

## From *blanqueamiento* to *reindigenización*: Paradoxes of *mestizaje* and multiculturalism in contemporary Colombia<sup>1</sup>

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During the past two decades Latin American projects of nationhood have experienced an unexpected shift towards multiculturalism. This move, accompanied by the reconfiguration of local and translocal ethnicities and constitutional reforms recognizing cultural diversity, has produced a surge of recent and provocative academic research (Gros 2000a; Kymlicka 1996; Van Cott 2000; Wieviorka 1997; Zapata 2001). Earlier, and from a different perspective, the role of ideologies and practices of *mestizaje* has also provoked sustained scholarly inquiry and political debate. Erstwhile cast within polar approaches that highlighted either the inclusive or the exclusive consequences of hegemonic ideologies of racial mixing, in the past years the debate has shifted focus to include a plurality of discourses and practices.<sup>2</sup>

This article interweaves these two key threads of investigation. We argue that academic discussions about pluralism and multiculturalism in Latin America have paid little attention to *mestizaje* as a crucial dimension of nation-making projects. Following a critical examination of the pluralist as well as the neoliberal inclination towards 'la nación mestiza' linking cultural recognition with rising social inequalities, we examine recent cases of indigenous resurgence and strategies of *reindigenización* of subaltern groups in Colombia. We explore the current pluralist turn of the Colombian imagined national community to ponder the shifting political and social elements of *mestizaje*, understood as a multifaceted and conflicting terrain. We argue that while in the recent past *mestizaje* promised a secure but ambiguous avenue to becoming white (*blanqueamiento*), it has now become an equally muddled path to becoming indigenous again (*reindigenización*).

### The Latin American nations at the crossroads

The current shifts in nation-making projects in Latin America have received a great deal of attention, especially in regards to their novel ethnic and cultural dimensions (Pineda 1997; Iturralde 1999; Chaves 2005). Christian Gros (2000), for example, has noted the unexpected erosion of the distinctive Latin American project of 'la nación mestiza' (the mixed nation) initiated in the nineteenth century. According to Gros (2000, 356), 'there was no place or future for the indigenous population in this project', except as 'a legacy from the past, as a "stain" that had to be cleaned, and in the republic of the liberal dreams, it had to disappear'.<sup>3</sup> Previously understood as the sole and only possible path to national unity, it gave way to a pluralist approach oriented in the opposite direction:

But at the end of the twentieth century the situation again changed, and the national populist project based on cultural *mestizaje* and assimilation has been left far behind (Gros 2000, 357).

Gros' broad perspective is provocative. It suggests that the shifts in nationhood and constitutional reforms signal the birth of a new era and a break with the past (Gros 2000, 353, 359). It also highlights the emergence of indigenous social movements, new modes of globalization, neoliberal policies and democratic reforms and draws attention to their articulation. Building on Gros' analysis and on our previous work (Chaves 2003a; Chaves 2003b; Zambrano 2004), we outline some of these connections in the following pages.

Latin America has experienced profound changes since the 1980s (see IDYMOV 2003). On the one hand there has been strong international pressure to redefine the role of national states as they accommodate to pressing global demands for restructuring (deindustrialization, free trade, free-trade zones, and transnational circulation of financial capital, among others). On the other, new local and regional collective agents, and ethnic, women's, urban, religious and sexual-rights movements have raised demands for recognition and for access to social rights and citizenship. Combined, they have resulted in diverse and often conflicting processes of political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization. A key feature of these processes was the transference of formerly centralized state duties to local governments and diversely located non-governmental agents. While private national and transnational enterprises were charged with providing for those public rights now understood as basic services such as health and education, local and regional governments were allowed to run their own budgets and programmes and earned the right to elect their members. These processes were accompanied by constitutional amendments or by newly signed constitutions in thirteen Latin American countries.<sup>4</sup> The reforms recognized the multicultural component of the nations by granting specific collective rights. And they complied with the rules of the international market as well.

This framework is useful for situating fluctuations in identity politics in Colombia, as our analysis will demonstrate. There are, however, crucial questions that Gros and other scholars who have examined the shift towards multiculturalism in Latin America have not asked, concerning the role of *mestizaje*. In their positive assessment of the current recognition of ethnicity in the region, several authors have not only privileged indigenous peoples over others, for example black populations, but have also failed to address the impact of the constitutional reforms and the reorientation of nation states on a wide range of *mestizo* collectivities such as peasants and urban dwellers (Gros 2000; Van Cott 2000). For example, Donna Van Cott (2000) has remarked that the only distributive actions in Colombia after the constitutional reforms were financial transfers<sup>5</sup> to *resguardos* (indigenous collective property); she does not elaborate, however, on the impact of such policies on the people who have no such rights. This is a crucial question today when cultural differences are flourishing in a context of mounting social inequalities. In respect to the celebration of multiculturalism, it is worthwhile to keep in mind how problematic the recognition of ethnic or other differences can be when not accompanied by distributive justice (Fraser 1997; Taylor *et. al.* 1994).

### **From *mestizaje* to *mestizajes***

*Mestizaje* has become a central component of nation-building in Latin America, both for national elites and for scholars (Wade 2003). In its nation-building dimension, *mestizaje* has provoked heated debates, usually cast in polar positions. On

one side it was promoted as a celebratory expression of racial democracy by some (but importantly, not all) influential nation-builders and past generations of Latin American academics (Da Silva 1998). On the opposite side, Latin Americanists – generally from the United States – saw *mestizaje* as a problematic ideology that created inequality, sustained racial hierarchies and sought homogenization and *blanqueamiento* (Stepan 1991; Stutzman 1982; Whitten 1981; Wright 1990; Wade 1993). To situate these differing perspectives, it is useful to acknowledge the ambivalence of nationalist discourses. ‘La nación mestiza’ signalled a break with the Iberian colonial past while separating itself from European and North American approaches that condemned racial mixing. It preserved existing racial hierarchies and celebrated whiteness, however. As a hegemonic project, *mestizaje* promoted education, the incorporation of *mestizos*, and partial assimilation of indigenous and black populations (Smith 1997a; Da Silva 1998).

