The Racialization of Accompaniment

Can Privilege Be Used Transparently?

By Sara Koopman

Accompaniers often say that they “make space for peace.” I recently finished a Ph.D. in human geography, which is the study of the relationship between society and space – so my dissertation is an attempt to think about how accompaniers “make space” and the role that privilege plays in that work.

“Mona, mona!” I am regularly called out as “white girl” when I walk down the street in Colombia. As a lighter-skinned person I am hyper-visible in Colombia, and regularly reminded of my color. It is the opposite of how invisible whiteness can be to me at times as a “white” person in the United States. As in the global North, though, whiteness is considered desirable and attractive, and thus all the more important for women. The models in Colombian beauty ads are almost always light-skinned, even blond, as are the news announcers. Hair straightening is common. Green contact lenses are another popular form of whitening.

“Mona, mona!” I am less likely to get called out as mona when I am in wealthier neighborhoods in the north end of Bogota. Most wealthy Colombians are light skinned. In Colombia “race” and class reinforce each other, and one of the ways they do so is through space. One part of how accompaniment “works” is by transgressing these norms.

In Colombia, not only are certain neighborhoods more likely to have people of lighter or darker skin, but entire regions are racialized. Racialization in Colombia is shaped by the Andes Mountains, which split into three huge chains that cross the entire country, with two large rivers between them. Historically the difficulty of crossing meant that Colombia became a country of distinct regions, and “race” is often conflated with region. Antioqueños (paisas, or people who live in a region in the northwest of the country) constructed their regional identity as “white” against a dark “other” on their periphery, in particular Urabá, where the peace community of San José de Apartadó is located (and where the Fellowship of Reconciliation’s accompaniment team works).

These divisions drew on imaginaries of “the tropics” as a space of poverty, disease, and violence. Colombian colonial elites, who lived in the cooler mountain city of Bogotá and held a strong belief in the superiority of “white” skin and Hispanic blood, repeatedly emphasized differences in region, and used altitude as a way to associate themselves with Europe. “Nature” was racialized and “race” was naturalized.

Racialization shapes the war in Colombia. Colonial imaginaries of one Colombia that is civilized and “white” defined against those spaces that are “black” and barbaric are spoken less openly today, but continue to shape the nation and shape what violence is done where. Violence has hit Afro-Colombians and indigenous people the hardest, and they form a greatly disproportionate number of the displaced. Their territories, for so long considered undesirable, are now widely seen by outside investors as an “untapped” treasure trove of gold, coal, hardwood lumber, and land and water for oil palm plantations for biodiesel.

Small farmers are being pushed off their land in a massive violent land grab, primarily by paramilitaries and their affiliates who are “developing” these lands with large agribusiness and mining projects. “Racial” oppression has always been integral to the workings of colonialism and capitalism. The usual justification was that colonizers would “improve” the land and the people, much as nature was domesticated to “improve” it.

In Colombia class and “race” interlock. Each not only shapes but reinforces the other, and one of the primary ways they prop each other up is through space. But there is some room for slippage. If a person manages to change their “race,” through whitening techniques like green contacts, it can improve their ability to get a better paying job, and vice versa – if they have enough money to move to a wealthier neighborhood, they may be seen as whiter. One’s daily social scripting by others into categories like “Indian” or “white” is never absolute but always in relation to attributes of power, wealth, and status. As such, white accompaniers are often assumed by Colombians to have class privilege (on the basis of both “race” and nationality), and those accompaniers who are “not quite white” but have nationality privilege and act and dress in ways that are read as signs of the assumed associated class privilege are also seen as “whiter” as a result.

“Mona, mona!” As one blond, light-eyed former accompanier from the United States put it, “It’s like I’m famous when I walk down the street.” Accompaniers in Colombia are read and understood through these colonial histories and imaginaries, and they stand out because they do not fit the expectations of what sort of people belong where in Colombia.

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

FOR petition delivered1608

FOR’s Elisabeth Rohrmoser and Liza Smith delivered 200+ petitions to the U.S. embassy in Bogota in late 2012 urging protection for threatened civilians in La Union.

Colonial inequities of race, class, and nation, which are co-created and intertwined, are part of how accompaniment “works.” Yet there is a trend amongst accompaniers and those who have written about accompaniment to deny or minimize this. What is emphasized instead is the power of political pressure. For example, when Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) members respond to an urgent action alert issued by FOR, and write to the U.S. ambassador, then FOR accompaniers are able to get a meeting at the embassy, and maybe get the ambassador to call the Colombian army general in the region.

But what if most FOR members were Bolivian citizens? A call from the Bolivian ambassador would not generate the same sort of response. Nor would coverage in the Bolivian media. So accompaniment relies on grassroots organizing and passport/racial/economic privilege. An unaffiliated individual white woman with a U.S. passport living in the peace community would also not have the same sort of an impact as an FOR accompanier.

