandro Lipschutz “to refer to inequalities or hierarchies based on both ethnoracial categories, such as indigenous and black, and a skin color continuum” (Telles and PERLA 2014). It was further explored and developed by sociologist Edward Telles and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America also known as PERLA. Their work identified skin color as a major indicator of social inequalities in most of LAC as

well as the importance of ethno-racial terminologies and methods in census taking. In contrast to the United States, skin color is the main indicative of a person's ethno-racial background in Latin America and the Caribbean. Although race and color may become interchangeable concepts, pigmentocracy better addresses this region's racial dynamics given the high rate of ethno-racial mixture which in turn makes skin color a more appropriate measure of discrimination and social inequalities (Telles and PERLA 2014).

Through the understanding of how pigmentocracies are structured we can see there is an inconsistent paradigm between racial mixedness or *mestizaje*<sup>1</sup> as an identity project in LAC and the acceptance of interracial or intercolor unions. Although Telles and PERLA provide the comparative and conceptual frameworks to understand these ethno-racial and color hierarchies, further examination of the role of gender and sexuality in the pigmentocracy could provide a more profound understanding on family formation. Previous case studies on partner choice and parental pressure demonstrate there is a clear preference for lighter skin color or whiteness.<sup>2</sup> Thus, an important aspect which shows the existence of pigmentocracy whilst upholding narratives of *mestizaje* and the myth of racial harmony is family formation.

Consequently, this article's main objective is to question how is the pigmentocracy reproduced or "transgressed" within families and partner preferences? To formulate an answer, the framework of pigmentocracy drawn by Telles and PERLA will be used while emphasizing family formation as the stage for racial and color boundaries to exist starting from childhood, followed by the family's influence on dating choices of young adults, and the racial bias in partner attraction. Furthermore, this article will rely on previous studies conducted in Cuba by cultural anthropologist Nadine Fernandez, and in Mexico by sociologist Christina Sue regarding interracial relationships and race mixture as cases of reproduction and transgressions of racial and color boundaries entrenched by social hierarchies. Through the lens of these contemporary

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1 "racial mixture; usually implies a mixed European and indigenous heritage; can also refer to mixture of African with European and indigenous blood, although the latter is not normally recognized" (Peloso 2014, 195).

2 "As in the United States and in many parts of the Western world, whiteness has long represented modernity and progress for many Latin American nations. For individual Latin Americans, it is used as a form of social capital that symbolizes and often entitles its bearers to privilege and status" (Telles and Flores 2013, 411)

scholars of Latin America and the Caribbean, a comparative and critical analysis of two different ethno-racial and political settings will demonstrate the points of correlations and opposition when examining family formation. Thus, this will highlight the importance of context and simultaneously point out what are some of the standardized notions of pigmentocracy in LAC households.

In the first section of this article, the history of racial formation in Latin America and the Caribbean will be explained beginning from European colonization until today's pigmentocracy. This historical perspective serves to reveal how racial mixedness and the myth of racial harmony are used to mask the race and color hierarchy. After demystifying non-racism ideologies, we can deepen the conversation to analyze the private sphere. This analysis will showcase how family formation and partner preference serve as a point of reproduction or transgression of the pigmentocracy. Lastly, this article will provide an insight as to why a gender perspective serves as an appropriate tool to further examine the relationship between pigmentocracy and family formation.

## II. Racial Formation in Latin America and the Caribbean

Much of Latin American and Caribbean history tends to be explored from the arrival of European colonizers due to the historical and cultural destruction inflicted on most of the indigenous population that had already been inhabiting the region. Not long after the arrival of Columbus and other colonizers, a social hierarchy was created through the enslavement of indigenous people and Eurocentric imperialist ideals. Moreover, the ethno-cultural diversity of the many indigenous groups that resided in the Americas was diminished and erased by lumping them all together as one. Latin American historian Vincent C. Peloso explains, "...the label 'Indian' swept all the island people (Caribbean) into one basket with none of the distinctions of ethnic group or office or blood that ruled local culture before the invasions" (2014, 4). Soon after, diseases, enslavement, and genocide significantly reduced the number of indigenous groups with the surviving lot exploited for labor.

