Construction of Identity and Dialogues of Race Among Latinas Studying at SOAS

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This paper discusses the interracial dynamics of those who define themselves as 'Latin American' while studying at SOAS, focusing on their process of identity after migration and how they conceptualise their own 'race' in a new setting. My research shows that students go through a process of racial identification due to their social dynamics at university, suggesting that there is liminal process that students go through while studying. Further, this research shows how race is a dialectical and contextual concept that is experienced differently depending on where the subject is situated. Besides, I discuss how elements of identity—cultural values; music, art, and dance; culinary practices; and language—are a symbolic part of identification within a community. Moreover, the role of memory is presented as important in the process of identification for those who were not born in the region but identify as Latin American. Hence, this paper presents an important note that the lack of representation of Latin Americans at SOAS and in the UCAS system triggers a search for belonging to an identity, intertwined with alterations of the self-perception of race during the process.

Keywords: identity, race, migration, belonging, Latin American diaspora

Personal Motivation

> *'Was it anthropology or a personal quest?'*
> – Barbara Myerhoff, 1979, p. 12

This paper is linked to a personal journey I am currently on as well as builds on my previous research interests in interracial dynamics, the dialectics that shape perceptions of race, and the construction of identity. I migrated to the UK in 2017, looking for better opportunities. Although now obvious, I was not expecting to find

SOAS Undergraduate Research Journal 2(1):5–13.
ISSN 2632-6299 (Print) | ISSN 2632-6302 (Online)

myself looking to be part of a larger group related to my background. Interestingly, my perception of background has been expanded by becoming part of the larger Latinx[1] collective and the reason was and is to avoid solitude and cultural loss. In terms of race, I have always positioned myself as white in both Argentina and Brazil, however since living in the UK I do not feel that my self-perception as 'white' fits in in the same ways as before.

Consequently, I discuss the different perceptions of race by which my participants define themselves depending on whether they are in Latin America or the UK. Further, the participants in this ethnography are SOAS students, which reflects how some Latinx people feel in the university environment and their awareness of race dynamics. In this paper, I will discuss the methods used, provide ethnographic description, and offer an anthropological analysis of the racial self-perceptions of Latinas both before and after migration and their identity construction in the university. My analysis also includes the cases of two Latin American women who were born in Europe.

Methodology

Of my five interlocutors for this research, three were personal friends and the other two were people I met through the SOAS Latin American Society. Although my fieldwork started with the research topic 'Concepts of race among white Latinxs at SOAS', the new girls I met changed the direction of the research and, moreover, deconstructed my own ideas of who was Latinx: they were not born in Latin America—previously I was only considering as Latinxs those born in the region—and had never lived in Latin America, so would not have experienced the dialectical transitions of racial self-perception from Latin America to the UK. This changed the research topic and amplified the complexity of what race and identity mean in a transnational perspective. Certainly, this ethnography has helped me to face my own judgments. In terms of research, those who responded to my call for participants did not correspond to my own understanding of Latinx: rather, it attracted anyone who *felt* Latinx. Additionally, it is important to note that my respondents were all female, therefore this research focuses on *Latina* perspectives on race.

As Myerhoff (1979:18) writes of her own fieldwork—'My closeness to the subject would be both troublesome and advantageous'—I too found that some questions were asked back to me, probably on account of my relationship with the interviewees. I felt conflicted in responding, as I feared it would damage the research by altering the biases of the participants' answers. At the same time, a two-way dialogue shows familiarity between us. Also, my research was with Latin

[1] *Latinx* is a gender-neutral term for Latin American.

American students at SOAS who were born in Colombia or Venezuela or were descendants of natives of those countries. They have had differences and similarities to my own Argentinian-Brazilian experience. This is comparable to what occurred to Fadzillah (2004) while conducting fieldwork in Thailand. Although she had a Malay background, the closeness and historical background of those countries resulted in many similarities as well as differences (2004:35-6), and she assumed a series of factors as being characteristic of South East Asian countries in general (2004:38-9). Similarly, I am bringing together experiences of a few countries as a proxy for Latin American experiences, due to the shared history and cultural values.

