The White Mask: hiding indigeneity through the ideology of mestizaje

Bethaney Turner
Canberra University

Abstract

This paper will explore the emphasis on Spanish heritage and "whiteness" articulated in the concept of mestizaje which has historically informed official Mexican Government policies and today continues to influence the everyday life practices of Mexican people. The ideology of mestizaje is shown to have been systematically deployed by successive federal governments since the 1930s in order to encourage the development of a unified national identity from the diverse mestizo and multifarious indigenous populations. However, such an identity presents as adversarial to indigenous identities by failing to recognise the particular needs and rights of the nation's first peoples, particularly in relation to land, health and education. Despite recent superficial advances in the status of the various indigenous ethno-linguistic groups throughout the nation, particularly since the 1994 Zapatista uprising and the movement's 2001 March for Indigenous Dignity, I suggest that in Mexico today many still believe that to have skin "the colour of the earth" is a negative and undesirable attribute. This sentiment is perhaps most overtly expressed by urban mestizos who continue to speak with great pride of their Spanish heritage while barely acknowledging their indigenous roots. Efforts to mask indigenous heritage are not uncommon in contemporary Mexico and this issue will be explored particularly in relation to the use of skin-whitening products by young, cosmopolitan, urban mestizas.