Recently, academics have begun to understand *mestizaje* as a plurality of local processes and as a contested terrain of elite and subaltern discourses and practices, crosscut by specific gender relations and relations of power (Anzaldúa 1987; Hale 1997; Smith 1997a; Smith 1997b; Wade 2003). Carol Smith, for example, has suggested that *mestizaje* consists of three, if not more, connected processes: 1) the social and gendered production and reproduction of people of mixed biological heritage; 2) the personal or collective identification either with actual *mestizo* communities or with the *mestizo* national subject (created by intellectuals); and 3) the discourses of intellectuals and subalterns about *mestizos*’ position in society of and their relationship to other forms of identity (Smith 1997b).

Similarly, Peter Wade (2003) has revised his previous stance (1993) that shared much with Ronald Stutzman’s (1981) postulate on *mestizaje* as an ‘all inclusive ideology of exclusion’. Instead of a unified ideology, Wade argues that in Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela there is a multiplicity of *mestizajes*. As a national ideology, it is ambivalent in several ways. Not all nation-builders have celebrated *mestizaje*. In fact, in Colombia a number of them vigorously opposed it while some of the celebrants shifted between praise and condemnation, a point also made by Roberto Pineda (1997). On the other hand, *mestizaje* has also found fertile ground in subaltern groups who, in turn, have produced their own versions of cultural and racial mixture.<sup>6</sup> The discourse on race and cultural mixing put forth from ‘above’ has not been understood from ‘below’ by *mestizos* and *mestizas* as the forging of ‘the cosmic race’ – a harmonious fusion of its white, Indian, and black components – as the Mexican ideologue Vasconcelos put it in 1925. Rather it has been experienced as the incorporation of distinct cultural sensibilities and practices, as a mosaic inscribed in the bodies of individuals that permits simultaneous and subsequent affiliations with different groups. Thus, cultural and racial mixing, but not cultural and racial fusion, permits multiple cross-overs and double or even triple identifications. At the same time *mestizaje* has reinforced its constitutive racial components, a point we will discuss below for the case of *reindigenización*. Before doing so, let us highlight two related theoretical threads that are useful for situating *mestizaje* as a multifaceted, fluctuating, and contested terrain.

First, the relational approach is a powerful tool to understand *mestizaje* and past and present fluctuations of identity-making in Colombia. We follow Wade’s intriguing suggestion that the centre (white and *mestizo*) needs to define itself in relation to the margins (Indian and black), thus generating conflicting practices of assimilation and reproduction in the margins. Furthermore, we propose that this

approach should be extended to examine the shifting and selective meanings of what counts as *mestizaje*. As Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn (2003, 5) have proposed, there are mixtures that are defined as mixtures while others are not; some mixtures, as they become increasingly visible, are named and transformed into natural categories, while others lose significance, or relate to historical and cultural processes that require more academic inquiry. Such an approach allows us to situate the dynamic relations between moving centres, changing margins and the mobility of intermediate categories. It also invites us to examine the second theoretical thread: the making and unmaking of physical, cultural, and theoretical boundaries.

Second, almost two decades ago Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) countered the persistent binaries that permeate *mestizaje* and the constitution of racial categorizations. In contrast to subsequent scholarship, Anzaldúa's evaluation of *mestizaje* was positive; she suggested that it challenged established categories. But the *chicana* writer and activist did not deny or silence the complex difficulties and disjunctures involved in holding multiple affiliations; rather she examined them. Border and borderlands emerged as key concepts for understanding *mestizaje* in Anzaldúa's approach. She referred, for example, to the permanent crossing of borders involved in being a *chicana*, borders that in this case were physical and social, between the United States and México, between *chicana* and *gringa*, between female and male.<sup>7</sup> In investigating the inequalities that mark these borders, she not only signalled the fluidity of the contexts and circumstances but also recognized limits to possible identifications by the *mestiza*. Following this approach, Anzaldúa emphasized the need to examine the sense and directionality of border crossings: in which direction do people cross? At what cost? These issues immediately take us to the frontiers and to the hierarchies existing among *mestizos*. This is a dimension central to the current reconfiguration of indigenous identities in Colombia, in which *mestizo* women have played a key role (Chaves 2005). Before we examine these issues, however, it is necessary to place *reindigenización* in context.

### **Ethnicities and social rights in Colombia**

The array of rights granted to populations recognized as ethnic at the signing of the 1991 constitution has attracted academic and international attention. Thanks to the participatory formulation of the new constitution and subsequent rulings providing territorial rights as well as political, economic, and cultural rights for indigenous and black collectives, Colombia ranks high among the Latin American nations. Judged from this standpoint, Colombia leads a trend that some academics have called the advent of a regional multicultural model (Assies 1999). Such a model not only imparts a prominent place to ethnicity within Colombian and Latin American social imaginaries, but also prompts the configuration and reconfiguration of new and perdurable social movements based on ethnic identities, black, African, and indigenous. These developments seem to fit within a broader, global shift in politics as well: from a class-based politics to politics centred on cultural identities (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Castillo and Cairo n.d.). Although attention to this shift casts a welcome light upon a diversity of collective agents (women, ethnic agents, gays and lesbians, among others) and highlights the contested construction of place as well as the conflicting definition of public and private domains, some approaches have ignored its challenging social dimensions

altogether. It is worthwhile to remember that the emergence of new national ethnic configurations has taken place within national and regional – if not global – contexts of increased social and economic inequalities. It is precisely the problematic and often overlooked links between the politics of recognition, social class formations, and social inequalities that we want to address in the Colombian case.

