

Dismantling the Ethnographer's House. On Mexican Middle Classes and Shopping Malls

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Abstract

Following Audre Lorde, this paper reflects on how to decolonize the ethnographic endeavor, arguing that every ethnographic inquiry should begin with a critical evaluation of our own class consciousness in relation to our field, and focusing on how class consciousness is inscribed onto our own bodies no less than onto the bodies of our interlocutors. Shopping malls are epitomes of neoliberal capitalism, serving as spaces where middle classes converge under one roof. Particularly in a neo-colonial context like Mexico's, malls tease questions of class in a distinctive manner by utilizing the body as advertising platform. This paper argues that my position as white upper-middle-class (cis)woman from the global north was not only the primary tool that facilitated this research but a tool that significantly influenced its direction and focus. Simultaneously, it raised broader questions concerning intersectional inequalities under neoliberal capitalism and underscores our ethical responsibilities as ethnographers.

Keywords: Class, Whiteness Studies, Mexico, Neoliberal Urbanization, Queer Methodologies

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Introduction: 'Mexico is not racist, but classist'

On a Saturday afternoon in April 2017, I met up with my central interlocutors, Laura and David, to grab a bite at a restaurant near the Angelópolis mall in Puebla, Mexico. While looking for something to do after our meal, we ended up sitting in front of the stairs that lead to the movies:

The food court behind us, a chosen observation spot, we talk about the different social classes in Puebla and how to distinguish them. Laura and David are frequent mall users, part of the target group of the mall and invited to the events organized for loyal and desired customers¹. They often mention their Spanish descentance (and the fact of

¹ This is part of a rewards system for loyal clients that includes prices and the possibility to get invited to exclusive events the mall organizes for these clients and desired visitors. These exclusive events were significant for this research, since they allowed me to gain access to the group of actors who represented the inner circle, a sort of mall community of actors who are not necessarily equipped with significant purchasing power but with other desirable features (such as conventionally attractive appearance, good manners,

having a Spanish passport) while simultaneously highlighting their pride of being Mexican. They both have travelled widely and they obtained higher education at the prestigious private schools and universities of the city. They live in their own house, not far from the mall, in an established middle-class neighborhood, while Laura would love to live in one of the new gated communities in the area around the mall, even if it would mean less living space.

That day, we were watching the people who came down the stairs, while Laura made the remark that they reminded her a lot of her "chacha" – her housemaid². This perception and denomination of actors as out of place, as out of her own social space, became clear in another moment in her house when she told me that she would remodel her downstairs service bathroom so that also "normal" people can use it, indicating where and how she draws distinction between social actors and what this remark means: excluding people like her housemaid from being conceded the same amenity as "normal" people like herself. She told me that day in the mall that she didn't understand why they – those like her maid – were there and what for, thereby delineating clear socio-spatial boundaries within the mall as a space for a certain kind of people. Another thing frowned upon by my interlocutors were those – usually darker skinned – people who came very dressed up while those perceived as from a "lower level" who did not dress up were seen as out of place but rather accepted for being "sencillo/a" ('simple'), indicating that there was no aspiration to be situated as anything but 'simple', as anything more than what my interlocutors concede at a first glance. (field notes, 18.02.2017)

This short introductory vignette serves as exemplifying context for the hidden dangers and disguises of the famous Mexican saying: "México no es racista, es clasista". I have heard this phrase countless times and it became the emic ethnographers gift I sought to unpack because I could not believe its content.³

Regarding the question of social classes, the simple-or-not-distinction mentioned above points to the symbolic constitution of social mobility. Being 'simple' implies not attempting to be someone you are not, hence not daring to aspire or demand access to a social space that historically and aesthetically is not perceived as yours by the space's hosts⁴. This threatens an order that, by my interlocutors, is perceived as static rather than negotiable or in flux. I had understood that skin tone was essential in these classifications though never directly

eloquence) to allow them being part of the social circle that constitutes the image of the target group for the mall.

² She chose to shorten the word 'muchacha' by using the diminutive.

