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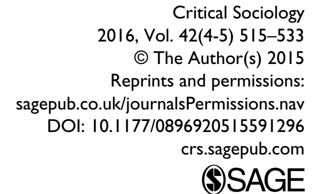

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'We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans': Privilege, Nationalism and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico

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Abstract
This article analyses the conflicting understandings surrounding the recognition of anti-black racism in Mexico, drawing from an analysis of the 2005 controversy around Memín Pinguín. We ask what is at stake when opposition arises to claims of racism, how racial disavowal is possible, and how is it that the racial project of mestizaje (racial and cultural mixture) expresses a form of Mexican post-racial ideology. We argue that the ideology of mestizaje is key for unpacking the tensions between the recognition and disavowal of racism. Mestizaje solidifies into a form of nationalist denial in moments when racism is openly contested or brought up. It becomes a concrete strategy of power that is mobilized to simplify or divert attention in particular moments, such as with the Memín Pinguín controversy, when the contradictions within the social dynamic are revealed and questioned. Here is where Mexico's "raceless" ideology of mestizaje overlaps with current post-racial politics. We explore state, elite and popular reactions to the debate to discuss how such public displays reflect an invested denial of race and racism while, at the same time, the racial status quo of mestizaje is reinforced. This, we argue, is the essence of post-racial politics in Mexico.

Keywords
anti-black racism, Mexico, Memín Pinguín, mestizaje, post-race, racial privilege, racism, sociology

> They hit me in the chest, testicles, abdomen. They forced me to clean their shoes with my own saliva. The policeman and the military made fun of me, they called me "fucking Black", "Memín Pinguín"; "where do you have the drugs, fucking Colombian Black?" Although the other detainees were also naked, they laughed too. Their aim was clearly to humiliate me. (Torres, 2014)[1]

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Introduction

Of all the horrific details of this chilling account by Afro-Honduran human rights activist Ángel Amílcar Colón about his ordeal when the Mexican police and military detained him in the city of Tijuana in 2009, the reference to the cartoon character Memín Pinguín is particularly striking. Hardly four years had passed in Mexico since the popular 2005 outpouring of money, writing and time to oppose the accusation by the US Congress that Memín Pinguín, the cartoon character's depiction and the comic strip, were racist. This article analyses the conflicting understandings surrounding the recognition of racism in Mexico, drawing from an analysis of the 2005 controversy around Memín Pinguín. We ask what is at stake when opposition arises to claims of racism, how racial disavowal is possible, and how is it that the racial project of mestizaje (racial and cultural mixture) expresses a form of Mexican post-racial ideology.

This article is one of a growing number of recent studies of racism in Mexico (and in other parts of Latin America) that contend with the issue of limited public racial recognition, in a context where the effects of racial exclusion are systemic and pervasive.[2] To illustrate this, for example, in 1994 it was established that an indigenous person with a college degree would earn 30% less than his or her non-indigenous counterpart (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 1994: 146–51); over 40% of the indigenous population in Mexico live in extreme poverty compared to 10% of the non-indigenous population (CONEVAL, 2012: 45); a person with lighter skin tends to have between two and three more years of schooling (Telles, 2014: 75). If we can claim that, more generally, controversies around race and racism reveal conflicting understandings but also startling sets of misrecognitions, in such a context like the Mexican one, the controversy of Memín Pinguín is a revealing case in point. Moreover, the worrying account of Ángel Amílcar Colón allows us to explore the continuity of racism in a setting overpowered by discourses of multiculturalism, post-race and nationalism.

We argue that in the case of Mexico, the racial project of mestizaje and its imposition as the official national ideology since the Revolution of 1910 are key for unpacking the tensions between the recognition and disavowal of racism. We propose that considering mestizaje not as a thing of the past that we, as Mexicans, have to overcome or are struggling to overcome, but rather as a project that is current and alive, allows us to grapple with current post-racial politics that conceal racial privilege and exclusion under the banner of racial mixing and multicultural recognition. Alongside the historical complexity of race relations, the unifying notion of mestizaje in Mexico solidifies into a form of nationalist denial in moments when racism[3] is openly contested or brought up. The ideology of mestizaje becomes a concrete strategy of power in particular moments, such as with the Memín Pinguín controversy, when the contradictions within the social dynamic are revealed and questioned. Mestizaje is then mobilized to offer an easy explanation: "how can we be racist, we are Mexican and mixed?"; or, by diverting attention from the actual racist claim to something else: "look at how racist people in the United States are, how can they call us racists?". Here is where Mexico's "raceless" ideology of mestizaje overlaps with current post-racial politics. As Mónica Moreno Figueroa (2010) explains, David Theo Goldberg's (2002) notion of "racelessness" is useful to frame Mexico's lack of public discourse on race and racism. For Goldberg, in his analysis of US racial relations, racelessness refers to the absence "of formal racial invocation from state agency and state personality" (2002: 261), while at the same time certain dynamics of social, economic and political life are fashioned by racial understandings. We use racelessness here to refer to a process of racial and racist normalization that acts in such a way that allows Mexican people to express and be convinced by the commonly spread idea that in Mexico there is no racism because we are all "mixed". Our position is that this association between a racial identity (being mixed) and an equality status (there's no racism, we are all the same, everyone is treated equally) has been

oversimplified in its rationale and it is very much part of what the post-racial position is about. Following Alexandre Da Costa (this issue), we use the term "post racial ideologies" to refer to:

> forms of thought, discourse, and action that evade, delegitimize, and seek to eliminate racial differences and their effects from the focus of academic scholarship, activist struggle, public debate, and state policy. Post-racial ideologies operate through racialized forms of power while simultaneously claiming the non-significance of race. They generate fraught understandings of belonging and inclusion that elide racial difference and structural racism in ways that allow the re-articulation rather than the transformation of racial inequalities within national and global developments. Moreover, when deployed as a strategy of power, post-racial ideologies continually seek to depoliticize race, racism, and difference in ways that demobilize anti-racist politics, substantive cultural recognition, and material redistribution. (Da Costa, 2014: 2)

