“Mona, mona, mona!” Whiteness, tropicality, and international accompaniment in Colombia

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“Mona, mona, mona!” I am regularly called out as ‘white girl’ by street vendors and random men when I walk down the street in Colombia. As a lighter skinned person I am hypervisible in Colombia, and regularly reminded of my color. It feels like the opposite of how invisible whiteness can be to me at times as a ‘white’ person in the United States and Canada.¹ As in the North though, whiteness is considered desirable and attractive, and thus all the more important for women. The models in Colombian beauty ads are almost always light skinned, even blond, as are the news announcers. Hair straightening, by means of vigorous brushing while using a hair dryer (un blower), is common and many women go regularly to the salon to get this done. Blue and green colored contact lenses are another popular form of whitening (blanqueamiento) and social body codes like these are widely understood and manipulated.²

I started thinking about whiteness in Colombia to make sense of how international accompaniment works. Accompaniment is a grassroots security tactic being increasingly used around the world. In a conflict zone some people, particularly certain outsiders, are less likely to be attacked than others. When more privileged bodies walk alongside those under threat they can serve as “unarmed bodyguards”.

The term accompaniment was first used for this work by Peace Brigades International (PBI), which sent the first international team to Guatemala in 1983. There are now international accompaniers in eleven countries. Colombia is the country with the largest number of accompaniment groups (twelve, including PBI). Accompaniment in Colombia is widely used to protect small farmers resisting or returning from displacement by paramilitaries who are often

¹I am a ‘white’ woman from the US, with ‘white’ parents from the US, who now lives in Canada. I lived in Colombia as a small child, and again from 2007-2009 while doing this research.

²Mara Viveros Vigoya and Gloria Garay Ariza, “El cuerpo y sus significados. A manera de introducción,” in Cuerpo, diferencias y desigualdades, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1999), 15 - 30”Whiteness” refers not only to skin color but also other phenotype markers such as eye color, hair color and texture, nose shape, height, etc..
tied to large agribusiness such as oil palm. These *campesinos* are organized in what are often called ‘peace communities’ with alternative development plans (‘plans for dignity and life’).

Accompaniers say that they “make space for peace”. I spent 15 months doing fieldwork in Colombia and held ongoing conversations with international accompaniers from six different organizations about how they understood accompaniment to work, how it ‘makes space.’ One of the things we looked at is how whiteness was part of how it works – and the paradox of using privilege (racial/passport/class – which are hard to separate in this context) to work for a world with more equality. Accompaniers use the fact that their lives ‘count’ more to try to build a world where everyone’s life ‘counts.’

An ongoing debate, amongst accompaniers and in the limited literature about it, is how much accompaniment is enabled by and relies on privileges of whiteness. I was surprised when accompaniers told me they had never discussed how whiteness was different in Colombia than in North America. It was in from our attempts to discuss this that I was inspired to research racialization in Colombia. ‘Whiteness studies’ as such has not reached Colombia and I found no academic work focusing on whiteness per se, but there is a growing academic interest in dynamics of race and ethnicity in Colombia, and here I aim to tease out of these a sense of what whiteness has meant and means in Colombia today, since what ‘race’ means, and how it functions, varies across time and place. Rather than reify ‘race’, or ‘whiteness’, it is my intention here to point to how it has and continues to be constructed. Ultimately the more we understand how ‘race’ is constructed, the more power we have to transform it. In Colombia race is spatialized, and certain spaces racialized, through persistent colonial imaginaries of tropicality. These were reworked in the Colombian context through what Taussig calls a ‘moral topography’, where types of people were classified into zones ranked by altitude.

I will first discuss racial categories in Colombia, and then how these are regionalized, before reviewing the racist discourses of tropicality that were and are used to do this. I then discuss historic attempts to ‘whiten’ the nation and the ‘Colombian race’. I end by looking at how these racial imaginaries are today both changing and hardening through the armed conflict. Ultimately I argue that there continues to be a strong association between race and place that accompaniers, however unintentionally or reluctantly, use to make accompaniment ‘work’ in Colombia.

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4 For an overview of much of this work see the bibliography by Eduardo Restrepo and Axel Rojas, *Afrodescendientes en Colombia: compilación bibliográfica* (Instituto de Estudios Sociales y Culturales, Pensar; Universidad Javeriana, 2008), http://hdl.handle.net/10644/2183.

5 Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, colonialism, and the wild man: a study in terror and healing* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1994).
‘Racial’ categories in Colombia

“Mona, mona, mona!” As one blond light eyed former accompanier from the US put it, “it’s like I’m famous when I walk down the street”. Colombians with lighter skin and hair are called “mona” (women) or “mono” (men). In some families the lightest skinned child will be nicknamed “la mona” (the ‘white’ one). Families will also often nickname the darkest skinned child “el negro” (the ‘black’ one). Racialization is never, anywhere, about “real” or “scientific” categories. ‘Races’ (what physical differences are used as cues and which specific combinations of skin color, hair type, facial features count as a ‘race’) change over time and place, in ways that tie in to different colonial histories. These social categories were (and are) used to legitimate processes of domination but have come to be seen as ‘natural’.

