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# Migration, racial capitalism, and Indigenous women: Re-Reading the gendered and racialized histories of U.S./Mexican migration

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## ABSTRACT

Studies of Mexican migration to the United States posit that from the 1940s to the 1970s rural men were migrant protagonists while women stayed home. If women migrated, they relied upon men's established networks. However, archival and ethnographic research with Indigenous Zapotec women from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, disrupts this narrative and demonstrates how women – instead of men – pioneered migrant networks. Originally employed in domestic service in Mexico City, Zapotec women leveraged work relationships to find opportunities in the United States. Subsequently, they helped other women to migrate. Studies have never documented these women-led migrant networks. Drawing on the analytic of racial capitalism, this article argues that Indigenous women's migration was not an anomaly, but rather a key aspect of the gendered and racialized logics of accumulation that subsidised economic growth in Mexico during the 'Mexican Miracle' (1940s to the 1970s). Accordingly, while Zapotec women found opportunity in international migration, they were rendered surplus through a similar racialized logic that devalued their reproductive labour on both sides of the border. This article contributes to studies of U.S./Mexican migration by centring the historical geographies of racialized accumulation logics when exploring how Indigenous Mexicans have moved to the United States.

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## 1. Introduction

In the late 1950s, three Indigenous Zapotec women migrated to Los Angeles, California. From the town of Yatzachi el Bajo, a small village located in the northern mountains of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, these young, single women came to work as live-in domestic servants for wealthy Angelinos. Aided by a pre-1965 U.S. immigration policy that allowed employers to request work permits for domestic servants (Boris 2022), and by the unique way domestic employment networks operate – by matching friends of trusted workers with friends of trusted employers – these women were the first from their region to establish themselves in Los Angeles. They then assisted friends, neighbours, and family members – mostly female, but also male – to migrate, find

employment, and settle. Consequently, they helped establish what is now known as ‘Oaxacalifornia,’ a transnational community of Oaxacan-heritage people in the Los Angeles area (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004).

The fact that women, instead of men, established these international migrant networks is unheard of in studies on U.S./Mexican migration. Most research analyzing the time period of the 1950s through the 1970s has consistently documented how – thanks to the Bracero Programme that legally brought Mexican men to work in U.S. agricultural fields – men founded and controlled migrant networks in the United States. Women largely stayed home (Cerrutti and Massey 2001; McEvoy et al. 2012). If women *did* go north, their movement was mediated by male migrant family members, in whose footsteps they followed (Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

How then, did these women-initiated networks emerge? I posit that the answer involves the way in which the labour of Indigenous women subsidised the ‘Mexican Miracle,’ a period of economic and urban growth that roughly spanned three decades (from 1945 to 1975). Starting in the 1950s, waves of Indigenous women migrated from rural areas to growing urban centres (Arizpe 1975; Gonzalez Montes 1994; Velasco Ortiz 2007). ‘Pushed out’ of rural villages by certain aspects of modernisation – including the creation of a cash nexus, greater economic integration, and an influx of industrial goods, which made their rural labour seem redundant – the poorest rural women began to sell their labour power in urban centres (Young 1978). They found work in one of the most devalued spheres of labour, domestic service. Although a racially subordinated and exploitable field of work, domestic service provided women with autonomy – albeit limited – from the strict gendered norms of their home villages. It enabled them to create migrant networks without the mediation of men, which they leveraged to help friends and family members escape arranged marriages or abusive partners. Women also generated new forms of social capital through interactions with their employers and other women working in the same household or neighbourhood. Indeed, it is these interactions that helped them initiate migrant networks to the United States.

In this article, I place Indigenous domestic workers at the centre of histories of Mexican migration to the United States by documenting these extraordinary women-led migrant networks. To do so, I use the analytic of racial capitalism to emphasise how racialized and gendered logics of accumulation and exploitation *within* Mexico informed international migration in important ways. Accordingly, I hope to contribute to a re-reading of U.S./Mexican migration that does not simply add in Indigenous peoples as a category of analysis, but that centres the historical geographies of racialized accumulation logics when exploring how Indigenous Mexicans have moved to the United States (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Kearney 2000; Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Stephen 2007; Varese and Escárcega 2004; Velasco Ortiz 2002; Zabin et al. 1993).

## 2. Racial capitalism, domestic service, and the ‘international division of reproductive labor’

Racial capitalism is an analytic that explores how processes of racialisation and capitalism are co-constitutive (Fraser 2016; Gilmore 2007; Launius and Boyce 2021; Pulido 2017; Robinson 2020). Its premise is the idea that capitalism ‘cannot function if we all are allowed to become fully human’ (Bhattacharyya 2018, x). Subsequently, capitalism

operates through constant processes of devaluation that help generate new frontiers of accumulation. Just as this is done in relation to space – via primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005) – so it occurs in relation to human life – via racial logics of differentiation – rendering some working bodies less than human and thus fair game for expropriation and exploitation (Fraser 2016; Pulido 2016). Melamed (2015) describes this well:

Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. (p.77)

This unequal differentiation of human value occurs through the creation of differences that are presented as natural – “biological,’ ‘cultural,’ ‘environmental” (Koshy et al. 2022, 2) – and operationalised through techniques of othering to discipline and order bodies according to race, but also through modalities of gender, sexuality, age, and/or dis/ability (Bhattacharyya 2018).

