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# Multiculturalism and Racialization in Latin America and the Caribbean

Bernd Reiter

City University of New York, breiter@usf.edu

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**Multiculturalism and Racialization in Latin America and the Caribbean****Multiculturalismo y racialización en América Latina y el Caribe****Bernd Reiter<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

This article, which is based on a keynote address, delivered for the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Caribbean Studies, held at the Universidad del Norte, Barranquilla, Colombia, in August of 2012, argues that Caribbean nations are in dire need to analyze and deconstruct the foundational myths upon which their national unities were constructed after achieving independence. This process is under way in such countries as Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, but has not been carried out for most Caribbean nations, maybe with the exception of Cuba. Where such efforts have not been pursued vigorously, myths of racial harmony tend to prevail. These myths, while having served the initial purpose of undermining factionalism and potential secession, are now standing in the way of recognizing cultural diversity so that it can be addressed with meaningful public policies. Before a thorough dismantling of such foundational myths of racial harmony is achieved, multiculturalism, i.e. the equal recognition of different cultures living in one country, remains elusive.

**Key terms:** Racism, multiculturalism, Caribbean, racial harmony, nationalism.

**Resumen**

Este artículo, basado en un discurso entregado con motivo del Segundo Congreso Internacional de Estudios del Caribe, celebrado en la Universidad del Norte, Barranquilla, Colombia, en agosto de 2012, argumenta que las naciones del Caribe están en extrema necesidad de analizar y deconstruir los mitos fundacionales sobre los que se construyeron sus discursos de unidad nacional después de lograr la independencia. Este proceso está en marcha en países como Brasil, México y Colombia, pero no se ha llevado a cabo en la mayoría de las naciones del Caribe, tal vez con la excepción de Cuba. Los mitos de la armonía racial tienden a prevalecer donde dichos procesos no han tenido lugar. Estos mitos, si bien han servido el propósito inicial de socavar el faccionalismo y la secesión potencial, ahora son un obstáculo para el reconocimiento de la diversidad cultural, impidiendo así que sea abordada con políticas públicas significativas. Hasta que el desmantelamiento de tales mitos fundacionales de la armonía racial no se logre, el multiculturalismo, es decir, el reconocimiento de la igualdad de las diferentes culturas bajo un mismo territorio nacional, sigue siendo un objetivo inalcanzable.

**Palabras clave:** Racismo, multiculturalismo, el Caribe, la armonía racial, nacionalismo.

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Department of Political Science, Graduate Center, City University of New York. Major Field: Comparative Politics. Researcher and professor at the University of South Florida. [breiter@usf.edu](mailto:breiter@usf.edu)

## Introduction

In this talk, I will share some thoughts and questions I have formulated for myself over the past years in my role as a researcher and scholar. During those years, I was fortunate enough to have lived in Colombia for two years (1988 – 1990), half of which I spent in Condoto, department of el Chocó. In 1992, I enrolled as a student at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil – and I ended up living in that place for eight years. In all this time, I rather worked or studied issue of democracy, democratic participation, and what is often called “problems of development.” Very early on I realized that racism is one of the main factors that blocks development and democracy in those countries.

After moving to the US, I thus focused my academic work on the question ‘how to achieve democracy and development’ which to me automatically meant: how to overcome inequality, exclusion, and stigmatization of blacks, indigenous people, and women. Instead of representing just an academic curiosity, this question was and continues to be connected to my effort to bridge the gap that often divides academic work from social activism.

To overcome this division I am actively engaged in several projects that seek to bring activists together with academics. One of the most important ones is the network of Latin American and Caribbean black community organizations which is trying to launch a USF summer training institute for Afrodescendant community leaders, to be held every July in Panama. I have launched this initiative in April of 2010 and we published the papers presented at the initial conference as a book, entitled *Afrodescendants, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas*.<sup>2</sup>

So it is with this background and experience of a practitioner and professor who teaches seminars on development, citizenship, and the making of race and nation at USF that I come to you today. I truly hope that some of my thoughts on this issue of multiculturalism and racialization in the Caribbean resonate with your own experiences and that they prove

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<sup>2</sup> Reiter, Bernd and Kimberly Eison Simmons (eds). *Afrodescendants, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press. 2012.

stimulating. I composed this talk as a sort of thought provocation – so please forgive me if some of the ideas seem radical or offensive. My aim is not to insult, but to stimulate.