What we will explore here, then, is how the re-articulation of raceless mestizaje as a post-racial ideology occurs and makes racial disavowal possible. How is this context generating the possibility of multiple interpretations of, and positions in relation to, the issue of racism in Mexico? To address these concerns, we have chosen to revisit the case of the 2005 public debate around the revival of the Memín Pinguín comic in Mexican popular culture. While the case has been discussed by some journalists and academics (Fernández L'Hoeste, 2006; Lomnitz, 2005; Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013b; Tello Díaz, 2005; Vargas, 2005; Vaughn and Vinson III, 2008; Velázquez Gutiérrez, 2008), we turn our attention here to the responses from some Mexican elite intellectuals (Krauze 2005a, 2005b; Monsiváis, 2005, 2008; Poniatowska in Palapa Quijas et al., 2005), whose argumentations in defense of the stamps, alongside state and popular reactions, give us clues about how the workings of post-race ideology take place in Mexico. We will start first with the controversy itself.

The Controversy

In March 2005, racism in Mexico hit the international limelight after the unfortunate comments of then President Vicente Fox about the Mexican population in the United States. Fox claimed that the Mexicans take the jobs "that not even the Blacks want to do", generating a strong negative critique inside and outside Mexico (Vargas, 2005).[4] However, Fox's comments, labeled by Rev. Jesse Jackson as "unwitting, unnecessary, and inappropriate" (CNN, 2005), reflect how anti-black racism is an unaddressed practice amongst many Mexicans. The pervasiveness of such anti-black racism came to public attention a few months later in response to the release by the Mexican Postal Service of five commemorative stamps featuring the character Memín Pinguín (see Figure 1).[5]

Memín Pinguín is the main fictional character of an eponymous children's comic, which first appeared in Mexico in 1943. It was created by Yolanda Vargas Dulché and originally drawn by Alberto Cabrera, and was later developed by cartoonist Sixto Valencia Burgos. According to cartoonist Valencia Burgos, Memín was inspired by the characters of Ebony White from the US comic *The Spirit*, the 1886 novel *Heart* by Edmondo De Amicis and the 1922 US comedy short films *Our Gang* by Hal Roach (Monsiváis, 2008). The comic's story develops around a series of mostly urban adventures centering on Memín and his three best friends, Ricardo, Ernestillo and Carlangas. The comic's website describes Memín as imprudent and funny, impetuous and smug; he is also lazy, ignorant, naïve, nosy, selfish although accessible and kind with his friends (who are always hitting him on the head, but consider him their most loyal friend) (Memín Pinguín, 2015). Physically, Memín is portrayed as more caricature-like than his friends, short for his age and bald. The website also mentions that at times Memín complains about his skin color, but suggests that this is "understandable due to the environment in which he lives, where his friends and almost everyone is

Figure 1. Memín Pinguín commemorative stamps. 2005.
Reproduced from: https://bcehricardogaribay.wordpress.com/2011/02/06/la-caricatura-en-mexico-memin-pinguin/ (accessed 14 January 2015).

always calling him 'Black', but not with a racist meaning, it's just that he is the 'little blackie in the rice'" (Memín Pinguín, 2015).

In reaction to the stamps, the administration of George Bush and the Congressional Black Caucasus of the United States (via people like Jesse Jackson, Melvin Watt, Emanuel Cleaver II and Donald Payne) protested (Althaus and Hegstrom, 2005). Congressman Emanuel Cleaver II introduced a resolution "that condemns Mexico for printing and distributing blatantly racist postage stamps".[6] He was voicing the concerns also of the Hispanic Caucus alongside various civil rights organizations in the United States. When they argued that Memín Pinguín was a racist depiction of black people, an intense reaction erupted in Mexico. The spokesman for the Mexican Embassy in Washington, Rafael Laveaga, "described the depiction as a cultural image that has no meaning and is not intended to offend" (Fears, 2005). And in Mexico, Ruben Aguilar, a spokesman for the then President Fox, called the stamps "a celebration of Mexican culture" (The Guardian, 2005). As Bobby Vaughn and Ben Vinson III discussed:

> [S]hortly after the stamp was released, many pleaded for the United States to consider the broader context of the image and its production, as well as its storylines, rather than simply rushing to interpret and chastise Memín's physical features. […] Memín had come to demonstrate what many Mexicans had always feared about the influence of ideas from the North – a desire to over-analyze situations for racially charged themes. (Vaughn and Vinson III, 2008)

As a result of this perceived interventionist act from the United States and the nationalist sentiment it provoked, Memín Pinguín's 750,000 issued stamps sold out within hours in Mexico's major cities (some people taking advantage and reselling the five stamps for up to US$70 instead of their value, at the time, of US$3.25), and the seventh edition of the comic was reissued (Camacho Servín, 2005; Mateos-Vega, 2005; Memín Pinguín, 2015). What is interesting in the case of both President Fox's outbursts of patriotic defense of Mexicans in the United States and of the issuing of the stamps was that while few raised their voices to defend or justify Fox's racist remarks, a

wide spectrum of high-profile personalities rose in support of Memín Penguín (Krauze 2005a, 2005b; Monsiváis, 2005, 2008, Poniatowska in Palapa Quijas et al., 2005). The Mexican media and key members of the intellectual elite from both ends of the political spectrum tried to play down the purported racism of the stamps and explain Mexico's non-racist national character, accusing the US of being interventionist with its remarks.[7] They tried to justify and defend the character of Memín Pinguín in terms of either historical mestizaje or naïve, harmless popular culture (Palapa Quijas, 2005).