Race in Colombia is shaped not only by the history of domination of First Peoples but also the history of slavery of African peoples. The first African slaves came to Colombia as personal servants to Spaniards in the early 1500s, but starting in 1580 they were brought in much larger numbers to mine gold. Between 1580 and 1640 between 135,000 and 170,000 slaves were brought in through Cartagena. Importation of African slaves declined at end of the eighteenth century. This may have been because needs were met by the growing population of ‘homegrown’ slaves, or because there was a huge decrease in mining profits by the middle of the 18th century and by the 19th century slaves had been moved to work on haciendas. Simon Bolivar, the leader of independence struggles during the 19th century, was afraid of an uprising of slaves and said that a "negro revolt" would be "a thousand times worse than a Spanish invasion." To control this threat he brought African descendants, both slave and those few that were free, in to the struggle for independence by promising them an end to slavery when independence was won. Yet he ended up granting not absolute freedom when independence was won in 1819, but the gradual ending of slavery through the manumission of children born from that time on. Slavery was not officially ended until 1851, by which time 61% of the black population

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6 S-----, field notes
10 Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2001), 49 – 51.
11 Ng’weno, *Turf Wars*, 102.
12 Ibid., 76.
were free. Slaveholders were compensated for the slaves they ‘lost’, while the enslaved received no compensation for their lost freedom. Much of that freedom was lost again when anti-vagrancy laws returned many to slave-like conditions.

Indigenous slavery however was abolished throughout Hispanic Americas in 1542 and there were complicated differences in the ways Africans and indigenous people were treated by elites. It is often argued that a key difference in the way ‘race’ functions in Latin America versus the US is that historically in the US “one drop of ‘black’ blood” meant a person was considered ‘black’, whereas in Latin America there was a legal continuum of categories depending on the various possible ‘races’ of the child’s parents. In the eighteenth century paintings of these castas like that in figure one were popular throughout Latin America.

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13 Ibid., 103.
14 Ibid., 105.
16 Peter Wade, Race And Ethnicity In Latin America (Pluto Press, 1997), 14–15.
Figure 1: Anonymous Mexican 'castas' painting from the eighteenth century, from the National Institute of Anthropology and History, Mexico City, Mexico (need to get permission for use)
Those categories are no longer official. The Colombian national census, last taken in 2005, collects information on “ethnicity”, but only under the categories of ‘black’, indigenous or gypsy (Rom). In 2005 the census listed 10.6% as ‘black’, but this figure is highly disputed. The 1993 census was the first to ask for ethnic affiliation, but did so in confusing ways that led to undercounting. It listed Afro-Colombians as only 1.5%, whereas the Afro-Colombian movement generally claims around 25%. Oslender argues that reluctant black self-identification in a dominant context of whitening is part of the wide variance in statistics. As Tate puts it, “racial identity remains a slippery category in Colombia, and most Afro-Colombians do not identify themselves as such.” Many people with some African heritage deny it and identify as mestizo. However it gets counted, Colombia clearly has one of the largest Afro-descendant populations in the Americas. Yet what is striking in the 2005 census is that those who do not identify as ‘black’, indigenous or Rom, 86%, are left unclassified. They are officially named simply ‘Colombian’. Yet whiteness is certainly not unnamed in daily life.

“Mona, mona, mona!” I was less likely to get called out as ‘mona’ when I was in wealthier neighbourhoods in the North end of Bogota. Most wealthy Colombians are light skinned.


18 Or rather, the first since 1918, when the government stopped including racial classifications in the census. Smith 1966 cited in J. Strecker, “Policing boundaries: race, class, and gender in Cartagena, Colombia,” American Ethnologist 22, no. 1 (1995): 70; Williams argues that racial categories were removed in 1918 in an attempt to whiten the nation. Fatimah Williams Castro, “The Politics and Everyday Experience of Race in Post-Constitutional Reform Colombia” (Rutgers University, 2011).


20 Even the Colombian government’s human rights observatory says that nearly one in four Colombians is of African descent. Forrest Hylton, Evil Hour in Colombia (London; New York: Verso, 2006), 138.

21 Oslender says that the most widely accepted estimate is 26%. Ulrich Oslender, “Fleshing out the geographies of social movements: Colombia’s Pacific coast black communities and the ‘aquatic space’,” Political Geography 23, no. 8 (2004): 966.

22 Winifred Tate, Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2007), 34.

23 A term meaning a mix of Spanish and indigenous heritage, sometimes including African heritage. The term was first imposed by Spanish conquerors as one of the castas (see figure one) to mean a Spanish father and an indigenous mother, and is now used more widely to mean a racial mix.


26 “las clases sociales tienen colores de piel” Urrea in Almario et al., “Aproximaciones a los estudios de razas y racismo en Colombia,” 187.
Wade says that the argument that class matters more than race has been widely made across Latin America. Streicker found the belief that class matters more than ‘race’ to be widely held in Cartagena, Colombia, but he argues that class discourse both hides and promotes racism. The relationship between ‘race’ and class is a classic debate amongst Latin American social scientists, but I believe neither trumps, replaces nor reduces to the other. Rather ‘race’ and class reinforce each other, and one of the ways they do so is through space.

There has been little study of whiteness in Colombia today, though there is a small but growing body of work on whiteness in the colonial period. It is only recently that studies of history in Colombia have looked at both history from below and the impact of ‘race’ and ethnicity on the continuing formation of the nation and its conflicts. In general the study of racialization is a relatively new field in Colombia, perhaps because Afro-Colombian and indigenous organizing for rights in the academy is also quite recent. What is clear is that racialization in Colombia has dynamics that differ from those of other Latin American countries.

