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Common Ways to See Differently: Race, *Mestizaje*, and *Criollismo* as Seen by Blind People in Chile and Venezuela

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Abstract

This article explores understandings of race, *mestizaje*, and *criollismo* among blind people in Chile and Venezuela. It demonstrates that visually perceived markers are not self-evidently constitutive of race as a social category. Participants show sound knowledge of racialized categories but also reveal significant differences in the identification of racial markers and in the way that race informs their understandings of *mestizaje* and *criollismo* in Chile and Venezuela. In Chile, where racial markers convey identity fixity and intersect overtly with social class categorizations, *mestizaje* and *criollismo* are conceptualized as separate elements of national identity. In Venezuela, where racial markers convey more identity porosity, *mestizaje* and *criollismo* are conceptualized as intertwined foundations of national identity. These social configurations counter naturalizing conceptualizations of race and enable a reconsideration of how different notions of admixture continue to permeate ideals of personhood and social relations in Latin American countries. They also erode academic conceptualizations of race that unwittingly contribute to legitimize the naturalization of race in public discourse—and potentially in governmental policy and practice.

Keywords: Chile; Venezuela; criollo; *mestizaje*; race; indigeneity

Resumen

Este artículo explora ideas sobre raza, *mestizaje* y *criollismo* entre personas ciegas en Chile y Venezuela. Los resultados muestran que los rasgos personales perceptibles a través de la vista están lejos de constituir de forma inequívoca la raza como categoría social. Los participantes demuestran conocimiento sólido de categorías raciales, pero también revelan diferencias significativas en la identificación de marcadores raciales y en la forma en la que la raza moldea sus formas de entender el *mestizaje* y el *criollismo* en Chile y Venezuela. En Chile, donde los marcadores raciales connotan rigidez identitaria e interseccionan abiertamente con categorizaciones de clase social, el *mestizaje* y el *criollismo* se conceptualizan como elementos separados de la identidad nacional. En Venezuela, donde los marcadores raciales connotan porosidad identitaria, el *mestizaje* y el *criollismo* se conceptualizan como fundaciones entrelazadas de la identidad nacional. Estas configuraciones sociales desmienten conceptualizaciones de raza que naturalizan esta categoría y permiten una reconsideración de la forma en la que las nociones de mezcla continúan permeando ideas del sujeto-persona y las relaciones sociales en países Latinoamericanos. También erosionan conceptualizaciones académicas de raza que inadvertidamente contribuyen a legitimar su naturalización en el discurso público—y potencialmente en la legislación y práctica gubernamental.

Palabras clave: Chile; Venezuela; Criollo; *mestizaje*; carrera; indigeneidad

There are multiple signs of the renaturalization of race in public discourse, which has been fostered by increasingly organized political movements across the world, ranging from the overtly racist to racially tinged nativist movements. Yet this renaturalization is also facilitated by scholarship that, as I discuss, abandons constructivist grounds in the conceptualization of race. Against this backdrop, this article discusses a research project whose results destabilize a key pillar of race-naturalizing discourse, namely the “visual idea of race” (Tamimi Arab 2018, 99). This idea maintains the concept of race linked to the assumption that its markers are pre-culturally-inscribed in visually perceptible phenotypical variance and thereby in biological substance. This article examines how blind people in two Latin American countries, Chile and Venezuela, understand racial categories, and its findings undermine the still widespread notion that elements of (visible) phenotype are self-evidently constitutive of racial differentiation. Additionally, it demonstrates that the principles of anthropological comparison remain effective when showing why race is a socially constructed and normalized category—not a pre-socially-apprehensible reality inscribed in the substance of human bodies, which is what race-naturalizing knowledge production contends. The comparison of the markers with which Chileans and Venezuelans associate indigeneity reveals the (differently) constructed character of racialized social categories. It also reveals substantive divergences in the conceptualization of the relation between *mestizaje* and *criollismo*—concepts that continue to play a pivotal role in shaping notions of national personhood and racialized relations in both countries.¹

This article thus intervenes in ongoing disputes over the concept of race. For over a century, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have sought to expose the flaws and risks of race-naturalizing knowledge production. Some of these efforts have been directed at academic perspectives that reproduce conceptualizations of race as a category defined by inheritable substance (be it biological or cultural), identifiable in three distinguishable streams. The first of these streams is scientific racism proper, which lends scientific authority to a political belief in biologically grounded collective hierarchies. This form of racism has never vanished from academia, and even at the peak of its international discredit in the wake of World War II, with UNESCO coordinating international works to expose its social dangers (Giraud and Martín-Sánchez 2013), it was sustained by academic institutions in different world regions (Dubow 1995; Comas 1961). In the US, the country that consolidated a dominant international position (also in scholarly production) in this period, academics cultivating that pseudoscience continued to receive significant private funding in the 1960s and 1970s, further counting on sympathetic journals to amplify the reach of their ideas (Tucker 2002).

Second, some scholars embrace the concept of biological races while trying to detach it from scientific racism. Returning to the US case, given its international influence, approximately 50 percent of physical anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s still approached the concept as scientifically sound (Cartmill 1999). Those scholars presented themselves as serving scientific truth, seeking to advance public health agendas and to overcome aspects of social inequality. Significantly, to date, the very same positioning has driven streams of scientific research that reproduce biologicistic conceptions of race. This is apparent in the search for “race-specific” therapies, which is a burgeoning field in medical research and, more generally, in genomic science, where racialized categories permeate research on genetic ancestry (Dressler, Oths, and Gravlee 2005; Wade et al. 2014). Indexing the facility with which preconceptions about race inform research design, such pursuits are developed in lack of conclusive evidence to support scientifically meaningful

¹ This article refers to *criollismo* as the set of socially predominant ideas and assumptions about what “being criollo” means.

correspondence between racialized groups and the presence of the DNA-sequence variants in which geneticists ground their research (Cooper, Kaufman, and Ward 2003).