In Colombia ethnic recognition has certainly promoted an impressive operation of distributive justice. Since the signing of the constitution, 31.3 million hectares or over a quarter of the country's total territory have been legally granted and titled as *resguardos* (indigenous collective property), while another 3.4 million hectares have been conceded to black communities on the Pacific Coast<sup>8</sup>. Together with territorial entitlement indigenous and black populations have gained the right to an education specifically related to their cultures and the right to run for congress under a special ethnic jurisdiction (Agudelo 2003). Indigenous groups have also obtained the right to administer, rule, and pass legislation over their territories, to use their languages in the public domain, to access free health services, and to promote and use their own medical practices, among other rights (Sánchez 2002).

Academics do not agree which conditions triggered such liberal granting of ethnic rights. Their arguments differ considerably. For some, these concessions constitute the long overdue payment of a historic debt of discrimination and exclusion of the concerned populations (Van Cott 2000). For others the land grants provide a tool to control territories under the grip of anti-state armed groups by opening them up to transnational investments (Castillo and Cairo n.d.; Escobar y Pedrosa 1996; Jackson 1995). They do seem to agree, however, that these rights have been granted to minorities. While this is fairly obvious in the case of the indigenous peoples, whose share is very small within the total Colombian population (the highest estimate is 2 per cent), the argument seems to hold true in the case of black populations as well. Although their demographic weight is significantly higher (from 18 to 26 per cent according to different estimates), the number of beneficiaries has been kept relatively small, restricted to black rural populations of the Pacific coast defined as ethnic (Agudelo 2004; Restrepo 1997).<sup>9</sup>

Regarding social and economic rights for subaltern, generally mestizo, majorities, the Colombian scenario has been bleak. In rural areas, for example, a comprehensive agrarian reform oriented to correct a grossly unequal land-tenure regime has never taken place.<sup>10</sup> More alarming, the modest distribution promoted by the National Land Reform Institute created in 1961 has basically been wiped out. The current state of affairs is so disquieting that analysts are talking about an ongoing 'counter agrarian reform' headed by paramilitary groups, who, besides concentrating lands in their own hands, are also responsible for the lion's share of the massive forced displacement of farmers throughout the country. Ironically, here the social and cultural dimensions meet: the population most affected by this process is made up precisely by the recently ethnicized black rural inhabitants of the Pacific lowlands who were granted collective titles in the first place (Wouters 2002; Oslender 2004). The decade that witnessed the signing of the new constitution also saw the persistent increase of income inequality. In 1991, the poorest 40 per cent of the Colombian population earned 16 per cent of the national income; it fell to 13 per cent by 1997. In contrast, during the same period, the richest 10 per cent increased their share from 32 per cent to 39.5 per cent, and by 2000 it mounted to 42.7 per cent. That year Colombia ranked ninth in the countries with most unequal distribution of wealth in the world (Livingstone 2004, based on the 2001 UNDP

Development Report).

The current widespread processes of reindigenización and re-ethnization must be situated within a context that combines rampant economic inequalities and social exclusion for the majority – not to speak of the consequences of a prolonged armed conflict and persistent human rights violations – together with opportunities for recognized minorities.

### **From deindianization to reindianization**

Becoming indigenous again is a deliberate reversal of deindianization, a process by which indigenous collectives divested themselves of their own identity in response to outside pressures (Chaves 2005). In her study of indigenous resurgence in Nariño, Joanne Rappaport (1991, 14), following Bonfil Batalla (1987) considers that deindianization ‘has little to do with the maintenance or rejection of indigenous culture and essentially is an ideological process related to group identification’. In that sense, deindianized mestizos preserve indigenous culture, but reject identification as Indians. Land-loss, access to rural education, proximity to urban centres, wage labour, and racial discrimination all trigger a denial of indigenous identity. In the following sections we will examine alternate paths of deindianization and its reversal paying special attention to the role of mestizaje in both processes.

Early efforts at reversing deindianization in Colombia go back to the 1970s when the vigorous indigenous movement that fought to repossess Indian lands from landowners was on the rise. Encouraged by their successes and the approval of new legislative measures that ratified corporate land possession rights for indigenous people, some collectives sought to reaffirm their Indian identities. This was the case with the communities of Natagaima and Coyaima in the central Andean region and the Zenú on the Caribbean coast (Triana 1993; Pardo 1993). While their ancestors had been singled out as Indians, their contemporary descendants were viewed as mestizo peasants. Their claims to Indianness and the reversal of deindianization, which contravened mestizaje’s mandatory path to whitening, were rooted in the defence of collective land rights rather than in cultural persistence.

Later, in the 1980s, the Pasto (Rappaport 1994) and Yanacona (Zambrano 1998; Zambrano 2000) in the Andean southwest, and the Kankuamo and Wiwa in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Morales 2000; Morales and Pumarejo 2004) followed the same path. Just as their predecessors, these collectives lacked the cultural diacritics that academics and experts usually linked to Indianness: indigenous languages, distinctive dress, or primordial worldview. Nevertheless, they were successful in fastening their claims to enduring colonial *resguardo* titles (collective land grants). In the late 1980s as deindianization was on the wane, the indigenous movement joined forces with national and international efforts to reverse racist and discriminatory practices that scorned indigenous lifestyles and resorted to academic discourses that praised local knowledge and the soundness of indigenous ecological practices. Their combined efforts led the state to respond by establishing special programs directed towards indigenous populations.

In the 1990s the ongoing revalorization of things indigenous was articulated in the signing of the new constitution, spurring a boom of reindianization processes that extend today. These processes resemble those that took place in the 1970s and 1980s insofar as their proponents lack key cultural diacritics. However, the current reindianization processes concern a diversity of heterogeneous social aggregates

throughout the country, including migrants and colonists, as well as urban inhabitants who do not necessarily attach their indigenous affiliations to the repossession of ancestral (rural) lands. Significantly, they question fixed ethnic categories and also reverse *mestizaje*'s directionality: from a privileged path to whitening to an enabling road for becoming indigenous.