Marx (1992) long ago recognised the importance of a ‘relative surplus population,’ or the ‘mass of human material always ready for exploitation,’ to capitalist accumulation.<sup>1</sup> The analytic of racial capitalism illuminates how relative surplus populations are racialized through legacies of slavery and colonialism (Koshy et al. 2022). Under these configurations, certain types of human activity were categorised as ‘work’ and considered legible as productive and civilised, while other activities were not: ‘labour evacuated ‘native’ work of any inherent meaning or value. The result was that colonised peoples had to translate their body power into ‘productive’ labour, but many would be doomed to always fall short’ (Rajaram 2018, 628). Subsequently, they were seen as only ever able to perform certain subordinated tasks. In contemporary capitalism, they are workers whose body power is not coded with the same type of value as others, labouring in ‘the dark underbelly of capitalism, its backstage operations where cheap and irregular labour is used up in the search for hyperprofit’ (*ibid*).

While this work can take many forms, social reproductive labour is particularly marked by racial logics and disproportionately realised by surplus populations in what Glenn (1992) calls ‘a racial division of reproductive labor’ (p.3). The racial legacies of servitude, developed through coercive labour systems under colonialism and slavery, perpetuate the idea that domestic workers are people of colour and lesser human value (Palmer 2010; Rollins 1985). This is in part because reproductive work, focused on activities that ensure that humans have what they need to reproduce themselves on a daily and inter-generational basis – clean clothes, clean homes, food, childcare – is not categorised as ‘real work.’ Rather, it is seen as an extension of tasks ‘natural’ to women (Bhattacharyya 2017; Katz 2001). Racial tropes depict women of colour as having inherent traits that make them especially suited for domestic work, such as dexterity, maternalism, lack of intelligence, or a subordinate nature. The enactment of ‘degraded labor’ confirms domestic workers’ supposedly ‘natural inferiority’, generating the idea that women of colour should serve, just as white people should be served (Glenn 1992). Additionally, paid domestic work is often ripe with domination (Chaney and Castro 1989). This is in

part because it takes place within the employer's home, where legal protections are not common and exploitation occurs through a strangely intimate relationship between the employer and the employee (Anderson 2000; Blofield 2012).

Although the subsidisation of social reproduction by racialized women workers has occurred for centuries, its current manifestation centres importantly on migration. Migration – either internally or internationally – means that any reproductive work that these migrant women previously engaged in at home – especially child or elder care – must now be performed by someone else, usually another female family member who is either older or younger, and therefore considered not as apt for paid domestic service. Similarly, this means that the labour and care required to constitute women of colour as domestic workers was also generated elsewhere, usually under conditions of greater precarity and cost, thus subsidising social reproduction in migrant destinations. Indeed, over the last several decades it has become increasingly common for domestic workers to be immigrants, especially in global cities marked by income inequality and large immigrant populations (Jokela 2015; Milkman, Reese, and Roth 1998). Their migration, largely from the Global South to the Global North, epitomises contemporary processes of value transfer in an unequal world system. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) refers to this as the ‘new world domestic order’ and Parreñas (2015) as the ‘international division of reproductive labor.’ A host of scholars argue that it is a defining aspect of increasing inequalities in a global era (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003).

The analytic of racial capitalism helps us assess how particular historical couplings of dark skin and servitude formulated through slavery and colonialism become harnessed to contemporary process of capitalist accumulation and domestic service. Accordingly, in what follows, I apply the analytic to explore how Indigenous women in Mexico were racialized as inferior servants, and how this came to inform their migration patterns within a particular moment of Mexico's economic and political history.

### 3. Racialized histories of gender, indigeneity, and migrant networks

Contemporary studies of Mexican migration place the Bracero Programme, which began in 1942, at the centre of long-lasting migratory patterns to the United States. The programme began a new era of gendered migration when it brought thousands of Mexican men to the United States to work in agricultural fields during World War II. Once the programme ended in 1964, many former *braceros* continued to work in the United States despite not having legal authorisation. Drawing on previous employment and social connections, they generated migrant networks through which they shared important information about how to migrate and find to work, thus making migration easier for friends and family members to follow in their footsteps (Boyd 1989; Massey 1988).

However, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) indicates that ‘immigrant social networks are highly contested social resources, and they are not always shared, even in the same family’ (p.189). Multiple studies have demonstrated how these male-oriented *bracero* networks reflected unequal power relations between men and women, emphasising that men tended to help men migrate, while limiting or controlling women's mobility (Davis and Winters 2001; Kanaiaupuni 2000). For example, Cerrutti and Massey (2001) found that ‘women almost always followed other family members, either the

husband or a parent. Only a tiny minority of female migrants began migrating independently' (p.187). Men regularly left behind their wives and families, often not consulting them on their decision to migrate; the inverse rarely occurred (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