³ These classifications mentioned here occurred in the context of an extensive ethnography aimed at unpacking the question of the Mexican middle classes in relation to neoliberal urbanization. Laura and David (names changed here to protect their identity) agreed to assist me in studying the social impact of the mall in Puebla and immediately told me they can tell how to classify the visitors. They were always aware that I was doing research, my recorder or notebook was in my hands at all times and they would also tell me what not to put in the study or write down. After a while, much in the manner proposed by Gluckmann (1963), my interlocutors themselves have established talking about others in the mall as gossip, while not once doubting their own ability or authority to classify people, and without questioning their own position that allows them to concede acceptance and access to the space mall.

⁴ The notion of the host has been described by Sara Ahmed (2004: 117–118), explaining the host-feeling that the white subject maintains by being constituted as the social norm (by nation states or media).

mentioned – as often the same choice of style would be frowned upon when seen on a darker skinned person but accepted on someone with lighter skin, and then would be re-translated in very restrictive and rigorous dress codes. Following that line, considering the mall as the space of the white upper-middle classes raises interesting questions about class belonging in Puebla. Historically, the mall has been associated with the middle classes, serving as a microcosm to zoom into these negotiations of social classes, especially since the mall has been constituted as a new urban center and a reference point to the city.

The following text is intended as a methodological reflection on doing ethnography from a privileged position. At the same time, it delivers insights into the intersections of Mexican classism and racism that could only be investigated thanks to this privileged position. It is divided into three parts: the first two ‘, provide some conceptual elements and explore the correlation between questions of neoliberal urbanization and the question of the middle classes in Mexico. The third part, titled ‘(Auto)ethnographic Explorations: Lifestyle Representations as Master’s Tool’, examines the mall as an agent and how it shapes class negotiations in the city through its advertising strategies, which also affect the positioning of bodies in a certain way, including that of the ethnographer.

Mastering Mallification

The mentioned mall is located in the city of Puebla, the fourth biggest city in the country and one of the few that has been established strategically by Spanish colonizers as a convergence point between the port in Veracruz and the capital, Mexico City. Today, it is famous for its UNESCO-protected historic city center, its status as a university city with a high density of educational facilities, and for being a rapidly growing city that retains young professionals, providing job opportunities in a place known for its conservatism within the country.

The centro commercial Angelópolis – with ‘Angelópolis’ being an allusion to the city’s name and its founding myth of being the place where angels danced – was later rebranded as Angelopolis Lifestyle Center and is a generous and luxurious shopping mall that had opened around one year prior to my first arrival in Puebla in 2002.⁵

This urban development is one of the largest megaprojects in Latin America and was the starting point for a highly controversial urban project involving not only local but also federal government participation. This project included granting building rights on land that had previously been declared a Territorial Reserve and further involved the expropriation of communal land (Jones & Moreno-Carranco 2007; Vázquez Pinacho 2007; Cabrera Becerra & Guerrero Bazan 2008). The urban development and its associated conditions are best described by Jones and Moreno-Carranco, who analyze Angelópolis and Santa Fé as two of the largest megaprojects in Latin America, contending that they are differentiated spaces for appropriation, revealing the local production of the global (Jones & Moreno-Carranco 2007: 144).⁶ In Mexico, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 was promoted as a beacon of hope and an avenue for the country’s prosperity and

⁵ It was located on the outskirts of the city and thus relatively far away, and could be reached only by taxi or car at this time.

⁶ As they further state: “Under the auspices of a government trust, the Fideicomiso Angelópolis, a package of large scale interventions were envisaged [...] The largest project, however, was the development of 1082 hectares previously expropriated by the state for less than US\$1 per m² from four ‘agrarian’ communities on the city’s periphery” (Moreno-Carranco 2007: 152).

progress (Zárate-Ruiz 2000). The period of this agreement coincided with the implementation of urban development programs and the proliferation of shopping malls. The mall was the anchor and starting point for the regional development program in Angelópolis, explicitly aligning itself with the neoliberal agenda. As a result, the federal government, along with the World Bank intervened by providing the necessary resources for the execution of the projects. In this way, they generated confidence in the private initiative (Vázquez Pinacho, 2007: 63), aligning the mall's inception with the brutal birth of Mexican neoliberalism.

