The powerful myth of racial equality:
A review of Colombia's mestizaje

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T he claim that we live in post-racial times relies on the broad recognition that human beings are genetically equal, the dismantled institutionalized racism, and the current multicultural and multiethnic policies. Thus, the post-racial ideal creates a convincing utopia that minimizes and almost denies racism, in which the larger the post-racialism, the less racism. In this sense, the Latin American mestizaje/racial mixture of three cultures (Indigenous peoples, Europeans, and African descendants) that identifies everyone as mestizo/mixed suggests the absence of racism. However, Latin American societies have had marked racial hierarchies, and today racism is ingrained in our social structures. Therefore, the historical and contemporary experiences of the Region show us that post-racialism and racism can coexist within the same context. This essay will try to answer the question why the Latin American discourse of racial equality based on mestizaje is misleading as it has not undone racial difference and hierarchy.

Compared to America, most Latin American countries do not have clear-cut racial identities or have experienced racial segregation.[1] In fact, the idea of *mestizaje* makes

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[1] Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, Critical Studies on Latin America. (London: Pluto Press, 1997).

race boundaries much more disputed and ambiguous than the binary ascription of black versus white.[2] On the contrary, like the United States, Latin American societies bore the burden of European colonial domination and slavery, which defined the nature of contemporary race relations and racial identities. Moreover, colonial hierarchical structures discriminated against African descendants and Indigenous communities through dispossession, exploitation, and isolation. The effects of these historical exclusions persist today under new racism forms that maintain disproportionately clustered minorities at the bottom of the social hierarchy[3].

Although all Latin American countries, except for Brazil, were colonies of the Spanish empire, obeyed the same doctrines and laws imparted by the monarchy, and followed a single creed imposed by the Catholic Church, the processes of race mixture were diverse and specific to each context. Therefore, this essay presents a case study of Colombia to explore the dichotomy between *mestizaje* and racism. In Colombia, racism is a vague concept because we have lived under the ideology that *todos somos mestizos*/we are all mixed. Therefore, we are the same race. The term *mestizaje* has gained value in Colombia over time, even accompanied by pride in our Indigenous origins and relevance of the African heritage, which enriches our folklore and customs.[4] As a result, the country has tried to sell itself as a home of diversity. However, the pride that means to be *mestizo* marks a new distance between the country we are and the country we claim to be.

Whitening Latin America

The general meaning for *mestizaje* in Latin America refers to the mixture of three cultures, Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous. It implies the mix of peoples within the same space and the interchange of social elements, resulting in new cultural forms.[5] Between 1500 and 1800, about 2.5 million Europeans and more than 6 million enslaved people arrived in Latin America, where they mixed with the Indigenous peoples (estimated at almost 6 million by 1650).[6] This mixture gave rise to societies

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[2] In Latin America, white versus black refers to a gradual scale of many skin tones resulting from being more European, indigenous, or African in appearance.
[3] Patricia Hill Collins, "No Storybook Romance: How Race and Gender Matter," in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 247–78.
[4] Emilio. Yunis Turbay, *Por Qué Somos Así?: Qué Pasó En Colombia?: Análisis Del Mestizaje* (Bogotá: Editorial Temis, 2003).
[5] Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*.
[6] Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz, "The Population of Colonial Spanish America," 1984, 1–36.

with large numbers of *mestizos.*[7] However, the racial classification consequential from this mixture was variable, and each country developed its labels and positions in society that became fundamental for their colonial social structures. This mixture creates an intersection between race and ethnicity. However, this essay does not divide the concepts and understand both as social constructions, where race relates to phenotypical variation, and ethnicity refers to cultural differences. Although these are separate concepts, in Latin America, ethnicity has often been used in place of race. According to Wade, the dismantling of the biological conception of race led to new racism based on deeply ingrained cultural differences, creating an overlap of the two concepts, where both involve discourses of ancestral origins and cultural geography.[8] Therefore, the discrepancies between Black and Indigenous are not so straightforward, and both involve appearance and social discrimination.