Thinking about race as a colonial construction that is biologically and behaviourally justified (Bancel, David, and Tomas, 2014), I follow M'Charek's approach (2013), where *race* is understood to be a biologised term used to justify the social creation of racial distinctions that have been materialised through science. Thus, 'race' has become perceptible in immigrants by phenotypical colonial concepts, by the stereotypical characteristics of nationalities (clothing, location where the subject could be found, dance performances, and public behaviour), and as part of national identity such as through physical appearance, local histories, and religious background. Hage (2012:49) has argued that 'race' is a malleable and fluid concept that the European powers imposed on colonial subjects. In this paper, I discuss the fluidity of race and the impacts of the racialisation of 'white' colonial subjects in their immigration process. Identifying as white is a dialectical process of classifying the self and racialising others through social geography, cultural practices, privileges, and the perception of universal representation (Frankenberg, 1993; 1997; Dyer, 1997). Thus, this research explores the perceptions of 'race' and the self by my interlocutors in their home countries, and its racialisation in their migration.[2]

The second part of this research centres on discussions with interlocutors born in the diaspora. Their self-perception of racialisation is part of an ongoing identity construction process which is related to race not as a delimited concept, but as a developing identity performed through collective cultural norms, memories, and perceptions of the self in the diaspora. The identity performance of my interlocutors also had unifying and divisive characteristics, as the Latin American diaspora in London is diverse and mostly composed of Brazilians, Colombians, Ecuadorians,

[2] Similarly, Halej (2015) discussed the boundaries of 'being white' for East Europeans migrants in London. The author argues that the boundaries of whiteness are not phenotypical for East Europeans, but rather related to 'invisible characteristics' such as accent, name, labour, or presence in stereotyped spaces.

Bolivians, and Peruvians (McIlwaine, Cock and Linneker, 2011).[3] There are homogenising aspects of the diaspora due to shared Iberian colonial cultural influence, shared social and cultural capital (Block, 2009), and an emerging collective cultural identity (Roman-Velazquez, 2017). Thus, I argue that the dialectics of identifying as Latin American when born in the diaspora are a complex process related to identification and relationships within the interlocutors' families.

Ethnographic Description and Anthropological Analysis

Perceptions of Race

In the SOAS Junior Common Room (JCR), commonly known by students as the place to take breaks from their studies, the walls are painted with faces of incredible academics and political figures. Often, these walls are also covered with pamphlets and flyers inviting students to a large variety of events. There are chairs and tables around the room, and since it was close to the holidays, the space was almost empty. We sat near the pool table, facing the painting of Berta Cacéres.[4] Marlene,[5] Margarita, and I ate crisps while we talked about our migration stories. They migrated first from Venezuela to Bahrain, from there to Saudi Arabia, and from Saudi Arabia to the UK. Marlene and Margarita are sisters; however, they have different perceptions of how they are seen in Latin America but the same understanding of how they are seen in the UK. Margarita said that she is Venezuelan in Venezuela, as there is just one 'race': 'Some people are more white, some people are more dark, but we are all the same there'. Marlene, on the other hand, said in Venezuela she was *blanquita,* which in her words means 'what here [in London] is called light-skinned.' This shows the complexity of self-perception: even though they are twins, they have different understandings of how they are racially perceived. Meanwhile, both expressed that because London is such a multicultural city, others cannot correctly identify their background: 'People think we could be Middle Eastern or Southern European.' However, people do recognise they are not Londoners, as they 'do not have a British accent.' Therefore, while at home they are considered 'normal' and/or *blanquita*, in London they are seen as foreigners, not due to their appearances, but because of their accent. At that point,

[3] Due to many Latin Americans either holding European passports or being visa overstayers, it is difficult to know the size of the Latin American population in the UK (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016).

[4] Berta Cacéres was a feminist Honduran activist and indigenous leader who fought for environmental causes and was killed on 2016 in her own bedroom by unidentified murderers (COPINH, n.d.).

[5] All interlocutor names are pseudonyms. They were chosen by my interlocutors as something meaningful to them.

I stopped recording our conversation and we took the no. 188 bus from Russell Square to Elephant and Castle, where we met up with Leticia.