Based upon our research experiences in Colombia, we examine the cases of reindigenización in two contrasting locations: in Bogotá, the capital city and political and administrative centre; and in the Department of Putumayo, a formerly peripheral colonization region that has become important in many ways.

### **Naturalizing difference: reindianization processes in Putumayo**

Putumayo has been a national and international economic frontier since the nineteenth century. Located in Colombia's upper Amazon it has persistently attracted outside migration and has been a site for irregular but recurring boom and bust cycles in quinine, rubber, furs, wood, oil and, more recently, the drug trade. Putumayo has also been an agricultural and settlement frontier since the middle of the twentieth century. Two major waves of migration, resulting from the pull exercised by new extractive economies and the push factors of land concentration and political violence in the central Andean areas of Colombia, transformed Putumayo's demographic profile. Thus, the first wave of permanent settlement was spurred by Putumayo's oil boom in the 1960s in conjunction with the loss of Andean indigenous collective lands (*resguardos*), the expropriation of peasant lands by large landowners and the political violence that raged across the country for two decades (1945-1964). The second wave came to Putumayo with the vigorous demand for labour on coca-leaf plantations as a result of the cocaine boom of the 1980s. Combined, these two waves produced a distinct contact zone in Putumayo, marked by social differentiation and settlement dynamics (Pratt 1997).

Throughout its history, the presence of the central state in Putumayo has been tenuous. During the colonial period and a significant portion of the post-independence republican era, the state delegated control of the area to Catholic missionaries in charge of transforming local 'savages' into 'civilized Indians'. The state's failure to address pressing local concerns propitiated in part the growth and relative political success of guerrilla groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Guerrilla groups stepped in and performed some of the neglected tasks of the central state including mediation of private conflicts, dispensation of justice, tax collection, and protection of colonist farmers. Today, while guerrilla groups and state and private armies are at war over the military and political control of the area, guerrillas and paramilitaries continue to keep a firm hold upon coca cultivation and cocaine processing.

With respect to its demographic and ethnic composition, the majority of Putumayo's approximately 300,000 inhabitants are mestizo, first- to third-generation settlers who migrated from other areas of the country. A significant proportion of these colonists came from the neighbouring Andean departments of Cauca and Nariño in southwestern Colombia, where the largest indigenous population of the country is concentrated. However, the migrants and their progeny did not, until recently, identify themselves as mestizo; rather they referred to themselves as *colonos* (settlers), a term which alluded to their migrant origins, not to their ethnic affiliations.

Although indigenous inhabitants now make up only ten per cent of the total population of the Department of Putumayo, they occupy a prominent place in Putumayo's imaginaries. As part of Amazonia, Putumayo is subject to hegemonic representations that claim that the Amazonian rainforest is a privileged site for the reproduction of nature and for the Indians who have taken good care of it. Before the processes of reindigenización began to flourish, there was a diversity of officially recognized indigenous ethnic groups. Five of them – Inga, Siona, Kofan, Kamsá, and Huitoto – were native to Putumayo; others – Paez and Embera-Catío – were indigenous communities that had moved from the departments of Cauca and Risaralda and achieved legal recognition in the 1980s.

During the initial stage of deindianization, indigenous peoples tried to distance themselves from indigenous identity. In Putumayo, they sought to mix with colonos and adopt their 'mestizo' culture. Based on this development, Chaves (2005) describes them as indigenous mestizos.

By the end of the 1980s, however, the process of reindigenización had begun. Mestizo peasant colonos and deindianized individuals, linked to the Inga and Kamsá ethnic groups native to Putumayo and living together in multiethnic *veredas* (dispersed settlements) in the rural areas and peripheral neighbourhoods of incipient urban centres, crossed back over to the indigenous side. Where local indigenous individuals had before engaged in deindianization during the high period of 'la nación mestiza', they now started to reclaim their indigenous affiliations in a pluralist nation. The mestizo colonos with whom they shared marital bonds also began to recompose their identities, and together they proclaimed the ethnic heterogeneity of their settlements. Following regional hegemonic representations of Indianness, they declared themselves as pertaining to one of the recognized native ethnic groups, Inga or Kamsá.

The instrumental motivation of such a posture was fairly obvious. Many of those claiming to be indigenous declared publicly that it was better to be indigenous than colono. To make their becoming Indian again official, they replaced the formerly non-ethnic Junta de Acción Comunal (Communal Action Council) with an ethnic cabildo (indigenous council).<sup>11</sup> Once legally recognized, membership in a cabildo would allow access to free health and education services, exemption from military service for males, resources and financial transfers, and even perhaps restitution of resguardo lands (Chaves 2003a) – all of which were not available to colonos.

By 1998 the relative and absolute figures of the local indigenous population had tripled.<sup>12</sup> So had the number of petitions for official approval of cabildos in Mocoa, Villagarzón, Puerto Guzmán, Orito, Puerto Asís, and Puerto Leguizamo (Chaves 2003a). A backlash followed. The indigenous political elites that represented native or recognized ethnic groups vigorously intervened and tried to block new approvals. From their standpoint the package of economic benefits and resources they were receiving at that time was at risk. If all the reindigenización claims were accepted, these benefits would diminish. The central government also intervened as the public costs for subsidizing private schools and private health companies that provided free services for indigenous people were rising exponentially. Ironically, the logic that subjected the provision of public services to the rules of the market and private profit backfired against the state that had supported it in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

In 1999 the Dirección de Asuntos Indígenas (DGA) of the Ministry of the Inte-

rior responded by sending ordinances to the municipalities instructing local officials about which type of ethnic indigenous subject was legitimate and recognized by the Colombian state. Interestingly, the criteria for defining these subjects built on expert knowledge. Collectives were privileged that spoke their indigenous languages and resided in rural areas, and whose mores responded to traditional *usos y costumbres* (uses and customs).<sup>14</sup> At the same time the DGAI excluded multiethnic and urban cabildos from Putumayo (Chaves 2003a).