Yet it is important to note that the Bracero Programme was not the only way Mexicans migrated to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, most *braceros* hailed from a specific geographical area of Mexico, what Durand and Massey (2003) refer to as the 'historic' migrant sending region located in the Central-West part of the country.<sup>2</sup> This area is largely populated by *mestizos*, or people of mixed Indigenous/Spanish descent. At the same time that they went north, Indigenous peoples from central and southern Mexico also began to leave their homes in search of work.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that racialized logics did not inform the Bracero Programme. Rosas (2006) demonstrates how then-Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho asserted that the programme would help 'rehabilitate' (skill-up) 'allegedly racially inferior rural Mexican men into modern citizens by exposing them to U.S. customs, skills, and work habits' (p.1).<sup>4</sup> This idea was informed by national imaginaries based on the racialized logics of *mestizaje*, which purported that through progressive mixing with descendants of Spanish blood, Indigenous peoples would become modern *mestizos*, leaving their indigeneity in the past (Basave Benítez 1992; Gall 2004; Moreno Figueroa 2011; Wade 2017). Under this logic, any racial or ethnic forms of identification were often subsumed by the vast political and identity category of *campesino*, or peasant. Subsequently, rural populations were often undifferentiated ethnically, with certain aspects of rurality – namely forms of work, type of dress, and cultural practices – seen as more primitive. Exposure to technology and modern ways of working were thought to help rural men become more *mestizo*.

However, during the same period, people marked as Indigenous – those who had not yet transitioned fully into *mestizaje* because they still spoke an Indigenous language – began to migrate *internally*, within Mexico itself, before moving north. Called stage or 'stepwise' migration, these migratory patterns were shaped by national policies of state-led modernisation that began in full force in the 1950s (Zabin and Hughes 1995). The building of roads and electric grids in combination with investment in industry through policies of import substitution industrialisation, or producing goods in-country instead of importing them, initiated a period of economic growth hailed as the 'Mexican Miracle.' While the 'Miracle' produced a growing middle class of *mestizo* Mexicans, it relied upon a racialized Indigenous underclass to do so. Indeed, a racialized relative surplus population of Indigenous peoples performed the most devalued yet essential jobs to promote economic growth on two main fronts: industrial agriculture and urban service work.<sup>5</sup>

In agriculture, agribusiness recruiters deliberately targeted Mixtec workers in impoverished villages of Oaxaca. They bused them north to the states of Sinaloa and Baja California. Not just men, but entire families were recruited to live in camps near agricultural fields, often in squalid and exploitative situations (López and Runsten 2004; Velasco Ortiz 2004). After a few years of living in northern Mexico, Mixtecs had access to new migrant networks and information, and they began to move to agricultural fields in the United States (Zabin and Hughes 1995). Likewise, this had an important gendered aspect: initially, women and children were more likely to stay in northern Mexico, while men would venture north.

Rural-to-urban migration also exploded during the ‘Mexican Miracle.’ Many Indigenous Oaxacans migrated to Mexico City (Arizpe 1985). This also had a different gendered pattern than *bracero* migration, as migrants were more likely to be women than men. In part, this was due to labour sector opportunities: it was hard for poorly educated Indigenous men to establish themselves in industrial settings, and so they were limited to temporary construction work or the informal economy (Hirabayashi 1993). Young, single women, on the other hand, *could* find jobs, mainly in domestic service or in informal street vending (Arizpe 1975). They often lived in their employer’s home, avoiding the need to rent accommodations but also increasing the possibility of endless workdays. They generated migration and employment networks in which they matched female friends and family with their employer’s contacts. Sandoval-Cervantes (2017) finds that this helped migrant women develop a sense of autonomy and independence not found in other migrant contexts at the time.

Many of these young women stayed in Mexico City to settle in growing urban neighbourhoods on the periphery of the city (Orellana 1973). Others, after working for a few years, returned to their hometowns to marry and have children (Sandoval-Cervantes 2017). However, the women of Yatzachi did something different: they used their employer connections and women-generated networks to migrate to the United States. In part, this is not surprising. Domestic service seems to be one of the main ways in which women-to-women migrant networks emerge and consolidate in both internal and international migration.<sup>6</sup> Since women control these employment networks – they are spaces where men have little say or sway – it also enables them to command the migration processes associated with them. Both Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) and Hagan (1998) show how once women made it to the United States (through participation in male family member’s migrant networks), they began to generate women-to-women migrant networks through domestic service.<sup>7</sup> These networks helped challenge men’s patriarchal control by giving women ways to migrate without them: married women could join their husbands in the United States through the help of female friends, and single women could leave home without parental support (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). However, the networks Hondagneu-Sotelo and Hagan document developed out of men’s initial networks and began in the 1970s. What is surprising in the case of Yatzachi is that women-led migrant networks began earlier, in the late 1950s. Even more unique is that women initiated them on their own and in places where men from their village were not already established.<sup>8</sup>

This article contributes to literature on U.S./Mexican migration by demonstrating how beyond *bracero* migration patterns, there were multiple ways in which Mexicans began to move north. Although Indigenous migration patterns demonstrate how internal migration helped them gain information and social capital before making riskier migrant sojourns across international borders (Zabin and Hughes 1995), I argue that this ‘step-wise’ migration had less to do with risk aversion and more to do with specific racialized forms of exploitation. Indeed, the analytic of racial capitalism helps us see how internal migration patterns were structured through racialized and gendered logics of accumulation. Indigenous people in Mexico were specifically targeted as low-wage workers who could fill the flexible labour needs – in both rural and urban contexts – of a specific type of economic growth purported by the ‘Miracle.’ That a racialized surplus working population in Mexico was able to insert itself quite easily into capitalist



accumulation processes in the United States decades later – with the added question of border regimes heightening workers' precarity – should come as no surprise.