In this vein, the Angelópolis mall in Puebla presents a striking case of mallification, a term commonly defined as the 'transformation into a shopping mall'. This sense of the term has been widely adopted by the media, often used to describe the proliferation of malls in general. I argue that mallification is a useful concept for highlighting the importance of material structures in driving the neoliberal project and the social repercussions it entails. Relatedly, I first encountered this term in an academic context: Dávila Santiago, in his study on shopping malls in Puerto Rico, employs it to describe a facet of the globalized world that points to the fact that in and through the mall we contribute to the hegemony of financial capital (Dávila Santiago 2005: 364).⁷ I further claim that the *mallification* of Puebla does not stop at the mall, nor at the area around it, but is a socio-political project that extends across the whole city, where the city center is being restored in the image of an open mall, as tourist attraction, and where people are sold ideas of safety. The city thus comprehensibly becomes a commodity, the reflection of an image and a lifestyle to be sold. In this manner, mallification here is applied to point to the very material and territorial notion of neoliberal urbanism manifested in and through the shopping mall as a central urban landmark and representational space.

The social and symbolic significance and impact of this urban development can be best described through a statement made during a conversation I had with my friend Chucho, who was an avid mall-goer throughout his adolescence and early twenties. I sought to understand how he explained the success of Angelópolis, which, over the years, had turned into a central hub, a public gathering place, and consequently, a sort of reference space for the middle and upper-class sectors of the city.

“[Before] options were very limited: there was a Sears⁸ in the city center that was stuck in the 80s, a chain called Rodoreda that got shut down a few years before Angelópolis had opened and a remedy of Liverpool called Fábricas de Francia where you could find the leftovers of what they did not sell in the capital —boring! Where I'm going with this is that when Angelópolis opened and the big stores that before you could only find in the capital started to arrive, what also arrived to the city was a feeling of progress. It created the illusion to be a big city, like the capital, much above the other neighboring cities. Everyone wanted to be a part of this and to be a bit closer to this modernity. In the first years it shifted from a peripheric area to being the area of the city [...].” (Interview, 27.03.2015, translation by the author)

⁷ I further claim that the *mallification* of Puebla does not stop at the mall, nor at the area around it, but is a socio-political project that extends across the whole city, where the city center is being restored in the image of an open mall, as tourist attraction, and where people are sold ideas of safety. The city thus comprehensibly becomes a commodity, the reflection of an image and a lifestyle to be sold.

⁸ Sears belongs to a chain of department stores based in the United States

Chucho identifies a causal relationship between the arrival of the big stores and the sense of progress in the city.⁹ Considering feelings of progress and modernity in relation to class raises questions of accessibility and further displays a way of racial thinking that frames ideas of class belonging, as echoed in the introductory comment made by Laura. Peter Wade has defined this as follows:

“Racial thinking is based on a complex and shifting set of ideas about certain aspects of physical appearance, linked to descent and the inheritance of ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ traits. These ideas have developed within a specific history of originally European and then global colonialism – as opposed to the ideas being simply one mode among a universal set of human ways of thinking about difference. Racial thinking is thinking about appearance, inherited substance and behavior in relation to specific categories which emerge out of colonialism. Racial categories are the product of historical, political and economic contexts – they are social constructs in the usual terminology.” (Wade, 2012: 80)

This resonates with Vainer (2014), who advocates for the decolonization of urban knowledge and city planning. Similar to Chucho, Vainer argues that “progressively, the Western – European and later North American – city became a universal model, exported in modes of urbanization and territorial land use planning and practices of production and consumption” (Vainer 2014: 49). He suggests freeing ourselves from competitive urban marketing models that hark back to colonial aspirations of progress and modernity, which aim to transform the city into a world-class city while obscuring urgent issues of social and urban inequality rooted in historically segregated cities (c.f. Vainer 2014).