Banned collectives promptly reacted to such a stark definition of ethnicity. To conform to the state's rigid classifications, they construed their everyday practices as uses and customs and redefined their cabildos as mono-ethnic and not multi-ethnic. Those mestizo colonos who did not have local or appropriate ethnic references travelled back to their old homelands (Cauca and Nariño) to inquire into their ethnic origins. There they called for, and obtained, the support of local indigenous authorities. In the process, memory and identification were fused to create the legitimacy of the ethnic subject that the state demanded.

Between 2000 and 2002, the formation of cabildos ceased to be just a means of obtaining benefits and instead became an end in itself. Cabildo organization was strengthened by promoting the attendance and active participation of its members. The involvement of women, who had usually been excluded from leading roles, was central in this shift. Women leaders headed the process, actively working to recreate identity and stress ethnic difference. They inspired attention to social memory by recounting personal histories, refashioned distinctive ethnic symbols, and in some cases even designed special attire so that outsiders would perceive their distinctive ethnicity while redefining mestizo practices as indigenous.

The reindianized groups of Awá and Pastos from Nariño, Paez and Yanaconas from Cauca, and Ingas and Kamsá from Putumayo did not all experience this process in the same way. The codes of ethnicity produced by state officers prompted submission to established hierarchies distinguishing more ethnic from less ethnic. Thus in this process, the Pastos emerged as more mestizo than 'legitimate' Indians. In addition to not originating in Putumayo, they were the only reindianized groups that could not prove that they spoke an indigenous language in their homeland. Rejected and under suspicion, they resorted to the one hard and undeniable evidence of Indianness left at hand: racialization. Paradoxically then, the very same physical appearance that once had acted as a barrier to full inclusion into 'la nación mestiza' now operated to certify the Pastos' affiliation with ethnic or racial Indians, thereby allowing a tense but doubtful inclusion into the multicultural nation.

### **From legitimate Indian to contested ethnic: reindianization in Bogotá**

When the process of reindigenización emerged in Colombia's busy capital city in the early 1990s, few, if any, traces still remained to testify that Bogotá had once been the home of an indigenous majority (Zambrano 1997). The bustling metropolitan centre with over five million inhabitants of mostly migrant origin was marked by a century-old project that sought to make the city modern and thus ethnically neutral by erasing the past (Rawitscher 2000). To better understand such an enduring project, it is necessary to situate it in a timeframe.

Before the advent of Spanish domination the vast interior highland had been densely populated and governed by the Muisca. Santa Fe, as the city was known during the colonial period, was founded in the early sixteenth century in Muisca

territory. For over three centuries thereafter, indigenous peoples would serve a succession of colonists who took pride in their Iberian descent and in what they considered to be a superior cultural heritage. By the end of the colonial period, racial and cultural mixing had transfigured the demographic contours of past centuries by transforming Indian majorities into minorities. Nevertheless, a distinct but shifting indigenous presence was discernible in the capital and its rural surroundings. The numerous indigenous *bohíos* (straw and dirt dwellings), which had stood for almost four centuries by the two rivers that traversed the urban grid, remained in spite of efforts in the early twentieth century to eliminate, or at least reduce, disturbing Indian traces from the topographic and social space (Zambrano 2004). The production and consumption of *chicha*, the indigenous corn beer, persisted as well. Urbanites of diverse social origins, ages, and trades would gather in *chicherías*, the shops where the fermented drink was generously served and communally shared. By the late 1940s, the bohíos and the nearby rivers were buried under thick layers of asphalt and the stigmatized consumption of chicha had gone underground. In 1948, in reaction to popular revolt in the city following the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a liberal popular leader, the production, distribution and consumption of chicha was banned from the city and the national territory. This move seemed to announce the end of a long era of indigenous presence in the city (Saade 1999; Calvo and Saade 2002).

Four decades later, in the 1980s the Indians – both Indians who had become anonymous in the city and Indians who were newly arrived – struck back. In 1990, a collective composed of long-time inhabitants of the populous suburb of Suba, an Indian town during the colonial period and now incorporated into Bogotá, achieved the unprecedented goal of becoming the first officially recognized urban cabildo in Colombia. Efforts by other groups in the same direction have not ceased since. Shortly thereafter, another urban cabildo was approved for the Inga who had started to migrate to Bogotá from Putumayo five decades ago. Similar demands followed by long-time inhabitants of the modern municipalities of Cota, Chía, Tocancipá and Sesquilé surrounding Bogotá, which had once been colonial *pueblos de indios*. In 1994 a cabildo integrated by the residents of a *vereda* (rural dispersed settlement) in Bosa, one of the seven former municipalities that the city absorbed in 1954, obtained legal recognition. At present a large group of Quichuas who began to move to Bogotá from Otavalo, Ecuador, in the 1950s are pursuing a similar goal.

A celebratory approach to such ethnic effervescence is hardly appropriate, however. The proliferation of indigenous claims has provoked adverse reactions and ambiguous responses by the state. The urban cabildo of Suba lost its legal recognition in 1999; Bosa's case is currently under investigation; and though conforming to specific classifications of ethnicity (distinctive language and attire), the Quichuas of the city will have to struggle to obtain legal recognition due to their foreign origin. In the environs of Bogotá, the cabildo of the municipality of Cota was also disavowed by the DGAI (Weisner 1987; Fiquitiva 1999).

The volatile fate of reindigenización in Bogotá can be examined through the instructive case of the people of Suba. In just ten years a community once indigenous went from an unmarked mestizo aggregate to indigenous again, was recognized as a collective with special rights, and then was denied indigenous legal status and entitlement to special rights. Throughout this process, the identity of the people of Suba oscillated from deindianized, unmarked mestizaje to approved ge-

neric Indianness to contested Muisca ethnicity.