Around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, millions of enslaved Africans were introduced as replacement labor due to the dying numbers of indigenous people. However, after the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and its success as a black-led uprising, a

domino effect of abolitionist movements began which brought the transatlantic African slave trade to dwindle down. Consequently, European powers sought a new form of labor force for their colonies. During the mid to late 1800s, indentured workers from Asia, mostly from India and China, were sent to LAC and concentrated in the Caribbean colonies of British West Indies in what came to be known as the coolie trade. Peloso describes the coolie trade as a tool for “Latin American countries to ease the transition from a slave labor economy to ‘indentured’ labor that was a slave labor force in all but name” (2014, 118). The coolie trade coming from China was finally banned around the 1870s whereas Indian indentured migration took several more decades until its eradication (Look Lai 1993).

From Columbus arrival to the Americas in 1492 until the abolishment of indentured labor in the early 1910s there was a continuous exploitation of marginalized groups at the hands of European imperialist powers for centuries. However, the reductionist history of LAC has neglected or even erased the indigenous, African, and Asian heritage existing in this region whereas Hispanic or other Europeanisms are continuously elevated. This section will explain how pigmentocracies or the ethno-racial color hierarchies were created in LAC and to expose the prevalent myth of non-racism.

## 2.1. Mixedness as the norm

Racial mixedness during European colonialism in the Americas was marked by sexual violence against indigenous and enslaved African women. In the central and southern regions of the “New World,” mixedness was also due the male-female ratio imbalance. During the early years of European colonization many of the arrivals in LAC were men which differed from the English arrivals in the north. “Spanish and Portuguese males, seeking to escape poverty in Europe, came to the New World in search of wealth; in contrast, the English settlement of the United States tended to be more family oriented, beginning with many families that were escaping religious persecution” (Telles and PERLA 2014, 15). Although as the colonial settlements moved further inland and the motivation and types of European movements to the Americas became more varied, LAC had been continuously increasing their mixed-raced population.

The resulting miscegenation also brought an unclear framework from the

oppressor’s perspective on how to regulate mixed societies. Sue explains, “to maintain social order amid various degrees of mixture, colonial authorities developed an elaborate caste system based on race, culture, and socioeconomic status. In this system, Spaniards were positioned on top, followed by mixed-race individuals, and then Indians and Africans” (2013, 11). Although many scholars point out that social positioning was not as clearly standardized throughout the region, the *mestizo* and *mulatto*<sup>3</sup> population were considered as somewhere in the middle as ambiguous and movable. However, “for those at the bottom of the pile, labelled indigenous and black (or worse, slave), there was less flexibility” (Wade 2010, 29).

Historian Carl Degler explains there were segregating laws enacted by the Portuguese in colonial Brazil, and free *mulattos* were treated different from mixed-race people with indigenous ancestry (1971, 213). Anthropologist Peter Wade corroborates this by stating, “although both sets of people suffered great hardship in practical terms, indigenous people were seen in some sense as superior to blacks” (2010, 29). Even today, many LAC countries choose to highlight their indigenous ancestry over their African heritage. In a recent study, Telles and PERLA argued that “symbolically and perhaps politically...the indigenous seem to occupy a higher status than Afrodescendants, especially in relation to nation-making narratives in the region” but indigenous groups also “have the lowest socioeconomic status of all ethnoracial groups in Latin America” (2014, 33). Thus, what has remained consistent since colonial times is the placement of indigenous groups and African descendants at the bottom of the hierarchy.

After the abolition of slavery, the influence of scientific racism and eugenics during the late 1800s and early 1900s continued to perpetuate preferences for lighter skin and white European physical traits. Law professor Tanya K. Hernandez explains, in contrast to American and European Mendel-esque eugenics<sup>4</sup>, Latin America favored Lamarck’s theory which “viewed external forces as influencing heredity so that characteristics an individual acquired in

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3 “a person of European and African heritage” (Peloso 2014, 195).