After we finished having some *empanadas* with *malta*, Marlene and Margarita went to the theatre while Leticia and I stayed together to have a hot *milo* in La Bodeguita. Leticia's migration to the UK showed her the contrasts of others' perception of her race. She considers herself 'white' but has had different experiences of how people perceive her. In Colombia, in the city she is from, she is perceived as *mona* (blonde)—'like washed in bleach'—although she looks 'more like the norm' in Bogota due to her brown hair and pale skin. In London, she said that she is perceived to be 'Southern European'. However, she noted a big difference when she was living in Cornwall, as she felt out of place in a British rural context and found that 'people knew she was not from there'. In Cornwall, Leticia is perceived as someone foreign, in London she is considered Southern European, and in her home city in Colombia she is 'blonde.' These different perceptions of race in different regions show how our bodies and phenotypes are racialised depending on the cultural context and everyday life interactions which influence 'race-making' (Lewis, 2003:283).

Furthermore, Leticia mentioned that she has been stereotyped as Latina in London by attitude, rather than by physical appearance: 'We're normal, and they say that we're *escandalosas* [loud, boisterous]. I don't think I'm *escandalosa*!' Also, when she danced people recognised that she might be Colombian. This suggests that perceptions of race are also related to body movements (M'charek, 2013) or region and are not always related to skin colour or other phenotypical characteristics, with race being an effect of relations between differences. As M'charek (2013:435) says, 'it is thus that race is a relational object.' With this, we can see how ethnicity is related to an expected behaviour, rather than phenotype, as well as interpellated from what is expected from the agent, as in this case being 'boisterous' as a Latin American.

Construction of Identity

In the cases of Leticia, Marlene, and Margarita, I asked when they found themselves identifying as Latinas. Leticia commented that this happened more at university, and that it was about discovering similar things that Latinxs had in common: 'In Colombia we have *empanadas*, in Argentina as well, so it's interesting that you can try all this similar but different food,' indicating that cultural values are important in the self-recognition of identity. Marlene also added that she felt her Latin American identity more at SOAS: 'I noticed my ethnicity more at SOAS, as it's difficult to integrate into groups when you come from a different background than theirs. At SOAS it was one of the first times I felt alone.' With this, Marlene suggests that it was difficult to be part of groups that did not share the same background, which led her to reach out to those who were Latin American. Further,

in terms of lack of recognition, Margarita said that it was also part of entering university: ‘Even in the UCAS application, I felt unrepresented. Latin American is not an ethnic category you can choose on the application.’ Thus, the lack of representation in a cultural or social context triggered the process of searching for their own identity.

Moreover, their recognition of themselves as Latin American at university can be related to the liminality that Turner (1969) discussed. In this case, liminality is the process of alterity that subjects go through when they are away from their common social setting and in a temporary environment where identities suffer alterations. When the subjects are reintroduced into their common social settings, they have incorporated new meanings to themselves. I consider university as the liminal moment: most participants are living away from home and are part of a larger group of students who have also left their homes; they are going through a process of identification within groups inside university. Thus, being at university is what gives participants space to reconstruct their identities. Additionally, we must also identify when we feel we are part of a group with which we have shared cultural values. There are emotional attachments related to ‘belonging’, a concept analysed by Yuval-Davis (2006:197). Yuval-Davis argues that belonging is related to ‘social location’, which in this case is to be young, have Latin American roots, and be a student (2006:199-200). This was further confirmed by another participant, Mar, who felt a change in her identity when moving from Spain to the UK to study at SOAS.

Findings: The Process of Belonging

The cases of Mar and Palmira are different from the previous cases, as they have not migrated from Latin America. It was their parents who did.