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27 Wade, Race And Ethnicity In Latin America.
28 The other way he puts this is that “race is embedded in class and gender discourse.” Streicker, “Policing boundaries,” 67.
29 Cunin in Almario et al., “Aproximaciones a los estudios de razas y racismo en Colombia” Typically Marxists have reduced race to class; some postcolonial scholars argue that race is the primary organizing hierarchy in Latin America, see Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn,” Cultural Studies 21 (March 2007): 211-223.
30 See for example Mary Roldán, Blood and fire (Duke University Press, 2002); Nancy Appelbaum, Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846–1948 (Duke University Press, 2003); A. Múnera, Fronteras imaginadas: la construcción de las razas y de la geografía en el siglo XIX colombiano (Editorial Planeta Colombiana, 2005); Santiago Castro-Gómez, La hybris del punto cero (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005); Claudia Steiner, Imaginación y poder (Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 2000); Peter Wade, Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Brooke Larson, Trials of nation making (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Cristina Rojas, Civilization and Violence: Regimes of Representation in Nineteenth-Century Colombia (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
Regional ‘races’

In Colombia not only are certain neighbourhoods more likely to have people of lighter or darker skin, but entire regions are racialized. Racialization in Colombia is shaped by the Andes Mountains, which splits into three huge chains which divide the country, and which are themselves divided by two major rivers, the Cauca and the Magdalena (see figure two). Historically the difficulty of crossing these meant that Colombia became a country of distinct regions, and ‘race’ is often conflated with region. For example “Paisas”, or people from the region of Antioquia, tend to have lighter skin and are stereotyped as shrewd and industrious entrepreneurs. They have strong regional identity as 'la raza antioqueña', based on a myth of racial purity and a lack of ‘black’ and indigenous heritage.

Wade argues that in Colombia in general ‘race’ is regionalized, that is say, it is not only reflected in spatial categories but actually constituted by them. Region is widely used today by Colombians both as a language of, and to concretize, racial differentiation. Regions are commonly defined in opposition, as either

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32 Wade, Blackness and Race Mixture, 66.

33 Ibid., 52; Soler Castillo and Pardo Abril, “Discurso y racismo en Colombia. Cinco siglos de invisibilidad y exclusion,” 182.

34 Applebaum argues that this became widespread in the nineteenth century, as writers widely glossed regions as homogenous races. Appelbaum, Muddied Waters, 208.
‘white’ interior, indigenous Amazon lowland, or ‘black’ coasts (the Atlantic being less ‘black’ than the Pacific).³⁵

Geographers have been complicit in the conflation of ‘race’ and region in Colombia. Henry Price was the first North American geographer to go on “expedition” to Colombia, in 1840. His drawings were exhibited at the Museo de Botero in Bogotá in January 2008.³⁶ There was a drawing of ‘the black woman’, ‘the indian woman’, and the “types” of people to be found in the city of Medellin. There was no critique offered of these typologies in the lengthy commentaries that were part of the exhibit. Even today the geography books that I found to be most widely available in book stores in Colombia are a seven volume series entitled “Human Geography of Colombia” that divides the country and taxonomizes people by region (i.e., what kind of people live where).³⁷

Appelbaum expands Wade’s argument that ‘race’ is regionalized in Colombia to look historically at how regional identities emerged in tandem with a discourse of racial and regional differentiation that was also always gendered. She argues that the racialized discourse of regional differentiation began in the 19th century as Colombians colonized the country (an ongoing process), and that greater morality and progress was assigned to those regions (and localities within regions) that were marked as “white”, while ‘frontier’ areas defined as “black” and “indian” were associated with backwardness and danger.³⁸ Antioqueños constructed their regional identity as ‘white’ against a dark ‘other’ on their periphery. Urabá (where the peace community of San José is located) was particularly seen as a periphery to be transformed.³⁹

In the 19th century around the world idealized visions of the nation-state by elites engaged in nation building imagined it as racially homogeneous.⁴⁰ Appelbaum argues that elite Colombian nation builders defined Colombia as a “country of regions” as a way to make sense of a population that did not fit that vision.⁴¹ As she puts it, the division of the country into regions, “was a spatial manifestation of a view of modernity that associated national progress with racial

³⁵ Wade, Blackness and Race Mixture, 54,64; Ng’weno argues that the largest numbers of Afro-Colombians are actually not rural people on the coasts, as widely imagined, but urban dwellers in Valle, Antioquia and Bolivar – though it is on the coasts that there are majority “black” departments. Ng’weno, Turf Wars, 102.


³⁷ Carlos A. Uribe, Geografía humana de Colombia (Instituto Colombiano de Cultura Hispánica, 1998).

³⁸ Appelbaum, Muddied Waters, 4.

³⁹ Ibid., 18.


⁴¹ Appelbaum, Muddied Waters, 207.
Hylton similarly argues that the idealized figure of conservative Antioquia, symbolized by the light skinned property owning frontier settler, became the measure of national progress, in contrast to the dark skinned tenant sharecropper, or communal landholder in the Cauca. The Antioqueño fetishization of capitalist "progress" was intertwined with a devotion to ‘white’ supremacy and practices of internal colonialism. Viveros too argues that throughout Colombia whiteness has been and continues to be considered a synonym for modernity and progress.

I find these arguments that in Colombia ‘race’ has been regionalized and regions racialized compelling, and they are certainly relevant to how accompaniers stand out more in certain regions because they do not fit the expectations of what ‘race’ of people belong there. Yet the connection made by these authors between whiteness and modernity points to something more at work.

**Out of the tropics**

The imaginary of Colombia as racialized regions is shaped by a Colombian version of tropicality. Technically all of Colombia lies in “the tropics”, that is, within the latitudinal lines of Cancer and Capricorn. Yet ‘the tropics’ are not just a physical but also a conceptual space, which is mapped with a geographic imaginary that, though somewhat newer, appears to be as enduring as that of ‘the orient’.