4 Hernández states “in Europe and the United States, Gregor Mendel’s 1866 book *Principles of Heredity* was used to develop a theory for eugenics postulating that successful people had good genetics, while disadvantaged people and groups had bad genetics, which no amount of social development could remedy so that the racial purity of good genes should be protected at all costs” (2013, 21).

adapting to the environment could then be inherited by later generations” (2013, 21). Many countries in LAC used Lamarck’s theory to tackle Eurocentric perspectives which viewed the region as “primitive” because of the large population of indigenous and African descendants. Hernández further explains,

Lamarck’s notion of genetic acquisition intuitively provided indirect support for the *mestizaje* concept that interracial intimacy between a white person and a black person would allow the resulting child to acquire whiteness and all the positive attributes socially associated with whiteness. With this reasoning, over time the presumably “stronger” gene of whiteness would predominate in the population and the numbers of blacks would decrease. (21-22)

To “modernize” their population, LAC governments welcomed European migrants during the late 1800s and early 1900s. At the same time, laws prohibiting the entrance of migrants of African ancestry and in some cases, Asian migrants as well, were instituted in Costa Rica, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela (Hernandez 2013, 27-28). As a result, countries such as Argentina became successful in “whitening” their population through mass migration from Europe to disproportionately decrease the number of darker skin individuals with visible African ancestry (Hernandez 2013, 22). In most of LAC, these whitening migration movements did not work to erase the large indigenous and black population, but it did continue to set the tone on who is considered desirable and undesirable.

## 2.2. *Mestizaje* and its glorification

As an apparent counter argument to scientific racism, *mestizaje* which generally refers to the majority mixed population in Latin America and the Caribbean, also became an ideological tool to unite an ethno-racially heterogeneous population. Mexican scholar, José Vasconcelos exalted *mestizaje* as a form of revolutionary anti-eugenics’ rhetoric during the 1920s. He was able to “institutionalize and widely disseminate his vision” due to his position as Minister of Education (Sue 2013, 15). Even though *mestizaje* was a driving tool for unity, it also held a preference for lighter skin mestizos, erasure of Africanness, and denial of the diversity among indigenous communities. By

claiming a racially homogenous mestizo identity, it only served to deny marginalized groups from the main scheme of national identity construction throughout LAC. In Mexico and many parts of LAC, *mestizaje* ideologies may have served as an important vehicle to accept race mixture, but it also brought forth “the belief that the country is free of racism” (2013, 15). This thinking expanded to other countries of LAC such as Brazil where the myth of racial democracy was also promoted during the 1900s.

Racial democracy assumes that high rates of racial mixedness has the potential to create post-racial or non-racist societies. This belief was developed by Brazilian scholar Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s in which he argued, “Brazil was unique among western societies for its smooth blending of European, Indian, and African peoples and cultures. As a result, he claimed that Brazilian society was free of the racism that affected the rest of the world” (Telles 2004). Although, racial democracy as an ideology began in Brazil, the basis of the myth spread all throughout LAC to differentiate from the racial segregation laws that were in place in the United States at the time. By creating this contrast with the US, Latin America and the Caribbean could mark itself as racially “progressive” given the high rate of racial mixedness. However, racial democracy only served to obscure the pigmentocracy that had been on the making since the arrival of European invaders.

### 2.3. The public and private sphere of pigmentocracies

In overview, skin color is considered as part of the social construction of race in LAC. As it was previously explained, the reason why color became the main criteria to designate the degree of a mixed-race individual belonging to a certain racial category was because of the large-scale miscegenation that had been occurring for several centuries. The white colonists had placed themselves at the top and the remnants of this structuring are what we see in today’s pigmentocracy which associates whiteness with modernization and superiority. Today’s white elite in LAC continues to be the most benefited from this social hierarchy in which their ethno-racial background and skin color as well as their higher social economic standing provides them with the power to perpetuate pigmentocratic thinking in society. By using the *mestizaje* ideology to create a unifying race-ethnicity-color national construction, the white elite has been able to hide the pervasive social inequalities based on ethno-racial categorization and

skin color.