I will divide this talk into two sections. First, I will talk about what from my standpoint appears to be the state of the art, or the things we know about multiculturalism and racialization in the region. Secondly, I will seek to deconstruct the notion of multiculturalism and argue that what we really are confronted with in the region is not multiculturalism, but European monoculturalism. Maybe as a German I can say: I know it when I see it.

### **The State of the Art: What do we know about Multiculturalism and Racialization in Latin America and the Caribbean?**

Much has been written about Gilberto Freyre's *Democracia Racial* as well as about José Vasconcelos's *Cosmic Race*. Freyre and Vasconcelos provided their state elites with exactly those tropes that allowed them to forge nations where difference and claim-making based on previous discrimination, was made impossible thus not only saving those emerging states from potentially devastating law suits, but also offering to the different peoples living on Mexican and Brazilian soil a way to imagine themselves as a new and united people. Freyre in particular was enthusiastic about all of the great things that the new world offered – and all of the old things that migrants to this region could leave behind – not least of which racism. Of course, this stressing of the new ran against all those that were not new to this region: indigenous people.

With the creation of powerful state apparatuses under Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, both of whom made “order and progress” their guiding principle but emphasized order over progress, the idea of “one nation, indivisible” was actively promoted. To these new states, doing so was necessary due to the large numbers of immigrants, the legacy of slavery, and in general, the presence of very heterogeneous societies all over the region. By not only actively promoting the idea that “we are all the same,” but criminalizing anybody who dared to say otherwise, these emerging states were

able to achieve stability and undermine any attempts to forge potentially costly cleavages among its populations. Both Brazil and Mexico to this day deal with the legacies of those days, because in the name of nationalism, difference was abolished, but equality did not follow.

At first, minorities seemed to have bought into these slogans of equality, as they promised to overcome a legacy of scientific racism and eugenics that clearly sought to promote whitening as the only means to achieve civilization and progress. With such racist thoughts, practices, and institutions as a backdrop, racial democracy and the idea of a cosmic race seemed very promising to all those that had previously been declared unfit, uncivilized, barbaric and degenerate mongrels by European and US scientists and their local elite adepts.

As the Brazilian case shows, the tropes of the cosmic race and the racial paradise where all people are the same became a central part of collective imaginings of these emerging nations. This was achieved through a massive promotion through all the means that these modern states had at their disposal: radio, newspaper, ministries of propaganda, and most importantly: school books. Beginning in 1930s, Latin American school children were all taught that theirs was a nation where everybody is the same, that is: brown and mixed and where the only minorities were some tribal indigenous societies living in remote jungle areas.

Like I said before: this story at first seemed appealing to almost all of the people living in any of the countries of the region. But as time went on, it became clear that this was after all only a story, propagated by powerful state elites who seemed to spare no effort in proclaiming equality while constantly enacting inequality. For those same elites did not seem comfortable when identified as mixed and half-black or half-indigenous themselves. Some of these elites went so far as to adopt indigenous names (as in Mexico), but they hardly ever seemed to associate with indigenous people, nor did they speak their languages. Latin American elites, instead, continued to associate and identify themselves with the white European colonizers that invaded these lands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, as time

went by and the poor, the excluded, and ethnic minorities started to organize for change by challenging these stories, sometimes threatening to overcome their internal divisions and joining together under one, big social movement, most Latin American elites saw the dangers in such an alliance and called on the military to avoid any such radical social changes that could topple them from power.