Similar to reindigenización elsewhere in Colombia, Suba's long-time inhabitants in the early 1990s did not display the privileged diacritics of Indianness: language, attire, and ritual. Instead, as many of the cabildo members recounted later, they had sought for several generations to erase any remaining indigenous attributes, including last names, local practices, and especially the memory of a collective but discriminated identity. Nevertheless, they were able to base their successful reindianization claims on the possession of a colonial *resguardo*. The process, however, proved to be complex. Suba's long-time inhabitants of the early 1980s were urbanites whose forbears had been peasants of indigenous origins; at that moment, they did not seek to preserve the memories of *resguardo* times. By the end of the same decade these memories burst unexpectedly back into the public sphere when avid property developers stepped in to take advantage of the city's unbridled growth by taking over the small scraps of lands that still remained in local hands.

Trying to resolve conflicting individual claims regarding the property of a small plot in El Cerro, the future head of the cabildo found instead a key piece of collective history at the National Historical Archives: the nineteenth-century legal record documenting the liquidation and ensuing division of Suba's colonial *resguardo*. He also found a long list of beneficiaries who carried the distinctive last names of long-time inhabitants: Bulla, Cabiatiba, Caita, Nivia, and Yopasá, among others. The document proved revelatory. Though local people had a vivid sense of long-standing rights to their lands, they had lost track of the collective and indigenous origins of these rights. Fragmentation of memory had accompanied the fragmentation of territory and community. Initially successful in regaining indigenous status and local government, the cabildo was not able to recover any land. Following the election of officers, the cabildo called for the community to reclaim its lands. On 9 October 1991 following a well organized march, Suba's reindianized people occupied a plot located at el Cerro del Rincón that had been invaded by an illegal developer. They were promptly met by the police who evicted them by force, arresting 42 persons.

Though the cabildo initially chose litigation as a route to restore collective properties, it gradually shifted away from this aim, and concentrated in obtaining rights reserved for ethnic groups by the 1991 Constitution: financial transfers and provision of services. But these claims foundered as well, as suspicion from healthcare providers and state officials was aroused, resulting in the reversal of the rulings that had recognized the cabildo.

As we have suggested above, in a country like Colombia where rights accorded to the general population do not lead to effective access to employment, education, and health services, the special provisions for ethnic groups provoke contestation. In 1997, Bogotá's Public Health Office denounced that the number of cabildo members with access to free health services had jumped from 1836 to 7456 in a period of six months. Accusations by cabildo members that its officers were lax in the accreditation of new members and dubiously handled other issues followed. The denunciations resulted in the dissolution of the cabildo, dictated by the Dirección General de Asuntos Indígenas (DGAI) of the Ministry of the Interior in 1999.

The harsh response of the DGAI invites examination. Even though several cabildo members in Suba had demanded corrective action for cabildo officers, the state office punished them all by liquidating the cabildo. The decision heightened ongoing internal divisions. Former members regrouped and organized two rival,

now unofficial cabildos seeking legitimacy. Resorting to legalistic action imposed since colonial times, both advanced legal petitions in favour of reinstating indigenous status. After long litigation, Colombia's state council ordered the former DGAI, transformed by that time into the Dirección de Etnias, to conduct a socio-economic study in order to determine 'the existence or not of the indigenous *parcialidad*' (a colonial term used in the past to refer to indigenous localities) of Suba. The study was to certify collective indigenous affiliation by verifying the presence or absence of a string of requisites:

A common history as well as group cohesion, a deep-rooted affiliation with the ancestral territory, worldview, traditional medicine, kinship ties and characteristic normative system that makes them different from the rest of the Colombian population.<sup>15</sup>

Later that year, the study sponsored by the Dirección de Etnias, which closely followed the state council's criteria, recommended that the cabildo of Suba should not be recognized. Its main argument centred on the absence of a common history linking its members. Rather, the study claimed, the cabildo had originated in the voluntary association of individuals who 'lacked connection to present or past ethnic pueblos' and did not possess the particular features of the Muisca culture such as its world view, roots tying them to an ancestral territory, distinctive kinship system, and so on.<sup>16</sup> In brief, according to the study, the members of the disavowed cabildo were not a community, but a recent aggregation of mostly unrelated, individuals without a common culture. Significantly, they were not 'different from the rest of the Colombian population'. In other words, according to this view, they came too close to the (mestizo) majority to be deemed as an ethnic 'Other'.

In Suba, once the initiative to recover land started to decline, the initial return to affiliation with a generic indigenous identity shifted to ethnic identification with the Muisca. Important in this shift were the 1999 ruling and the 2001 decree that ratified the study's negative judgement. Similar to the case of Putumayo, cabildo officers contested the Ministry's concerns. Like in reindianization cases elsewhere, they proclaimed that what had been lost could be recovered (see Sotomayor 1998). To this end, they organized a forum on Muisca memory and identity in 1999. There they announced that they had engaged 'in an organizational process intent on reconstructing the cultural bases of the Muisca people' (Cabildo Indígena de Suba 1999, 9). Significantly, the cabildo officers – generally men – closely followed the state council's definition of Muisca ethnicity, just as the socioeconomic study mentioned above had done in the first place. In search for the 'common history' and the 'deep-seated historical link to ancestral territory', they turned to a scholarly inquiry into their primordial past and origins. They are learning the long-gone Muisca language from dictionaries and catechisms written by colonial Spanish missionaries and are recovering their pre-Hispanic history from colonial chroniclers and some contemporary historical studies.

