
Discussing Mestizaje in Latin America: Expanding HCI's Perspectives on Race

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss how the ideology of “mestizaje” constructs race in Latin America to add nuance to HCI’s understanding of race. Race and racism are culturally and historically constructed. In Latin America, to be racially Black, white, or Indigenous is fluid and mobile, in contrast to the U.S., where racial categories are typically less flexible. Therefore, if HCI is to address racist sociotechnical systems and critically engage with race in the systemic analysis of inequities, then HCI needs to look at how other societies construct and experience race. Otherwise, HCI runs the risk of propagating false “universal truths” that reify oppressive structures of discrimination. We take a “pluralistic” view of race and analyze how experiences of “mestizaje” in Latin American illuminate the understanding of racist technologies. By using a different constructions of race, we propose new race-based research questions for the field of HCI to consider.

Author Keywords

Race; Racism; technology design; Mestizaje; Latin America; pluralistic views

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models; Empirical studies in HCI;

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Introduction

As researchers and designers in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), shaping the future of technologies that support social justice, how do we decide what is racist? For example, Schlesinger explains that a chatbot's blacklist (a technical solution to handle racist language) might exclude the term "mulatto" since, in the U.S., it is a historically racist term to describe a racially Black and white person [24]. However, in Latin America (LATAM), "mulato" [no double t in Spanish] is colloquial because, historically, it never was as a racially stigmatized term. In fact, self-identifying as "mulato" may be desirable. In LATAM, what it means to be racially Black, Indigenous or white is not a rigid and immobile categorization like, typically, in the U.S. [34].

To support socially just sociotechnical systems, HCI has strived to incorporate aspects of feminist and critical theories as a way to care for and look after the interests and values of the minoritized [1, 9, 17, 22, 23]. Recent research on the values within a design that leads to racist technologies reflects this effort [12, 24, 19]. However, that work analyzes racism from an U.S.-centric, perspective. If we seek a critical engagement with race, that unpacks how race and its associated privileges and discriminations are embodied and materialized within the design of technology, we need to understand how race operates within different cultural-historical settings. We argue HCI needs to embrace a pluralistic approach to understanding race, so as not to impose false "universal truths" [10].

By describing race and racism from only a U.S. viewpoint, we run the risk of imposing and propagating the societal structures being challenged—particularly as many parts of the world, especially those in economic disadvantage, consistently appropriate technology, and culture from the U.S. [16, 30]. Furthermore, ignoring the breadth of current and

historical perspectives of how race and racism are experienced worldwide deprives us of alternative configurations—unquantifiably better or worse—to understand HCI's role in how race and racism operate through technology.

In this paper, we use "mestizaje", the colonial practice, and postcolonial ideology behind "la raza" (the Spanish word for race) to explore the construction of race in LATAM. A large portion of the population in LATAM is categorical "mestizo"—people with mixed European, African, and Indigenous parentage, with non-mestizos (Indigenous, Africans, whites, etc.) sometimes represented by significant minorities in each country [28]. "Mestizaje" makes "la raza" a much more fluid concept than race in the U.S, aligned with notions of *whiteness* that change depending on who uses it and for what purposes [15, 31]. As a working paradigm, "mestizaje" is not without its complications; it works as a practice for unity and homogenization that, unfortunately, also ends with the exclusion of the minoritized. When people claim to be "mestizo" or "la raza", they may also use these terms to credit good attributes as stemming from their "whiteness" and negative ones from their indigenous self [32]. This fluid interpretation also comes at the cost of being able to define systems for affirmative action, since "virtually everyone" ought to benefit from such policies [28, 33].

Taking a pluriversal approach to HCI knowledge production [10, 36], rather than replacing the dominant, U.S.-centric view, we propose to expand HCI's view of race to also consider different cases of inclusion/exclusion, segregation, and broadly "mestizaje". Drawing from examples of mestizaje in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and the U.S. border, we explore how to broaden and enrich HCI's conversations on race. Through this, we also seek to render visible how the racial discourse and stereotyping that might take place on

technological platforms in Latin America differs from U.S. paradigms.

Race

In this paper, we conceptualize “race and/as technology”, in the same ways of critical race scholars and historians of technology [2, 7]. Race is not just a social construct, but a politic, an invention that serves as a system of oppression [3]. Racialized groups who have whiteness are privileged and considered normal and standard [14]. Those without whiteness are discriminated against and perceived as “other.” Furthermore, race, technology, and design are co-constitutive: co-producing, reproducing, and reifying one another [35]. We also use sociologists, Omi and Winant’s definition of racism, a system that “creates or reproduces structures of domination based on racial significance and identities” [21].

The concept of race is Eurocentric. Only in the western world does the idea of one’s skin color being a different shade designate one’s culture/ethnicity. Biologically, there are no differences between races: There are no ‘Black’ people, or ‘Brown’ people, or ‘white’ people – ‘only people who think of themselves as white’ [3]. Therefore, someone is racially white not just because they have less melanin in their skin, but because of the way society has defined the societal rules for determining racial membership and social status.