Today, most of LAC places closeness to whiteness at the top whereas closeness to black and indigenous ancestry at the bottom of the pigmentocracy. There might be a few contrasting points between countries such as percentage of the population belonging to certain ethno-racial categories, the political context in which narratives of *mestizaje* and racial democracy have been accepted, or the possible progression towards multicultural acknowledgement. For example, Brazil has been able to start implementing policies such as affirmative action to acknowledge racial and skin color discrimination, and to move away from the myth of racial democracy. However, other countries such as the Dominican Republic define their national identity away from their own African heritage for the purpose of differentiating from its Haitian neighbors. Therefore, current policies addressing ethno-racial and color inequalities as well as national identity construction, deeply influence the varied ways in which pigmentocracies are handled in LAC.

Although skin color and ethno-racial hierarchies are clearly present, the ideologies of racial mixedness continue to be pervasively accepted by the public to justify myths of racial harmony. This comes into even sharper contrast when examining the private sphere. Family formation and partner preference in LAC does not coincide with racial mixedness ideologies since whiteness continues to be guarded and desired, whereas black and darker skin family members are marginalized by their own kin. Thus, the pigmentocracy continues to be reproduced at home in direct opposition to the supposed “racially progressiveness” of *mestizaje* and racial democracy. In the next section we will examine how this reproduction of pigmentocracy occurs at home, and the way interracial couples navigate their defiance of racial and color boundaries.

### III. Family Formation and Partner Choice in the Pigmentocracy

Interracial and intercolor unions are said to be at the core of Latin America and the Caribbean's (LAC) racial mixedness ideologies. And yet, families continue to guard and desire whiteness, marginalize black and darker skin relatives, and reject partners that do not fit into the whitening schemes. Due to this, interracial couples find themselves in a peculiar arena of demonstrating actual *mestizaje* whilst being subject of scrutiny by their families and other



social circles. In this section, the main question to answer is how the pigmentocracy is reproduced at home through the racial and color boundaries in which parents and other family members reinstate repeatedly. Manifestations of these boundaries can be seen since early childhood and adolescence through teasing, bullying, and parental control over the dating choices of the younger members of the family. Consequently, this plays an important role in the child’s development by dictating who is considered an “appropriate” choice of partner as well as creating internalized colorism among mixed-color families. The overall family pressure stems from the potential reproduction of lighter or darker skin children among the younger generations. This creates a cycle at home where the recreation of pigmentocracies begin with family guidance on children’s partner choice.

### 3.1. “*Desde chiquito*”

From a very young age, the pigmentocracy tends to be transferred through the affirmation of racial boundaries and attitudes towards marginalized ethno-racial groups. These boundaries are placed in the friendships children create at school or in the neighborhood through the transmission of the parent’s or guardian’s own prejudice. Whether it comes in the form of teasing or dating control, these techniques to reinstate racial boundaries have a lasting effect on the child’s perspective of others. In Fernandez extensive research in Cuba, she described how a blond five-year old was being teased at home by his grandmother. The teasing stem from the boy becoming close with a black girl at school. The grandmother emphasized the girl’s skin color as being very dark, but the boy refused to accept this depiction of her as black, and instead protested she was white (2010, 149). This family dynamic shows how from such a young age, children are directed to belief that creating a close relationship outside their own ethno-racial and skin color group is seen as transgressive behavior. Therefore, children are being reoriented to comply with race and color boundaries placed by the pigmentocracy.

Once these children become teenagers, they will begin to have their first experiences with dating and express a preference in partners. To maintain the *mestizaje* narrative, partner choice is disguised as simple attraction and not as a conscious racial and color bias that has been instilled early on. However, commonly heard eugenic phrasings such as *mejorando la raza* or “bettering the

race” conveys the erasure of African and indigenous ancestry while promoting a whitening goal through the reproduction of lighter skin offspring. Sue explains, “the ‘bettering the race’ philosophy justifies the seeking out of lighter partner while dodging a conflict with the *mestizaje* ideology (because it encourages interracial relationships) and the nonracism ideology (because it is framed as being motivated by an aesthetic-driven consideration of potential offspring)” (2013, 77). Myths of racial harmony or nonracism allows apparent individual choice of attraction instead of attributing ethno-racial and skin color discrimination as a possible motivation when it comes to seeking partners. Colorist beauty standards among Latin American and Caribbean communities support this by praising whiteness and European physical traits as attractive whereas blackness, brownness, and African or indigenous physical traits as undesirable. Evidence of this can be found in the common marketing of whitening skincare products as well as the portrayal of mostly light-skin Latin American and Caribbean people in popular media. Thus, closeness to whiteness is publicly and privately seen as the staple of beauty in LAC which consequently dictates who is considered a desirable partner.