Mastering the Middle Classes

Returning to the introductory vignette and Laura’s remark on how she perceives the others in the mall, the way she concedes belonging to that space from her privileged social position alludes to how we can understand and conceptualize the mall as both Master’s House and, as will be explored further, as a Master’s Tool: “The Master’s Tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 2003: 27), which means that if we use the tools of capitalist-racist-patriarchy to examine that same capitalist-racist-system, our results will be rather narrow. (cf. *ibid.*) For the argument made here, it means that as ethnographers we ourselves are at risk of becoming that same tool if we are unaware of our place and keep focusing on those excluded rather than on those excluding, unaware that notions of saviorism that fuel our discipline maintain these tools we thought we deconstructed. Furthermore, the mall in its conception as status-providing consumer temple represents this Master’s House and at the same time serves as tool to maintain this system by placing the actors, as described here, for marketing purposes. Additionally, the notion of mallification sheds light on the mastering of capitalist elites and how they assert control over and shape the city, turning citizens into consumers and, in the mall, even into commodities – commodities whose time is consumed

⁹ He also situates the city of Puebla to a certain degree in a double semi-periphery: first the semi-periphery characterized by Wallerstein (1976), into which Mexico certainly falls, which constantly confronts the social actors with the imaginary of progress and of the modernity of the so-called industrialized world (García Canclini, 1989: 18) and secondly the allusion to being in the shadow of the nearby capital.

within a space that very prominently presents specific actors as targets while excluding others from the desirable space that is the shopping mall. Thus, when Laura perceives someone as 'like her chacha' and with that automatically as out of place, the master's logic of who has a space in (t)his house and who does not, becomes more pertinent. This also intertwines with questions of class: shopping malls are constituted as spaces for and of the middle classes (Dávila 2016; Donner 2016; Martínez Andrade 2015) and tease ideas and aspirations of being middle class in their marketing strategies. Constituting the mall as an instrument for mastering the middle classes takes on a unique dimension in this specific socio-historic context where social constructions of *race* and class mutually reinforce each other and are not to be understood as separate entities. Furthermore, middle class status itself can be understood as a master's tool, in the sense that the idea of a stable middle class, even if it is only imagined or solely refined to economic status or consumption practices, can be misleading in an economic system driven by credit and debt (c.f. Harvey 2007; Graeber 2011). It can be utilized as a marketing tool to project an idea of imagined social stability in the city that needs to be critically examined and contextualized.

In this manner, I intend to briefly provide some facts and underlying discussion concerning the (economic) implications of being middle class in Mexico. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) conducted a study on the Latin American middle class, stating that the average monthly wage income of a two-family household that determines one's belonging in the middle class was between 5,346 and 14,256 pesos.¹⁰ However, this economic distribution should be regarded as a benchmark while class-belonging is rather negotiated via cultural traits, education and the social circle that surrounds you. Economic income and demonstrated purchase power can be misleading or present as only one factor in the complex social composition of the middle classes, as seen in the statements made by my central collaborators who, like many others, self-identify as middle class. Middle classes are said to be the primary beneficiaries of urban infrastructure programs (Harvey 2007; López Santillan 20008; Dávila 2016). The significance of the global middle classes has been stressed by anthropologist Henrike Donner, who states that ethnography has shown that middle class homes not only cultivate new meanings related to individuality, self-improvement and discipline, but also function as sites where neoliberalism is fully realized. Here, notions of respectability and upward mobility are linked to aspirational lifestyles and micro-practices embedded within the broader fabric of a class-based society (Donner 2017: n.p.). Consequently, I argue that what she claims of middle-class homes applies similarly, if not more prominently, to a shopping mall. As she further states,

“[a]t a time when middle class lifestyles are actively encouraged both by nation states and international institutions (including corporations), when politicians are pushed to support the 'squeezed middle', and when class is used by many to describe who they are or hope to become, it seems necessary to investigate the links between middle class self-identification and the institutional factors that help to shape this, and anthropology is surely well equipped to do so” (ibid.).