For example, Mexican public figures such as historian Enrique Krauze defended the stamps and Memín as a "highly pleasing image rooted in Mexican popular culture" (Krauze, 2005b) and lectured us on the benign situation of black slaves in New Spain compared to the British colony. "If [Jesse] Jackson and [Al] Sharpton", writes Krauze, "were to look at some of the essential facts of African American history in Mexico, I think they would find much to respect" (2005b). According to Krauze, Mexico's black slaves had a better chance due to the opportunities enabled by mestizaje. For example, Krauze (2005b) writes:

> Africans could buy their freedom and give birth to children who were in turn free to marry anyone of any racial origin. Moreover, they were able to move through colonial society with a certain ease and even some advantages […] they could work freely in tropical agriculture and skilled occupations, especially as blacksmiths, painters, sculptors, carpenters, candle-makers and singers in the churches. In the colonial society of New Spain, men and women of color mixed easily with the rest of the population.

Moreover, in those places where racism persists in Mexico (i.e. Chiapas) it is because, Krauze argues, the process of mestizaje "barely functioned" (2005b). So not only is slavery rewritten here as opportunity, but Krauze also implies the success of mestizaje for the Africans and their descendants as they managed to mix easily, unlike the indigenous people in Chiapas, and buy their way to freedom.

Perhaps more surprising were the remarks of left-wing novelist Elena Poniatowska, who is known for her critique of the state's national project. According to her:

> In our country the image of the Blacks awakens a huge sympathy, which is reflected not only in characters like *Memín Pinguín*, but also in popular songs. Even *Cri Cri* [a famous Mexican children's song-writer] created his "little Black watermelon boy" song. In Mexico, in contrast to what happens in the United States, we have treated Blacks in a kinder way. (quoted in Palapa Quijas et al., 2005)

Krauze and Poniatowska's remarks echo the dominant belief in Mexico that the country's treatment of black[8] people has been more benign and endearing than in the United States: it has been "kind". This belief and common stereotype has been made possible partly through the silencing of public discourse on the existence of black people in comparison to the well-known history of slavery, segregation, racism and criminalization of African Americans in the United States. This erasure of blacks in Mexico derives, first, from the dominant idea that the black population in Mexico has disappeared thanks to the process of integration that is integral to the project of mestizaje (Aguirre Beltrán, 1967; Saldívar, 2014; Sue, 2013) and, second, by state policy that hesitated and delayed their recognition.

An interesting element of the Memín Pinguín controversy is how it recreates a particular version of the history of racial representation, and with this, it disregards the possibility of discussing the presence of blacks in Mexico. More importantly, the way the discussion is framed elides the social conditions and continuous exclusion of black people. When some, like Mexican intellectual Carlos Monsiváis (2005, 2008), maintained that the problem generated around this case was due to the US government intervention threatening Mexican sovereignty, they turned the debate

towards a nationalist response, missing what would have been a great opportunity to discuss the workings of racism in Mexico and its proximity to, and tension with, the issue of sovereignty and nationalism.

There were other public voices, from journalism, academia and activists, that did highlight the issue of racism and raised strong critiques. Black organization Mexico Negro demanded an apology from President Fox for issuing a stamp that "rewards, celebrates, typifies and makes official the distorted, ridiculed, stereotyped and reduced vision of black people in general" (Castellanos, 2005). Within academia, for example, anthropologist Maria Elisa Velazquez declared that the problem is that Mexico's black population is invisible, and thus the racism they are exposed to goes unrecognized. This reveals, she argues, many Mexicans' ignorance of the implications of racism (quoted in Vargas, 2005). Mexican anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz, writing for a US-based online magazine, argued that the "Memín affair reflects decades of profound and unacknowledged changes in the relations between the United States and Mexico" (Lomnitz, 2005). He emphasized how the belief in mestizaje as a way of conquering racism has taken hold in many Mexicans' imaginary of the country, particularly "in contrast to the Anglo-American penchant for genocide, apartheid and Jim Crow" (Lomnitz, 2005). Two columnists of the leading leftist newspaper *La Jornada*, Ochy Curiel (anthropologist, feminist and anti-racism activist) and José Agustín Ortíz Pinchetti (left-wing politician and congressman), wrote strong critiques about the ongoing disavowal of racism in Mexican society (Ortiz Pinchetti, 2005; Curiel, 2005).

While these are encouraging lines of analysis, such efforts, we believe, were lost amidst the stronger voices of members of Mexico's intellectual elite and the furor of anti-interventionist sentiments of many journalists, accompanied by the overwhelming popular support for the stamps. So, how can we explain that racist practices actively invade institutions and organizations, media and cultural products, social conflicts and tensions and the everyday life of ordinary people, despite the professed absence of racism and the inclusiveness of mestizaje's racial project? Is it possible to argue that the exclusion lived by a particular group, say indigenous peoples, is not indicative of an underlying racist logic (Moreno Figueroa, 2010) and the omnipresence of Mexican racism (Knight, 1990) that affect all members of society? How can we explain the abuse that Amílcar Colón received by the Mexican police and the military in Tijuana in 2009? We argue that state, elite and popular reactions to Memín – the character, comic and stamps – reflect an invested denial of race and racism while, at the same time, the racial status quo of the well-established mestizaje racial project is reinforced. Moreover, this invested denial appears to tie neatly in with an older, well-established and ongoing process of normalization of racism. This denial and normalization of racism, we argue, is at the core of post-racial politics in Mexico, and in the controversy around Memín Pinguín we can see how it takes place, as well as its larger implications.