Third, the naturalization of race is also reproduced by “raciological” social theory that conflates political and moral behaviors with essentialized biophysical or cultural traits (Wolf 1994, 4). Such social theorization reaffirms premises and logics that scientific racism depends on when defining and ordering human diversity, including conceptualizations of humankind as a set of subgroups (pre)defined by hereditary characteristics (Ingold 2008). These concepts pivot on the idea that an essential substance is transmitted from generation to generation among the members of (pre)defined human subgroups. This perspective evidently sustains raciological thinking when the substance in question is conceived of as biological, but potentially also when such substance is conceived of as cultural.

When raciology underpins theorization, mere terminological replacements of *race* with *culture* or *ethnicity* become insufficient to counter fundamental premises of scientific racism, as historical precedents demonstrate. Regimes of racial segregation have resorted to the concept of inheritable cultural difference to sanction the existence of distinct human subgroups, with South Africa’s Apartheid as a case in point. Werner Eiselen, a leading ideologue of Apartheid, elevated cultural difference (not biological race) as a legitimate justification to maintain segregation between racialized groups (Gordon 1988, 540–541; Kuper 1999, xii–xiii).

The responses that scholars and activists produce to counter those three academic streams of race naturalization have, of course, been varied, partly because those responses are necessarily molded by the specific codes of scholarly validation that they set to critique and partly because their authors do not always share a common conceptualization of race—an ongoing challenge in the social sciences (Mullings 2005; Doane 2006). Nevertheless, all responses to race-naturalizing scholarship remain united in their affirmation of a premise that needs underscoring amid renewed transmutations of scientific racism, raciology, and its folk expressions: any reality that we may grant to the concept of race is the product of historically informed processes and practices.

This very same premise orients scholars concerned with discursive naturalizations of race that are (re)produced from beyond academic spheres. A challenging example of that extra-academic naturalization motivates the research on which this article is based—namely, public discourse that gives preeminence to the visual idea of race. The wide reach of such discourse is well illustrated by the facility with which the color-blind metaphor became central to debates around racism in the US and other the English-speaking countries: that sight-centered metaphor gained (and maintains) a prominent position in those debates by striking a chord in widespread preconceptions about race—notwithstanding critiques of the color-blind rhetoric as a disguise of ongoing forms of racialized discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2018) and as an ableist conflation of the lack of eyesight with ignorance (Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison 2017).

This article discusses the findings of a research project designed in dialogue with scholarship that unsettles preconceptions about the visual idea of race (and the raciology it sustains). A recent instantiation of such scholarship brought empirical tension into the logics underpinning the color-blind metaphor by exploring how blind people in the US understand race (Obasogie 2010). It showed blind research participants associating race primarily, though not exclusively, with visual traits such as skin color, thus buttressing the contention that visually perceived markers (and thereby biophysical differences) are not self-evidently constitutive of race as a social category.

My project explores perceptions of race among people with visual impairment in Latin America, specifically in Chile and Venezuela, and its results underpin that same contention. Yet additionally, these results unsettle raciological perspectives by reaffirming a basic constructivist tenet: the meaning associated with configurations of race is molded

by structures of relationships and experiences that form through distinctive national histories (Segato 1998). This article buttresses that tenet in two complementary ways. First, showing that participants from Chile and Venezuela associate race in general and indigeneity in particular with differing identity markers that express varying degrees of overt intersection with perceptions of class hierarchies. Second, examining how those associations interplay with differently construed understandings of *mestizaje* and *criollismo*. This second exercise makes a significant contribution because, while both concepts remain central to the configuration of experiences and ideals of national identity and personhood in Chile and Venezuela, they have received uneven scholarly scrutiny. *Mestizaje* and associated ideas about racial democracy continue to generate abundant discussion given their “persistence [even] in the face of decades of sustained critiques” (Wade 2017, 484; for a review essay similarly underscoring the prominence of these questions, see Cohen 2022). In contrast, explorations of *criollismo* (and its relations with ideas of *mestizaje*) remain underdeveloped, despite the importance that the criollo concept has in defining the (different) place that race and cultural admixture are assigned in the production of narratives of national identity in Latin American countries.

Background and methodology

In Latin America, racialized categories and references to phenotypical difference have been central to characterizations of individual and national bodies since the colonial period, and they remain so even as more recent languages of national diversity minimize the social significance of phenotypical difference (Nieves Delgado, García Deister, and López Beltrán 2017). Skin difference and color categories occupy a prominent position in those characterizations and, more broadly, in everyday processes of racial categorization (Ramírez 2002).

Yet the meanings ascribed to color categories have been shaped in national formations in which the concept of *mestizaje* and, more generally, notions of admixture pervade common understandings of national selves and public debates about the extent to which, beyond their everyday usages, such categories can be used to inform policy. Latin American countries thus provide a rich platform to explore expressions of the visual idea of race, the logics that sustain it, and its connections with social formations in which ideas about mixedness permeate narratives of national identification.

My focus on Chile and Venezuela is motivated by additional considerations. As Latin American authors frequently remark, references to phenotypical difference and the usage of color categories in processes of social categorization do not imply that the meaning ascribed to these categories can be abstracted from the social relations they articulate and express in concrete locations (Stefoni 2016; Chaves Chamorro 2002). My comparison draws on those contributions, examining cases from two countries that, in several respects, project contrasting national images and self-representations within and beyond the region. Key contrasts are identifiable in the ways recent national census designs reflect and condition conceptualizations of racial diversity and *mestizaje* in Chile and Venezuela.