It took many years of clandestine organizing and careful mobilizing, sometimes under the disguise of the Catholic Church, to finally break the power of traditional elites and their military governments. Only in the 1980s, which is commonly called “the lost decade” in Latin America, were the excluded able to topple authoritarian regimes and find ways to finally make their voices heard. The 1980s was thus not a lost decade for everybody. For the historically excluded, it was a decade of re-democratization and increased organization and successful mobilization, so that finally, in the 1990s, we were able to witness changes in the social hierarchies and associated power structures of some Latin American countries. Under their new presidents, most Latin American countries changed their constitutions and for the first time officially recognized that they even had minorities. Some of them started to enact special policies targeted at those populations. Examples include the 1991 Colombian Constitution, Affirmative Action in Brazil, anti-discrimination legislation in Mexico, the 1997 Peruvian law which criminalizes discrimination, the new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, as well as several policies and projects for Garifunas in Honduras, for indigenous people in Chile, and for Afro-descendants in Colombia.

It is only now that the age-old “social question” is taking center stage among Latin American political leaders and it is not so much because they want to do that, but rather because they receive massive pressure from below. Latin American social movements are as powerful as ever and they clearly demonstrate that no change will come from above – just as American civil rights did not come from above.

At this point, then, the story of how elites constructed tropes of racial harmony and how Afro-Brazilians were able to fight back the hegemonic ideology of a racial democracy that de-legitimized their efforts to organize is well told. The Colombian story is also emerging

strongly, with the help of such outstanding scholars as Alfonso Munera<sup>3</sup> and Arturo Escobar<sup>4</sup>, among many others. Other, similar, stories are struggling to reach the surface of national and international attention, thanks to the pioneering work of such scholars as Peter Wade<sup>5</sup> and Alejandro de la Fuente,<sup>6</sup> whose work focuses on race and nationalism in Cuba. The situation of Bolivian indigenous and black people is slowly taking shape, as is the story of those groups in Peru and Ecuador. We now also know more about the situation of indigenous and black groups living in Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Nicaragua, thanks to the outstanding work of people like Juliet Hooker<sup>7</sup>.

The same is not true for the Caribbean. There are very few analyses of how national identity favored white and brown people over black people, however defined. Every time I have a student wanting to write about racial identity and nationalism in the Dominican Republic, they face a shortage of relevant literature. But the Dominican Republic is not the worst. How about racial and social hierarchies in Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Jamaica, the smaller leeward and windward islands, and the leeward Antilles? We know next to nothing about the forging of nationalism in the Caribbean – maybe because it is a difficult topic for this region, as independence arrived late, or never to Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Aruba, Curaçao, Guadeloupe, and Martinique and the question of national identity emerges together with the question of independence.

For whatever reason, research on nationalism, multiculturalism, and cultural rights in the Caribbean is scarce and where it exists, it does not reach a broader audience, maybe because other problems seem more important. I want to argue here today that research on how nations are defined and by whom this defining is done is of the utmost importance and consequence. The same is true for research on the social movements that resist such violently inclusive constructions of nationalism.

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<sup>3</sup> Munera, Alfonso. *El fracaso de la nación. Región, clase y raza en el Caribe colombiano (1717- 1821)*. Cartagena: Ancora Editores. 1998

<sup>4</sup> Escobar, Arturo. *Territories of Difference*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Wade, Peter. *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. London: Pluto Press. 2010

<sup>6</sup> Fuente, Alejandro de la. *A Nation for All*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Hooker, Juliet. *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2009.