Blackness and the Mestizaje Project

In the 1940s, when Memín Pinguín was first published, the Mexican state's effort to integrate indigenous, mestizo and white populations under a national banner and avoid a public recognition of black people was at its peak. During the post-revolutionary period, the state developed a political agenda based on ideas of social justice and economic growth. In order to achieve this, the state promoted the creation of a new citizen that would result from the process of mestizaje. This new citizen would be a member of the so-called "cosmic race" proposed by then Minister of Education José Vasconcelos (1948 [1925]). The mestizo as the subject of national identity was presented as the embodiment of the new modern Mexico (Gamio, 1916), and in this project of state formation, "Mexican" became equivalent to mestizo. Like Brazil's idea of "racial democracy" (see Motta, 2000; Telles, 2004; Twine, 1998), mestizo Mexico promised equality and justice and the erasure of

the old caste-like system through an appropriate process of mixing of the population that favored whitening, combined with a class-based social organization. Mestizaje's hegemony relied both on its promise of inclusion as well as on the generation and reproduction of racial hierarchies necessary to justify who is in and out of the project. Mestizaje is, in Ronald Stutzman's words, "an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion" (Stutzman, 1981).[9] But, as Peter Wade observes, drawing from his work on Colombia, despite its perceived "inclusiveness" and fluidity, mestizaje is shaped by clear racial hierarchies where whiteness is valued and blackness and indigenousness are marginalized (Wade, 2005: 240). However, while for Colombia Afro-Colombians are at the center of the discussion on issues of racism, for Mexico blackness was officially "erased" as black anti-racism (deeply embedded in the *castas* taxonomy, or as expressed in Vasconcelos's disdain for the African component of Mexico's racial composition) was never challenged and was mostly considered an issue that had no relevance for Mexico's unifying project.[10]

Within this new social imagination of the ideal citizenry, black people did not figure. This is in part due to the specific history of the enslaved peoples of African descent in the Mexican colonial period. According to Lomnitz (1992), the enslaved people of African and Afro-Caribbean descent, contrary to the indigenous groups, were not recognized as having the right to preserve – or recreate – their own internal hierarchies, and the possibility of a slave community, society or nation was aborted. They were enslaved under the logic that their own nations resisted Catholicism, so "through intensive surveillance by the Church and by their masters, individual slaves would earn their entrance to heaven and, in some circumstances, their or their children's manumission" (1992: 267). Generally, Africans were more valued as individuals than their indigenous counterparts – because they were an expensive property and, in part, because of the belief that they had a better "physical nature" (1992: 269). All this has combined to create a story for the African population and their descendants of racial mixture, dispersal and segregation which has amounted to an apparent belief that "there are no Blacks in Mexico, you can't see them", which corresponds well with the intentional official omission of accounts of slavery (Velázquez and Iturralde, 2012). Hence this lack of visibility of black peoples fits perfectly into a paradigm that avoided explicit racial identifications of those considered the legitimate, or relevant, national population groups, i.e. indigenous and Spanish.

In fact, during colonial times more slaves entered the country than Spaniards, yet their relevance to the colony is not mentioned in the state-endorsed schoolbooks, for example. Anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán estimated that during the colonial period the ratio between blacks and Europeans was 20:1 and that by 1810, when slavery was abolished, 10% of the population was Afro-descendent (Aguirre Beltrán, 1972 [1946]). Other scholars have suggested that approximately 200,000 slaves arrived in Mexico during the colonial period between 1521 and 1810 (Kemper, 1995; Knight, 2002). Robert Kemper argues that by 1810, when the war of independence started and slavery was abolished, it was likely that just over 10,000 people of African descent lived in New Spain, "although in the same year the census registered 600,000 people of *afromestizo* groups" (Kemper, 1995: 538). At the beginning of the 21st century blacks are only beginning to gain some recognition in national policy. While in the censuses from 2000 and 2010 a question on self-identification for indigenous peoples was incorporated, black people have not been explicitly contemplated yet, although their inclusion in the census has been debated for over a decade. It is not until 2015, in the intercensal survey of the census bureau, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), that a question on black self-identification has been considered, laying the ground for its use in the 2020 Census (Rudiño, 2014).[11]

As a result of the specific historical development of the country, it might be feasible to consider that black people, until recently, have had a difficult or "tricky" place in Mexico's dominant national imaginary, making it possible that a global black figure (from which Memín Pinguín is

created) becomes easier to adopt and project onto. It might seem risky to speculate here why this character has taken such a deep hold in Mexico's popular culture alongside a dominant racial discourse of mestizaje, and not just explain it as a certain form of global fashion.[12] But it seems clear that the idea of blackness as a racialized position that is exceptional ("there are no Blacks in Mexico") was easy to articulate in precisely the strongest historical moment of the mestizaje project in Mexico (the 1940s).[13] Thus the case of Memín Pinguín bears witness to how Mexican racial disavowal is entangled in hegemonic discourses that allow for racist practices. This is what we call the "possessive investment" (Lipsitz, 1998) in the denial of racism, where mestizaje, "racelesness" and the normalization of racism make it possible to see the figure of Memín Pinguín as loveable and unproblematic, while hiding how mestizaje justifies racial exclusion and privilege in contemporary Mexico.

George Lipsitz's (1998) arguments about the "possessive investment" in whiteness help get at the core of the difficulties around the recognition of racism, and to tackle the issue of privilege. For Lipsitz (1998), arguing that there is an interest in the maintenance of a regime of oppression implies addressing the benefits that can be drawn from such a state of affairs. Possessively investing in a particular social order means creating and protecting the structures and rationales of certain interests. While Lipsitz's analysis is a careful dissection of the racial project of the United States set around whiteness as the site of privilege, here we are interested in considering to what extent this conceptualization is useful for getting at the workings of post-racial politics in Mexico and the constant struggle for the recognition of racism. We argue that what we see is a "possessive investment" in mestizaje that enables some Mexican elite intellectuals, state officials and popular sectors to deny the racist character of the Memín case.

In the following section we discuss three ways in which the "possessive investment" in mestizaje is recurring among the defenders of Memín's innocuous character. First, a patriotic defense against US intervention; second, the "comforting" commonsensical argument that Memín is part of Mexican popular culture; and third, the assertion that in Mexico "race" is not a problem. All three themes constitute parts of the racial ideology of mestizaje of the early to mid-20th century and show strong continuities and repercussions in early 21st-century Mexico.

