

# **Anti-Colonial Action in Real Time: Mestizx Latinx People, Place, Cisheteropatriarchy, and Our Way Forward**

By Alejandro Bupara

**ABSTRACT.** Mestizx Latinx peoples, being of both white and Indigenous heritage, are colonized peoples on colonized lands living under the settlers' systems of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and capitalism. Mestizx Latinx people have made various attempts to reckon with this colonized status and define an anti-colonial, liberatory way forward for ourselves. This essay explores the contemporary context of Mestizx peoples in the United States, positioning our history within the broader story of settler colonialism. It investigates our disconnection from our ancestral lands and traditions, arguing that Mestizx Latinx people have formed new attachments to places on these colonized lands via the hood and that these attachments are nevertheless an incomplete framework for understanding if they do not deal with Mestizx Latinx peoples' relationship with Indigenous peoples. This essay further argues that such a framework is still incomplete if it does not involve healing from the settler system of cisheteropatriarchy and that facilitating this healing is the sacred charge of hood, queer and, transgender Mestizx Latinx people and hood feminists more broadly.

The story of Mestizx Latinx peoples begins with colonization. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging this bare fact, despite the deep pain of such a pronouncement; on the contrary, we *must* acknowledge history's harsh truths in order to accurately describe our world. For Mestizx Latinx people—literally “mixed,” understood here to mean people of both Indigenous and European descent with roots in Latin America, who are not

Black or Indigenous but are racialized as nonwhite—for these people, to understand ourselves is to know that our very existence is a side effect of colonial violence: our story begins with the European invasion of the Americas.

Settler colonialism shaped everything about our peoples, from our languages to our cultures to our sociopolitical institutions. Moreover, the ways Mestizx people move through the world are to this day thoroughly infested with violent colonial attitudes and practices, in terms of both our all-too-common willingness to further the project of white supremacy at the expense of Black and Indigenous peoples and our persistence in perpetuating the settler gender and sexuality systems of cisheteropatriarchy. Indeed, the resulting, appalling oppression of womxn, queer, and transgender Mestizx people *by men of our own communities* is one of the greatest crimes of colonialism. This essay explores the contemporary context of Mestizx peoples in the United States, positioning our story within the history of settler colonialism. It investigates what it means for the descendants of place-based peoples to be disconnected from our ancestral homelands and traditions, arguing that we have formed new understandings of place and belonging in spite of the settler colonial project. It further argues that these understandings, although joyful, are nevertheless incomplete if they do not include active solidarity with the ancestral stewards of the lands where we find our peoples colonized. Finally, this paper discusses the beginnings of a way forward from the devastations of colonization, positing that there can be no such movement without first healing from cisheteropatriarchy, and that this healing is the sacred charge of queer and transgender Mestizx people and hood feminists more broadly, making a comparison to the spiritual roles of Two-Spirit people within Indigenous societies.

## **Settler Colonialism, Mestizx People, and Our Place in These Lands**

The impact of the European invasion of these lands on their original inhabitants cannot be overstated; from the start, the genocidal settler colonial project sought to deprive Indigenous peoples of both land and life. Dean Itsuji Saranillio (2015) defines settler colonialism as a “historically-created system of power” whose aim is to “replace Indigenous peoples with settlers who are discursively constituted as superior and thus more deserving over these contested lands and resources.” Patrick Wolfe (2006) further discusses settler colonialism as being characterized by a “logic of elimination” wherein the foundation of the settler society is the elimination of Indigenous peoples. The settlers accomplish this elimination via multiple methods, including the outright massacre of Indigenous people by the settler military, police, and mobs. However, the settler attempt at elimination also utilizes more insidious weapons, including laws banning traditional Indigenous cultural practices, institutionalized adopting of Indigenous children into white families, and other forms of cultural genocide. A significant and particularly repugnant weapon of settler colonialism is sexual violence and the attempt to rape Indigenous people out of existence through the patriarchal and patrilineal understanding of kinship that the settlers brought with them. Sarah Deer (2015) notes that “rape is a fundamental result of colonialism, a history of violence reaching back centuries.” It is this particular violence of the settlers to which Mestizx peoples trace our origin.