National censuses in both countries dichotomize their populations as indigenous or nonindigenous, and these statistics regained prominence as governmental technologies under the influence of modernizing positivist ideologies, in the 1870s in Venezuela and in the early 1900s in Chile (Gundermann, Vergara, and Foerster 2005; Angosto-Ferrández 2014).² However, in 2011, the Venezuelan Bureau of Statistics introduced a design that, maintaining that dichotomization, additionally enabled the nonindigenous population to

² Chile's late arrival to the positivist modernization of censuses as governmental tools, which in several Latin American countries occurred in the 1870s and 1880s, was conditioned by particular historical conditions. Military conflicts maintained the state administrations in a process of unstable consolidation until late in the nineteenth

self-identify as Black, Afro-descendent, Moreno/a, White, or Other. This novelty accorded with supranationally fostered changes in Latin American censuses that, in the past three decades, have increased the number of ethno-racial categories that classify the population (Del Popolo 2008; Martínez Novo 2014). In Venezuela, these changes entailed a reformulation of a still predominant narrative of Venezuelan nationality as sustained by three racialized groups and their admixtures: Indigenous (American), Black (African), and White (European) (Wright 1990). This narrative, which situates notions of *mestizaje* as a core of national identity, has nonetheless been partly detached from its whitening dimensions through combinations of grassroots activism, scholarship, and popular cultural expressions of resistance to anti-Black racism, which have a long history in Venezuela.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Afro-descendent heritage became the focus of influential studies through which progressive Venezuelan intellectuals countered eugenicist policy and ideological conceptualizations of African contributions to nationality as a question of the past (Sojo 1943; Liscano 1973; see also Madero 2010). Additionally, the literature denouncing anti-Black racism and documenting expressions of resistance to such racism also constitutes a significant body of critique that continues to grow to this date (Mosquera Muriel 2022; Montañez 1993; Pérez 1994). Beyond scholarship, organized expressions of an Afro-Venezuelan social movement mobilizing demands of recognition and economic justice have had a significant political presence at least since the 1980s (García 2007). This movement influenced transformations in the census design of 2011 as well as the incorporation, over the past two decades, of distinctive Afro-Venezuelan agendas in various state agencies (Ruelle-Orihuela and Caballero-Arias 2017)—although members of the Afro-Venezuelan movement underscore the limited impact of these changes beyond nominal modifications in state agencies (Pineda 2019).

In contrast, Chilean censuses maintain the indigenous-nonindigenous dichotomization in consonance with a configuration of national identities that largely disregards Afro-descendent contributions to nationality. Such conceptualization is not merely conditioned by demographic factors and the oft-alleged smaller proportion of the Afro-descendent population that, relative to other Latin American countries, lived in the territory during the colonial period (Oliva 2016). Indeed, by the late eighteenth century, just decades before republican independence, nearly 18 percent of the population of Santiago, and over 20 percent of the population of regions such as Coquimbo, was enumerated as Black or *mulato* in censuses conducted by institutions linked to colonial administration such as Santiago's bishopric (Cussen 2006, 53). Historical records show how such a presence, amid a weakening of the colonial order of castes based on ideals of blood purity, caused anxieties among elites who were seeking to preserve the principles of the colonial order (Undurraga Schüler 2009). In this light, the erasure of African contributions to nationality has been interpreted by Chilean researchers and activists as “one of the forms in which racism is expressed in this country” (Oliva 2016, 187) and as the outcome of an oligarchic “nationalist pigmentocracy” that negates the condition of Chileanness to the black population (Campos 2017; see also Salgado 2012).

Methodology

This article draws on semistructured interviews and focus groups with people with visual impairments, including blindness, in Chile and Venezuela. Participants were identified through a combination of passive snowballing and the mediation of private organizations that support them. A total of thirty-five participants were interviewed in Chile (Santiago;

century. The so-called Occupation of Araucanía, spanning over two decades, ended in 1883. The Pacific War, a confrontation in which Chile faced Peru and Bolivia, finished in 1884.

south—Puerto Montt, Los Lagos; mid-north—La Serena, Coquimbo) and in Venezuela (Caracas; south—Ciudad Bolívar and San Félix, Bolívar State). Focus groups were held in La Serena, Chile, and in Venezuela in Ciudad Bolívar and San Félix.

The selection of these locations was in part conditioned by practical considerations, namely, access to participants through organizations of support in cities where I have lived or conducted field research. But including locations from different regions was primarily a purposive decision based on knowledge about regionally informed variance in perceptions and conceptualizations of racial identities. In Chile and Venezuela, particular regions are more strongly associated with indigeneity and racialized diversity than others, a culturally mediated perception reflected in and reinforced by key areas of policy design such as census making. Until 1952, the enumeration of the indigenous population in Chilean censuses had a “regional character” that, in practice, constrained the recognition of indigeneity to the southern regions of the country, associated with the Mapuche or “Araucano” population (Gundermann, Vergara, and Foerster 2005). Similarly, until 2001, the Venezuelan census enumerated the indigenous population in only eight of twenty-three states, given technical definitions of indigeneity that preidentified those eight states as “traditional” indigenous territories (Angosto-Ferrández 2015, 32–39). In relation to these geographies of racialization, three of the locations where I conducted interviews are in regions that national censuses historically associated with indigeneity: Puerto Montt in Chile and Ciudad Bolívar and San Félix in Venezuela.

This study was not designed in search of statistical representativeness of the national populations, but the personal and demographic profiles of participants were notably varied, as indexed by information they provided on age, sex, occupation, highest educational qualification obtained, place of residence, region where they spent their first fifteen years, degree of visual impairment, life period when blindness or sight loss was identified (i.e., at birth or at a later stage in life). See Table 1 for a summary of participants’ characteristics:

Table 1. Demographic profiles

	Participants	Sex	Socioeconomic background	Interview locations	Focus group locations
Chile	17	9 women 8 men	Low/middle classes	Santiago La Serena Puerto Montt	La Serena
Venezuela	16	6 women 10 men	Low/middle classes	Caracas Ciudad Bolívar San Félix	Ciudad Bolívar San Félix

In Chile, participants included nine women and eight men; in Venezuela, six women and ten men. They all between the ages of twenty and seventy, and all from socioeconomic backgrounds that included members of lower and middle classes (as indexed by occupation, educational qualification, and aspects of personal biography discussed during interviews). Nearly half (sixteen) of the interviewees were blind, and others presented their vision in terms of “remnants,” whether in conceptual terms (e.g., “I distinguish pale or dark contrasts,” “I perceive figures but not heights or colors”) or as in a medically established percentage (e.g., “20 percent”). The life stage in which participants identified or were diagnosed with blindness or loss of vision varied too, ranging from people who were blind from birth to those who had lost their sight in their forties through illness or accident. Participants also self-identified in relation to the ethno-racial categories used in

their respective national census (2012 for Chile and 2011 for Venezuela), and all official census categories found representation among interviewees in both countries, though not in direct proportion to the census results. In what follows, I refer to elements of personal and demographic information when they help situate interviewees' comments in relation to my interpretations.