"We Are Not Racist ...": Patriotism and Anti-US Nationalism

Let us now consider the first main aspect we identified in the defense of the stamps and the comic: the patriotic defense against US intervention. The combination of Mexican national pride and anti-US sentiment has been part of the tense relationship between the countries, particularly since the Mexican-US war of 1848 when the United States annexed half of Mexico's territory. This event had a profound impact on Mexico's national consciousness. While in the previous 40 years of independence (1810) the country had witnessed endless internal armed conflicts, which a weak central state had struggled to contain, following the Mexican-US war a new national sentiment emerged. After the "shared" experience of the war, patriotic and nationalist feelings became popular in Mexican society. National symbols were used to create a sense of belonging and unity in a society profoundly divided due to many years of conflict (Vieira Powers, 2002). It is in this period when the idea of the national subject overtook the *criollo* figure,[14] and the racial and cultural concept of mestizaje and Mexicanness became popular.

More importantly, since 1810 Mexico has used its "kinder" treatment of indigenous people and the early abolition of slavery as a central point of comparison between the racist segregationist culture of the United States and Mexico's "inclusive and just" mestizaje. This position was echoed in the 2005 controversy by Enrique Krauze:

> When a North American accuses a Mexican of racism, the retort fits in a question: Have you ever, in your 229 years of independent history, had a Native American or Afro American president? Of course not. Mexico, on the other hand, not only can boast the paradigmatic cases of [Presidents] Benito Juarez (a Zapotec who learned Spanish at the age of 12) and Porfirio Diaz (whose mother was Mixtec) but other central actors. The Independence leader Jose Maria Morelos had black roots as did his Lieutenant General Vicente Guerrero, who became president just eight years after Independence was obtained. (Krauze 2005a)

As Krauze's statements attest, defending the blessings of mestizaje and denying racism are commonplaces of Mexican patriotism and anti-US sentiments (see Lomnitz, 2005, 2010; Ortiz Pinchetti, 2005; Tello Díaz, 2005).[15] But mestizaje also emerged as an anti-colonial response, promoted by the ruling elites, to ideas of purity and "white" hegemonic discourses emanating from European and US scientific racism, social Darwinism and eugenics. This was an idea that took an important populist twist after the Revolution of the 1910s and became a unifying force. This race-based project was supposed to overcome the racist ideology that predominated before the Revolution. As Emiko Saldívar (2008, 2014) argues, mestizaje was portrayed as the embodiment of both the demand for social justice and for the political and economic modernization of the country; it is the ideology coined by the post-revolutionary elites that created a sense of unity and belonging without the need for political and legal recognition of indigenous and black peoples.[16]

It was this enactment of mestizaje as racially progressive that the intellectuals we have been discussing here – Monsiváis, Krauze and Poniatowska – decided not to engage with when it came to the Memín Pinguín case, even though they all wrote seminal books in the 1980s that criticized the all-encompassing mestizo national project (see Krauze, 1986; Monsiváis, 1987; Poniatowska, 1980). It seems there is a difficulty in linking the development of mestizaje ideology and Mexican identity with the ways in which racial discourses developed in Mexico.[17] We found Monsivais's response particularly puzzling. For Monsiváis, the accusation that the comic is racist came about only after President Fox's comment that the Mexicans in the US take the jobs "that not even the Blacks want to do" (Vargas, 2005). But more importantly, he insists that this accusation of racism is just "the will to transfer one's own racism to somebody else's society" (2008: 3). As Lomnitz (2010) has argued, the idea that "race" is a concept imported from outside is common among Mexican intellectuals. While it is clear that Monsiváis wants to make a point about the interference of the Bush administration, he misses the opportunity to critique some internal issues about the multiplicity of forms of racism in Mexico.[18]

As a highly regarded critic of the nation's social, cultural and political life, known as a chronicler of street life and popular culture, Monsiváis, who died in 2010, gave voice to Mexico's minorities and oppressed while challenging those who abused their power. He was known for his analytic and often satirical descriptions of Mexico City's popular culture and has become an obligatory reference for any study of modern popular culture in Mexico. How, then, do we explain his failure to see that Memín was not only a medium through which the elite reproduced power and gender relations, but also racial hierarchies? How could somebody known for his critical eye for understanding the subtle and unsaid so quickly dismiss the issue of race? Monsivais is not alone in this. There seems to be a more generalized inability of many Mexican intellectuals to critique both mestizaje and racism at the same time. It is as if the idea of race appears as incompatible with mestizaje, thus making an anti-racist mestizaje from below very hard to construct given its historical hegemonic use by the nation-building elite. We believe that it is the hegemonic character of mestizaje that is difficult to break through, even for someone like Monsivais, due to its normalization force, the promise of inclusion it bears, its deeply rooted anti-black racism and the belief that Mexico's deep social injustice is solely rooted in class stratification.

This takes us to the second point we want to elaborate: popular racism, that is, the ways in which a racial project takes hold in people's imaginaries and everyday lives through its articulation non only among the elite but with popular culture, making the emergence of a character such as Memín Pinguín possible.

"We Are Mexicans": Mestizaje as the Project of the "People"

The new official project of mestizaje that emerged after the Revolution of 1910 had the mestizo subject at its center as the building force of its project of modernity and progress. This mestizo was envisioned as the sole result of the mix between the Spanish and indigenous heritage, and the African presence of Mexico's modern history was ignored. The most representative visual example of this is Diego Rivera's (1886–1957) monumental murals that covered the walls of the National Palace and other governmental buildings. Out of the ashes of the Revolution, the murals were commissioned with the idea of educating and teaching the illiterate "masses" about their national (and racial) identity and history, and Rivera would produce the imagery that became the official representation of the state.