Mar was in Spain when we did our interview through Skype. We had met twice before, at the Latin American Society ‘Meet & Greet’ and in the SOAS Paul Webley Wing, where we talked about having the same interests in music, cheesy TV programs, and academic studies. She was born in Tokyo and has known herself as Swedish-Spanish-Venezuelan since childhood. Her mother was the one who emigrated from Venezuela. When Mar moved to the UK to study at SOAS, she found it difficult to define *what* she was: ‘The problem in England is that there are such defined lines of race, that when you see the questionnaire forms, I don’t know what to put.’ That started to become a journey of finding herself: ‘I wasn’t able to put a tag on who I was, and that was the moment I began to question what I am.’ As mentioned before, the liminality of being at university and the lack of representation in official categories affects the situation of the self in relation to an identity. Mar commented that due to shared cultural characteristics and physical appearance she started to see herself as Latina, and that external perceptions also had an influence. She told me that someone at SOAS said to her, ‘you look Latina,

but painted on white'. External interpretations of the self can be internalised into an inner discussion of recognition, an interpellation from the exterior to the understanding of the self (Althusser, 1971). Further, she said that having fewer Latin cultural references in the UK, compared to Spain, made her rethink and redefine her identity. We can then consider that in the identification of the self the being also has the agency of choosing an identity, and that is what the person feels closer to. This argument is related to Leite's (2017:8) concept of *identification,* 'the process through which one comes to think of oneself as belonging to or essentially connected with a particular social category.' Therefore, Mar's identification with a Latinx identity was determined by internal and external influences.

However, in the case of Palmira, this has been intertwined with her British identity, resulting in her feeling part of both. I met Palmira after her work shift near Victoria Station. Palmira's case is distinctive from the other cases. She was born in the UK and never migrated, instead her father and his family migrated from Colombia. Palmira told me that she has changed the way she identifies over time: 'At the beginning of my youth I used to say I was just Colombian, I never claimed my English side. But then, I needed to claim who I am: I am British, I am Colombian.' In her case, she said that in the past she used to recognise her Colombian side more than her British heritage. She started feeling that it was unfair to her mother's side to ignore their presence in her life. Thus, the recognition of identity also involves matters of affection and emotion for the person; for Palmira, being Colombian-English was a racial, emotional and cultural process of self-recognition.

Furthermore, I found that Mar and Palmira have experienced their Latin identity in similar ways. Both grew up listening to Latin American music, eating food, and having an understanding of the culture. However, they have heard the stories of migration in a different way. Mar comments that 'I know the full story through my mum.' Meanwhile, Palmira does not know the details of the migration process: 'We don't talk about it. I think it is not to relive the trauma. It is quite painful for us.' However, they select the good and funny memories to talk about. The case of the selection of memories that are good to remember and relive in Palmira's case, instead of the 'full story' as in the case of Mar, shows selectiveness by the interlocutors' families. This selectiveness caused Palmira 'pain about the migration,' even though she was not part of that process. This is related to how subjects choose to remember memories, including the emotions felt throughout that time, something Uehling (2004) brings into discussion with regards to the Crimean Tatars' forced migration movements. Here, Uehling further discusses how memories can be absorbed by descendants who listened to their parents' stories. Therefore, memories and feelings passed through the family can still influence descendants and be part of their feeling of belonging to the diaspora.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how perceptions of race are subject to migratory and social context and to the social elements by which the self defines its identity. With this, I considered how Latinas studying at SOAS experience their process of ethnic and racial identification. First, I discussed how perceptions of 'race' differed depending where the individual is situated. This is because race as a social construction redefines itself through dialectical interaction: when subjects migrate, it readjusts to the new setting and disparities may exist between previous and present perceptions of their own race. Therefore, we can see that the social construction of race is not a fixed term in the self, as it is subjected to the context the person is in and the interactions within it.

Further, I discussed the elements related to defining identity. Shared cultural values; music, art and dance; culinary practices; and language are the elements by which the participants feel identified as Latinas. Furthermore, memories are important for identity perception to one's belonging and emotional attachments of the diasporic journey. Finally, as the participants were students, the lack of representation in the UK and at SOAS triggered the search for an identity and perception of belonging, which can be related to processes of liminality and identification.

This paper has shown how students at university go through a liminal process in relation to their identity and feeling of belonging, and how external processes and interpellation can influence the location of the self in social groups. The influences of external perception and interpellation of what is to be Latin American go together with the preferences and agency that subjects use to locate themselves within that category. Hence, this research has shown how identity is an ongoing dialectical process that involves both self-perception and the perception of ourselves by others, and that in the case of race and being racialised as a result of migration, the new social setting has other values for the concepts of 'race'.

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