In 2015, Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra and economist Gerardo Esquivel engaged in a public discussion regarding the middle classes in Mexico. Central to this discussion was the

¹⁰ I did not ask my interlocutors directly about their income, as this was a sensitive subject, especially given that most of them work freelance. Nonetheless, I maintain that most of them can be placed at the upper end of the income scale or even above it.

question of whether Mexico should be considered a 'poor' or a 'middle class country'. In this debate, Esquivel, in his final response, classifies the question of whether Mexico was poor or middle class as trivial and states that it was much more important to fight poverty in the country (Esquivel 2015: n.p.). Bartra, on the other hand, argued that understanding the middle class is crucial for comprehending contemporary Mexico, including and especially concerning poverty. He articulated, "[in the middle class], differences, identities and discriminations are reproduced in a variety of forms that continue to mark society" (Bartra 2015a: n.p.) He concluded by stating that Mexico was already a country wherein the hopes and fears of the middle class dominate the cultural and political scenery (Bartra 2015b: n.p.). In this debate, and probably also due to my scientific-disciplinary affiliation, I side with Bartra, who argued that the middle class is "a heterogenous conglomeration of social groups, an enormous space in which certain ways of life can be recognized" (Bartra 2015b: n.p.). Hence, the guiding questions to decipher the mall as an epitome of middle class identities were as follows: Who are these middle classes in Puebla, and are there distinct lifestyles among them? Is it even appropriate to categorize these diverse groups under a single terminological framework? In more specific terms for analysis, how do the upper-middle classes distinguish themselves from or align with other social groups or classes found in the mall?

In his treatise on the capital's middle class, López Santillán asserts that the middle class is the "touchstone in redefining the economic, social, cultural, political, and urban dynamic of modern societies" (López Santillán 2008: 15) and highlights the important correlation between class structure and urban space (ibid.: 21). As argued here, social stratification in Mexico – and Puebla – cannot be solely attributed to neoliberal urban policies in relation to class; it must also consider urban and colonial imaginaries that still influence everyday practices, especially those of the upper and upper-middle classes. Prominently positioned at the beginning of this paper, something I repeatedly encountered during my research was the conceit that Mexico is not racist but classist. I thus examine more closely how 'culture' and 'class' are constituted by my interlocutors in the mall and in relation to the other groups present there.¹¹

In his work *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu employs class structure precisely as a multidimensional social space that is comprised by the field of social positions and the field of lifestyle. He argues that positions in this social space are negotiated through material exchanges in the field of social positions which occur in conjunction with symbolic negotiations in the field of lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984). Furthermore, the concept of habitus, defined as the embodied history manifested in the social actors' systems of feeling, thinking and behaving (ibid.: 166), is crucial for deciphering social differentiations exercised through symbolic patterns of domination within the mall community, involving actors like Laura and David. As indicated via the introductory field note, thinking about lifestyle and the importance of looks in Mexico should draw our attention to *race* as socio-culturally developed distinguishing characteristic, as it is a country where the relation between poverty, discrimination and skin tone has been proven.¹² Being white or 'europeanized' represents a

¹¹ The denomination 'other groups' is rather polemic and should be understood as an emic category, as this form of othering arose from the statements of my interlocutors. We do not know if the person identified as 'like her chacha' by Laura ultimately possesses more purchasing power than Laura herself or not.