We know this, for example, about Jamaica, the birthplace of Black Nationalism. In Jamaica, paralleling the story of most of Latin America, “out of many, one people” has remained an empty promise and a promise that only superficially disguises the deep-seated colorism that informs the social hierarchies of that country. In doing that, colorism is a racial project, even if it differs from those enacted and reproduced elsewhere. The story how Jamaican brown nationalism was constructed, by whom, and with what means, however, remains to be told and explained. Only very recently have social scientists begun to tackle these issues. My friend and colleague Maziki Thame<sup>8</sup>, a political scientist of the University of Jamaica, Mona Campus, wrote that in Jamaica, brown-skin people like Manley and Bustamante successfully mobilized the black masses – only to secure office for themselves and excluding blacks. By doing so, they confirmed the racial project of Jamaica, which is one based on colorism. Haiti has a similar history, not yet coherently told (despite the excellent work of such authors as Laurent Dubois<sup>9</sup> and C. L. R. James, author of *The Black Jacobins*<sup>10</sup>). In post-revolutionary Haiti, light-skin mulattoes took over the privileges of white elites and they have tried to hold and defend these privileges to this day. Thus even in Haiti colorism informs merit, beauty, and political power. Or think about the Dominican Republic. There, colorism is so pervasive that blackness is vehemently denied by the big majority of the country.

To capture these constructions and ideological justifications of political power, merit, beauty, and social hierarchy, one needs to see beyond skin color and whiteness vs. blackness. Biology is not the relevant factor here. It is how biology is interpreted, categorized, and hierarchized. Being white, black, brown, mulatto, mestizo, etc. means different things in different countries and not all labels carry the same value everywhere. Anybody trying to explain Latin American or Caribbean social and racial hierarchies to North Americans knows this from experience. This is so because racial projects are national projects. They emerge when political elites decide where to draw the dividing line among the people living under one state. That is why we talk about racial regimes; because state

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<sup>8</sup> Thame, Maziki. “Reading Violence and Postcolonial Decolonization through Fanon: The Case of Jamaica.” *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.7, n.7 (November 2011): 75-93

<sup>9</sup> Dubois, Laurent. *A Colony of Citizens*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2006.

<sup>10</sup> James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins*. New York: Vintage. 1989.



power is involved in these projects. The political elites of any country, at a certain point in time, normally right around independence, have to decide how to best achieve their main goals, which are: first, to secure enough followers so they can stay in power, i.e. to defend their political supremacy; and second, to use this political power to secure their economic supremacy, i.e. to defend their inherited economic privileges. These two motives are universal – at least we can assume them to be for analytical purposes, so we can then see how much insights these assumption render. Normally, they explain a lot.

The central question that political elites face after independence is with whom to ally and against whom. Anthony Marx<sup>11</sup> has illustrated the analytical power of this framework. The answer to this question for political elites is simple: ally with the strong, against the weak. If the strong are sufficient in number, or sufficiently armed, we end up getting typical white-dominated planter societies, based on racial regimes where the white inheritors of colonial rule control all of the social, economical, political, and even cultural life of a country. They rule and decide what is worthy and beautiful. This is the story of the USA.

If the political elites are not powerful enough or too small in number and if they do not have enough obvious allies, the story gets more complicated. Under such circumstances, allies have to be made. This is normally achieved through the dissemination of ideologies that rely either explicitly or implicitly on the idea of national unity and mestizaje. However, none of these ideologies are strong enough to break the power of the usage of whiteness as a sort of symbolic capital, inherited from colonial time and used as a tool to secure and defend privilege. By ordering life around the doctrine “the whiter the better” political elites are able to weaken potential power contenders, breaking them apart. Look at Brazil for a prime example. To this day, the black majority is unable to overcome its internal divisions and elect black candidates to political office. Or look at Colombia, where majorities have been treated as minorities ever since independence and their role in the country’s history systematically denied. In all of this, whiteness is not a biological certainty, but a symbolic capital carefully constructed and negotiated in daily interactions.

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<sup>11</sup> Marx, Anthony. *Making Race and Nation*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1998.