Since the conquest of the Americas the tropics have been imagined ambivalently, as either paradise or hell. They have been portrayed paradoxically as both a naturally abundant Eden where minimal labour is required for subsistence and as a space of poverty, disease and violence. The tropics are where Europeans can escape to and leave dull modernity behind with the ‘noble savage’, or the tropics are the heart of darkness, a space of primitiveness and destruction that will

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42 Ibid., 27.
43 Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, 23.
44 Ibid., 26–27.
45 Viveros Vigoya, “Imagenes de la masculinidad blanca en Colombia. Raza, Género y poder político.”
46 Mahrouse argues that it is the imaginaries of Orientalism that most shape international accompaniment. She focuses on accompaniment in Palestine. In Colombia it is tropicality that shapes racist imaginaries. G. Mahrouse, “Deploying White/western Privilege in Accompaniment, Observer, and Human Shield Transnational Solidarity Activism: A Critical Race, Feminist Analysis” (University of Toronto, 2007).
ruin the modern European and sap his racial superiority and ‘masculine vigour’. The tropics are imagined as either a space of exuberant dark naked bodies that refuse to be regulated, to work, and have unbounded sexuality and fertility, or as an inhospitable toxic space that is too hot and humid and will sicken Europeans and their descendants, though not indigenous peoples nor Africans and their descendants, who belong there. Naturalists, physicians and geographers played key roles in giving this discourse scientific authority. This scientific edge included constructions of bioclimatic zones and tropical medicine that aimed to ‘control’ the tropics. Both the climate and the disease of the tropics have been studied as ‘excessive’ and beyond ‘normal’.

The Colombian version of tropicality was that what mattered was not latitude but altitude, since this made the temperature change. European naturalists and geographers did distinguish “between hot, wet, lowlands, dry savannas, and cold alpine areas” but the first was taken to typify the tropics as a whole and upland regions were even portrayed as semi-European in their temperate flora and fauna. Colombian colonial elites, who held a strong belief in the superiority of ‘white’ skin and Hispanic blood, repeatedly emphasized this difference to associate themselves with Europe. Given how large and high the Andes Mountains are in Colombia, and that the capital, Bogotá, is in a high mountain valley, altitude was easily available as a ‘Europeanizing’ discourse.

Caldas (see figure three) was the official geographer of the virreinato and wrote that being up in the highland ‘zone’ keeps one’s skin ‘white’ and mind clear, and that both degenerate as one sinks into the

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50 Arnold, “‘Illusory Riches’.”

51 Mauricio Nieto, “El imperio del hombre y el imperio de la naturaleza” (presented at the Tres tristes trópicos: Imaginarios y construcción de nación, Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia, 2008).

52 Ibid.

53 Arnold, “‘Illusory Riches’.”

54 the viceroyship, the local representative of the Spanish crown.
muck of the tropics. It was Caldas who established the principle, in the Colombian context, of the superiority of the Andes and its supposedly ‘whiter’ ‘races’ over the “savagery” of the coast, the ‘other’.  

He wrote in 1808,

“When this [facial] angle grows, all of the organs of intelligence and reason grow; when it diminishes, these faculties also diminish. The European has 85° and the African 70°. What a difference between these two races of human beings! The arts, sciences, humanity, the Empire of earth are the patrimony of the first; brutishness, barbarity and ignorance are the endowments of the second. Climate has formed this important angle. It is climate that has dilated or compressed the cranium, and climate has also dilated or compressed the faculties of soul and morality.”

Caldas was influenced by Lamarckian ideas, popular in Europe at the time, whereby climate shaped physical and moral progress. Caldas depicted a geography of ‘races’ by altitude zone that was much like his idol Humboldt's plant zones. The ‘exercise of the day’ was to classify not only plants and animals but people too. In the nineteenth century civilization was also being perceived in more and more racial terms in Europe, which shaped Colombian elites as they formed their idea of the nation. It was widely believed by Colombian elites that mestizaje was a solution.

**Whitening the nation**

Today Colombia is widely imagined as a mestizo nation, as it has been since the end of the eighteenth century. As Múnera puts it, “the power of this idea is so strong that many refuse to see otherwise. But mestizaje, rather than being a growing reality in the colonial regime, was the formulation of an ideological project of the criollo intellectual elite.” He argues that the paradox was that the nation predicated its existence on a Universalist character, i.e. we are all

57 Humboldt is widely considered the “father” of geography in Latin America, and his map of plant “zones” up and down the Andes continues to be widely reproduced and displayed in museums in Colombia. Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero*, 264.
60 my translation Ibid., 39. Criollo refers to those with “pure” Spanish heritage born in the Americas.
mestizo, but actually the elite maintained racial privileges and practiced brutal discrimination against ‘blacks’ and indigenous people and a wide variety of darker mestizos.\textsuperscript{61}

Yet in the nineteenth century Europeans saw all of Latin America as ‘other,’ criollos included.\textsuperscript{62} Perhaps this shaped Colombian elites’ urgency to distinguish themselves and create their own other, even as they idealized mestizaje. As one of Colombia’s ‘founding fathers’ Samper put it in 1868:

"There [i.e., in the coastal region] the primitive man, coarse, brutish, indolent, semi-savage and burnt by the tropical sun, that is, the Colombian boga, in all his insolence, his stupid bigotry, his cowardly self-satisfaction, his incredible indolence and his shameless speech, the child of ignorance rather than corruption; and here [i.e., in the highlands] the European, active, intelligent, white and elegant, often blond, with his poetic and penetrating glance, his ringing and rapid speech, his elevated spirit, his ever distinguishing manners." \textsuperscript{63}