The European colonialism in Latin America introduced a hierarchical structure based on race, placing the so-called primitive Indians and the dehumanized African slaves at the bottom and the white and civilized Europeans at the top. Initially, the biological argument of the purity and superiority of European blood over the Indigenous and Black race was the foundation for discrimination. The construction of white domination over colored populations made it possible for *mestizos* to identify themselves with white elites. While it may be called *mestizo* rather than white and does not have the same status as a European, it is not Black.[9] Indeed, a *mestizo* with lighter skin, dressed like a Spaniard and speaking Spanish, could pass for white.[10] Later on, this boundary between white and *mestizo* will be even more blurry. After generations of *mestizaje*, the racial divisions of the early colony started to disappear concerning physical attributes, as very few people remained "pure" Indian, European, or African; most were *mestizos*. Then, characteristics besides skin color, such as language, religion, dress, and culture, became determinants for social classification. Therefore, according to Graham *et al.*, the process of *mestizaje*, sometimes seen as basically racial, was social.

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[7] The term *mestizo* is commonly used to describe people descended from ancestors of two or more ethnic groups. While initially used to describe the descendants of European and Indian parents, the term widely refers to people with ancestors from different cultures.

[8] Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*.

[9] Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia*, Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

[10] Jorge Orlando Melo, *Historia Mínima de Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2020).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a *criollo*/creole[11] (Spanish descendants born in Latin America) elite of politicians and military with European roots primarily led to the emancipation from Spain. Hence, with variations between territories, minority communities were still exploited and oppressed in many countries under the idea of inferiority.[12] The euro-racism inherent to the *criollos* privileged the *mestizo* over Black and Indians, perpetuating after the independence slavery and marginalization. Therefore, the ideas about race and *mestizaje* were crucial elements in the independence of Latin American countries and vital in the discussions about national identity. According to Appelbaum *et al.*, discourses of *mestizaje* in Latin America described the *mestizo* as a modern racial ideal.[13] Some even stressed the benefits of racial mixing, arguing for positive eugenics of healthy crossbreeding.[14] Indeed, many countries claimed *mestizaje* as a symbol of Latin American identity. However, the idea of the racial mixture was often biased towards whiteness, as it "would supposedly bring about the elimination of Blacks and Indians and the creation of a mixed society that was at the distinctly whiter end of the spectrum."[15] This process of whitening the nations viewed Blacks and Indians as inferiors and placed them at the bottom of the social development through isolation, poverty, and lack of education. Therefore, the idea of *mestizaje* has created an ethnic boundary product of unequal political and economic relations that systematically discriminate against minorities.

With the mixed and varied racial composition of Latin American societies and the growing sense of national identities of newly independent countries, the continent debated between accepted European racialist conceptions of human beings and policies that fit their realities.[16] However, governments have generally preferred catholic white people, encouraging new waves of European immigration, while Black, Asian, and Jewish immigrants were restricted. As a result, white and lighter-skinned

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[11] *Criollo*/Creole (from the Portuguese crioulo) is a term used since the European colonization of America, applied to those born in the American continent but with a European origin. Unlike the native, the *criollo* was an inhabitant born in Latin America of European parents in the Spanish Empire.

[12] Teun A van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Latin America* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

[13] Nancy P Appelbaum, Anne S Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, *Race & Nation in Modern Latin America*, *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[14] Peter Wade, *Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom: Genomics, Multiculturalism, and Race in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[15] Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 32.