#### 4. Zapotec women: from colonial servants to Hollywood housekeepers

While the shift toward sourcing domestic workers from the Global South has exploded over the last several decades, it importantly began in the 1960s (Chaney and Castro 1989). In the United States, civil rights initiatives enabled Black and Chicana women to leave domestic service and find other areas of employment.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, immigrant women – mostly Mexican – took their place, especially in areas with high rates of Latino immigration. Los Angeles was one of the key cities where this occurred: foreign-born Latinas became 68% of the domestic workforce by 1990. Data from 2018 indicate that this pattern has held: 80% of housecleaners in California were foreign-born, the majority from Mexico (Waheed, Wong, and Herrera 2020). It is important to note that this data only accounts for national origin, not ethnic identity, and thus statistics on Indigenous Mexican houseworkers are not registered.<sup>10</sup>

In this section, I use archival and ethnographic research to explore the racial histories of domestic service in Mexico and to show how women from Yatzachi became some of the first 'foreign-born Latinas' to work in domestic service in Los Angeles. Data was gathered through the revision of documents in the municipal archives of Yatzachi, as well as through life histories with more than forty people from the municipality who had migrated either to Mexico City or Los Angeles during the period in question. Prolonged ethnographic work with the broader transnational community in both Yatzachi and Los Angeles from 2010 to 2018 also informs this paper.

##### 4.1. Racialized histories of domestic service in Mexico

From the beginning of Spanish colonialism, Indigenous women were forced into domestic service (Kuznesof 1989). While this created complex forms of intimate attachments between Indigenous women and their colonisers, 'the very bedrock of these attachments was predicated upon violence: including deracination, the control over female bodies, unequal relations of power, and ongoing expressions of loss' (Van Deusen 2012, 16). In 1811, at the dawn of Mexico's independence from Spain, Mexico City census data indicated that 73% of domestic servants were part of a 'subordinate' racial category: either 'Indios' (42%) or 'Casta' (meaning mixed with Spanish blood, 31%). Women outnumbered men, representing almost three-fourths of all servant populations (Salazar 1979). Likewise, they were migrants from rural areas: 88.5% of live-in domestics came from elsewhere (*ibid*). These Indigenous women received low wages and were cast as inferior and 'dirty' (Goldsmith 1998). They were considered to be dependents of their employers who were tasked with 'civilizing' them through instruction and social supervision (Kuznesof 1989; Blum 2004).

When the Mexican revolution erupted one hundred years later, the colonial renderings of Indigenous women as a racialized source of 'degraded labor' became incorporated into the post-revolutionary nation-building project (Goldsmith 1998). High rates of internal migration meant an oversupply of domestic workers, which depressed wages and generated an informal sector that helped prop up the formal economy. With the



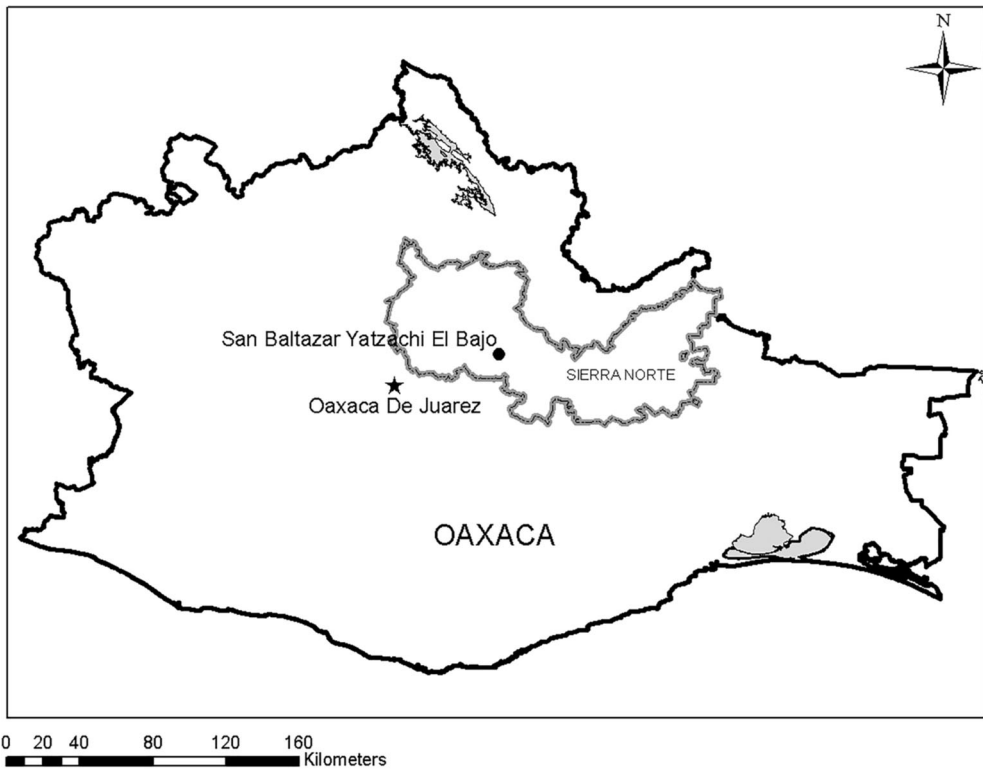
beginning of the ‘Mexican Miracle,’ female domestic workers were in high demand. The reported number of domestic servants almost doubled from 1950 to 1970 in the capital (increased from 310,165 to 541,063 people) (Arroyo 1981; Wilson 2009).<sup>11</sup> These workers were mostly migrant women, indicating the continuity of the pattern of impoverished and racialized female workers in the informal sector subsidising the growth of the formal economy (Jelin 1977). Blum (2004) goes so far as to argue that domestic service subsidised the post-revolutionary national development model. While post-revolutionary nationalist discourses and policies celebrated women as wives and mothers, domestic workers were expected to remain childless to better serve their employers. They were the invisible support aiding the growth and coherence of middle-class, *mestizo*, families.