Questions in the structured part of the interviews revolved around four themes: categories of racial classification (included and not included in censuses); *mestizaje*, *criollismo*, and the relations between these two concepts; racism and discrimination; and racial diversity in Latin America. In selecting these themes and designing questions, I drew on the literature on race in Latin America but also on previous research and personal experiences that informed my thinking about adequate communicative forms and "how to ask" (Briggs 1986). Since 2004, I have spent ten years living in Venezuela, including for five consecutive years, and I have visited Chile multiple times, including periods of field research of up to three months. In these countries, race and racial issues are topics that people generally engage with easily, even in casual conversation (if sometimes negating their relevance), yet they are topics that generate divergent opinions and, for some people, distress and strong sentiments of injustice—for example, in recollections of episodes of discrimination. Considering this, I opened interviews discussing national censuses, which enable an incursion into racial questions through a language (that of demographics and statistics) generally perceived as politically neutral (Nobles 2000). Participants were invited to self-identify in relation to census categories, to comment on their understanding of those categories, and to discuss other racial categories that, not being included in the census, they were familiar with. The opening questions for Chile were as follows:

- Question 24 of the 2012 census was "Do you belong to any indigenous (originary) people? Yes/No" If the answer was yes, the enumerator asked: "Which one do you belong to? Mapuche, Aymara, Rapa Nui, Likan Antai, Quechua, Colla, Diaguita, Kawésqar, Yagán o Yámana, Other (specify)?" How did you/would you self-identify in relation to these census questions? Why?
- What other ethno-racial categories are you familiar with that do not appear in the census?

The opening questions for Venezuela were as follows:

- In 2011, the census asked whether you self-identify as indigenous or not. Those who did were asked to name the indigenous people they belong to, and those who did not were asked to self-identify as Black, Afro-descendent, Moreno/a, White, or Other. How did you/would you self-identify according to those categories? Why?
- What other ethno-racial categories are you familiar with that do not appear in the census?
- What does this [particular] census category mean to you?

These questions sparked interview dynamics that generally took the form of a "conversation with a purpose" (Robson 1993 via Josephides 2020, 96), which I needed to refocus only occasionally with my questions for both countries:

- Do you identify the racial identity of people you interact with?
- Can you identify an indigenous person when interacting with her/him? If so, how?
- What do you understand by *mestizaje*? How do you identify or describe a mestizo person?

- What do you understand by *criollo*? How do you identify or describe a *criollo* person?
- What is the relation between the terms *mestizo* and *criollo*?

I asked one additional question of Chile: “How do you describe the figure of the Chilean *roto*? Does the category *roto* have racial connotations?”

Contrary to ableist and sight-centered assumptions reproduced discursively by the visual idea of race, I did not come across any expressions of lack of knowledge on the themes being discussed. Participants demonstrated sound familiarity with racial categories and discourses in their respective countries and, generally, ease in speaking about them. Some remarked that race is not something that influenced their social attitude or value judgments, with comments such as “I don’t place any importance on that” and “I converse and converse and don’t ask.” Others, particularly in Venezuela, remarked that they could rarely identify in racial terms the people they interacted with, and that if they tried to do so, they “sometimes got it right and sometimes got it wrong,” as a participant from Ciudad Guayana put it. Rather than a lack of knowledge about racial discourse and categories, such comments illustrate the lingering strength of the experience of *mestizaje* in Venezuela and other parts of Latin America, as I discuss later.

The following discussion is organized in sections that partly converge with the established research themes and partly respond to alternative themes that emerged during interviews. The first section explores the markers that participants associated with indigeneity as a racialized identity. Through this focus on indigeneity, I examine current understandings of that racialized dichotomization of the national population (indigenous-nonindigenous) that for over a century has been pivotal in structuring census design in Chile and Venezuela. The second section explores current understandings of *mestizaje* and *criollismo* in these two nations. These sections make apparent key differences in the configuration of race in Chile and Venezuela, which I discuss in the conclusion.

Markers of indigeneity

Indigeneity is associated with distinctive identity markers in both countries. However, the way those markers characterize indigenous people as distinguishable members of society differs notably, even when the same marker is mentioned in both countries. Some markers are phenotypical and perceptible only visually, whereas others fully depend on senses other than sight as conduits of perception. I use that distinction to organize this section, starting with the discussion of nonvisual markers of indigeneity: linguistic and speech features, surnames, clothing, and odor.

Linguistic and speech features

Participants pointed out distinctive linguistic and speech features as markers of indigeneity in both countries. This was much more recurrent in Chile, where illustrative remarks included: “I think I’d identify indigenous people by their accents . . . Mapuche people extend [*arrastran*] the ‘ch’ sound,” noted Mercedes, born and raised in Santiago.³ Marta, also from the same city, stated that indigenous people “speak more languidly [*más arrastradito*], and at times one cannot understand them well.” In La Serena, Ángela remarked that she could identify an indigenous person because “they are a bit more sober [*parco*] in their way of speaking.”

³ This article uses pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of research participants.