[16] Richard Graham et al., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, Critical Reflections on Latin America Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

people have often been privileged, holding positions of power, earning higher incomes, and being more educated than Black, Indigenous, and darker-skinned people. In the twentieth century, many countries in Latin America drafted new political constitutions, where the recognition of ethnicity played a significant role. According to Restrepo, these constitutional reforms recognized the minority populations and their diversity and inequalities constituted by hierarchical cultural differences.[17] In this sense, the identification of Indigenous and Afro-descendant ethnic groups grants recognition under the law. However, this does not mean that minorities are no longer stigmatized by sedimented stereotypes dating back to colonial times. Dijk suggests that racism against Indigenous people and people of African descent is today one of the major social problems of the Region.[18] Wade confirms that Indigenous peoples and descendants of African slaves all over Latin America have formed organizations and social movements that call for various reforms to land rights, political rights, and cultural autonomy.[19] The continuous claim for those rights acknowledges that the concept of a homogenous race, where everyone is equal before the state, does not level the playing field for historically discriminated communities. The unifying discourse of *mestizaje* is still in debt to these minorities, who still bear the burden of their colonial status.

Colombia, a country of regions

The process of conquest of the territory now known as Colombia began in 1499 by the Spanish empire. The most visible result of the invasion was the drastic decrease of the Indigenous population due to conflicts, subjugation, and diseases. Furthermore, the need for labor in the colony encouraged a massive trafficking of African slaves. As a result, the remaining Indigenous communities were from the central and southern parts of the territory. In comparison, the mining exploitation in the coastal areas received most of the slaves. It is important to note that the solid religious component of the Spanish colony led to a strong movement of evangelization. From the beginning, the Catholic Church drew a dividing line between the Indians, considered lost souls who needed to be saved and therefore evangelized, and the African slaves, considered pagans, non-human, and soulless.[20] Thus, the colonial authorities

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[17] Eduardo. Restrepo, *Etnización de La Negridad : La Invención de Las "comunidades Negras" Como Grupo Étnico En Colombia* , Genealogías de La Negridad. (Popayán, Colombia: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2013).

[18] Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Latin America*.
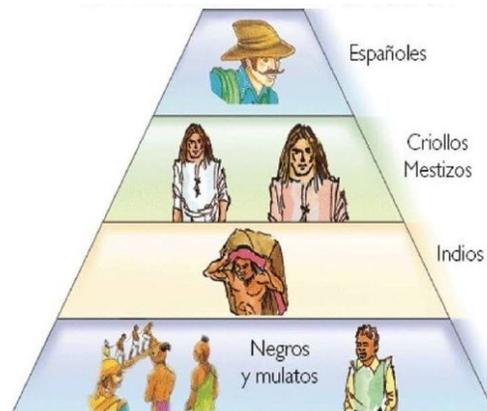
[19] Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*.

[20] Melo, *Historia Mínima de Colombia*.

disparaged the mixture between Black and Indians, sowing political discord between both minorities.

The racial mixture in Colombia began at the time of the conquest. The Spaniards who arrived were mainly men, and the victory beyond the territory was the subjugation of native women. Besides the failed efforts of the Crown to stop the racial mixture, the process expanded during the colonial period (1550-1810). Therefore, Colombia is the product of merging three cultures (Indigenous, Spaniard, and Africans) that generated new ethnic groups, the *Mestizo* (indigenous and white), the *Mulato* (black and white), and the *Zambo* (indigenous and black). The *mestizos* constitute the majority group in the country. On the contrary, the *Zambos* are less represented due to both races' suppression during the conquest and the colony.

The construction of the colonial society under a hierarchical structure shows how the Crown created a culture of discrimination and racism. The hierarchy maintained a superior position for the peninsular Spaniards first, then the *criollos*, and then the category of *mestizos* and *mulattos* with all the gradations that only their eyes could discriminate. The colonial society was a brutally unfair system because it marked an evident hierarchy between the different groups, with discrimination and disadvantages for those who were not white.