Domestic work, whether performed by women who identified as Indigenous or not, became racialized in a particular way. As previously mentioned, in post-revolutionary Mexico, indigeneity became socially and culturally marked by more than just language or skin colour, and work was seen as an important avenue to ‘modernize’ Indigenous peoples. Specifically, factory floors and industrial agriculture fields were seen as the main employment spheres through which people could leave indigeneity behind and become *mestizo* (Dalton 2015; Loza 2016). Domestic work, on the other hand, did not offer this possibility: it was a sphere of labour through which the racialized category of gendered indigeneity was solidified, rather than overcome.<sup>12</sup> Saldaña Tejeda (2013) argues that domestic service remained in part racialized because it was a unique sphere of intimate interaction in which the difference between the *mestiza* (marked as the employer) and the racially marked ‘other’ (the rural or Indigenous employee) could be continually recreated. The racial logics of differentiation played out through daily practices of distancing, such as the creation of separate eating spaces, use of different utensils, and consumption of different foods.<sup>13</sup> Decades later, Goldsmith (1998) found that even if domestic workers did not identify as Indigenous nor speak an Indigenous language, their employers in Mexico City often implicitly labelled them as such.

#### 4.2. Indigenous Mexican maids

It is within this context that young Zapotec women from the town of Yatzachi began to migrate to Mexico City in the 1950s. San Baltazar Yatzachi el Bajo (or Yatzachi, for short), is a municipality in the southern state of Oaxaca. One of Mexico’s most indigenously populated states, Oaxaca is home to 16 different ethno-linguistic groups, among them the Zapotecs, who reside in several regions including the northern mountains, where Yatzachi is located (see Figure 1). The peak municipal population occurred in 1960, when 1,839<sup>14</sup> people were registered as living in the municipal seat, San Baltazar Yatzachi el Bajo, as well as in four other small villages (all within a short walking distance). Although roads were starting to be built around this time, to get to Oaxaca de Juárez, the state capital, people had to walk for several days (Worthen 2012).

How and why were women from Yatzachi attracted to distant urban employment? The story begins with coffee. Between 1938 and 1954, the world market price of coffee rose twenty-two-fold (Young 1980). Yatzachi’s microclimate did not allow for production of the bean, but those of neighbouring towns did. Located on the other side



**Figure 1.** Map of San Baltazar Yatzachi el Bajo.

of a steep river valley, their cash profits began to monetarize a regional economy that had been dominated by barter and exchange. New forms of wage labour and credit systems emerged, as did land concentration and class differentiation. Young (1980), doing ethnographic fieldwork in the area in the 1970s, identified the creation of three classes: a small commercial class, a small rural proletariat, and a large subsistence class that engaged sporadically in market production. Industrial goods began to flood the regional market, creating new demand for cloth, soap, kerosene lamps, and hand-grinders (Young 1978; Berg 1976). However, cash was still hard to come by, especially for those of the rural proletariat and the subsistence class. They worked in the regional coffee harvests, but soon some men began migrating seasonally to conduct agricultural work in the sugarcane fields of Veracruz.

Women, on the other hand, and to a greater extent than men, began to migrate to urban centres where they would engage in paid domestic work. Young (1980) argues that this is because women's work in the community became categorised as redundant. Their agriculture work was thought to be supplementary to men's, they were not allowed to participate in the male-dominated sphere of community leadership, and the things they had previously produced, such as handicrafts and woven blankets, were devalued as industrial versions become more easily accessible. Finally, the arrival of the corn mill meant that women no longer had to spend hours each day grinding corn with stone implements to make tortillas, the staple of their diet. A perception that young women 'did nothing' became common (Young 1980, 77).

The 1958 local census of Yatzachi's municipal seat (which had a population of around 600 people) shows to what extent women migrated. In all, 129 people (categorised as adults or students) were identified as living outside the town. Roughly half were women and half were men. Of the 61 women listed, half (29) were domestic workers in Mexico City, and there were more women than men in the nation's capital. The women working as maids ranged in age from 16 to 43, and only three were married. Only one person, a man identified as a *bracero*, was living in the United States (see [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)).