Tropicality was not only how Europeans saw Colombia, but was also widely taken up and reworked by the Colombian elite in the Andean interior as a way to define themselves in opposition to what they were not. The highlands were seen as civilized and the tropical coasts were imagined as savage and racialized as ‘black’. \textsuperscript{64}

Noted Colombian geographer Agustín Codazzi (see figure four), for whom the current government institute responsible for official map making is named, led a commission in the early 1850s which set out to map the new republic and assess possibilities for development. As in many places around the world, in Colombia geographic knowledge was understood as a way to order and thus control territory - to know not only what is where, but what should be where.\textsuperscript{65} Codazzi “bemoaned the nudity, lack of love for work and lack of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{61}{Ibid., 134–5.}
\footnotetext{62}{Múnera, Fronteras imaginadas; Castro-Gómez, La hybris del punto cero.}
\footnotetext{63}{Wade, Blackness and Race Mixture, 13.}
\footnotetext{64}{Restrepo, “Tropicalismo y Racializacion.”}
\footnotetext{65}{Nieto, “El imperio del hombre y el imperio de la naturaleza.”}
\end{footnotes}
ambition” he perceived among ‘blacks’ and ‘Indians’ in low lying zones. He and other writers of the time thought that the cool highlands required a rugged lifestyle and gave a ‘healthy rosy glow,’ as opposed to the torrid lowlands which were unhealthy and ironically too fertile, providing an easy life that led to laziness. ‘Nature’ was racialized and ‘race’ was naturalized.

The ‘Colombian Race’

The hygiene movement, strong between 1910 and 1930, attempted to ‘whiten’ Colombia through greater physical and moral ‘hygiene’, in the belief that racial characteristics had both hereditary and environmental factors that could be manipulated. Yet it was considered that many traits were not alterable, and so eugenic thinking was also strong at the time. As such there was a push to foster European immigration - though only from the ‘right’ regions of Europe, that is, those with the right height and weight, facial features and ‘nervous blood temperament’ that could truly ‘move the country forward.’ It seems that even Spaniards were not necessarily ‘white enough’. Calls to whiten the Colombian population through mixing in more European stock are as recent as books published in 1953 and 1962.

In the first decades of the last century multiple studies were published about what was framed as the Colombian ‘racial problem’, such as the 1917 book Nuestra razas decaen. Algunos signos de degeneracion colectiva en Colombia y en los paises similares (Our races are in decline: some signs of collective degeneration in Colombia and similar countries) in which Miguel Jimenez Lopez wrote "se trata simplemente de razas agotadas, que es preciso rejuvenecer con sangre fresca" (it is a matter of races that are simply worn out and need to be renewed with fresh blood). Castañeda Medina argues that anxiety of ‘what race are we’ was answered at the beginning of the twentieth century with the argument that the "Colombian race" was a ‘race’ in itself, which needed to be protected from degeneration through technologies of power, that is, through normalization imposed through medical and legal institutions (i.e., controlling matrimony, births, etc).

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66 Appelbaum, Muddied Waters, 37.
68 Ibid.
70 Wade, Blackness and Race Mixture, 17.
72 Ibid., 298.
Whiteness was seen as the path to modernity and national advancement. The Colombian elite’s inability to inspire much ‘white’ immigration was one of the major frustrations of their 'civilizing' project in the nineteenth century. Other countries in Latin America with similar worries in the nineteenth century were more successful in luring ‘white’ European immigrants, often through subsidies for travel. Argentinia, Cuba and Sao Paolo were notably so, as was the Colombian region of Antioquia.

Scholarship on mestizaje across Latin America has argued that the idealization of mixing that became strong in the beginning of the nineteenth century was generally based on the idea that ‘whiter races’ would mix in to ‘improve’ the darker ones. Behind the populist discourse of ‘we are all mestizo’, which submerges and denies difference, lies the hierarchical discourse of blanqueamiento (whitening). ‘Indians’ and even sometimes ‘blacks’ could be romanticized as part of a glorious past that with paternalistic guidance would be integrated and whitened. Jordan calls blanqueamiento ‘the whitening imperative,’ with the ideal being an ever whiter mestizo hybrid that would eventually eliminate blackness. Blanqueamiento shapes discourse and policy, but also daily practices. Many Colombians today continue to engage in blanqueamiento as a social practice for upward mobility. This might entail the physical act of looking for a whiter spouse for lighter offspring, hair straightening, or simply denying having any blackness in one's heritage.

Castro Gómez argues that in colonial times in Colombia being ‘white’ did not have as much to do with the color of one's skin as with wealth and social rank. He argues that this ethnicization of wealth involved a cultural imaginary around lifestyle, woven by religious beliefs, clothing, profession, type and place of housing and family relations, certificates of nobility and coats of arms, forms of address (“don”), and behaviour. The colonial Bourbon reformation in Spain wanted to promote social mobility as a way to modernize the state and the economy so they

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73 Múnera, Fronteras imaginadas, 147.
75 Appelbaum argues that the result was an ongoing rough correlation between racial definition and the economic condition of these countries and regions. Appelbaum, Race and Nation in Modern Latin America, 212.
76 Ibid., 209; Wade, Race And Ethnicity In Latin America, 32.
77 Wade, Blackness and Race Mixture, 18.
78 Ibid., 11.
80 Wade, Blackness and Race Mixture, 77.
81 Castro-Gómez, La hybris del punto cero.
actually allowed wealthy *mestizos* in the colonies to buy whiteness certificates (‘*cedulas de gracias al sacar*’), which allowed them to receive education, marry whites, enter the priesthood, and above all, practice certain economic activities.\(^{82}\)