However, such comments presented a marked contrast with those made by participants who live or have lived in Chilean regions with high proportions of indigenous population and reported more regular contact with indigenous people. Thus Lope, who lives in Puerto Montt, the capital of a region with one of the largest proportions of indigenous population in Chile (28.3 percent according to the 2017 census), remarked: “There are people I have known for years, and it is only now that I learn they were Mapuche. That is the case with a guy I have known since he worked in preparations for my first communion years ago; I only recently learned that he is Mapuche He speaks just like us [nonindigenous people].” Similarly, Juana, who lived with her indigenous (Mapuche) partner in the Araucanía region (32 percent indigenous population) several years before returning to La Serena, explained: “[Frankly,] I was unable to distinguish [between indigenous and nonindigenous people while living there]. There is not much difference between the indigenous person and a country person.”

Analyzed in relation to other comments made by these and other interviewees, the contrasting comments reinforce the contention that stereotypes, defined as cognitive structures “linking a social group to a set of traits or behavioral characteristics” (Hamilton and Sherman 2014, 3), can be learned and reproduced through processes of socialization, independently from direct interactions with members of the groups to which stereotypes are applied. Illustratively, at a different point in her interview, Mercedes clarified: “To be honest, I don’t have much contact with indigenous people, [but] *I think* I would identify indigenous people by their way of speaking . . . I also *imagine* that they have straight hair” (my emphasis). When I asked Mercedes, who is blind from birth, how did she know, she responded: “I know through conversations You get to hear things like ‘He’s got a Mapuche face.’”

In Venezuela, linguistic and speech features rarely appeared as markers of indigeneity. In Ciudad Bolívar, Marcos, who self-identified as “indigenous and White” and as having “remnants” of sight, stated that he never knew if the people he interacted with “were Black or White,” with the occasional exception of indigenous people “because of their way of speaking.” Ricardo, a blind participant also from Ciudad Bolívar, similarly remarked that he could identify indigenous people “because of their special form of speaking Spanish.”

When asked to elaborate on those statements, both participants presented that marker of indigeneity (“a special form of speaking”) as a trait of Venezuelan diversity, equating it to any other regional varieties of Spanish in the country. Thus Marcos explained that “the way of speaking” enables him to identify people from different regions, such as *gochos* [in reference to people from the Andean Venezuelan states] or *maracuchos* [in reference to people from Maracaibo, Zulia]. In turn, Ricardo explained that “as one distinguishes people from the Andean region, one distinguishes Pemon people [an indigenous people from southern Bolívar].”

In summary, only in Chile were linguistic and speech features identified as markers of racialized difference, specifically by interviewees living in cities with a low proportion of indigenous population and reporting rare interactions with indigenous people. Chilean participants who reported regular interactions with indigenous people characterized the existence of that marker of indigeneity as a (misguiding) stereotype. In Venezuela, the association of distinctive speech features with indigenous people was uncommon, and when it occurred, it signified a de-racialization of indigenous difference by characterizing those speech features as expressions of a regional variation of the national language—equivalent to any other regional variety.

Surnames

Only Chilean participants identified surnames as markers of indigeneity. “Surnames, first of all” was the simultaneous response of several participants in the focus group of La Serena when I inquired whether anything enabled them to identify an indigenous person. That response synthesized what most Chilean participants pointed out as a reliable—indeed, a determinant—marker of indigeneity. Marta, who is blind, explained that she knew if a person was indigenous only when coming across “a Mapuche surname, which is what one identifies more easily.” Juan, a Mapuche participant from Santiago, highlighted the importance of surnames when discussing experiences of racial discrimination at school: “I was very discriminated against by my peers due to the question of surnames My last name is Aniquir, which is Araucano.”

The determinant character that Chilean participants ascribed to surnames was also apparent in narratives of self-identification. Marta explained that she did not identify as a member of an originary people “because of my surnames”; in turn, Paloma, from La Serena, self-identified as an indigenous (Diaguita) woman: “My grandfather’s surname was Sereno, and the Serenos are Diaguitas. I am Cerezo Cerezo, but since my grandfather was indigenous, and ancestry up to five generations above one’s own mark [indigeneity], I am a Diaguita.”

References to surnames were totally absent among Venezuelan participants, as were references to the marker discussed in the next section: clothing.

Clothing

Clothing was identified as a marker of indigeneity by some Chilean participants. Marta explained that she could identify indigenous people by “their clothes, because when someone helps you, you normally hold on to their clothes.” Asked about the type of clothing she referred to, she indicated: “It is like tousled, looser, more carelessly used Also the texture [can be revealing] since sometimes they use *chilote* [produced in the Chiloé Archipelago] wool.”

Analyzed in relation to other interview material, such references evidenced intersections between indigeneity and social class hierarchies. Several interviewees who signaled classism (along with racism) as a source of discrimination pointed out clothing as a marker of class. Juan, a telephone receptionist, indicated that he treasured his blindness as protection against class prejudices “because [thanks to it,] I speak with a person, not with ties or jeans” (using those clothing items as metonyms of upper and lower classes, respectively). Similarly, Lucas, also a phone receptionist living in Santiago, stated: “Why do you think that I wear a tie? Because this way I can go anywhere, whereas if I just wear jeans and a T-shirt, I could not. I have experienced it myself. When wearing jeans and T-shirts, no one paid attention to me. If you go to the bank, go with a tie and they’ll attend you right away.” Lope, who was unemployed and from a low-income household, explicitly mentioned “the way of dressing” along with “the place where they live, the way of speaking, the way of treating other people” as markers of the upper class to which he had grown sensitive as a participant in assistance programs implemented by an elite group of donors in his locality.

Against this backdrop, Marta’s comments on clothing as a marker of indigeneity illustrate how collective identities are expressed and associated with clothing and dressing differences (Crane 2012; Fair 1998), in this particular case revealing the low status associated with indigeneity in perceived class hierarchies. The same association was revealed in Chile by participants who referred to odor as a marker of indigeneity, as the next section shows.