Though there is a general agreement about their ethnic affiliation as Muisca, there are differing approaches. Some community members, especially women, have insisted on connecting with the recent past, recovering the spirit of the meetings of the 1990s that collected the oral histories from elders. They insist, too, on the importance of re-signifying present everyday practices and knowledge, usually viewed as minor from a dominant masculine perspective. They claim that their Muisca roots lie in their traditional food ways, knowledge and usage of plants, and

ceramics and textile production. The study's argumentation shows the successful migration of the discrete, timeless, and homogenizing perspective of radical otherness espoused by classical anthropology into contemporary state classifications, revealing the connections between the production of knowledge and the exercise of power (see Rosaldo 1991; Restrepo 1997). Interestingly, on this occasion the use of anthropological knowledge by the state helped to reinforce lasting ideologies of *mestizaje*. The case of Suba exposes the Colombian state's ambivalence toward *mestizaje* and border crossing, especially when those who cross to the ethnic side prove to be too culturally and spatially close to the mixed majorities and not sufficiently different from them.

### **Conclusions: ambiguities of reindigenización and the equivocal status of mestizaje**

Common threads emerge when considering the cases of reindianization examined here. Though located in the contrasting sites of Putumayo and Bogotá, both dynamics relate to current shifts in nationhood. They also converge with the global reshaping of ethnic diversity in which the image of the pure native stands on a privileged pedestal. In a context of mounting social inequalities, indigenous *mestizos* and *colonos* of Colombia's upper Amazonia and recently urbanized *mestizos* or migrants of indigenous origins in the capital city have sought to overcome their social predicaments by becoming indigenous again.

During the emerging period of celebratory multiculturalism in Colombia, both cases were initially successful. But they were soon subjected to state scrutiny and strict control when their numbers soared and the limited circle of privileges and funding reserved for ethnic minorities appeared to be endangered. It is interesting to note that what was at risk entailed more than just setting limits to the distribution of differential rights. It also impinged upon the very same production of difference. Reindianized *cabildos* transgressed a lasting symbolic and ideological order predicated on the reproduction of Indians and blacks as the well-defined Other (Wade 2003). And they did so by loosening the persistent association between (marginal) territory and (marginal) identity. In the case of Putumayo, the Pastos contested the required links between ethnicity, space, and time. Not only did their ancestors not originate in Putumayo, but territory was not the primordial anchor of identity; even their historic connections with a distinct ethnic group from their original homelands were tenuous. In turn, the urban status of indigenous *cabildos* in Bogotá also infringed on the links established between ethnicity, space, and time: for a long time, Indianness has been attached to a type of location, persistently connected to immobile or backward rural settings, and posited as polar opposite to vibrant and modern metropolitan scenarios such as Colombia's capital city.

The dynamics of reindigenización in Putumayo and Bogotá further clashed with the hegemonic mode of production of difference in Colombia. In addition to the absence of academic and officially preferred diacritics of Indianness such as language, attire, and uses and customs, their muddled histories and ongoing cultural and racial mixtures proved to be too indeterminate. Both the mixed composition of multiethnic *cabildos* in Putumayo, where formerly deindianized Indians and *mestizo colonos* had jointly opted to become indigenous again, and the unexpected fluctuations in identity-making of formerly indigenous urbanites in Bogotá sounded too familiar and too *mestizo*, to be considered as different. The dynamics

of reindigenización also questioned received beliefs that proclaimed mestizaje as a pathway to ethnic erasure. Thus, they provoked suspicion as well as a drive to control them. In both cases, the Colombian state intervened in similar ways: the institutions in charge of defining indigenous ethnicity (DGAI in both cases, and the state council in Suba) produced detailed lists of requisites and traits that reindianized groups should demonstrate. Significantly, these lists were built on lasting constructions of radical otherness long espoused by expert knowledge (in both cases) and, more recently, by indigenous movements (in the case of Putumayo).

However, the drive to end ambiguity and multivocal interpretation of indigenous ethnicity as well as that of mestizaje did not halt reindigenización efforts in either case. Those affected by state intervention moved to fulfil the ethnic prerequisites. In Putumayo, female leaders reinforced membership and participation in *cabildos* seeking legitimation by refashioning practices of everyday life as uses and customs built on recent histories. Male leaders in Suba turned to the scholarly recuperation of a remote pre-Hispanic past and a long-lost indigenous language, while dissident women, similar to those in Putumayo, attempted to re-signify everyday life and recent histories.

But while the responses of those most affected by the state's harsh imposition of ethnic definition indicate a submission to the requirements of legitimacy demanded of the ethnic subject by the state, these responses also created a new legitimacy for the agents who promoted reverse border crossing. Reindianized *cabildos* in Putumayo shifted from being a means to an end and generic indigenous peoples in Suba became ethnic Muisca. In turn, the submission to the state's rigid ethnic definitions provoked further ambiguities. In the absence of powerful evidence for negotiation such as colonial land titles, the Pastos relied heavily on the most 'evident' proof of Indianness that they had inherited from colonial times: their ethno-racial traits, and the Muisca from Suba insisted on recovering a primordial Indianness. In other words, both have resorted to essentializing strategies that emulate those imposed and sustained by the Colombian state in the first place. Thus, on a broader scope, the two cases examined here reveal the troubled and power-ridden dynamics in the un-making and re-making of ethnic difference and mestizaje in Colombia.

Reindigenización poses several important questions. First, it probes notions of mestizaje. In their effort to become indigenous anew, subalterns of mixed racial heritage and mixed culture have aired their voices and crossed the rigid boundaries instituted to separate ethnics from non ethnics and mixed from pure peoples, thereby seeking a place of their own within the changing imaginaries of the nation. Border crossing moved in the opposite direction of deindianization and blanqueamiento, the formerly cherished end station of 'la nación mestiza'. Instead, border crossing opens up mestizaje to highlight its indigenous component.