The idealization of whiteness goes further than just partner preference, it also influences how darker skin children are treated in mixed-race families. Many darker skin family members and relatives experience marginalization at home. Sue interviewed an upper-class light-skinned woman in Mexico who describes how her darker skin cousin had been teased and bullied by their family. This instigated the cousin’s internalized colorism which drove her to feel the need to “drink milk and put on powder, hoping to become white” (2013, 102). Furthermore, there is a sharp contrast between lighter skin and darker skin children’s treatment in mixed-race families. Within the same household, darker skin children witness how they are neglected whereas their light skin sibling or relative is being given most of the attention and acclamation. The psychological trauma black and darker skin children experience at home becomes detrimental to the development of their identity and selfhood. This results in downplaying and rejecting their own indigenous or African ancestry which was evident when darker skin family members would state they wish they had been born with lighter skin (Sue 2013, 106).

### 3.2. Guarding whiteness and dating control

Many young adults in LAC feel pressure from their parents or older family members regarding their dating choices to maintain or "guard" whiteness among light skin family members. The guarding of whiteness can be explained through a gendered lens in which white women are deemed as needing protection from black or brown men. In her extensive research on colonial intimacies, anthropologist Ann Stoler explains how white women were subject of scrutiny and policing when it came to interactions with native men of color. "Although novels and memoirs position European women as categorically absent from the sexual fantasies of European men, these very men imagined their women to be desired and seductive figures to others. Within this frame, European women needed protection from the 'primitive' sexual urges aroused by the sight of them" (2010, 58). Stoler continues explaining how in some instances this "sexual threat" was labeled as the "Black Peril" in Africa and the British empire as "the professed dangers of sexual assault on white women by black men" (2010, 58). Therefore, narratives that depicted colonized groups, particularly Africans and Asians, as a danger to white female "purity" and a transgression to the preservation of whiteness has been a common theme in imperialist thinking.

This guarding of whiteness can be seen in the case of one of the interracial couples Fernandez interviewed in Cuba. Irena and Luis who are white and black respectively, were pressured by Irena's white father to end the relationship. In the context of Cuba, socialism and egalitarianism was said to trump over racism since "racial distinctions no longer existed in revolutionary Cuba" (Fernandez 2010, 18). Although a type of racial democracy or color-blindness was said to exist in the public sphere, the private realm of interracial relationships between black and white Cubans were and continue to be considered as a form of defiance of racial and social boundaries. The father who had been part of the egalitarian Cuban Revolution (1953-1959), threatened his daughter's boyfriend by pulling a gun on him. From the father's perspective, "he had given enough for this revolutionary project and he would not 'sacrifice' his white daughter to the cause of racial equality" (163). Irena's father saw his white daughter as someone that needed "protection" from a black man and allowing her the freedom to enter an interracial or intercolor relationship would be considered "sacrificial" from the father's perspective. Most of this control is

rooted in the fear of reproducing darker skin children which in turn, would “taint” the whitening ideals the white family has been able to maintain by marrying within the same ethno-racial and color group.

By contrast, Stoler also states that the “sexual abuse of black women was not classified as rape and therefore was not legally actionable, nor did rapes committed by white men lead to prosecution” (58). This shows the power disparities that come with the intersections of gender and race. In many European colonies, white women were being policed and blamed for enticing native men whereas white men had the liberty to commit sexual violence and exploit native women. Through this frame, there’s a possibility that lighter skin men in Latin America and the Caribbean have more liberty in choosing partners for non-committed relationship regardless of ethno-racial or color boundaries in contrast to lighter skin women. Moreover, the culture of *machismo*<sup>5</sup> that plagues LAC excuses men’s promiscuity as a supposed sign of hypermasculinity even when married or in a relationship. Fernandez explains that for white families, “while neighborly interracial interdependence and friendships are common and fostered, sexual interracial encounters should be more closely controlled—encouraged for white male pleasure, discouraged for serious relationships—and should be unthinkable for white women (particularly middle-class women)” (2010, 150). Within this framework of race and *machismo*, the white Cuban father felt it was his responsibility to control his daughter’s dating choices.