Historically, in the U.S., race has been constructed as a clear-cut form of skin-color classification - thanks to the historical legacy of the racist legislation, the one-drop rule [8]. For example, President Barack Obama was unequivocally categorized as “Black” rather than “white” or “mixed” during the election [15]. Within such context of sharp racial identities, “what is racist” is simply identified as discrimi-

nation towards clearly defined groups with Blackness [15]. Although, the notion of “passing,” or when someone from a racial category “passes” as someone of another racial category, somewhat complicates racial categories in the U.S. [34].

Mestizaje in Latin America

In LATAM, race—mestizaje—is culturally-driven, individualistically dynamic, and based on the historically-situated ideology of mixing. For example, a brown-skinned person can be racially white one moment and racially non-white (e.g., Black, mestizo, or Indigenous) the next. It just depends on how they present themselves and whom they present to [18, 31]. The racial privilege of moving “back and forth” is somewhat similar to “passing” in the U.S. However, in the U.S., passing is not as common, incredibly difficult to do, and highly stigmatized [34].

This view profoundly complicates the role of race in how individuals and society construct “the other.” While there is ample reason to see racism at work, the role of culture in practices of racial exclusions and inclusions obscures the significance of race and racism in the region [27, 32].

Similar to English colonies(e.g., now the U.S.), Spanish and Portuguese colonies functioned on racial hierarchies that positioned Europeans at the top and Black and Indigenous at the bottom. However, unlike the U.S. American colonizers, Latin American colonizers promoted the mixture of Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous people—referred to as mestizaje—as a standard and desirable practice to populate their colonies [6]. Mestizaje led to the creation of a new, “in-the-middle” racial group with privileges not afforded to Black and Indigenous groups [20, 32].

While initially biological, or physical attributes were the only criterion for racial discrimination, the sheer ambiguity of

mestizos' appearances and backgrounds forced the use of cultural markers as the typical way to determine who belonged to what racial category [18, 32]. People thus, could move across categories by leveraging markers such as morality, religion, education, clothes, and language together with their skin color [18, 32]. As a result, Black and Indigenous groups could use informal opportunities to challenge how they were constructed as "the other." Indigenous people who were able to adopt mestizo traits—e.g., speaking Spanish and wearing specific clothes—could pass as mestizos. Mestizaje even allowed Black slaves related to mestizos either to buy or to win their freedom [6, 20].

After the independence wars, old colonies in LATAM used mestizaje as a unifying ideology to build country-wide identities that resisted European views of LATAM nations as "mixed" and "inferior" [29, 31]. As an ideology, mestizaje sought to extol "la raza" as a culture of mixedness that downplayed biology, and thus, argued to be superior to segregation [29]. The culturally-based practice of mestizaje in no way implies an absence of racism: it is, however, different from racism in the U.S. It complicates systematic "othering" based on "clear cut" racial identities; the role of race in constructing "the other," then, becomes highly subjective and dynamic [18, 31].

In LATAM, often, people keep simultaneous identifications that they can activate through cultural factors. While passing as "white" might be desirable most of the time, within mestizaje, individuals might also want to leverage their non-whiteness, for example, when maintaining familial ties and kinship [15, 31]. As a result, individuals tend to subscribe to culture and class over race. However, mestizaje's emphasis on seeking national homogeneity by promoting whitening still purposefully devalues the lives and experiences of those Black, Indigenous, and darker-skinned individuals

and groups who struggle to leverage multiple racial identities [26, 27, 28].

Mestizaje and HCI's View on Race

We now explore how the dynamic inclusion/exclusion experiences of mestizaje in LATAM can inform race-related HCI research areas. *First*, we discuss how mestizo lives complicate an HCI research and design that calls out and counteracts racism. *Second*, we identify how the mixed nature of race in LATAM and power structures can illuminate possible issues for information systems that classify race. *Third*, we present examples of how technology perpetuates structural and individual racism in racially-ambiguous contexts. Our explorations demonstrate that, for HCI, discussing mestizaje can broaden the kind of technology-based questions that the field poses.

About Technologies That Can React To Racism

HCI and related fields have shown an interest in promoting technologies that are more inclusive of different racial identities. As a result, some studies have explored how intelligent technologies can productively react to race-biased data and avoid racist interactions [24, 12, 19]. Ethnographic work on the spaces of racial inclusion/exclusion that people navigate in LATAM can provide a new understanding of what is racist speech in other contexts outside of the U.S. Moreover, it can illustrate further complexities for technology to intervene in these racially-dynamic contexts.

The race-based language people use, and the racist remarks they tolerate are highly dependent upon their context and lived experiences. For example, many African Brazilians choose to downplay race's role in discriminatory interactions because of the extensive mixture and the strong national rejection of cultural differences between Brazilians of different skin colors [26]. Although they are critical

of racist structures and proud of to be Black, they are often highly tolerant of racist remarks, responding with either humor or dismissal as a form of resistance. Rancheros, who migrated between the U.S. and Mexican border, also use subtle, context-dependent forms of resisting racism [15]. In Mexico, they refuse being associated with mestizos to avoid being lumped together with people from larger cities. In the U.S., they reject the term Latino by intentionally misusing it to refer to Italian Americans.