Wealth continues, in more subtle ways, to buy whiteness. Today it can pay for hair straightening and coloured contacts. But in more indirect ways, as Bonnett puts it, “money whitens.”\(^{83}\) Streicker reports that older people in Cartagena use ‘*claro*’ for a light skinned poor person but ‘*blanco*’ if that person is wealthy.\(^{84}\) Wade writes that the same individual dressed shabbily and smartly will be identified with different colour terms.\(^{85}\) Viveros and Garay say that a man may use a good suit and careful diction with a neutral accent to move from ‘*indio*’ to ‘*doctor*’.\(^{86}\) Viveros writes that for a *mestizo* to be considered an ‘honorary white’ it is essential that they have “good manners” and the habits, tastes and behaviours of the wealthy.\(^{87}\) Cunin separates these ‘cultural’ forms of whitening from the ‘biological’ ones, e.g. marrying lighter skinned partners.\(^{88}\)

Whiteness opens access to both economic and social status.\(^{89}\) Castro Gómez argues that all of this construction of whiteness had as its aim, either openly or not, the private concentration of capital: economic, social and cultural.\(^{90}\) In Colombia class and ‘race’ not only intersect, they *interlock*.\(^{91}\) Each not only shapes but reinforces the other, and one of the primary ways they prop

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\(^{82}\) Ibid., 104.


\(^{84}\) Streicker, “Policing boundaries,” 60.

\(^{85}\) Wade, *Race And Ethnicity In Latin America*, 38; Werner writes that in the Dominican Republic what she calls “social whitening” is “achieved through a combination of living in urban spaces, taking on an urban look, and engaging in forms of labour socially constructed as “modern,” such as factory work. M. Werner, “Embodied negotiations: identity, space and livelihood after trade zones in the Dominican Republic,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 17, no. 6 (2010): 38.

\(^{86}\) “Doctor” being a term of respect generally not signifying an actual MD or PhD. Viveros Vigoya and Garay Ariza, “El cuerpo y sus significados. A manera de introducción.”

\(^{87}\) Viveros Vigoya, “Imágenes de la masculinidad blanca en Colombia. Raza, Género y poder político.,” 10; In the other direction Streickler writes that older people in Cartagena in the 1990s would call most Afro-Colombians “moreno” unless they were considered to speak and act rudely, in which case they would be called “negro”. Streicker, “Policing boundaries,” 10.


each other up is through spatiality. But there is some room for slippage. If a person manages to change their ‘race’, through whitening techniques like green contacts, it can improve their ability to get a better paying job, and vice versa – if they have enough money to move to a wealthier neighbourhood, they may be seen as whiter. The way Chaves puts it is that one’s daily social inscription in categories such as ‘indian’, ‘black’, or ‘white’ is never absolute but always in relation to attributes of power, wealth, and status. As such white accompaniers are often assumed by Colombians to have class privilege (on the basis of both ‘race’ and nationality), and those accompaniers who are ‘not quite white’ but have nationality privilege and act and dress in ways that are read as signs of the assumed associated class privilege are also seen as ‘whiter’ as a result.

**Changing imaginaries**

Indigenous Colombians have played an important role in challenging ‘the racialization of progress’ and disarticulating modernity from whiteness by asserting that Colombia is neither ‘white’ nor *mestizo*, but rather a racially plural nation. This has happened most spectacularly on paper. Wade argues that the ‘white’ republic enshrined in the 1886 constitution was replaced, in the 1991 constitution, with a vision of a ‘pluriethnic’ nation. Neither uses those actual terms in the text, but the 2011 calendar issued by the Colombian think tank ‘Observatorio de Discriminacion Racial’ (Racial Discrimination Watch) highlights the following from the 1991 constitution:

“The Colombian Constitution recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the nation” (article 7)

“All persons are born free and equal under the law and shall receive the same protection and treatment from authorities and shall enjoy the same rights, liberties and opportunities free from any discrimination on the basis of …. race” (article 13)

Though Collins also used the term interlocking, the idea that systems of oppressions do more than intersect but also interlock has become influential primarily through the work of Razack. M.L. Fellows and S. Razack, “Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women, The,” *J. Gender Race & Just.* 1 (1997): 335.

92 Chaves, M. in Almario et al., “Aproximaciones a los estudios de razas y racismo en Colombia,” 192; This is a more complex understanding than the argument widely made by US sociologists studying Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s that class determined “race”, such that, they argued, a wealthy “black” man was seen as “white” and a poor “white” man was seen as “black”. Elizabeth, “La competencia mestiza. Chicago bajo el trópico o las competencias heurísticas del mestizaje.”

93 Appelbaum, *Muddied Waters*, 27.

94 Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture*; see also Daniel Bonilla Maldonado, *La Constitución multicultural* (Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2006).
Appelbaum also emphasizes that the new constitution both reflected and reinforced a changing imaginary. Soon after it was signed the state launched what appeared to be a ‘let us all be happily multicultural now’ campaign, with posters that said ‘unity in diversity’ and had pictures of smiling women and men of various phenotypes and regional and ethnic dress.95

Shortly after the passage of the new constitution the national identity cards (cedulas) were also changed. Before 1993 these had a category for “color”, which included entries such as rosy white (blanca rosada) and trigueña (which the Espasa dictionary lists as “corn-coloured”).96 The new cards have other biometric data, but no entry for ‘race’ or ethnicity.97 Yet ‘race’, and racial discrimination, was not so easily erased. As Garcia Marquez put it “somos dos paises a la vez: uno de papel y otro en la realidad” (we are two countries at the same time: one on paper and another in reality).98 The decade after the signing of the constitution was one of growing income inequality that also exacerbated racial inequalities.99