I use the term “Mestizx” to refer to a specific group of peoples with roots in Latin America (I say peoples because there are many different such groups in Latin America; however, I speak primarily to the Mexican-American context). Mestizx people have both European and Indigenous ancestry and perhaps Asian or African ancestry as well; however, Mestizx people have key factors

differentiating us from all these groups. Mestizx people are not Indigenous, in that we have been disconnected for generations from our Indigenous roots. Mestizx people, although we may have African or Asian ancestry, are not racialized as belonging to these groups, with material consequences for our treatment in a society with anti-Black racism among its core features. We do not have the racial “marker of slaveability” inherent to Blackness in a white supremacist settler society (Richardson, 2016). However, neither are Mestizx people racialized as white; we are placed into a nonwhite category of racial “otherness,” with all the violence this placement implies. As Elizabeth Martinez (2017) states, “these experiences cannot be attributed to xenophobia, cultural prejudice or some other, less repellent term than racism.” She gives an example of Mexican women “working at a Nabisco plant in Oxnard, California, [who] were not allowed to take bathroom breaks from the assembly line and were told to wear diapers instead,” and she asks: “can we really imagine white workers being treated that way?” (Martinez, 2017). Further examples abound in the United States, from the fact that the median Latinx family owns 4% of the wealth of the median white family (Asante-Muhammad et al., 2019), to the fact that Latinx people make up 17.6% of the national population but 19.3% of people killed by police in 2014 and 2015 (Strother et al., 2018), to the fact that Latinas made an average of 53 cents on every white man’s dollar in 2017 (Vagins, 2018) compared to 80 cents for womxn as a whole. Thus, although we are not Black or Indigenous, we are not white, and we experience all the consequences of our racialization in a white supremacist settler society. A term is needed to describe this specificity since “Latinx” is not a racial category but a pan-ethnicity; it is in this sense that I use the word Mestizx.

Mestizx people are thus a quandary of colonialism—a by-product of the settlers’ invasion of these lands and the rape of Indigenous child-bearing people. In

the United States, we first became present in any significant number after the conquest of the Southwest in 1848, when “the new nation expanded its size by almost one-third, thanks to a victory over that backward land of little brown people called Mexico” (Martinez, 2017). Mestizx people experienced the effects of our racialization from the start, treated as “conquered subjects” and dispossessed of “millions of acres of Mexican-held land by trickery and violence”; moreover, “hundreds of Mexicans were lynched as a form of control” (Martinez, 2017). This situation illustrates the tension in Mestizx people’s existence: all too often in our history, our goal has been to achieve the same power level as the settlers rather than to dismantle their oppressive structures entirely. In telling the story of the United States’ conquest of the Southwest, Mestizx people often frame the issue as I just did; the story then becomes about the imperial violence of the United States and its abuse of the people of those lands, without noting that those lands were *already* marked by colonial violence, for Mexico itself was and is a settler state. Mestizx people can lament the murders of our people and our dispossession from “our” land; however, that land was never ours to hold. We will never create an anti-colonial way forward for ourselves until we reckon with this conflict.

### **Displacement and Disconnection: Reckoning with Our Own Pain Without Contributing to the Pain of Other Peoples**

Indigenous peoples are and have always been place-based peoples, with a people’s culture and tradition very much wrapped up in its ancestral homeland. Winona LaDuke (1999) cites the example of the Pacific Northwest, stating how “virtually every river is home to a people, each as distinct as a species of salmon.” She further notes that “our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together,” and “these relations are honored in ceremony,

song, story, and life that keep relations close—to buffalo, sturgeon, salmon, turtles, bears, wolves, and panthers” (LaDuke, 1999). Mestizx people have lost our connection to our ancestral roots and have thus lost the “protection, teachings, and gifts of our relatives” (LaDuke, 1999). Although there were trade links between the regions today called Central America, Mexico, and the southern United States for centuries (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), the ancestral stewards of the lands Mestizx people find ourselves on in the U.S. Southwest are the Chumash peoples, the Tongva, the Diné people, etc., not our ancestors. Mestizx people have thus been deprived of a major facet of our cultural lifeblood. Our attempts to address this violent bereavement have taken various forms; ultimately, we have dealt with the disconnection from our ancestral homelands and cultures by forming new attachments to place that attempt to disrupt our colonized status, with varying degrees of success.