Odor

References to odor as a maker of indigeneity were rare but significant for the connotations these references conveyed in Chile and Venezuela. In both countries, such references instantiated the widespread presence of odor as a symbolic marker of difference across cultures (Classen 1992; Larrea Killinger 1997), but whereas in Chile, the connotations of such references evidenced perceived intersections between race and class categories, in Venezuela, they were linked to notions of autochthony (with foreignness as its opposite).

Some Chilean participants associated distinguishable odor with migrant persons from specific nationalities. Marta, who runs a small chiropractic business, commented, “[I can] identify Peruvian people [by their smell] because they eat a lot of garlic; it comes out of their skin.” This reference to Peruvian nationality is significant given the well-documented Chilean national narrative that portrays Peruvians as racially different (an indigenous other) (Ibarra Cifuentes 2019; Mora and Undurraga 2013).⁴ The way this racialization of Peruvian migrants currently intersects with perceptions of class hierarchies in Chile became apparent when I asked Marta if there were any other groups of people she could identify through smell: “Yes, I know who I’m speaking to by the smell; if they use perfume, one can immediately say, ‘This one is upper or middle class.’ . . . People of humble origin have other smells.” Through such references to odor as an identity marker, indigeneity (with “Peruvian migrant” as a proxy in this case) is again brought to partial equivalence with lower class: indigeneity is distinguishable from “upper and middle classes” just as, using in Marta’s expression, the latter are separable from people of “humble origin” (a euphemism for lower class).

One Venezuelan interviewee, Víctor, referred to odor as a marker of indigeneity: “I lived with [indigenous people], and smell is a way to identify them, [for] their smell is distinctive, autochthonous.” The adjective *autochthonous*, in principle neutral, gains positive connotations when contrasted with the adjectivization of the (bad) odor that Venezuelan popular lore associates with people from countries linked to colonization (specifically with Spanish and Portuguese people), which in this context can be interpreted as anticolonial sentiment.

Phenotypical features

In both countries, some participants associated indigeneity with phenotypical markers, too. In Chile, these were mostly markers of bodily shape, as illustrated by the following comments (by Josué and Mercedes, respectively): “[Indigenous people] are a bit shorter, more corpulent”; “I believe Mapuche people are shortish.” In consonance with previously discussed markers (clothing, odor), such references to bodily characteristics evidenced strong intersections with class-based identifications through their association with manual and physical labor (and thereby lower classes). Illustratively, Marta explained that indigenous persons “are shorter but more robust, with hands more worked out, corpulent arms, stronger muscles.”

In Venezuela, references to phenotypical markers mostly related to skin color and were integrated into discussions of *mestizaje* as characteristic of Venezuelan identity. Thus Eucario (from Ciudad Bolívar), self-identifying as part indigenous, commented that his skin color expressed what he described as a mixed identity heritage: “My mother had white family, as if they were Spanish, but she had indigenous and Black race too, from Africa . . . I was born . . . a bit Indian, a bit brownish [*marroncito*].” Also in Ciudad Bolívar, Agustín—who, when self-identifying, stated, “I would need to tick two census categories: Indigenous and Afro-descendent”—explained: “[In my family] runs indigenous blood [but]

⁴ With varying levels of public resonance, this narrative is identifiable in Chile at least since the nineteenth century, when it played a utilitarian function for Chilean elites during the Pacific War.

Afro-descendent blood too. My dad is *moreno*, and my mum is white, and I am what in criollo terms we call *blanco-jabao*.”⁵

Such centrality of skin color in Venezuelan categorizations was also identifiable in discussions of color nuances associated with specific categories. For instance, in the focus group in Ciudad Bolívar, Gertrudis, a blind woman who self-identified as “Black of African origins,” contended that *piel canela* (cinnamon-colored skin) is equivalent to *moreno/a*; Ricardo disagreed, suggesting that “*moreno* is a little bit darker than *canela*”; while another participant (unidentified in the recording) disagreed with both, suggesting that “*canela* is clearer than *trigueño*”—*trigueño* being a category that some consider proximate to, if not interchangeable with, *moreno/a*.

In combination, the markers of indigeneity discussed in previous sections (linguistic and speech features, surnames, clothing, odor, phenotypical features) demarcate and express different models of racializing differentiation and national personhood in Chile and Venezuela. In Chile, these markers convey more identity fixity, as the inscription of indigeneity in specific surnames illustrates most clearly. They also make indigeneity intersect overtly with low social class categorizations (as references to clothing, odor, and phenotypical features demonstrate). In Venezuela, markers convey more identity porosity and integrate indigeneity into a conceptualization of national personhood in which admixture is central (with skin color as a pivotal marker). This conceptualization entails a potential minimization of the degree of otherness associated with indigeneity, as noted in the analysis of references to speech features and odor as markers of indigeneity.

The next section shows that a conceptual logic connects these distinguishable models of racializing differentiation with the form in which *mestizaje* and *criollismo* are defined in each country.

Mestizaje, criollismo, and their relations

Research participants made clear that *mestizaje* remains central to their understandings of nationhood, but they also revealed that the conceptualization of *mestizaje* is very different in Chile and Venezuela. Such difference accords with the notions of national personhood that the racial markers discussed in the previous sections reveal (less permeable to variants of admixture in Chile than in Venezuela). Additionally, those conceptualizations of *mestizaje* combine consonantly with (also different) understandings of *criollismo*, contributing to the crystallization of distinguishable ideas about the racial foundations of nationality in both countries.

Chilean participants presented the mestizo character of the nation as unquestionable, with statements like “we’re all mestizos” being frequent. Some participants even qualified the negation of that national trait as an expression of racism: “Someone who is a racist will be scandalized, but I think we all are [mestizos],” commented Patricia. Participants also converged in their definition of *mestizaje* as the product of indigenous and Spanish admixture, with statements such as, “It is the admixture of Spanish and the indigenous races” (Mercedes) or “[Mestizo] is mixed, indigenous with Spanish” (Lope). This conceptualization of *mestizaje*, already identifiable in intellectual circles and popular culture expressions over a century ago (Gutiérrez 2010; Montecino Aguirre 2012, 113–138), remains clearly dominant across Chilean society (see Barandián 2012; Valle 2014).⁶

⁵ *Blanco-jabao* generally refers to a person with white skin and features associated with other racialized groups, particularly Afro-Venezuelan. This example illustrates that this category may also be associated with indigeneity.