Dismissal and resistance strategies to racism, are widespread across LATAM, and pose important questions for HCI to consider: Who gets to decide what is considered racist speech? Who determines who gets offended by discriminatory speech, and how the response to it should be?

The aforementioned cases reveal the need to understand the lived experiences of racialized individuals in order to assess, react to, and resist technology-based racist interactions. It also becomes relevant to study productive forms of human-technology race-based interactions. The examples we provide suggest technologies could scaffold individuals' self-reflection of their perception and attitudes towards the racist incidents of which they are bystanders, victims, or perpetrators. New understandings could then inform the design of technologies that operate under a more inclusive, pluralistic understanding of race.

About Technologies that Classify Race

The literature on information systems has long acknowledged how systems for racial categorization are both needed and problematic [5, 4]. While these systems can enable institutions to provide appropriate support for racial minorities, their lack of flexibility can end up dismissing particular experiences and cases. Most literature on category systems and race has focused on contexts with a history of segregation where race is seen as commonly shared set of clas-

sifications based on skin color [5, 4]. Next, we present experiences of mestizaje in Latin America as a way to further expand the understanding of how these systems fit into the everyday lives of those in the middle of existing categories.

LATAM is the region of the world with the highest levels of socioeconomic inequities [27]. A long list of studies confirms that skin color is a crucial determinant of such inequities [25]. However, until recently, no remediation plans were possible since no racial data was collected during national censuses [28]. Policy-makers have often dismissed race as an important differentiator in the region; the extensive mixture is often thought to make color categories too fluid for racial distinctions to be even feasible [33].

Although many countries have started to collect racial data, the exclusive nature of mestizaje has been a barrier to this process. Many people whom society identifies and treats as Black or Afro are not willing to self-identify in those categories, often because identification in lighter-skinned categories is socially preferable [28]. Considering how mestizaje implies fragmentation as well as contextual use of identities [31], the following list of questions become essential for HCI to consider. First, how does design support systems for racial classification that caters to individualistic and ambiguous kinds of racialized experiences? Second, what might be the role of technology in helping individuals to visualize better how their lived experiences correlate with their self-identification decisions? Lastly, could technologies play a role in supporting how individuals perceive the consequences of their self-identifying decisions?

About Technologies That Perpetuate Racism

The field of HCI has begun to explore how design embeds and perpetuates racism at a societal level [13, 19]. The complex interactions between mestizaje and the DNA test technology in LATAM can suggest further aspects for HCI

researchers to consider. Although DNA is not a marker of race [11], our examples demonstrate how societies and individuals read them as race-based technologies. Notably, these cases shed light on areas to explore for understanding technology's role in reproducing racism at both the individual and systemic levels.

The case of DNA technologies in Brazil illustrates how technology can perpetuate racism at a systemic, or structural level in a context where racism is often dismissed nationwide. Brazilian politicians have been using DNA data to promote the idea that the populations high level of "mixedness" makes the concept of Black Brazilians impossible to sustain [33, 28, 26]. For example, politicians used the 67% European ancestry of the samba singer Neguinho da Beija-Flor, an Afro-Brazilian cultural icon, as a way to confirm that affirmative action programs are not feasible in the context of mestizaje. In this case, DNA technology both embeds and perpetuates racism by helping power structures dismiss racialized experiences [33]. Drawing from this case, we propose that HCI could further explore how technologies support homogenizing discourses that dismiss the lived, fragmented experiences of individuals in contexts where race is ambiguously constructed.

The case of Colombia offers a view of how technology perpetuates racism at an individual level and provokes insights on important research questions to consider. As in most LATAM countries, in Colombia, DNA results often reveal a high mixing of ancestries. However, the historical practice of whitening has led some groups in this country to only value the percentage of the test that describes their European ancestry, thus resurrecting the ghost of the biologically defined "races" that genetics has worked so hard to lay to rest [33]. This suggests that HCI can do more to understand how individuals make sense of race-related technology-delivered

information. In that line, another important research endeavor could be to understand the role technology might have in challenging individuals' dominant readings of race-related information.

Conclusion

In this paper we talk about race, racism and how these constructs become embedded into sociotechnical systems. In an effort to produce a pluralistic view of race in HCI, we have conceptualized race under the lens of "raza" and "mestizaje" from LATAM. We explored three areas of interest to HCI through examples from LATAM: 1) How technologies react to racism, 2) how technologies classify race, and 3) how technologies perpetuate racism. Through these exploration, we highlight that the questions of "what is racist" and "who belongs to what racial category" is complex and not as clear-cut as HCI has previously described. Further, we shed light on possible race-based research questions for HCI to consider.

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