‘Race’ at war

Under processes set in motion by the new constitution, 31.3 million hectares of traditional territory, just over a quarter of the country’s land, were legally granted and titled as resguardos (indigenous collective property) and another 3.4 million hectares were legally granted to historic black communities on the Pacific Coast.100 Though this was a major achievement, these regions continue to be marginalized economically, with dramatically higher poverty and illiteracy rates, far fewer homes with electricity and running water, and few roads and public services in general. As Oslander puts it, though the new constitution offered discursive inclusion and territorial

95 Appelbaum, Muddied Waters, 214 These posters were on the walls of my home for many years.


97 Jaime Torres Melo (via personal communication) suggests that the change was made not because of pressure to remove the color category but in search of a more effective mechanism for identifying bodies in a context of violence. Indeed the text of the law itself (law 38 of 1993) describes in great detail how the dental records now associated with the identification are to be used for this purpose.


100 as of 2006. Ibid.; Ng’weno argues that granting this title was a way to bring remote areas into the fold of the state. Ng’weno, Turf Wars, 188.
rights, these groups faced continuing socioeconomic and political exclusion. These regions have also been the hardest hit by the war. These are the areas most likely to be bombed and fumigated, and residents face a far higher rate of massacres, assassinations, and displacement.

The imaginaries of tropicality have been militarized. Barbarities are done in those spaces imagined as barbaric. Armed actors use imaginaries of ‘race’ and place to make invisible their acts of violence in places scripted as violent. As Carlos Rosero, a leader of the Black Communities Organizing Project (PCN – Proceso de Comunidades Negras) puts it, racial discrimination is expressed through war and the war is racialized.

Traditionally black and indigenous regions, most of which were only recently titled, are the new frontier, targeted for natural resource extraction. This is the continuation of the long pattern of frontier colonization and violence. Roldán in particular writes about how that process has been racialized. She argues that ‘la violencia’, the period of violence in the 1940s and 1950s that is seen by many as the beginning of the current war, was a culmination of, as she puts it, the ‘internal colonialism’ of regions, which was then used to justify violence against ‘others’ as a pretext for seizing their land and natural resources. She argues that ‘la violencia’ was the product of capitalist development. Of course there are many dynamics at work in the violence today, but this certainly continues to be one of them.

Violence has hit Afro-Colombians and indigenous people the hardest, and they form a greatly disproportionate number of the displaced, because their territories, for so long considered undesirable, are now widely seen by outside investors as an ‘untapped’ treasure trove of gold, hardwood lumber, and land and water for oil palm plantations. These areas have also become more important geopolitically and geoeconomically in the push to connect Colombia more to


\[102\] Of course this is in broad strokes and some historically ‘whiter’ areas have also faced extreme violence and displacement, including some areas of Antioquia.

\[103\] Personal communication, date

\[104\] Roldán, Blood and fire.

\[105\] In one 2008 survey in 17% identified as Afro-Colombians. Ordoñez, “Los afrocolombianos: La población más vulnerable como consecuencia del desplazamiento forzado”; Oslender says one-third of the displaced are thought to be Afro-Colombian, but as he notes, these are very difficult statistics to track. Many of the displaced do not register officially as such out of fear, and the official registries do not track “race” or ethnicity. Oslender, “Another History of Violence”; Even with these limited statistics, “the probability that an Afro-descendent citizen has been displaced is 84% higher than that of white-mestizos.” Garavito, Alfonso Sierra, and Cavelier Adarve, Racial Discrimination and Human Rights in Colombia: A Report on the Situation of the Rights of Afro-Colombians.
global commerce and make it a biodiesel power. There are pending massive development projects to connect rivers and roads across Northwest Colombia to compete with the Panama Canal and major road building to carry goods into Panama and further North, as well as pipeline construction. Drug traffickers are also using more routes through this region.

These capitalist interests are threatened by Afro-Colombian communities gaining collective title to their traditional territory. Though this right was established by law 70 of 1993 it was not until many years later that most communities were able to fulfill the requirements to get their title. But in the late 1990s there was a repeated phenomena where communities, after struggling for years for legal ownership of their land, would sign the documents giving them collective ownership - and soon thereafter paramilitaries would move in to their area, committing violence aimed at scaring people off their newly legal land. Ironically it was precisely when communities received their land titles that they were pushed off their lands and the entire Pacific coast region, which had been known as a peaceful refuge from the rest of the war, saw intense combat between the FARC and the paramilitaries. The situation has become extreme, such that in 2007 79% of those Afro-Colombians eligible to live on collectively titled land in the Pacific had been pushed off of it. Some communities have bravely resisted displacement and formed peace communities and humanitarian zones in the region, with the support of both national and international accompaniers.

Afro-Colombian and indigenous people have long been the poorest in the country, but they have become even more so. Hylton argues that since the mid-1990s the paramilitaries have been redistributing “wealth, political power, and property toward the light skinned top of the social pyramid.” But the army itself has also been responsible for massive displacement from traditional Afro-Colombian areas, most famously in the brutal ‘Operation Genesis’ along the Atrato river systems in 1997, which led to the displacement of 15,000.

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106 Colombia is already the fourth largest palm-oil producer in the world. Uribe repeatedly emphasized it as a development goal and funded its expansion. For an analysis of these policies and their impact see Oslender, “Violence in development.”