The "education of the masses" became a central task for the post-revolutionary state, well into the 1980s. Public education became a vital force of the expansion of the federal state into the most remote and isolated parts of Mexico. Official education was accompanied by the profound belief that the "masses" needed to learn to read, write and build a patriotic spirit, and also that it was important to replace their "religious and local fears" with "modern" values (Vasconcelos, 1948 [1925]). This "moral education" of the masses was also undertaken by the growing cultural industry, especially radio, the movie and TV industries, and the press. We should consider Memín Pinguín cartoons as part of such efforts, a device for moral and civic education.

The comic was created in 1943 when the national literacy campaign was in full swing, and the 372 chapters of the comic have been re-published and re-edited several times since then, selling a record 25 million copies monthly in 1978 (Palapa Quijas, 2005). The story told by many of the creators and publishers of the comic (Editorial Group Vid) is very much embedded in this education endeavor. For example, Manelick de la Parra, general director of the publishing company and son of the original scriptwriter of the comic, Vargas Dulché, recalled in an interview apropos of the Memín Pinguín case in 2005 that in the 1950s Memín was a means to learn how to read. "The comic strip did help children and adults to learn how to read, out of curiosity about what was happening to Memín" (Palapa Quijas, 2005). Although in 2005 the comic was selling only four million copies monthly, the stamps signified a revival of interest in Memín Pinguín.

Given that Memín formed part of the "moral education" of the masses, the comic book contributed to the normalization of anti-black racism based on the "darky" character in the popular sector. This was evidenced by the massive turnout at post offices throughout the country on the day the stamps went on sale. "Since the World Cup in 1986 we had not seen this many people," affirmed a post office employee (quoted in Camacho Servín, 2005). This support is further expressed in a sense of generational continuity in consumption of the comic. One man said, after enduring an hour-long wait to acquire the famous stamps, "my grandmother used to read Memín, my mother too; I read it, grew up with him and now my son does too" (quoted in Camacho Servín, 2005; Palapa Quijas, 2005).

So what is it about Memín Pinguín that makes the comic so popular and that makes anti-black racism and its possibility blur out of focus? An element that contributes to this popularization of racism is precisely its normalization within the comic. The ways the black body is addressed, and how it comes to embody the figure of the good but foolish black person, are very much in line with the famous US "picaninny" figure. As sociologist David Pilgrim discusses, "Picaninnies had

bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths into which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon. […] Picaninnies were portrayed as nameless, shiftless natural buffoons" (Pilgrim, 2000).

Overall, the representation of the character follows what has been called "darky iconography", a wide-ranging, remarkably pervasive form of representation of blackness (Reese, 2008; Sterling, 2010). Sterling argues, in his analysis of Memín Pinguín, for the need of placing

> any analysis of global blackness in national and local context, and the complex investments in such representations there. But however popular Memín Pinguín may be, whatever present-day resonance he may have among what Krauze refers to as Mexico's "poorer people,"[19] the character also illustrates the remarkable pervasiveness and range of so-called darky iconography around the world. Images like these reflect the common ways in which their global recreation and appeal depend on erasures of provenance, on the sustained voicelessness of the "poorer people" who are both readily represented and underrepresented. (Sterling, 2010: 40)

We can see the normalization of these images in the Mexican public's reaction of surprise when the subject of Memín Pinguín being a racist comic arose again in the US in 2008 when members of the African American community in the US complained that the supermarket chain Wal-Mart was selling it. In response, De la Parra, general director of the comic's publishing company, said:

> It is incredible that people protest against Memín Pinguín, a character who fights against discrimination and highlights spiritual beauty over physical appearance […] But, it seems that some people have political motives and are adamant about seeing racism where there is none. (Manelick de la Parra quoted in Arceo S, 2008)

This intervention is interesting as it reveals the extent of the difficulties in elaborating the connections between the comic, the Mexican national context, and racism as a variety of forms and practices of oppression and exclusion. One of the key points here is De la Parra's assertion that Memín is a character who does not comment on his body as he supposedly "highlights spiritual beauty over physical appearance" (as if this is a way to counter discrimination). And we may concede that yes, of course, he does not comment on his physical features, as he has to be continuously dealing with his animalistic and buffoon-like portrayal and the demeaning way he is set up in particular social and power dynamics within the comic. For example, in an episode where Memín and his group of three friends are on a school trip to Teotihuacan (a major archeological site near Mexico City), we see Memín embellished by the backdrop of the pyramids while saying that he feels "Teohaticano", which is some sort of combination of being from Teotihuacan but also being Haitian (Vargas Dulché, 2012). This fortuitous allusion to Haiti could be read in reference to that country's visibility in the media after the 2010 earthquake, reinforcing the idea that blackness is something foreign, while in tension with the presence of Memín in Mexico. He is then put on the spot, as he usually is throughout the comic. When Memín asks how to do a report about the visit, his friend Carlos calls him "*zoquete*" (dumb) because he does not understand what he has to do and thinks it is very difficult. Carlos then "kindly" encourages him to do the report, saying that he cannot believe he is such a brute. But there is no comeback, no challenge to the reproduction of racism through the implication and reaffirmation of hierarchies – neither from Memín, nor from the teacher who has been listening to this exchange.

Privilege: The Invested Disavowal of Racism

Memín is inextricably an elite depiction of poverty and popular culture. It is, as Monsivais correctly points out, "the observation of poverty or wealth that destroys families and forces single

mothers to wash huge piles of someone else's clothes so they can give some education to their children" (Monsiváis, 2008: 2). It is to this argument – that race is not the problem, but class – that we now turn our attention. In his article reflecting on the debate around Memín Pinguín, Monsiváis proposes that, really, "the gaze is not racist. The central theme of the comic is not the 'burned' skin but social class. Memín is ridiculed but not excluded, and the jokes are the predictable ones: what then can be called 'racist' about it?" (2008: 3).