The crossover to the ethnic side begs another crucial question: who among the significant substratum of Colombian mestizos seek to become ethnic? Despite obvious regional and local specificities, the answer lies in the social class of those individuals and groups languishing in the lowest social echelons; precisely those who have never achieved the promised end station of mestizaje are the ones who seek to redress their unflattering conditions. In other words, reindigenización flourishes where blanqueamiento has failed as an instrument for upward mobility. In this sense, reindigenización manifests a strong instrumentalist component: it pursues a legitimated cultural remedy to alleviate profound social inequalities.

The social composition of reverse border crossers poses a third line of inquiry. Though mestizos who reconstitute themselves as Indians are subalterns and poor, not all subaltern and poor mestizos opt for becoming Indian or ethnic; rather, in some cases they reject it entirely.<sup>17</sup> In other words, there are limits to border crossing, or as Pablo Vila (2000) has poignantly suggested, border crossers are opposed and controlled by border enforcers. Thus in the cases examined, reindianization efforts were questioned by 'pure' Indians, academics, and state officials who imposed rigid technocratic categories.

Reindigenización lays bare the marked hierarchies that configure mestizaje, and casts light on the hierarchies operating between ethnic subjects as well as among themselves and other subjects. At this point the process reveals its full ambivalence: while it destabilizes the essentialist push in the construction of ethnic differences, it also provokes the active response of ethnic and state subjects who benefit from the ratification of rigid borders in a period of multiethnic shift. This process will require more investigation into reindigenización and the entwinement of race, ethnicity, and class in the shifting and often volatile context of the co-construction of Indians, mestizos, whites, and blacks in Colombia

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## Notes

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at 'Mixing Races', a workshop organized by the SEPHIS programme and the University of Cape Town (South Africa), Cape Town, 17-21 June 2005. We thank Sumit Mandal, Michiel Baud, and Joanne Rappaport for their insightful comments,

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2. In the past years the debate has shifted focus to include a plurality of discourses and practices from Stutzman 1981, Whitten 1981, and Wright 1990; to Anzaldúa 1987, Hale 1997, Pineda 1997, Smith 1997a, Smith 1997b, Da Silva 1998; and Wade 2003.
3. Unless otherwise specified, all translations included in this article are ours.
4. The following new or reformed constitutions recognize the plural ethnic composition of the nation: Argentina (1994), Bolivia (1994), Brazil (1998), Colombia (1991), Costa Rica (1997), Ecuador (1998), Guatemala (1985), Nicaragua (1986), Panama (1983), Paraguay (1992), Peru (1993), Mexico (1992), and Venezuela (2000). Chile amended its Ley Indígena (Indigenous Law) in 1993. For a comparison of some of these cases see Iturralde (1997). Van Cott (2000) compares Colombia and Bolivia.
5. Financial transfers are state-budget allotments that are paid directly to indigenous and black collectives or to municipalities.
6. De la Cadena (2000) studies this issue for Peru.
7. For suggestive developments on Anzaldúa's work on borders see Alarcón (1990) and Lugo (2000).
8. See [http://www.mininteriorjusticia.gov.co/pagina5\\_subdetalle.asp?doc=276&cat=102](http://www.mininteriorjusticia.gov.co/pagina5_subdetalle.asp?doc=276&cat=102); see also [bsubdetalle.asp?doc=276&cat=102](http://www.bsubdetalle.asp?doc=276&cat=102); Castillo and Cairo n.d.; Agudelo 2003.
9. Interestingly, *mestizaje* impinges strongly upon the definition of black populations. Due to the diversity of experiences, locations, and racial and cultural mixing, not only the borders are unstable between who is black and who is mixed, but it is also difficult to fix a black ethnicity (Wade 1993). The predicaments of such instability are revealed when trying to produce census figures, which in many cases have opted for colour and phenotypic criteria, rather than cultural typologies (Barbary and Urrea 2004).
10. Colombia's national agricultural census figures indicate that the largest 10 percent of all farms, including ranches, encompass 80 percent of the farmland. The tendency to land concentration has accelerated since the 1970s (Livingstone 2004).
11. In the Andean region, indigenous *cabildos* were instituted during the colonial period by the Spanish crown as a form of indirect rule so that indigenous *caciques* would administer some local affairs and articulate with the colonial state. There, *cabildos* were recreated and became instrumental for indigenous movements in the twentieth century. In the Amazonian lowlands, including Putumayo, they have a recent history. In the 1970s, the Colombian government promoted the organization of *cabildos* and *Juntas de Acción Comunal* to mediate between state officials and the rural populations.
12. Putumayo's estimated population is 323,549 inhabitants, 68 per cent of whom live in the rural zones while the remainder lives in urban centres. The indigenous population is estimated to be between 23,500 and 33,500, according to different sources, official in the first case or provided by the indigenous regional organization, in the second case.
13. On the privatization of the Colombian public health system, see Abadía (2004) and Hernández (2000). On the differences between subsidized and indigenous health systems see Puerta (2004).
14. *Usos y costumbres*, literally uses and customs, is a colonial expression coined to designate legitimate pre-Hispanic indigenous practices. Jean Jackson (2002, 84) examines the employment of an essentialized 'trait list' by the Organización Indígena Nacional (ONIC, National Indigenous Organization) to define indigenouness. She shows how this trait list was conversant in terms and language to those of the Colombian national legislation and the social sciences.
15. Ministerio del Interior y Justicia, Dirección de Etnias, A-Z Suba, 2001-2003, 27. Sept. 13, 2001. 'Respuesta del Consejo de Estado a la impugnación de la Alcaldía al fallo de tutela a favor del Cabildo de Suba', ff. 29-47.
16. Ministerio del Interior y Justicia, Dirección de Etnias, A-Z Suba, 2001-2003. 14. 'Estudio sociocultural. Comunidad de Suba', n.d. (c. 2001), f. 151-338.
17. For indigenous *mestizos* who do not seek reindianization see Sotomayor (1998); for black *mestizos* who do not seek ethnic recognition see Cunin (2000) and Losonczy (2000).

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