Both Sue and Fernandez provided extensive insight on interracial dating in Mexico and Cuba, but there was one contrasting case on parental control over their children’s dating choice. Fernandez interviewed Yanet and Victor, a young interracial couple in Cuba who are white and black respectively. The couple had experienced objection from Yanet’s grandparents, but not from her mother who had divorced Yanet’s father and married a black man. Although Yanet’s mother experienced the rejection from her own parents, she went on to have a child with her new partner. The mother who was herself intermarried with a black husband, was open for her daughter to also date outside her own ethno-racial and skin color group (Fernandez 2010, 153). It seems then, that if a parental

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5 Machismo is the “supreme valuation of characteristics culturally associated with the masculine and a denigration of characteristics associated with the feminine” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

figure “transgresses” from the reproduction of pigmentocratic thinking at home, it opens the door for other family members to also engage in interracial relationships more freely.

On the other hand, Sue interviewed a light-brown Mexican woman named Gloria who explained how her father had his first marriage with a black woman. The intermarriage led to Gloria’s father becoming excluded from the rest of the family. After experiencing this ostracization, Gloria’s father began to think of interracial relationships as “aberrations” (2013, 93-94). Both cases provide a reversal of parental behavior on interracial relationships. This could be due to the different contexts of Mexico and Cuba, and the gender role disparities between a mother and a father. Other unknown factors such as age and social class could have also influenced these contrasting views. Although not much information is provided about Yanet’s mother and Gloria’s father, they both experienced parental pressure from the older generation and had contradictory results. The mother defied her parents and the existing racial hierarchy whereas the father abided to the pigmentocracy and expressed disgust towards “transgressive” interracial relationships.

### 3.3. Symbolic escape from the pigmentocracy

While the top strata of the pigmentocracy tend to guard the social capital whiteness provides, those near the bottom believe there’s a possibility to climb the social ladder by intermarrying white or lighter skin partners. Degler’s comparative study of Brazil and the United States pointed out that in Brazil “the mulatto or mixed blood in general, occupies a special place, intermediate between white and black; he is neither black nor white” (1971, 107). This goes in contrast with the US where the one-drop rule has been imposed to regard blackness. Degler explains that in Brazil there is an “escape hatch” for mixed-race people of African descent which may not be an option in the US. (1971, 107). However, it has also been argued that Degler’s mulatto escape hatch paints an incomplete picture of the struggles brown and mixed-race groups experience since it complies and supports the pigmentocracy by continuing to uphold whiteness as the desirable goal or outcome of interracial families. Thus, the mulatto escape hatch is more accurately described as a “symbolic escape.”

The symbolism of a “escape hatch” can also be applied to the spatial aspect. There are neighborhoods or *barrios* throughout many cities in LAC that are

populated by darker skin families with lower socioeconomic status and tend to be labeled negatively as “bad areas.” This conflation of race, social status, and location leads to the racialized notion of neighborhoods. Fernandez interviewed a young mulatto man named Javier who lived in a *barrio* in Cuba. Javier described his discomfiting interactions with his neighbors who saw him as “bourgeois or homosexual because he did not fit the local schema of male behavior” (2010, 85). Since Javier enjoys spending time reading, he was seen as deviating from the masculine scene of the *barrio* for which intellectual activity was seen as unmanly given that the *machismo* culture existing in Javier’s neighborhood defined male activities as spending time “outside” and “hanging out in the street” (85). Whereas, staying indoors or having passive hobbies such as reading was being associated with femininity and women’s gender role of keeping the home. Due to these experiences, Javier minimized interacting with his largely black neighborhood, and chose to date lighter skin women as part of his “distancing strategy, as whitening had been a century earlier” (85). In this case, social mobility through interracial relationships was linked to escaping a geographic space associated with blackness and lower social status.