For Monsiváis, the accusations of racism at the heart of the controversy around the stamps come mainly from ignorance about the history of the comic as a complex and popular product of Mexico's cultural industry that values the portrayal of what it means to be a "good son". Monsiváis argues that what gives strength to the comic is the fact that it is constructed in the genre of melodrama and its soap-opera-like feeling. For Monsiváis, the really pressing issue is class distinctions. For example, when in one issue Memín's friend, Carlos, is urged to leave his poor mother to go and live with his rich father, Monsiváis interprets Carlos's rejection of this proposal as honoring the tradition of the pleasure of suffering and the idealization of the mother.

What Monsiváis misses in his insightful commentary is that in his interpretation of popular class and gender relations as melodramatic, there is also a clear racial construction of social relations. Is it really possible to argue, as he does, that "the Mexican readership from sixty years ago or from last year wouldn't have tolerated an openly racist comic" (2008: 3)? It is our argument that such an assumption is wrong. The majority of the Mexican readership has not realized (or cared sufficiently) that the comic is racist and, yes, they have tolerated it (very similar to the reactions and controversy around the comic *Tin Tin* in Belgium) (Reuters, 2012). Monsiváis argues that while in the US comic *Our Gang*, by Hal Roach, racism is evident in the exceptional treatment of the "negrito", this is not the case in the Mexican comic, where Memín "is strictly a quaint, charming fact. He is not inferior; he is different, nothing else" (2008: 3). What does it mean for someone to be described as a quaint and charming (picturesque) piece of data? Simply being the different one? How can we critically accept that "difference", when invoked in relation to racial issues, is exempt from value? Memín is constantly ridiculed and his best friends, while making degrading remarks about his body, his features and his intellectual capacities, are not excluding him.

Monsiváis's definition of racism is tidy: "racism, amongst other characteristics, is the accumulation of discriminatory actions that are justified and demanded by prejudice, and is the operation of choosing subjects to be ridiculed" (2008: 3). While we would not have major disagreement with this definition – if considered as one possible version of racism focused on individaul action and which does not take into account its systemic and social character– to then insist that Memín's comic is not racist, and that the issue is class and not race, is debatable. Here, we are not talking about a segregationist context where racism works to radically exclude black people from mainstream life. On the contrary, in Mexico we have a purportedly raceless situation where jokes, friendly banter and fun can be accomplished without major consequences for the perpetrators (Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013). This means that the premise of saying or doing this "*con cariño*" (with kindness), as Poniatowska remarked, establishes a status quo where racism can be elided and the ways in which it is related to other forms of exclusion such as sexism or class distinctions are rendered invisible. It is what Mary Jackman (1994) calls "domination without an expression of hostility".[20]

Many class-based analyses start from the idea of "conflict"; that is, that society is organized around class conflict. Such work fails to recognize that long-term discrimination, especially along the lines of class, gender and race, does not show open conflict. On the contrary, those who benefit from a society that ensures them power and wealth are very invested in avoiding conflict. As Jackman points out: "When a relationship is regularized and institutionalized, it is simply a case of *c'est la vie*. Personal acts of aggression are not required to claim one's due as a member of the

advantaged group: benefits simply fall into one's lap" (1994: 8). Given that racism in Mexico has been normalized through the ideology of mestizaje, that is, we are facing a raceless social organization, benign depictions of discrimination and racial hierarchies are seen as part of the given, the status quo, making it easy to overlook the intrinsic relationship between racial and class discrimination. Both of these, together with gender discrimination, are the cement, the stickiness, that keeps in place a system of privilege and domination that benefits only a few. We can see this in the fact that in Mexico, as they are pretty much throughout the Americas, indigenous and black women are at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. The elites avoid racial conflict by either down-playing the existence of power and the privilege and benefits that this brings to them, or by disguising these relationships with expression of love and care for the dominated group and the appreciation of "their culture". As Jackman proposes, "the everyday practice of discrimination does not require feelings of hostility, and, indeed, it is not at all difficult to have fond regard for those whom we subordinate, especially when the subject of our domination accedes to the relationship compliantly" (1994: 10). Consequently, Krauze can justify Memín Pinguín as a "highly pleasing image" (Krauze, 2005b); Poniatowska (2008: 3) can claim the "kinder way" black people have been treated as a proof that Mexico is not racist, and Monsiváis (2008: 3) can mislead us to believe that Mexicans "wouldn't have tolerated an openly racist comic".

Mestizaje, and more recently multiculturalism, make both elites and dominated people believe that they are all united under the harmony of a post-race era of diversity and recognition. This is a particularly poignant warning that should be taken into account when observing developments towards the institutionalization of a discourse of inclusion that is invested in the disavowal of race and racism and does not challenge underlying racist assumptions about difference.

Conclusion

Memín Pinguín's controversy, its particularities and the ways in which the case was responded to, is an example of post-racial politics in the specific context of Mexican mestizaje. It allows us to observe a process of normalization, as numerous official and public voices rushed to possessively deny its racist character and re-establish the "hope" for racial harmony promised by mestizaje (Da Costa, 2014). By persisting in the silence around *blackness* in Mexico, and by the same token reinforcing mestizo normativity as racial privilege, racial exclusion was naturalized and the recognition of racism was avoided.

Official multiculturalism and post-race ideologies reveal their failures to curtail racial exclusion when confronted with an event like the Memín Pinguín controversy. This example illustrates how the mestizo experience is all-encompassing, has outlived its foundational period – the consolidation of the modern national state – and is still found at the beginning of the 21st century as an important articulating force. This mestizaje also demonstrates its strength in concealing the workings of racism under an apparent national unity. Memín reminds us, first, of the fragility of initiatives to manage difference and, second, of how the political embrace of inclusiveness and respect still needs to be reimagined and effectively implemented.

But, what are the social and political implications of this invested denial of racism? Ángel Amílcar Colón´s experience sounds an alarm about how an image and narrative defended as "pleasing" and "lovable" takes on a racist and violent nature when acted out upon the flesh and blood of a person; where the racist joke finds echo even amongst the other victims of the police, breaking any basic sense of companionship or solidarity.