⁶ This conceptualization was nonetheless associated with opposed political projects. In its democratizing formulations, the mestizo figure was construed as model for a national identity counterposed to the one cultivated by conservative elites. In its conservative formulations, the mestizo figure negatively eroded aristocratic ideals and natural rights to governance, thus playing a metaphor of social decay. In consonance, elite

Such conceptualization of *mestizaje* appears impermeable to other notions of racialized admixture, as exemplified in comments like “The mestizo [is] identified with the European [and] originary peoples question, and nothing else. An Asian arrives, and a whole new diversity arrives” (Julio, from Santiago). This entails phenotypical associations that can lead to exclusionary social practices, as recollections by Jordán, a participant from La Serena with Lebanese heritage, indicate: “Conversing with a woman at a clinic, something came up about Chilean people and she told me: you can’t have an opinion because you’re not Chilean. ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘I am about to turn seventy and was born in Chile.’ She retorted, ‘Well, by the color of your skin and your eyes, you are not Chilean.’”

Participants in Venezuela consistently defined the country as mestizo too, but defining *mestizaje* as “an admixture of Black, indigenous, and White,” as several interviewees put it. In their self-identifications, interviewees often appealed to such definitions to ground their characterizations of personhood. Marcos, who self-identifies as indigenous, explained: “My mum is *morena*, and my grandmother is black, and all her brothers are blacker than *morenos*. We are six siblings and we all came out White, although one we call ‘la negra.’” Comparably, Milagros explained: “We all have a part of indigeneity in us, but also my grandfather on my father’s side was Trinitarian, and on, my mother’s side my grandfather is German, so a bit of everything.” Moreover, several participants remarked that census categories did not aptly convey their notions of personhood, as they do not include any unambiguously mestizo category.⁷ Illustrative comments include “I would not know what to respond [to the census]” or the previously mentioned “I would need to tick two census categories.”

These different conceptualizations of *mestizaje* in Chile and Venezuela reveal divergences in the assignation of racialized diversity in dominant narratives of national identification. Such divergences also become apparent in examinations of understandings of *criollismo*, which in both countries remains another conceptual pillar of national identity. As I show next, the racial dimension identifiable in contemporary understandings of *criollismo*, as well as the conceptualization of the relation between this concept and *mestizaje*, is markedly dissimilar in Chile and Venezuela.

Chilean participants commonly associated the criollo concept with “traditions of our country,” and in parallel, they established a clear-cut distinction between *criollismo* and *mestizaje* (and with that, an erasure of admixture from the characterization of national tradition). “Criollo is like following traditions, and mestizo is the admixture of cultures or races. They are different things,” explained Lope. Similarly, Josué remarked: “A criollo celebration is what people associate with custom and tradition, mestizo is an indigenous person with a European person.” “Criollo is that which is ours, national, . . . the criollo celebrations [*fiesta criolla*], what is typical from us. Mestizo is another term,” stated María.

Such clear-cut conceptual separation of *criollismo* and *mestizaje* sits awkwardly with the generalized descriptions of Chile as a mestizo country. On the one hand, the national body is defined unequivocally as mestizo; on the other hand, its cultural production, encapsulated in the idea of tradition, is not. Significantly, such contradiction was dismantled when participants were asked to comment on the figure of the *roto*, which occupies an ambiguous position in the definition of national idiosyncrasy. In a positive light, the *roto* appears in public discourse as a representation of positive national attributes, an incarnation of an idealized mestizo subject who is possesses both the virtues of a poor but courageous Spaniard and the virtues of the fiercely libertarian ‘Araucano’ (Salazar and Pinto 2014, 141). With pejorative connotations, references to this figure

strategies to reproduce social dominance included marriage alliances articulated around ideas of racial purity (see Salazar and Pinto 2014, 141; Stabili 2003).

⁷ In social practice, *moreno/a* is an ambiguous category that can denote both, and, either, or blackness or mestizness (see Angosto-Ferrández 2014, 387–388).

invoke social hierarchies, and *roto* even becomes a classist insult that stigmatizes people and behaviors deemed as representative of the underclass (Cortés Aliaga 2009).

Chilean participants made evident the conceptual relation between the figure of the *roto* and *criollismo*, both signifiers being strongly associated with tradition. For instance, Paloma described the *roto* “as the maximum expression of our traditions,” and Lope as “he who follows traditions.” When asked if they considered the *roto* as entailing racial connotations, most participants brought the concept of *mestizaje* back into the discussion again, thereby connecting *criollismo* with *mestizaje* and this latter concept with national tradition. “The *roto* is the typical Chilean character, the character that represents the people, and yes, it can be a mestizo,” stated Ana illustratively.

The form in which indigeneity is conceptualized in Chile as a racialized identity opens up grounds for understanding this indirect, labyrinthine association of *mestizaje* with national tradition that the figure of the *roto* facilitates. As we saw in the exploration of its markers, indigeneity intersects strongly with low status in perceived class hierarchies; in turn, classism and racism are overtly identified as sources of social discrimination.⁸ In this social scenario, the severance of national tradition from *mestizaje* that common understandings of *criollismo* articulate is also an act of concealing class complexes and dominances: it facilitates an erasure of potentially conflicting class considerations from the idea of tradition, which can thus operate as a seemingly unifying, transversal concept of cohesive identification rather than a field for the expression and experience of societal difference and conflict. The ambiguous meanings triggered by the figure of the *roto*, celebrated as an epitome of national identity and as the source of a classist insult, reinforce this interpretation.