Social hierarchy in Colombia during the colonial period[21]

The colonial social structure defined the hierarchy among races and described each group's social and economic role. The main difference between the Afro and Indigenous communities was the condition of slavery, which subjected the Blacks to forced labor in the peripheries. On the other hand, the Indians were divided and isolated in particular rural territories in their condition of freedom. This urban-rural division would define the dynamics of the country's development, where *criollos* and *mestizos* centralized political power.[22] Furthermore, the geographic complexity of Colombia made it challenging to connect the cities and create roads and means of communication, thus there developed a rising distancing between the urban centers and the periphery. This situation promoted the creation of subcultures with distinctive processes of *mestizaje*, creating regional identities.[23] Till today, the dominant area has been the Andean region, the central location, concentrating 70% of the population, creating a model of center-periphery development, where political and economic power focuses on the capital. For this reason, Colombia holds the name of the country of regions.

Natural regions of Colombia[24]

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[22] Melo, *Historia Mínima de Colombia*.

[23] Nancy P Appelbaum et al., *Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846-1948* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[24] The natural regions of Colombia are territorial divisions made from heterogeneous characteristics in terms of geography, climate, vegetation, and soil conditions. Image retrieved from https://informacionimagenes.net/mapa-de-colombia/

The country's social and economic development processes after independence in 1819 were fundamental in determining the opportunities of the regions. However, this development was highly unequal, favoring racial discrimination to the detriment of the Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities. Different arguments support this thesis: the *criollos* held the political power;[25] the Andean region concentrated the universities limiting access to the periphery;[26] the economic hubs were distributed in the central zone of the country, leaving the other areas for extraction of raw materials;[27] and the less essential regions lacked infrastructure investment.[28] Therefore, those inequalities increased the influence of the Andean region and the *mestizos*, recognizing whiteness as superior, educated, and advanced.

In the mid-nineteenth century, two colonial institutions remained: slavery and the Indigenous *resguardos*/reserves. A *resguardo* is a socio-political institution of Spanish colonial origin that provides collective property ownership to Indigenous people.[29] Liberalism's idea of legal equality of all Colombian citizens led in 1851 to suppress differences based on ethnicity.[30] The most significant changes were the abolition of slavery and the privatization of the *resguardos*. By the end of the century, the Afro-Colombian population was, at least legally, equal to the rest of Colombians. However, the majority, those living in the Pacific zone, were still separated by barriers of wealth, education, and geography from the higher social groups, the *mestizos*. Alike, a new Indigenous policy codified the existence of the *resguardo* as a small and politically weak unit dependent upon local authorities led by *mestizos*, where land distribution was uneven, favoring regional elites and denying access to Indigenous groups.

The beginning of the twentieth century presents a fragmented country with a regional division as a geographic and social order. In particular, the race separation created by the regional structure promoted inequalities and built hierarchies, leaving

[25] Melo, *Historia Mínima de Colombia*.

[26] Catalina. Muñoz Rojas, *Los Problemas de La Raza En Colombia : Más Allá Del Problema Racial, El Determinismo Geográfico y Las "Dolencias Sociales,"* Memoria Viva. Coleccion Bicentenario. (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2011).

[27] Appelbaum et al., *Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846-1948*.

[28] Yunis Turbay, *Por Qué Somos Así?: Qué Pasó En Colombia?: Análisis Del Mestizaje*.

[29] The Constitution of 1991, recognizes *resguardos* as territories from a community of Indian descent, with inalienable, collective property ownership, governed with autonomous law under their cultural guidelines and traditions.

[30] Eduardo Posada Carbó and Adolfo Meisel Roca, *Colombia*, América Latina En La Historia Contemporánea. (Madrid: Taurus, 2010).

regions marginalized by poverty and conflict. Melo claims that Colombia failed to consolidate a unique national construction, prioritizing regional identities, leaving minorities behind.[31] Although Colombia has achieved extensive economic development since its independence, improved the population's quality of life, and extended life expectancy, income inequality is one of the highest in Latin America.[32] Moreover, the high poverty rates concentrate in the Pacific and Amazon regions, which are predominantly inhabited by Afro and Indigenous people. The first studies of *mestizaje* in Colombia were carried out in 1975 to establish the ethnic contributions in the populations of each region. The results demonstrated the predominance of Spanish heritage in the Andean region, the African in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and the Indigenous ancestry in the Amazonian area. Regarding these studies, Yunis Turbay states that "It is evident the genetic non-homogeneity of the Colombian population and the unequal distribution of the different ethnic groups shows the existence of regions distinguished by their genetic contributions, where the racial valuation has a significant role."[33]