However, even if mulatto and darker skin individuals manage to symbolically “escape” the *barrio* by partnering with a white or lighter skin person, interracial couples continue to be judged by friends and acquaintances. Throughout her interviews, Sue described how friends of interracial couples questioned the reason behind their dating choices and rationalized it as a “status exchange” in which “the darker individual needs to somehow ‘compensate’ for his or her darker skin tones” (2013, 89). This is often viewed through a gendered lens in which men are to provide good economic standing whereas women are expected to present beauty ideals of whiteness. (Sue 2013, 90). This assumption of “status exchange” could be due to phrasings such as “money whitens” which have been used in LAC to describe well to do darker skin persons that have achieved success in their careers. By using this phrase, social class mobility supposedly trumps over race and color inequalities which is untrue given that upper-class dark skin Latinos still experience colorism and racism. An upper-class light skin mother interviewed in Mexico made it clear that “education and family background will go only so far — no amount of money, status, or good education would make it allowable for her daughter to date a black man” (Sue 2013, 90). Thus, the idea that “money whitens” does not hold true given that

skin color discrimination still occurs regardless of socioeconomic status.

Although financial status may factor in partner choice, it is not relevant enough to “whiten” nor overlook color disparities. In Cuba, Fernandez found interracial couples composed of darker skin men of lower socioeconomic status than their lighter skin partner. Therefore, “money whitening” as a form of status exchange does not always hold true, but it serves to describe how others see interracial couples. Without “status exchange” or “money whitening,” families, friends, and the couple’s surrounding communities tend to have trouble rationalizing the motivations for interracial relationships which emphasizes the strict racial and color boundaries that have been embedded for many since childhood. To better understand the nature of interracial unions as “transgressing” the pigmentocracy, we must look through a gendered perspective.

### 3.4. Gender, skin color, and the “transgressions” of pigmentocracies

Among the color and gender variables of interracial relationships, both studies in Cuba and Mexico showed dark skin men with light skin women as the most common interracial pairing in comparison to dark skin women with light skin men. Whether it is a symbolic form of “mulatto escape hatch” or “status exchange,” this color and gender aspect remained constant. As Stoler’s analysis on colonial intimacies explained, white European men exploited native women of color which in turn could invoke images of brown and dark skin women as sexual objects and denying them as marital or relationship partners. Furthermore, the racial “transgressions” that white or light-skin women perform by dating and marrying black or dark skin men could also be a form of defiance against gendered dating control instituted by parents, particularly fathers. This could also explain the previous case of Yanet’s mother and Gloria’s father. Yanet’s mother was open for herself and her daughter to have formal relationships with black men whereas Gloria’s father was against white-black interracial or intercolor dating for his daughter and even those around him.

As we have seen, skin color was an important factor that determined family formation and partner choice, but it was limited to explain the root of “transgressive” behavior within interracial relationships. I argue that gender inequalities need to be included when analyzing the functions of pigmentocracies, especially if we are addressing the private sphere of families and interracial

unions. By expanding ethno-racial color hierarchies to include gender disparities within it, there is a clearer pattern of interracial partner preference. The *machismo* culture existing in these pigmentocracies creates racial and gender motivations for lighter skin women and darker skin men to “transgress” social norms. In the case of black and dark skin women, they are at a disadvantage as one of the most marginalized groups since they do not hold the privilege of race/color as light skin women do, and they must adhere to patriarchal subversions which dark skin men do not necessarily experience at the same rate as their female counterpart. Consequently, light skin men may believe they have nothing to gain from contradicting the pigmentocracy which places them at the top.

Additionally, racial mixedness ideologies that are overly present in LAC demonstrate how the reproduction of lighter skin children is at the core of upholding pigmentocracies at home. As Wade stated, “*mestizaje* needs to be understood as a deeply gendered process” (2010, 94). Since the weight of responsibility to have lighter skin children is placed on women regardless of their own skin color, family formation in the pigmentocracy is undeniably a gendered phenomenon of oppression. Even though interracial couples are said to be “transgressing” the racial and color boundaries of the hierarchy, mothers are still expected to pass down the lighter partner’s skin color to their children as a method to “better the race.” Having a family history of interracial unions is not enough to go against colorist views which was evident among mixed-race families that continue to exalt the pigmentocracy at home. A true form of “transgression” or defiance of the pigmentocracy would require allowing their daughters to date freely without racial or color lines, and to embrace their darker skin children with equal affection as their lighter skin counterparts. If not, the pigmentocracy would continue to be reproduced at home regardless of the interracial coupling.