¹² The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI 2017) for the first time officially confirmed that in Mexico there is a cause-and-effect relationship between skin color and socio-economic status that dissolves this distinction between social and ethnic segregation.

unique form of capital that has to be addressed in this context. Therefore, when analyzing these phenomena, we have to broaden Bourdieu's approach and adapt it to this sociocultural context where dress as the body surface and the body itself are considerably connected. Luis Martínez Andrade, in his chapter *The Shopping Mall as the Paradigmatic Figure of Neocolonial Discourse* takes account of these specificities of a society where colonial paradigms of differentiation still appear to set the pace for hegemonic discursive practices (Martínez Andrade 2015: 37), as divulged in Laura's statement, drawing a line between "normal" people like herself and "lower level" people like her housemaid which follows this colonial paradigm. He further argues that analyzing the hegemonic corporeality in Latin America allows us to observe the internalization of the canons of beauty and the prescriptions of what is aesthetically valid in a context of colonial continuity (ibid.: 50). He proposes to incorporate the inescapable notion of corporeal capital, which he defines as phenotype characteristics and somatic features that determine the locus of enunciation in geopolitically specified social-cultural relations (ibid.). As indicated before through Laura's determination of the 'chachas' in the mall, the phenotypical characteristics are never explicitly mentioned as distinguishing feature by the social actors in focus, but translated into perceptions on fashion styles in relation to urban practices like going to the mall.¹³ In this context, corporeal capital has a similarly transversal logic as economic capital in the way it is correlated to ideas of culture. Echeverría (2010) has described this idea of whiteness as a way of conforming to capitalist modernity. From this perspective, the notion of the Whitexican¹⁴ was born, which, rather than referring to skin color, pays tribute to the discriminatory attitudes of a privileged sector of the Mexican society. As stated earlier, *race* represents a historical relationship that reproduces entrenched hierarchies of class domination, aiming to legitimize labor division responding to a long and contradictory process of the formation of a social body (c.f. Forssell 2020; Vainer 2014) that narratively excludes the body of the perceived "chacha" from a prestigious shopping mall.

Thus, given that the mall is not only deeply affected by these local hegemonic discourses that position it as a prestigious discursive object in the urban imaginary but also employs these imaginaries as marketing strategy, the question remains: how does the mall, as actor, serve as a tool for mastering these urban middle classes and their self-perception?

(Auto)ethnographic Explorations: Lifestyle Representations as Master's Tool

As for the constitution of the mall as space for and of the middle classes, I asserted that the mall teases aspirations through its marketing strategies that incorporate historically shaped distinctions that are discursively maintained as class distinctions.

On that same day in the mall, when Laura had referred to those she perceived as being "from a lower level" and explained why the social classes were so strongly labeled ("marcadas") in Puebla, she and David started a discussion on the topic of social classes. Initially

¹³ On that note, Turner argues that dress becomes the language through which the body as common frontier of society is expressed (Turner 2012: 486). Martínez Andrade, accordingly, contends that the body is a sign of the hegemonic narrative and adopted as walking commercial which serves to advertise its imperial signs that we especially find in a shopping mall (Martínez Andrade 2015: 43).

¹⁴ First mentioned on Twitter in the year 2008 it unites the words Mexican and white to point to a certain sector of the Mexican society (s.f. Forssell 2020).

uncertain about their place within the constructs of the middle classes, they ultimately decided on being upper-middle class based on their self-defined class belonging: this idea of class belonging that many of my central interlocutors shared was dispatched from economic status¹⁵ and defined their class as those who belong to their social scale, their social circle, those they went to school with. David took it a step further and, without having read Bourdieu, defined class belonging as related to having the same habits and customs, the same lifestyle. Thinking about the mall's marketing strategies and the way it rebranded itself as lifestyle center plays into that same logic: conceding the mall space, and consequently class belonging, exclusively to a certain kind of people.

During a conversation with Gerardo, then marketing director whom I had met at the Starbucks in the mall, he expressed the following: "But for the media I need a luxury atmosphere, so I need luxury people." (Interview, 16.01.2017, translation by the author) The notion of "luxury people" alludes to a specific social space in the social strata and refers to higher class people – Whitexicans. As pointed out before, it refers to those "aesthetically valid in a context of colonial continuity" (Martínez Andrade 2015: 50). On another occasion, Gerardo even referred to the "correct people" and told me he invited the social circle around his mom¹⁶, even if they did not purchase anything in the mall and so officially had no right to get invited to the mall events. Laura and her friends are invited because they comply with the image of "luxury people". Consequently, class belonging in this context is primarily a symbolic act, governed by specific norms on how to adequately use this lifestyle moment which further depends on your corporeal and cultural capital rather than your economic one. This relates to Navarrete's observations concerning the editorial whitening (Navarrete 2016: 61) as seen here:¹⁷ a white woman alongside the statement "The only appearance that does not cheat is mine".