That accompaniers are using racial as well as passport privilege becomes clearer through the experience of accompaniers with weighty passports who do not fit the Colombian imaginary for that country. Several Latinos from the United States and Sweden have served with the U.S. and Swedish FOR teams in Colombia. The racialization process in Colombia ascribes both regional and international identities with certain traits. Being from the United States means you are widely associated with capitalist modernity and imagined as white, wealthy, and beautiful. But not all can perform to this script equally. Members of the peace community called one dark-skinned accompanier the gringo negro (black gringo) – because just plain gringo would mean white. Latinos from the United States seem to fit the imaginary even less. Latina-gringa seems to not even register as a category.

Accompaniers of color did tell me that they were seen as whiter when they were with a white person, but most accompaniers seem to have mixed feelings about this. Some accompaniment organizations make sure that people of color are never more than a small percent of a team. Some always send out accompaniers of color with a “white” accompanier. Another strategy has been to place accompaniers of color in particular places where they will stand out (like sending Latinos to Afro-Colombian communities).

Yet I was also told by several accompaniers of color from the United States and Europe that they were seen as “less brown” in Colombia. One said she thought it was because it was assumed that she had economic resources since she could travel so far. Nationality and its associated class shape the way race is perceived. Whiteness is not just about who you are, but where you are. People of color from the global North are imagined as whiter because their accent, clothes, attitude, and other subtle performances are associated with a “where” that is associated with whiteness (and with modernity and wealth).

Accompaniers of color told me that their safety and effectiveness had a great deal to do with how they performed their status as an “international,” a role which most of those I spoke to performed more explicitly and actively than white accompaniers. They are asked to show their U.S. passport a great deal more often than their white teammates. Some make a point during these encounters to speak in English to teammates and to carry themselves with confidence. Others make a point of wearing foreign-style clothes beyond simply their team t-shirt, such as travel pants. Though in some ways accompaniers of color are more at risk than their white teammates, often Latino/a accompaniers in particular build closer ties, and are more able to read social cues, in ways that increase the safety of both their teammates and those they accompany.

Many accompaniers emphasize their use of passport privilege and deny that nation is entangled with race and class. Yet accompaniers cannot use their citizenship strategically without using the political, economic, and – in the case of the United States – military might behind their passport, and the whiteness associated with it. Denial of this seems to be a reflection of the discomfort of acknowledging that race is part of how accompaniment works.

Yet whether or not accompaniers are using it consciously, race is inevitably part of how accompaniers are read by Colombians, and therefore of how accompaniment “works.” To recognize the workings of white supremacy is not to “perpetuate racism.” Quite the opposite, it is an important step in dismantling it.

Accompaniment is not all or only about race, but it is certainly shaped by it. For accompaniers to ignore racial imaginaries and inequities looks like a liberal “race to innocence” – Sherene Razack’s term for maintaining a belief in ones non-involvement in the subordination of others. Accompaniment organizations cannot transcend race by adopting so-called colorblind policies.

I was surprised by how rarely inequity and privilege were talked about explicitly amongst accompaniers, given that the premise of accompaniment is that some bodies are less likely to be attacked, which ultimately means that accompaniment uses systems that value some lives more than others to try and build a world where everyone’s life is valued. Yet none of the basic explanations given by the different groups on their sites about what accompaniment is and how it works mention privilege. It would be useful for accompaniment organizations to more directly and regularly talk, internally as well as publicly and online, about how accompaniment uses privilege.

It is colonial relationships (of race, class, and nationality intertwined), and tapping in to them through grassroots pressure from networks (those e-mails you send when you get an action alert), that shape accompaniment and make it possible. But accompaniment can also use colonial imaginaries to challenge ongoing colonial relations. Ultimately it is the work accompaniers do of challenging United States (and European and Canadian) foreign policy and building alternative ties between the people in those places that will most change the systems that make some lives worth more than others. Accompaniers are challenging neocolonial relationships when they build different “people to people” relationships between the United States and Colombia.

The question that drew me to this research was whether accompaniers wear down or reinforce the structures that make some lives worth more than others. Privilege cannot be “given up,” but maybe it can be “worn down” if it is used to work against the very structures of geoeconomic and geopolitical power that create gulfs of privilege. If racism, (neo)colonialism, and capitalism prop each other up, then perhaps some of the privileges earned from one can be used against the others.

Perhaps privilege can be “leveraged” in ways that support organizing that ultimately aims to change relations of privilege. Accompaniers may not “use up” their privilege when they use it, but through broader organizing, like using the stories of organizations they accompany to work against U.S. military aid, accompaniers can work against the structures that create some of the very privileges they are using. At the very least accompaniers can more clearly aim to use privilege without reinforcing it. That is more likely if privilege is used with honesty, clarity, and accountability.

1607 Sara Koopman recently finished her Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia. She is currently living in Bogota, Colombia, doing a postdoctoral fellowship. For more discussion of these issues, please see her blog: decolonizingsolidarity.blogspot.com.