110 Hylton, Evil Hour in Colombia, 94.

111 That figure is an estimate by Arocha and Maya, “Afro-Latin American Peoples,” 402; For accounts of these attacks see Oslender, “Violence in development” Several brave communities have returned to that area, with international accompaniment, and are in protracted struggles with the palm oil companies that took their land.
The war in Colombia is characterized by displacement. Small farmers are being pushed off their land in a massive violent land grab, primarily by paramilitaries and their affiliates who are then ‘developing’ these lands with large agribusiness and mining projects.\textsuperscript{112} ‘Race’ oppression has always been integral to the workings of colonialism, capitalism and modernity.\textsuperscript{113} ‘Whiteness’ served as a way for colonizers to distinguish themselves, and ‘race’ has been used to rationalize domination and dispossession ever since.\textsuperscript{114} As Susan J. Smith puts it, the construction of ‘race’ was really about the “appropriation and exploitation of the material wealth, cultural life and psychic well-being of (non-white) colonized peoples by (white) colonizing others.”\textsuperscript{115}

\textbf{Conclusion:}

“Mona, mona, mona!” This is the context in which international accompaniment is being done in Colombia. Those communities that are resisting or returning from displacement tend to be in these racialized ‘frontier’ regions, and as such the whiteness of accompaniers stands out there all the more. Accompaniers go against the script. Rather than go in to these regions to ‘modernize’ and develop them, they stand alongside those who have a different vision of dignity, those who are resisting both the incursion of armed actors and that of capitalist development. As such accompaniers stand out as ‘out of place’. This is part of how accompaniment ‘works’ in Colombia. But so too are the imaginaries that see whiteness as desirable, as the path to ‘modernity’. It matters in what way, that is, what direction, accompaniers are ‘out of place’. A brown skinned accompanier in a light skinned community would be read very differently.

The regionalization of ‘race’ in Colombia has much to do with colonial discourses, particularly the imaginaries of tropicality as they were reworked in Colombia. Though racial discrimination was made unconstitutional in 1991, these deep seated dynamics continue and have been amplified by war. The war is driven by desires for capitalist development and ‘modernity,’ which is imagined as white. Colonial imaginaries are used to justify racialized violence, and the war has hit darker skinned people the hardest and reinforced white supremacy.

Racial categories were created as part and parcel of colonialism. Tropicality is one form of the basic colonial idea that certain people belong in certain places and that those places affect who they are. In colonial times in Colombia ‘white’ was conflated with Spanish, with progress and

\textsuperscript{113} For a useful review of this history internationally see Ali Rattansi, \textit{Racism: A Very Short Introduction} (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007).
\textsuperscript{115} Smith, “Black:White,” 98.
modernity. As Bonnet puts it, “European social and economic paradigms were connoted through
the symbols of ‘race’, symbols that gave capitalist incursion and modernity a European, and
hence white, identity.”116 Today, while ‘white’ is still associated with modernity, that modernity
is generally imagined as sited not only in Europe but also, and primarily, in North America.
Although there are plenty of famous light skinned Colombians, light skinned Colombian friends
in Bogotá told me that they too regularly get asked where they are from (as I constantly was). In
the imaginary it seems that ‘white’ now often means not necessarily ‘from Antioquia’ (the
‘whiter’ region of the country), but perhaps foreign, and in either case, desirable. Not just any
foreign of course, but primarily from the US, now the foreign country with the greatest influence
in Colombia.117 Imaginaries of ‘race’ are not only regionalized in Colombia, but also
internationalized. ‘Race’ and class intertwine in Colombia differently than they do in the US,
partly because the spectre of the US is twisted up in it. In today’s neo-colonial reality whiteness
is still associated with power, modernity, and place. The way these imaginaries work is not the
same across all times and spaces in Colombia. In some regions lighter skin may be read as
‘paisa’, in others as from the interior generally, in others those groups and foreigners may be
lumped together.118 In general though, it is widely imagined that people with lighter skin will
have greater economic and political power.

Power and ‘race’ relations shift across both space and time. Neither space nor ‘race’ is created
once and then done. They are always a doing, one that can reinforce or reshape power relations.
It is not accidental that Antioquia ended up ‘whiter,’ nor that the war hits Afro-Colombians and
indigenous people the hardest. These social realities are (re)created daily through racist
discourses, practices, and policies. But there is always agency and dissent.119 Brave
communities are resisting displacement, organizing around their own visions of human dignity,
and going against these scripts of their spaces as backwards and what it is they need to
‘modernize.’ One of the ways they are able to ‘stay in place’ and rework imaginaries of those
places, is through the solidarity of accompaniers who, when they walk with them in these places,
are also going against these racial scripts and are seen as ‘out of place.’

I appreciate the opportunity to share this as a work in progress. In another incarnation this piece
was a chapter of my dissertation on accompaniment. I am trying to figure out whether or not to
include the accompaniment context when I submit it to a journal. I worry that readers will end

117 Though I was also occasionally asked if I was from Canada (the largest recipient of Colombian asylees after
Ecuador and the base of major mining projects) or Western Europe.
118 Forest Hylton, personal communication, date
119 Appelbaum’s book, for example, is an in-depth historical study of how racialized and colonized people around
one Colombian town have resisted, adapted and shaped the social order. Appelbaum, Muddied Waters.
up thinking that accompaniment works only, or even mostly, through race. Including accompaniment may also distract from and dilute the argument about how whiteness works in Colombia. Or maybe not. Maybe without the accompaniment context readers would wonder why a white woman from the US cares about whiteness in Colombia and who I am to write about it? Maybe I should actually include more of the accompaniment context and share stories from another chapter about how whiteness plays out in accompaniment day to day? The thing is that those stories are mostly about accompaniers that are not white (e.g. Latinos from the US), and how that changes things. I would appreciate feedback. It is about 6,500 words now so it would be plenty long without the accompaniment context, but there is also room for more stories. Suggestions?

References


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