What is the story of nation building and race-making in the Caribbean? Maybe with the exception of Cuba, we do not know. What we do know is that nation-making and race-making go hand in hand. Race should thus not be treated as a cause, or independent variable, but as an effect or outcome, a dependent variable. When national elites forge nations that serve them and their interests, some groups are placed outside of the realm of citizenship. Because they are excluded and mistreated, they become a race. Race, thus, is a shared experience of exclusion and mistreatment, not a biological reality. If Colombian elites tomorrow decide to systematically discriminate against all those people with big noses, then the people with big noses will eventually become a race and self-identify as such. Look at the history of the Jews in Europe or the Japanese Burakumin for examples on how “races” are made through discrimination. However, discrimination creates solidarity and brings people together that otherwise would have nothing in common, thus forging “racial solidarity” which has been and can still easily be used as a way for political mobilization. Think of the case of the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda as a prime example.

The choices that emerging national elites have are relatively few. In some countries, elites ally with the strongest groups against those unable to pose enough of a threat to national unity, thus creating apartheid and segregation regimes. This is the case for the US and such countries as South Africa. In others, elites are able to diffuse potential opposition of the masses by disseminating ideologies of amalgamation and mestizo nations. This is the case for most of Latin America and the Caribbean. Accordingly, the racial regimes look and operate very differently in different countries – but they all achieve the same outcome: to secure traditional elite privilege in the political and economic spheres by invoking skin color as a marker of merit, beauty, and higher level of civilization.

So what does this mean for the Caribbean? And what can be said about multiculturalism and racialization in the Caribbean? I will elaborate on this question in the second part of my talk: The first question we need to ask when discussing multiculturalism is what the word means. This leads me to the second, and final, part of my talk.

**What is “multiculturalism?”**

From my reading of such authors as Charles Taylor<sup>12</sup> and Will Kymlicka<sup>13</sup>, multiculturalism stands for different groups living together under one nation, where the cultural particularities of each one receives equal respect and treatment from the government and the different citizens. It is based on the recognition of groups perceived as being different. The classic example for this is Canada, where Anglophones and Francophones were able to defend their different cultures and languages – as well as the native Inuit, who achieved state autonomy from the central government in 1999 by creating the autonomous territory of Nunavut. It comes to no surprise that both authors mentioned above are Canadians.

**What are the prerequisites for something like this to happen?**

First, there must be different groups living under one nation state. Secondly, these groups must interact with each other as groups and recognize each other's claims for recognition and difference. To the best of my knowledge, none of these two preconditions hold in the Caribbean. At the level of groups, it appears that there are no groups in countries like Jamaica, Haiti, or the Dominican Republic. Precisely due to a very pervasive framing of “one nation, undivided” the legitimacy for groupness has been severely undermined almost everywhere in Latin America and the Caribbean. Black social movements have thus had a very difficult time almost everywhere when trying to forge some sort of group solidarity among their nonwhite populations. The only exceptions come from places where there was a rather late migration of West Indians into the nation, as in Panama, Honduras, Costa Rica, and the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast. In all those cases, those immigrants were able to hold on to their distinct language (mostly English) and their Caribbean culture. In most cases, these groups also did not merge into a larger black group with the local “colonials.” Instead, they carved out positions of relative privilege for themselves, which required a

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Kymlicka, Will. *Multicultural Citizenship*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1996.

distancing from the local black population. So with the exception of these late black migrant populations, there are no groups in a strict sense in the Caribbean.

For groups to take on an ontological reality, people have to first believe and act accordingly. Sometimes, this is achieved through statistics, because statistics and particularly censuses create different categories to divide the population. Those categories can be of the utmost importance, as such authors as Melissa Noble<sup>14</sup> have shown for Brazil. Her work, just like most of the work on this topic, relies on the groundbreaking research of Benedict Anderson<sup>15</sup> and Eric Hobsbawm<sup>16</sup>. What all these authors demonstrate is that census data is very sensitive and can be very explosive, because it provides those that seek to construct groupness with the necessary arguments and evidence. This is the insight of Rogers Brubaker<sup>17</sup>, when he discusses the role of “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” in forging groupness.