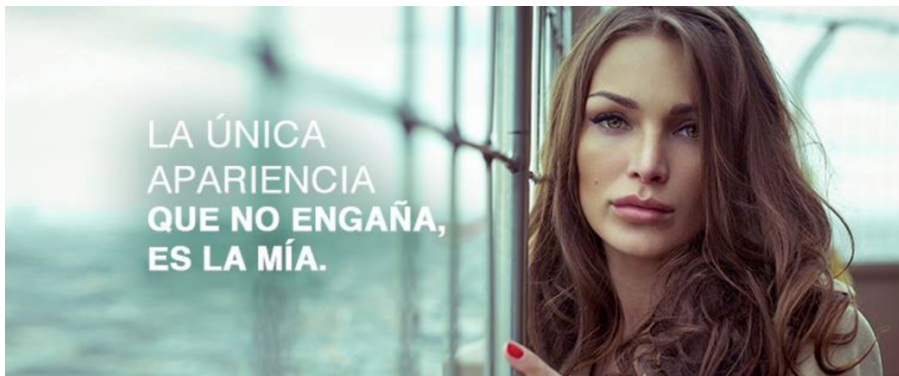


Figure 1: Poster at Angelópolis Mall.

Source: *Luxury Hall Facebook* (2010).

¹⁵ It is not a secret that many of those perceived as belonging to a higher class, especially in the mall, struggle with debt and financial challenges in making ends meet. They often face a lot of pressure to conceal these struggles.

¹⁶ Laura is a childhood friend of Gerardo's mother.

¹⁷ Figure 1. Extracted from the Facebook page *Luxury Hall*, the newer branch that had been added to the Angelópolis Mall in 2010. This was a widely spread marketing campaign with posters all over the mall, it was also the cover of the magazine the mall publishes (Luxury Hall 2010, <https://www.facebook.com/Luxuryhall/photos/a.274708015952283/1297560223667052/?type=3>, last accessed: 10.02.2024).

This starkly illustrates the notion of “luxury people” mentioned by Gerardo, opposed to the “chachas” identified by Laura. This indicates in a brutal way that there are appearances that can cheat, pointing to a colonial matrix (Vainer 2014) that significantly informs negotiations of class belonging which culminated into the logic of the Whitexican. As Sara Ahmed (2007: 156) contends:

“White bodies are habitual insofar as they ‘trail behind’ actions: they do not get ‘stressed’ in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness ‘goes unnoticed’. Whiteness would be what lags behind; white bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated ‘towards’ it, and this ‘not’ is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are orientated around.”

This brings me to reflect on my own position as a researcher and mall visitor, a position that has been underscored by David that same day described here. While observing me coming down the electrical stairs, he classified me as someone who “does not have to show off or prove anything”. As a Mexicanized German-Lebanese researcher from Berlin, I had demonstrated that I didn’t need to pretend, that I did not have to display anything, and that I did not become stressed, following Ahmed (2007). Hence the question is: as researchers, shouldn’t we have to face, scrutinize, problematize and address our whiteness more thoroughly? Should we not get stressed?

In the mall, not being white is something that is noticed; it closes the door to the shopping mall. Not being white would have led to an entirely different research project.¹⁸ Once more returning to the famous saying that ‘Mexico is classist, not racist’, this unsettles the understanding and conceptions of class in a country that ‘mestizo-washed’¹⁹ these embodied signifiers of distinction and discrimination into the notion of class in a socio-historical context where middle-classness has been linked to whiteness.