In contrast, Venezuelan participants fully integrated *criollismo* into their understanding of *mestizaje* as a foundation of nationality. Thus, for instance, Gracián described a criollo person as “the nomenclature of colors, all skin colors: *moreno*, Black, White . . . The criollo includes everyone.” When asked if criollo and mestizo are related in their meaning, participants responded affirmatively.

This understanding of *criollismo* complements ideals of Venezuelan nationality as a totalizing developmental system of mestizo selves that for some people even blurs the indigenous-nonindigenous dichotomization of the national population. This is captured in statements such as “[*Criollismo* includes indigeneity] because the indigenous person is born here and is criollo” (Milagros). The conceptual logic that sustains this notion of *criollismo* in Venezuela is identifiable in wide-ranging usages of the term *criollo* as an adjective. When asked what *criollo* means when used to qualify something like a garlic (“criollo garlic” being a common product), participants responded: “It means that garlic is criollo, from here from Venezuela” (Milagros); “that garlic is one made here, in Venezuelan land” (Víctor); “there are garlicks from abroad that are grown here; they become *criollo*” (Gracián).

The logic underpinning this conceptualization of *criollismo* becomes clearer when exploring its associations with other nonhuman beings, as characterizations of a “criollo horse” illustratively reveal: “It is born in that place . . . in that environment,” Agustín noted; another participant (unidentified in a focus group conversation) remarked: “It is raised here, it was born here and has the skills from this place.” These comments convey a notion of (national) place as an environment in which living beings develop distinctive (criollo) traits or skills. In tandem with prevalent ideas about *mestizaje* and its

⁸ Such views on classism accord with recent research in Chile on experiences of discrimination. In examining how those experiences may have contributed to mobilize people from poor neighborhoods in Santiago de Chile during the social revolts of 2019, Álvarez-López, Méndez, Angelcos and Rasse (2024, 56) cite a UN Development Programme report from 2017 that “identified unequal treatment as a key element of the experience of social inequality in Chile, with individuals with disabilities and those belonging to indigenous communities or the lower classes more likely to experience mistreatment and discrimination.”

incorporation in notions of *criollismo*, such a conceptualization of (national) place reinforces an idealized configuration of Venezuela as a developmental system, which, in principle, can accommodate any difference in (racialized) origin as well as non-predetermined variants of (racialized) admixture. This presents a clear contrast with prevalent understandings of *mestizaje* and *criollismo* in Chile, which set rigid conceptual limits to the types of racialized selves that can develop “traditional” national traits.

Conclusions

Race-naturalizing discourses have an evident public presence and are regaining political traction in an international scenario where permutations of racist nativisms inform the ideologies of new parties and social movements across the world. This is not directly dependent on the ways race may be conceptualized (and on occasion naturalized) in academia, yet it would be naïve to disregard the role that knowledge produced in this realm plays in the legitimization of political positions in public discourse—and potentially in informing governmental policy and practice. The reaffirmation of constructivist premises in the conceptualization of race as a social-scientific category remains a necessity in this scenario.

This project contributes to that goal. First, it destabilizes the (race-naturalizing) logics that underpin the visual idea of race, which, along with its apparent commonsense claims, entails a reinforcement of biologicistic conceptions of race. Second, the project’s comparative grounds generate novel insights into differing configurations of race in two societies molded by specific historical trajectories. An identification of the historical factors that conditioned the form of those configurations is beyond the scope of this article, but such identification is not indispensable for apprehending the different ways indigeneity as a racialized identity is characterized in Chile and Venezuela, or for appreciating how that characterization relates to diverse forms of understanding *mestizaje* and *criollismo* as concepts that shape notions of national personhood and racial relations.

This comparison shows evident differences in the definition of *mestizaje* that prevails in Chile and Venezuela, and it demonstrates that the examination of current understandings of *criollismo* in Latin America is a fruitful avenue for enhancing knowledge about configurations of race on the continent—including the contemporary role of ideologies of admixture within it. This project, within its limited reach, illustrates the plasticity that the *criollo* concept presents as a signifier that captures and sanctions ideals of national culture and personhood. In Chile, a country that participants unambiguously defined as *mestizo*, considerations of racial admixture have nevertheless been erased from common definitions of *criollismo* as the expression of national culture (except when appeals to *criollismo* are explicitly associated with the figure of the *roto*, both an epitome of national culture and a stigmatized incarnation of class marginality). In contrast, *criollismo* in Venezuela is integral to the consideration of the country as a *mestizo* country, and in turn notions of *mestizaje* is all-embracing in characterizations of national personhood that becomes potentially open to any form of racialized admixture.

These differing understandings of the relation between *criollismo* and *mestizaje* are sustained by differing understandings of how racial identities are inscribed and marked in bodies and selves. As we saw when exploring markers of indigeneity, stereotyped markers in Chile convey a message of atemporal fixity (best represented by the determinant character given surnames) and a more overt association with the perception of class hierarchies (with racialized identities triggering associations of subordinate class). In Venezuela, racializing markers are seen as more malleable and only partly defining of (racialized) selves, which are often portrayed as the container of multiple and coexisting identities.

The experiences and knowledge of people with visual impairment in different countries, including people who are blind from birth, thus remind us that the perception of phenotypical variance is always mediated by socially constructed and circulated schemas.

In social categorizations, sight, and “what everyone can see,” is never a transparent window for the identification of unequivocal types of human diversity but a conduit for the perception of a world permanently inscribed with historically conditioned (and potentially changeable) meaning. For people in societies whose historical trajectory has situated racializing codes as central scaffolding in the conceptualization of social diversity, any sensory conduit (hearing, smell, touch, sight) becomes a potential avenue for the perception of variable markers of racialized social categories. Yet historical trajectories, characteristically undefined due to their political foundations, also underpin the fact that the same sensory conduits can be used to interpret the markers of diversity in nonracializing forms—or, as examinations of notions of *criollismo* in Venezuela convey, as markers of racialized diversity conceived as a constitutive dimension of an idealized national community in which the social prevails over the biological in the formation of (national) personhood.

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