Interviews with women who worked as maids in Mexico City during this period bring these numbers to life. Sitting in her home in Yatzachi in 2018, Nachita told me about how young girls, mostly the poorest of the poor, migrated for work. Her parents had land, but not enough money to farm it, and seven children to support. Her older sisters tried to work within the region, at first going to wealthier people's homes to make tortillas. Her father would work as a day labourer in mezcal production. At a very young age, Nachita started working too. She would sweep her aunt's yard and feed the pigs in exchange for bread and coffee each morning. She remembers how her older sisters went to Mexico City and started working as domestics. When one of them, Teresa, returned to visit the family, Nachita recounts that she 'wore shoes and a pretty dress. And I thought, well I can work too and have shoes too!' At a very young age – she believes she was six or seven years old – she went to Oaxaca City with her aunt and uncle to meet up with her brother, who was working at a drycleaner and sleeping in the business' hallway at night. He helped her find work, first caring for a baby and then washing dishes. After a few years, she convinced her uncle to take her to Mexico City with him so she could join her big sister, Teresa. He was reluctant, but she persuaded him by saying she would pay for her own train ticket. She was not yet ten years old. Once she arrived in Mexico City, her sister took her in and managed to get her hired in the same home where she worked.

Although Nachita had some initial help from male family members, all the women I interviewed found work in Mexico City through women's networks. As more women came to the city, these networks expanded. This had several important effects. First, working in Mexico City as a domestic came to be a new life option for women from Yatzachi. Some used it to get ahead economically – many would send money home to support the education of siblings, for example – others to escape arranged marriages or abusive relationships. Second, it provided support systems for women migrants. If a woman was sick, or had to confront a difficult situation, there were other female friends and family members with incomes who could help them. Likewise, on weekends they could meet up with their friends in public parks to socialise and find moral support.

**Table 1.** Number, location, and occupational status of WOMEN living outside Yatzachi, 1958.

	Mexico City	Oaxaca City	Other places	
Housewife	10	3		
Teacher	1	3		
Maid	29		1	
Student	6	3	5	
Nurse	1			
TOTAL	47	9	6	62

**Table 2.** Number, location, and occupational status of MEN living outside Yatzachi, 1958.

	Mexico City	Oaxaca City	Other places	
Soldier	10	4		
Worker	11	2	1	
Employee	12	1		
Student	6	9	8	
Teacher	2	2		
TOTAL	41	18	9	68

Third, the development of these domestic employment networks meant that women were able to exert more agency in their employment choices. For example, Nachita worked with her beloved employer for eight years, but when a health condition prevented her from carrying the laundry up and down the stairs, she found new, less physically-taxing employment through her sister's connections. It also helped women get out of situations where racism was especially degrading. This was the case for Ofelia, whose first employer scolded her when she did not know what an ashtray was. He called her *burra* – referencing the stupidity of a female donkey. The same employer also belittled her because of her leather sandals, a marker of rural indigeneity (she was still too poor to buy shoes). Deeply offended, Ofelia found a new position within a week with the help of female friends. Her sister gave her money to buy shoes and a sweater so she could appear more 'modern.' Finally, women also generated new forms of social capital through interactions with their employers and other women working in the same household or neighbourhood. It is these interactions that helped women move their migrant networks from Mexico to the United States.

#### 4.3. Transnational domestic workers

Around the late 1950s, several women who had been working in domestic service in Mexico City managed to find similar employment in the United States. One woman, Micaela, got an offer from friends of her employer in Mexico City to move with them to California. Another woman, Damiana, was invited by a female friend (originally from Oaxaca, but not from the same region), whom she had met in Mexico City, but had since migrated through her own networks to San Antonio, Texas. Nachita was yet a third woman who managed to find an employment connection. Working in Mexico City for an Mexican woman who was married to a man from the United States, she accompanied them and their two children on a vacation to Los Angeles. While there, the man's sister, who was pregnant, offered to hire Nachita as a nanny. She told Nachita to bring someone else with her so she would not be lonely. Nachita returned to Mexico City, processed her paperwork at the consulate, and then she and her sister, Rufina, went to work in Los Angeles. Yet another woman, Leovigilda, was offered the opportunity to work at a daycare in Texas, replacing one of her friends who failed to pass the health inspection necessary for her immigration papers.

One of the main advantages of working in the United States was the pay differential. Women were shocked and excited as to how much they could make, often more than ten times what they earned in Mexico City. Additionally, up until 1965, immigration law made it fairly easy for employers to legalise their domestic workers if they were from

the Western Hemisphere, so women were able to migrate legally, something that also encouraged them to make the move (Boris 2022). Yet they were fearful at first. They did not know what the United States was like, or how they would be treated. They had only heard stories of the country from men in Yatzachi who had returned to the town after short stints as *braceros*.<sup>15</sup> With the support of other women, they moved forward. Ana recounts how her sister, Leovigilda, debated going to the United States. Leovigilda asked Ana and their cousin, Herminia, ‘Hey girls, will you help me? If I don’t like it there, will you help me to come home? Help me pay for my return?’ They agreed. Ana explained, ‘since we had never been to the United States, we had lots of doubts ... we weren’t sure that women could go to the United States, because only men were allowed to go as *braceros* ... but we thought, wow, we shouldn’t let this opportunity go to waste.’ So Leovigilda went to Texas under the agreement that if the work was good, she would help the others migrate; if it was bad, they would help her come home. The risk was worth it, and soon Ana and Herminia joined Leovigilda.

Now in the United States, these women began to do what they had done in Mexico City: clean houses, make food, and care for children. They also continued helping other friends and family members (male and female) find employment and establish themselves in their new migrant destinations. Micaela’s employer in Los Angeles was happy to help her wealthy friends find more domestic workers through Micaela’s networks. They both became well-versed in the documents that people needed to get work visas at the consulate in Mexico City. In Texas, Leovigilda’s employer was friends with a sheep rancher, and she helped men from Yatzachi find work with him. By the time Yatzachi conducted another citizen census in 1964, 33 people were now living in the United States: 19 of them were women!