Colombia, a multicultural country

The national narratives that shape Colombia stand on the link between the knowledge constructed as truths by elites, socially validated by a society identified as a *mestiza*, and the invisibility of minorities.[34] The words from the Colombian president, Laureano Gomez, in 1928, are a clear representation of the dichotomy between *mestizaje* and racism in Colombian society: "Our race comes from a mixture of Spaniards, Indians, and Blacks. The last two streams of inheritance are stigmas of complete inferiority. In what we have been able to inherit from the Spanish spirit, we must look for the lines and guidelines of the Colombian character."[35] Indeed, it was only until the mid-twentieth century that Blacks and Indians began to be incorporated into the academy as objects of study, recognizing their identity and culture and creating a national history beyond colonization and racial mixture.[36] Therefore, to tell our history only from the point of view of *mestizaje* is a process of socio-racial

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[31] Melo, *Historia Mínima de Colombia*.
[32] Melo.
[33] Yunis Turbay, *Por Qué Somos Así?: Qué Pasó En Colombia?: Análisis Del Mestizaje*, 59.
[34] Jesús Serna Moreno and Ricardo Javier Solís Herrera, *Afroamérica : Historia, Cultura e Identidad*, Colección Historia de América Latina y El Caribe (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012).
[35] Laureano Gómez, "Interrogantes Sobre El Progreso de Colombia," in *Conferencias Dictadas En El Teatro Municipal* (Bogotá: Minerva, 1928), 30.
[36] Americo Portocarrero Castro, "Los Textos Escolares Como Narrativas de La Nación; El Caso de Las Ciencias Sociales y Los Afrocolombianos" (Pereira, 2010).

discrimination, which reduces the minorities to skin color and cultural stereotypes, maintaining the colonial classifications assigned to us.

Besides the historical construction of the country based on *mestizaje*, officially, the law only recognized Colombia's diversity since the Constitution of 1991, when we understood ourselves as a multiethnic and multicultural country. In the new Constitution, the Indigenous and Afro communities, once considered second-class citizens, are recognized as collective subjects. In particular, in two articles of the Constitution, minority groups are identified and protected. Article 7 states, "The State recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian nation." Article 8 reads, "It is the obligation of the State and the individuals to protect the cultural and natural wealth of the nation."[37] Likewise, the Constitution established special seats in the Congress for Indigenous and Afro-descendants. It also promotes ethnic education and special quotas for Indigenous and Afro-descendant people in public universities. It provided more extensive protection to Indigenous communal landholdings, transcending the existing *resguardo* legislation. These advances are progressively becoming a reality. However, these groups have to face the prejudices and interests rooted in a society still impregnated with whiteness-centered colonial values and reluctant to acknowledge the autonomy of individuals.[38]

The discourse of racial equality based on *mestizaje* led Colombia to drop the use of the term race slightly and instead established ethnicity for denoting social categories. According to the 2018 census of Colombia, 87.58% of the population consider themselves whites and *mestizos*, 9.35% Afro-Colombian, 4.4% Indigenous, and 0.006% Gypsies.[39] Thus, almost 90% of the population classified as *mestizo* establishes the contemporary construction of a monoethnic society that has faced a whitening process, inevitably implying a darkening of some. The idea of whitening builds not only on color but on cultural boundaries that neglect the value of the Indigenous and African heritage, knowledge, and customs.[40] The association of *mestizo* with whiteness has helped to maintain the idea of race and the practice of racism. Therefore, the case study of Colombia shows the coexistence and codependence of racism and race mixture. The inclusive ideology that we are all

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[37] General Archive of the Nation. Political Constitution of the Republic of Colombia (1991).