Turning back to the mall, it can be conceptualized as a master’s tool and master’s house in the manner that it embodies a logic of hierarchy and hierarchization. Additionally, through their marketing strategies, the mall fuels social competition and contributes to the labeling of classes and classed practices.²⁰ The mall is a house rooted in a racialized patriarchal logic, determining whose bodies are desired and who is considered as out of place. In this manner, similar to the question of class in relation to racial thinking, mallification serves as a tool for performing middle-classness.

When I started this research project, I had in mind the question from Spivak’s famous essay: “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1993: 90), wondering who were “the subaltern in

¹⁸ On that note see further Giglia (2003) who describes the challenges and discriminations her non-white students faced doing research in a Mexican Shopping Mall.

¹⁹ A provocative term used by the author, following the concept of greenwashing or pinkwashing, that aims to critique the notion of a ‘raza cósmica’ (cosmic race). This term was introduced by José Vasconcelos in 1925 with the aim to erode ideas of social Darwinism that were very present in a country that was about to reinvent itself in the model of Europe. However, it also aimed to acknowledge all citizens by stating that everyone is a mestizo/a, thereby erasing the deeply ingrained social and corporeal distinctions that persist in Mexico.

²⁰ Through its centrality as emblematic and representational space for the city, as well as through these exclusionary marketing strategies, the mall becomes a significant (urban) social agent that exercises a form of social domination which takes up and furthers patterns of racial thinking and negotiations of class belonging. As ethnographer, being accepted by this social agent was as crucial for the research project as being seen as “one of them” by my interlocutors.

the mall". However, I found the second question she poses right after much more intriguing, pertinent and important, especially regarding my own position in the mall that I myself had frequented as a teenager: "What must the elites do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?" (ibid.). Thus, my research centered on the shopping mall as both a material and social space, serving as an epitome of neoliberal urbanization. My primary focus was on the white upper-middle classes, who consider this space as their own and are targeted by the mall administration, much like myself. To scrutinize the ongoing construction of the subaltern in the mall, I examined the behavior and dynamics of the white upper-middle classes.

Returning to the methodological questions posed here, my own positioning significantly informed and shaped the research I conducted. In the words of Lorde, I had to find new tools to comprehend the mall and the signifiers I carry within my own body and identity. As she states:

"difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively 'be' in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters." (Lorde 2003: 26)

These different strengths reflect our different positions as researchers in a discipline that was born with and out of colonialism, differences that have to be made visible and explicitly addressed. Being considered target for the mall was an existential part and starting point for this research, as this cultural-corporeal-social capital made me honorary member and gave me access.

Moussawi, in his brilliant ethnography on queer strategies in Beirut, suggests moving toward "queer flexible methodologies" as an orientation that asks us to consider the constantly changing nature of the field, disruptions, and nature of access. A queer flexible methodology accepts that our methods are co-constituted by the field and are part and parcel of fieldwork that require a certain form of letting go and of being humble (Moussawi 2020: 8). 'Queer' can function as a conceptual tool to point to the necessary disruptions, and as methodology can disrupt and dismantle the masters – ethnographer's – house. It makes us rethink questions about distance and (dis)comfort while doing research though the aim should be that 'queer' as distinguishing feature to the still exiting normative master's tool becomes obsolete. In this manner, Anima Adjepong, in their insightful reflection on doing ethnography from a queer of color perspective argues: a "reflexive practice brings to light how the privileging of certain bodies can obfuscate the ways in which the ethnographer's embodiment is implicated in their research" (Adjepong 2019: 28).

What I wanted to emphasize here are two central arguments: first, to scrutinize our understandings of class belonging according to the context in which we conduct research, while at the same time writing ourselves back into the narrative to break through and disrupt the colonial history of our discipline; second, to find ways to continue to make our research personal without losing scientific rigor (Abu Lughod 1991), and to problematize and advance the notion of situated knowledge. Ethnography has always been an explicitly classist and racialized project, making it particularly necessary for those of us conducting research in the global south while inhabiting bodies that work, represent, and teach from the global north, to reflect upon these circumstances.

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