In the United States, women found better working conditions in general. Although initially most had live-in positions that lend themselves to greater exploitation, Ofelia explained that ‘in the United States they [the employers] weren’t as demanding as in Mexico, because in Mexico once you finished your tasks, they would simply give you another instead of letting you rest.’ She attributed the hyper-exploitation to lack of other employment opportunities for young women back home: ‘back then women – the young girls – were just stuck in Mexico, there were no other options.’ Indeed, part of the reason Micaela went north was because her employer in Mexico City would yell at her. Additionally, with their employers in California, their indigeneity was not an issue. They were simply Mexican in the eyes of most people (except other Mexicans), and while that carried its own racist connotations, it was different than the racist colonial legacies they faced as Indigenous people in Mexico. The women who moved to Texas, however, suffered under racist segregation policies. After a few years, they decided to move to Los Angeles, where their friends assured them that racism was felt less.

Although the domestic work was difficult, these women had new experiences they had never dreamed of in Mexico, especially those who worked in the homes of the Hollywood elite. Damiana worked for the likes of Roman Polanski, Jacqueline Bisset, and Natalie Wood. In her house in Oaxaca City in 2011, she showed me pictures of her in the latest 1960s styles, some of her sipping beers, always with a host of girlfriends celebrating a birthday, or a bachelorette party, or going to Disneyland. In one picture, she is sitting behind the wheel of a gorgeous silver Dodge car her employer gifted her so she could go visit her girlfriends. Many women migrants also bucked more typical life pathways: they

chose not to marry, or delayed marriage till much later in life. Emilia was determined not to marry until she had gotten enough money to build a house for her mother in Yatzachi and pay for her brother's medical expenses. Nachita married in her fifties, after 33 years of working in Los Angeles. She returned to Yatzachi with her husband at that time. When I asked her how she thought her life would have played out had she never left her hometown, she said: 'I would have married and had a ton of kids, and I would have suffered with them.'

During the initial years of pioneering and leading migrant networks in the United States, women from Yatzachi did something even more unheard of: several married women migrated to the United States *without* their husbands. Ofelia was one of these pathbreakers: she was married with three young daughters when she left Yatzachi in 1960. Her husband had been injured. Ofelia made ends meet without him, but she could not afford an education for her daughters. She shocked everyone when she went to Mexico City, leaving behind her husband and the kids. She was there only a few months when her sister, Micaela, encouraged her to come to the United States. Micaela found Ofelia a job, told her what papers she had to take to the consulate, and sent her money to pay for her trip. Ofelia's migrant remittances were put to good use: her daughters continued their studies. She told them to go to school so that, 'the day a drunk man cheats on you and then tries to hit you, you can tell him to get out, because you will have a way to support your children without him.' Other women who wanted to support their children's education also followed in Ofelia's footsteps. At least two other married women went to Los Angeles with this purpose.

It appears that women's international migrant networks dominated for perhaps a decade or so, until men were able to solidify their own networks. Men initially worked in agricultural fields north of Los Angeles, but after a few years, most shifted to urban employment. Women were key to helping them become established in the city, often finding them jobs as gardeners or handymen with their employers. They used their growing English skills to help them answer job ads and negotiate terms of work. When one man got a job at a famous hamburger restaurant, he began to recruit more men from the region. Indeed, men from Yatzachi had more extensive inter-village networks back in Oaxaca than women – most likely due to their work in governance structures and patriarchal configurations of inter-village relationships – and this was reflected in migratory patterns. As men helped others from nearby towns come to the United States, more traditional gendered networks that marginalised women emerged.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the 1965 Immigration Act eliminated the possibility of employers easily obtaining papers for domestic workers, making immigration more challenging. People from Yatzachi began to migrate with false documents – using the green cards of friends or family who looked like them – or finding other, more dangerous ways to cross the border. The town soon began to empty out, long before other towns in Oaxaca consolidated international migration patterns. Yatzachi became known as the 'ghost town' of the northern mountains.

## 5. Conclusion

Why has the history of Indigenous Zapotec women establishing migration networks in the United States not appeared in academic literature to date? As mentioned previously,

a focus on the gendered migratory patterns of *braceros* – categorised as *mestizo* by default – often obscured an analysis of the racialized aspects of migration that occurred during the ‘Mexican Miracle.’ Yet starting in the 1990s, a host of scholars began to explore the migration of Indigenous peoples to the United States. They have analyzed labour sectors, Indigenous and ethnic identity, construction of transnational communities, and political organising at home and abroad (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Kearney 2000; Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Stephen 2007; Varese and Escárcega 2004; Velasco Ortíz 2002; Zabin et al. 1993). Although some of this literature has addressed gender issues, even examining the role of women in domestic service in Los Angeles (Aquino Moreschi 2012), the way Zapotec women established migrant networks has not been mentioned. Why?