As censuses are conducted by states and states can be assumed, in most cases, to be controlled by traditional elites, it becomes clear why most states are so reluctant to provide census information. Because census information is like ammunition. Just imagine what could have happened if we had reliable information about black unemployment compared to white unemployment, black and white educational levels, incarceration rates, etc. in Caribbean and Latin American countries.

Well – I think everybody can imagine what happens: It is enough to look at the US to get a sense. From the US case, we can learn that categories reflect back on people’s lives and they start using these categories to self-identify. This is the biggest fear of many elites in most of the Caribbean basin – even those where “whiteness” is not a biological reality at all and

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<sup>14</sup> Noble, Melissa. *Shades of Citizenship*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso. 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Brubaker, Rogers. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2006.

almost nobody can claim it. This fear is probably best summed up by the book title of Brazilian author Celia de Azevedo: *Onda Negra Medo Branco*<sup>18</sup>.

To come back to my topic, I suggest that the first learning in this reflection is that groups are social phenomena that need to be mutually recognized for them to have any effect on real life. Even more: they need to be officially recognized by states for them to have any real consequence in such fields as politics and policy, that is: areas that affect power and privilege. Without such recognition, there can be no multiculturalism.

For this to happen, groups must first be proposed, or invented, and then the idea of a specific groupness must be actively disseminated by ethno-political entrepreneurs and their organizations. In this process, the state and the media are of crucial importance and no groupness will emerge without an active dissemination of this way of defining one nation. So for now, my diagnosis is that, with the exception of indigenous groups, there are no groups in Latin America and the Caribbean and hence there is no multiculturalism.

### **What do we have instead?**

I would argue that we have nations that are biologically brown, black, and mixed but that remain firmly European in their culture and value system. To this day, my sense is that the Caribbean is a sort of Tropical Europe, where those that were able to secure colonial privileges for themselves have actively defended them by claiming some sort of whiteness, or Europeaness, or civilizational advantage for themselves.

This is even more astounding if we consider that in some islands, there are virtually no biological whites. So what we are facing today all over the Caribbean Basin is a **European monoculturalism** that is sometimes sustained despite the absence of Europeans and their white descendants. This is possible, because the label “white” really stands for privilege, where reference to whiteness is just one way out of many to justify such undeserved privilege. Of all the possible ways to achieve this, whiteness is particularly effective, due to

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<sup>18</sup> Azevedo, Celia de. *Onda Negra Medo Branco*. São Paulo: Ana Blume. 1987.

its colonial reference. But others work just as well, so that we are confronted with local varieties of defenindig privilege that make use of skin color, religion, descent, gender, etc.

**So to conclude:**

Biological diversity has nothing to do with cultural, or even national, recognition. What the example of the Caribbean shows us is precisely that it is possible to construct monocultural systems of value and social, economical, as well a political hierarchies that are constructed through their relation to whiteness and Europeanness – even in the absence of whites and Europeans in the country. This is mind-boggling – as anybody reading the work of Frantz Fanon quickly understands.

The only serious contentions against this European monoculturalism comes from Black Nationalism and Rastafarianism, thus from Jamaica. Even the pretty strong negritude movement around such authors as Aime Cesaire was not able to effectively challenge this monoculturalism, probably because negritude has remained a literary movement and as such never truly threatened white economic and political supremacy, nor did it challenge the state.

Rastafarianism and Black Nationalism, to the contrary, have done precisely that an in doing so they represent the only true, and known, multicultural and multinational projects in the region, even if there are others, such as the movement of Garifunas, Cimarrones, Palenqueros, and others. What sets Rastafarianism and Black Nationalism apart is that they are political projects that are constructed on notions of difference and recognition that automatically lead to process of racialization and the forging of racial solidarity that is able to bridge the internal divisions caused by the biological, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of all those that form part of it. Through framing and disseminating their destinies as one and the same, they actively engage in racialization for the sake of creating a race and with it, racial solidarity. In doing that, they go 100 percent against the dominant trope of unity, harmony, and oneness, which is why these movements are perceived as so radical and threatening by traditional elites.

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