#### IV. Conclusion

From the genocide and enslavement of indigenous and African groups, the pigmentocracies that exist all throughout Latin America and the Caribbean have continued to perpetuate colonial remnants of skin color hierarchies. By placing communities with mostly African and indigenous ancestry at the



bottom, it exemplifies how racism and colorism continue to be present even among the ethno-racially mixed region of LAC. Although whiteness may have become more of a symbolic capital due to the high rate of racial and cultural mixedness, its value continues to influence the private sphere of family creation. Furthermore, *mestizaje* ideologies claim racial mixedness as a staple of LAC’s identity creation, and yet black-white or dark skin-light skin couples are judged as “transgressive.” This reveals the contradictory nature of mixedness and idealized identity constructions that are based on whitening schemes which continue to invalidate blackness and celebrate whiteness. In turn, the authority that families impose as to who they embrace or marginalize can have traumatic effects on darker skin children that grow up believing their value derives from skin color. These family structures are indicative of the pigmentocracy being upheld at home.

The cases in Cuba and Mexico demonstrated how interracial couples are scrutinized and become targets of discrimination at home and in their communities due to the “transgression” of social boundaries stemming from the pigmentocracy. Much of this objection against interracial relations is directly linked to the reproductive possibility of lighter or darker skin children. Women’s dating practices becomes a “transgression” when they form relationships with black or darker skin men. Although lighter skin men are also pressured by the family to not date outside their racial and color boundaries, darker skin women in these interracial relationships are expected to reproduce the lighter parent’s color or to “better the race”. Therefore, the way racial and color boundaries are upheld at home is fundamentally through a gendered perspective given that the pressure falls on women to be able to reproduce lighter skin offspring. Gender holds an imperative relation in the structuring of social hierarchies in Latin America and the Caribbean, thus the expansion of pigmentocracies to go beyond ethno-racial and skin color ideologies is necessary to demonstrate relevant aspects of social inequalities that transpire in the private sphere.

Just like a gender perspective can be incredibly insightful in understanding how pigmentocracies occur through family formation, future research projects could tackle other themes regarding sexual orientation or contemporary migrants which could contribute to a more nuanced understanding on how this social hierarchy is reproduced and transgressed in different yet connected paradigms. This research relied on the ethno-racial mixedness of African,

Indigenous, and European heteronormativity, but the inclusion of same-sex couples as well as emerging ethno-racial groups such as Asian Latin Americans may provide a more elaborate understanding on the diversity of developments in the private sphere in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Abstract

# Family Formation in the Pigmentocracy: The Guarding of Whiteness and the “Transgression” of Interracial Relationships in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Ideologies of racial mixedness has been the enduring mask of racial harmony in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) since the 1920s. These ideologies were conceived to unite an ethno-racially diverse population into a homogenous identity that proclaimed the racial and cultural mixture of European, indigenous, and African ancestry as the creolized trifecta composing the population of LAC. Mixedness was also exalted as the solution to racism and the creation of non-racist societies while concealing ethno-racial and skin color discrimination of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. Contemporary studies on ethno-racial inequalities point to skin color as the major indicator of discrimination in LAC which brought the conceptualization of race and color hierarchies also known as pigmentocracies. In this hierarchy the top is deemed in closeness to whiteness while the bottom in closeness to blackness. Those at the bottom may consider interracial relationships as a tool for social mobility whereas those at the top implement their own strategies to guard their position as well as their children. This article seeks to understand how pigmentocracies are reproduced and transgressed in the private sphere. The guarding of whiteness among lighter skin families and the marginalization of darker skin relatives in mixed-race families are some of the ways the pigmentocracy continues to be upheld at home. These examples of reproduction of pigmentocracy are also contrasted with the paradoxical position of interracial couples as “transgressions” of the racial hierarchy whilst being proclaimed as the backbone of mixedness ideologies. Ultimately, I argue that the most critical factor that influences family formation and partner preference in the pigmentocracy is the reproduction of

darker or lighter skin children. In turn, a gendered lens proves to be an insightful tool to understand family formation in the pigmentocracy.