A shared commonality of all the actors that defended the character of Memín – regardless of class and political positions – was their invested denial of racism, which is a core aspect of Mexican mestizaje as post-racial ideology. This, we argue, was done by "loving" the character, by reinforcing the

normative identity of mestizo as the national identity, and imposing the mestizo experience over any other non-mestizo, Afro-descendant or African-American voices. The idea of the singular mestizo nation thus comes full circle in the enactment of narratives of racial difference. This is possible in a context where the voices of the historical targets of Mexico's racism – indigenous, black, Jewish and Asian people – have seldom been listened to or discussed in the 20th and 21st centuries.

All the aspects mentioned above have been recurrent characteristics of mixed-race racial projects, and the recognition of differences, the celebration of mixed origins, and the silence of racism are trends that Mexico shares with other Latin American countries, particularly Brazil. What is new under post-race politics is another aspect displayed in the debate presented here: the possessive denial of racial hierarchies and privileges. While post-revolutionary racial projects presented mestizaje as the way to recognize social inequality and overcome social injustice, particularly that suffered by the indigenous population, in post-racial politics of the early 21st century, inequality and social justice are no longer part of the equation. Instead, it is assumed that with the nominal recognition of cultural difference the social exclusion that racism helped to normalize is no longer in place. An exercise in imagining effective political interventions that aim at building an anti-racist agenda needs to bear in mind examples such as that of Memín Pinguín, where the workings of mestizo privilege pervade, as too does racism.

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Notes

1. All translations are the authors' own.
2. For example, see the work of Castellanos Guerrero (2000, 2003), Castellanos Guerrero et al. (2009), Castellanos Guerrero and Landázuri Benítez (2012), Gall (2004, 2007, 2013), Moreno Figueroa (2008, 2010, 2011), Navarro Smith and Vélez-Ibañez (2010), Ortiz-Hernández et al. (2011), Saldívar (2014), Saldívar and Walsh (forthcoming), and Sue (2013).
3. Or homophobia, as was the case of the use of the word *"puto"* (faggot) by the cheering Mexican fans at the 2014 Football World Cup in Brazil (see, for example, Khan, 2014; Rumsby, 2014).
4. See examples of the critiques to President Fox's comments in the BBC (2005), CNN (2005) and *The New York Times* (Thompson, 2005).
5. Reproduced from https://bcehricardogaribay.wordpress.com/2011/02/06/la-caricatura-en-mexico-memin-pinguin/ (accessed 14 January 2015).
6. See the video-recorded address at: http://www.c-span.org/video/?187462-2/house-sessionandstart=7898 starting at min 3:12:00. The text can be found in the *Congressional Record, Vol. 151, Part 11: Proceedings and Debates of the 109th Congress: First Session*, which we accessed through Google Books (http://books.google.co.uk/books) (both video and text accessed 20 January 2015).
7. Few journalists raised the need to look beyond this event to the supporting social framework that keeps silencing the pervasive Mexican daily racism (see, for example, Curiel, 2005; Gargallo, 2005; Ortiz Pinchetti, 2005; Vargas, 2005).
8. We have decided to use the term black to refer to populations of African descent in Mexico, as it seems this is the preferred term of choice by the population that has chosen to self-identify with the terms black, Afro-descendants or Afro-Mexicans. This was debated in relation to the inclusion of this category in the 2015 intercensal survey and the 2020 national census.

9. See, for example, De La Cadena (1996), Gould (1996), Hale (1996, 2002), and Smith (1997).
10. However, recent research has shown more complexity to this process (see, for example, Lewis, 2001; Sue, 2013).
11. In March 2015, for the first time since Mexico became an independent nation in 1810, the national Census Bureau (INEGI) included the category of black, Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant in the intercensal national survey with the incorporation of the following question: "According to her/his culture, history and traditions, does (NAME) consider herself/himself black, that is, Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant?"
12. Christina Sue and Tania Golash-Boza's article on racial humor as part of color-blindness ideology in Mexico and Peru is an excellent account of how anti-black racism and mestizaje intertwine (Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013a).
13. In the last three decades, but in particular the last 10 years, the presence of black organizations in the coastal region of Oaxaca and Guerrero has increased, and they have become important interlocutors with state and federal officials.
14. *Criollo*, creole in English, here refers to the "pure" descendants of Iberian people who during the colonial period were at the top of the hierarchical social order and then led much of the war of independence.
15. Various authors have discussed the question of the denial of racism in different Latin American countries. Overall, they argue this denial is commonplace due to the belief that mixture is preferable to and "less nasty" than binary divisions (Hernández, 2012; Rahier, 2014; Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013b). Also, in many contexts, this denial has an anti-US aspect and a sentiment of comparison as being "better than" the United States. This can be seen, for example, in conversation about affirmative action in Latin American countries. So, overall, the resistance to acknowledging racism is both a Mexican and a regional phenomenon for which anti-US feeling allows a sort of displacement of public recognition: "the United States is the worst".
16. Indigenous people did not gain legal recognition until 1992, and black people are still fighting for it.
17. For a more detailed discussion see Moreno Figueroa (2008) and Vieira Powers (2002).
18. Paradoxically, in the same publication where Monsiváis defended Memín Pinguín against US intervention, other academics wrote incisive analyses of the same event and the overall situation of racism in Mexico (Vaughn and Vinson III, 2008; Velázquez Gutiérrez, 2008) and Latin America more generally (De La Cadena, 2008).
19. Sterling is referring here to Krauze's comment in his 2005 piece that Memín Pinguín "is a thoroughly likable character, rich in sparkling wisecracks, and is felt to represent not any sense of racial discrimination but rather the egalitarian possibility that all groups can live together in peace. During the 1970s and '80s, his *historietas* sold over a million and a half copies because they touched an authentic chord of sympathy and tenderness among poorer people, who identified with Memin Pinguin" (Krauze, 2005b).
20. See also the notion of "cordial racism" for the case of Brazil (Owensby, 2005).

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