One possible answer could be the disconnect between internal and international migration patterns (King and Skeldon 2010; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017). Internal and international migration are often not studied in conjunction, yet a growing scholarship demonstrates how in many cases, internal migration was either a precursor to international movements or proceeded in tandem with transnational strategies (Sandoval-Cervantes 2017; Zabin and Hughes 1995). Yet another possibility could be that women-controlled networks dominated only for a short period of time and in specific places. Women helped other women migrate, but they also helped men, who then quickly began to form their own gendered networks (Hagan 1998; Repak 1994). In the case of Yatzachi, as men’s networks expanded, they were able to exert more control over women’s migration. Research that does not include a historical perspective may miss these brief windows of women-dominated migrant networks.

I argue that applying the analytic of racial capitalism can help us identify more cases like that of the women from Yatzachi. This is because by considering how legacies of colonialism and slavery render certain populations surplus – exploitable or disposable – within capitalist development, racial capitalism helps us analyze how logics of race, ethnicity, and gender divide populations into groups that receive differential treatment according to the value that can be extracted from them. It thus contributes to literature on Indigenous migration not by making Indigenous peoples visible as migrants, but rather by demonstrating how racialized constructions of gendered indigeneity were constitutive of migrant patterns linked to specific devalued labour sectors. Additionally, the analytic helps explore how both the internal and international migration of Indigenous peoples are linked because they both are embedded within racialized logics of capitalist accumulation processes that, while operating differently in particular contexts, are similar in the way they use racialized surplus populations. Finally, the analytic helps generate an intersectional approach to the ways in which working bodies are gendered and racialized in specific geographies at particular historical moments. Accordingly, it is my hope that the analytic of racial capitalism will continue to help demonstrate how careful historical work in Indigenous communities may reveal very different gendered and racialized forms of Mexican /U.S. migration than previously identified.

## Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on the use of relative surplus population to analyze contemporary dynamics of global capitalism, see Bernards and Soederberg’s (2021) special issue in *Geoforum*.



2. The main states are Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Durango, and San Luis Potosí. The authors also include Aguascalientes, Nayarit and Colima in this geographical division, although they sent less migrants.
3. Actually, there were many Indigenous *braceros*, some hailing from central and southern Mexico. Loza's important (2016) work examines the histories of Indigenous *braceros*.
4. The reasons that Central-Western Mexican states became involved with the Bracero Programme are varied and fascinating. See García (2021).
5. Andrews (2018) argues that village-level patterns of land concentration and differing levels of inequality in local political systems helped determine whether Indigenous Oaxacans went into agriculture versus urban work.
6. Scholars point to the emigration of women from Ireland to the United States in the 1800s as an important historical antecedent of women-led migrant networks (Diner 1986).
7. Cerrutti and Massey (2001) identify the creation of women's international migration networks after women arrived in the United States with men's initial support. Meanwhile, Kosoudji and Ranney (1984) argue that during the 1970s, young single women, especially from southern Mexico (i.e. a more Indigenously populated area) generated 'new migration networks that are unlike the patterns established during the Bracero Period' (p.1141), yet they do not elaborate.
8. Repak (1994), although working with Salvadorans (not Mexicans), finds that women initiated and controlled migrant networks to Washington, D.C. in the 1960s. Similar to the situation of the women from Yatzachi, these young, single, women were working in domestic service in their country where they made connections with United States foreign service agents, who helped them legally migrate to Washington, D.C. as domestic workers. These women formed migrant networks, helping their female friends and family find work in housekeeping.
9. The history of domestic workers in the United States demonstrates how the employment field varies across geographical region, ethnic/national origins, and time period (for example, Asian men dominated domestic service in California in the early 20 century, as did European immigrant women in the Northeast). For an overview, see Glenn (1985) and (1992).
10. While beyond the scope of this paper, several scholars explore how Indigenous identities are constructed, reconfigured, or erased when faced with racial and ethnic categories, such as 'Latina,' that operate in the United States. See Kearney (2000) and Blackwell, Boj Lopez, and Urrieta (2017).
11. As in other growing urban centres all over Latin America, these workers were predominately young, single women who migrated to the city from rural areas (de la Cadena 1991; Gisbert, Painter, and Quiton 1994; Radcliffe 1990).
12. Indeed, Gall (2004) argues that the *mestizo* agenda targeted men and women differently: men were assimilated while women were segregated, exterminated, and controlled.
13. Imaginaries of domestic workers as Indigenous women overcoming their racialized status became popular in *Mexican* soap operas or *telenovelas*. Starting in the 1960s, domestic worker protagonists—portrayed as rural, Indigenous subjects marked by long braids, native dress, ignorant ways and rude behavior—would work their way out of domestic service (through loyalty, hard work, or love) and simultaneously leave behind their racialized condition to become *señoras* (ladies) (Durín and Vázquez 2013).
14. Data taken from the VIII Censo General de Población 1960 from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía.
15. A handful of men from Yatzachi participated in the Bracero Programme, as did other Zapotec men from different regions in Oaxaca. The men from Yatzachi largely returned to the town, instead of establishing themselves more permanently in the United States.
16. This is the case of Yalalag and Solaga, towns a few hours' walking distance from Yatzachi, with a large migrant population in the United States.

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## Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (study number 06-0130) starting in 2009 at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Informed consent was procured verbally by subjects who participated in the research, and my research was approved by Indigenous community authorities. The Institutional Review Board approved verbal consent given that the context of language and cultural barriers could make signing a consent form a practice that promoted mistrust rather than confidence.

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