To the Grey in Between: An Exploration into Racial Identity in Perú

“Reilly” Hannah Lorastein, 2013

In my original proposal for this research project, I wrote a lot about the language of “black” and “white.” As an Africana Studies major and a multiracial individual, I have had a lot of experience with secondary literature about racial identity in a U.S. context. When I decided to look at Peru, I read many articles on the subject of racial identity in Lima, however I had no first hand knowledge of the experiences of Peruvian citizens – only my own complex experiences regarding racial identity as a bi-racial first generation Peruvian immigrant in the United States. Even now as I write the term “bi-racial” it seems to refer to histories, institutions, and identities existing in the United States.

While in Lima, I met a number of people and spoke to them about their family histories. I also met with a Professor of Sociology at a top university, two officials at GRADE, a market research firm, the editor of a major newspaper in Lima, El Comercio, and read reports about racism in the media produced by Lundu, and anti-racist activist group. Each of these sources was able to provide me with valuable information. Most significantly, I was introduced to what two scholars referred to as ‘the cholo question.’ Cholo, I learned, is a significant word in Peru. It is not simply slang, as I learned it growing up in Los Angeles. In a Peruvian context, it is used as an insult. To paraphrase what Raúl Castro Perez, the editor of El Comercio, described during an interview, it means that a person is backwards, is nobody, and has no history. Aside from a valuable overview of the influences of colonial structures on present-day Peruvian social politics, Mr. Perez provided me with a number of books and articles, which were able to introduce me to the current academic conversation around race in Peru.

Speaking with Juan Carlos Callirgos, a Professor of Sociology at Lima’s PUCP (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú) was also extremely helpful. He introduced me to a new framework for thinking about race. According to Callirgos, there is a spectrum of racial identities, and where one falls on this spectrum depends on the situation into which one is placed. This means that racial identity is fluid, ever changing, depending on who and what one is interacting with. One may be “blacker” or “whiter” or “more Indio” in a certain time and place depending on what is happening around them. These two ideas that have helped me to completely reshape my framework for understanding race and racial identity.

While in Peru I stayed mostly in Lima, however I also visited Cuzco. Seeing the contrast between the two places was important. Exploring the city, talking to people, and learning more about the history of the country as a whole gave me more context for understanding the attitudes about race and racial identity that I observed in Lima. For now, it seems that there are many social attitudes and stereotypes that remain entrenched in Peru’s society—the ghosts of a lingering colonial legacy. And while discrimination remains, there is also a new movement growing—the cholo movement—which finds power in being racially fluid. As one man said to me, “we are everything.” I would like to explore this movement further in the future. This summer experience has given me the tools to launch many new research projects, in multiple directions, and I am excited about where it will take me next.

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