[38] Restrepo, *Etnización de La Negridad : La Invención de Las "comunidades Negras" Como Grupo Étnico En Colombia* .

[39] DANE – *Official Census of Colombia 2018*. National Department of Statistics (2019).

[40] Graham et al., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*.

mestizos has defined our national identity. But, on the other hand, it points out that some *mestizos* are lighter than others and nourish a whitening process, where darker skin is more stigmatized. Therefore, even in mixed-race societies, colorism exists, meaning the darkest, most African appearances rank still lower in racialized hierarchies.[41]

Finally, violence, the great tragedy of Colombian society, has been a factor that shows the inequalities of the territory, demonstrating the vulnerability faced by historically isolated communities. Moreover, as violence spread into the Caribbean and Pacific regions, Indigenous and Black populations are the greatest victims.[42] Invisible to the state and society, these minorities are at constant risk of displacement, illegal recruitment, and being murdered with impunity. Thus, the systematic racism faced by minorities in Colombia is complicit in the violence that is gradually removing them from our multicultural spectrum.

Racism and decolonization

In the past and today, claims that Latin America is a racially tolerant region without racial discrimination have played a significant role in its history, culture, and politics. However, this discourse does not undo colonial racial hierarchies where being Black, Indigenous, or dark-skinned was/is also associated with low status, lack of education, and poverty. Racism, more than just direct violence and segregation, is a systemic form of domination and inequality ingrained in the social structure. Therefore, the discourse of *mestizaje* as a unifying tool of race in Latin American countries has created a veil of post-racialism. The official rejection of the existing racial hierarchies in our societies has made invisible the struggles and inequalities of Afro-descendants and Indigenous communities along the continent. As a result, Latin America lives under a misleading idea of no-racism. Indeed, the emergence of academic interest in studying racism in Latin America has started only over the last few decades. Dijk outlines four causes for the slow process of recognizing racism. First, dominant elites often denied racism under the ideology of racial democracy. Second, compared to a more explicit and legalized segregation in the United States, the inequalities in Latin America were seen as relatively benevolent. Third, social inequality has always been attributed to class rather than race. Last, academia in Latin America has shown more interest in ethnic studies rather than race and practices of

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[41] Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia*.
[42] Melo, *Historia Mínima de Colombia*.

racism.[43] Thus, *mestizaje* is no guarantee that racism does not exist. Both *mestizaje* and racism are realities in Latin America, and they remain together profoundly rooted in our societies. Therefore, they are building on Hill Collins' concept of rebellion in the struggle against racism.[44] It is time to recognize the historical fight of Indigenous and Afro-descendants in Colombia for their civil rights and cultural continuity. Policies directed to recognize their rights and their struggles are beginning to open up increasing space for actions against racism. Today, anti-racism movements are building a rebellious consciousness against the ideology of racial democracy. Their resistance to ethnic domination and the public claim of racism are our hopes for change.

Latin America became independent of the Spanish empire, emerging as a continent. However, we did not decolonize from Europe, and we continued looking at ourselves with the eyes of the oppressor. We continued classifying ourselves with the parameters with which they ranked us. In Colombia today, we continue considering words such as *Indio*/Indian, an insult. We continue viewing the Afro communities as an invisible world, thus valuing European ancestry as the only valid one. In other words, somehow, the way we look at ourselves only includes and validates the Spanish perspective, denying our multiethnic history. Thus, in Colombia, we must still reflect on our understanding of decolonization. Decolonizing means looking at ourselves from our diversity, the Indigenous world, the African heritage, and not only from the European world –which is also part of our history.[45] So, we need to rethink our diversity because we are not specifically Afro, nor uniquely Indigenous, nor precisely Europeans. But we are Afro, Indigenous, and European, all at the same time. We are the legacy of *mestizaje.*

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[43] Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Latin America*.
[44] Hill Collins, "No Storybook Romance: How Race and Gender Matter."
[45] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Molly Geidel, *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonisation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020).

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