One of the most well-known and misguided attempts at refiguring a Mestizx understanding of place and belonging in this colonized context is the concept of Aztlán. “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” formulated by Mexican-American students at UCSB in the late 1960s, proclaims:

In the spirit of a new people... we, the Chicano, Mexican, Latino, Indigenous inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun...declare that the call of our sangre is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny. (Alurista, 1969)

El Plan thus mentions the Indigenous inhabitants and “civilizers” in the same breath, flattening the distinction between Mestizx and Indigenous peoples by referring to “reclaiming the land of their birth,” and it mimics the language of Manifest Destiny in positioning this reclamation as “our power, our responsibility, and our

inevitable destiny” (Alurista, 1969). Aztlán in this view figures as a mythical lost homeland for Mestizx people; this framework is thus an attempt to deal with the violence of our disconnection by reframing Mestizx people as Indigenous: *we never really lost our connection! We’ve been on our lands this whole time!* Therefore, this concept of Aztlán hinges on the erasure of the actual ancestral stewards of these lands, leading to newer generations of Latinx thinkers calling the concept what it truly is: settler colonial aspirations (Alvarenga, 2018).

### **The Hood: Class, Urban Racialized Poor People, and New Attachments to Place for Mestizx People**

Although the concept of Aztlán and its erasure of the Indigenous peoples of the U.S. Southwest is violent, it is by no means the only way to conceptualize Mestizx people’s place within or way forward from settler colonialism. Mestizx people have formed new attachments to place on these colonized lands, and the context of these attachments is inseparable from class. One consequence of the sociopolitical system of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy and capitalism that reigns in the United States has been segregation, wherein Mestizx people are forced into urban ghettos or hoods; in fact, both racial/ethnic segregation and concentration into economically disadvantaged areas increased for us from 1970 to 2000 (Timberlake & Iceland, 2007). This creation of an urban underclass has resulted in Mestizx families forming long-term roots in particular states and cities and forming attachments to particular hoods and blocks. The white supremacist imagination frames the hood—any urban poor neighborhood, particularly one predominantly Black and brown—as a site of violence; but no view could be more incomplete. There is violence in these places, but there is also the formation of something new and wonderful. These are places where we know our neighbors, where we can go just down the street to the taqueria, where

we protect, maintain, and express the hybrid culture we have synthesized in the centuries of our existence. The hood shapes us, makes us grow, and ever beats in our hearts even when we're away; there is nothing like it. It is here in these sites that we, Mestizx people, have carved out our sense of belonging. We have found ourselves a colonized people on colonized lands, disconnected from our ancestral homelands, and we have found a way to form new attachments to place.

Although these new attachments represent making the best of a bad situation, they are incomplete if they make no attempt to deal with the context of settler colonialism and our relationship with the Indigenous peoples of these lands. As Mestizx people navigate our response to our disconnection, we must practice active solidarity with Indigenous peoples and ensure that we are not contributing to their dispossession in turn. We must be intentional about uplifting the fact that Indigenous people are not dead, cultivating real reciprocal relationships with them and centering their voices as the ultimate decision-makers on their ancestral territories. Above all, as Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us, decolonization and anti-colonial action are not buzzwords to be thrown around; we must therefore always be working to restore Indigenous life and land and disrupt settler futurity in these occupied United States.

Although this framework for dealing with our disconnection represents a disruption of settler colonialism, it is by no means the end-all-be-all of our way forward. Mestizx people must recognize that colonization works in multiple ways, with multiple axes of oppression intersecting nonlinearly (Crenshaw, 1993); to attempt to deal only with issues of race or the land is to leave our anti-colonial efforts woefully incomplete. The violence in our home spaces is not what the white supremacist imagination posits, but it is there. This violence is yet another effect of colonization: the settlers' capitalism forces us to get money

by any means, often necessitating a turn to crime; the settlers' cisheteropatriarchy infiltrates our minds and actions and leads to our own communities tearing ourselves apart. There can be no true reckoning with the devastations of colonialism without first healing from cisheteropatriarchy. For Mestizx people, the performance of this necessary task by hood Mestizx queer and transgender people—and hood feminists more broadly—contains echoes of a spiritual role similar to those performed by Indigenous Two-Spirit people.

### **Rejecting Colonial Cisheteropatriarchy: Hood Queerness, Hood Trans\*ness, and Hood Feminism**

One of the most painful effects of settler colonialism was the imposition of the settlers' gender and sexuality systems of cisheteropatriarchy. Bell hooks (2004) defines patriarchy as “a political-social system that insists that... [men] are inherently dominating, superior to everything and anyone deemed weak, especially [women]... and [are] endowed by the right to dominate and rule,” with the further right to “maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.” Inseparable from this system of men's supremacy is the concept of a gender binary—wherein the only “valid” genders are those of men and women, and these genders correspond to at-birth assignments based on genitalia—and the companion notion that heterosexuality is the natural sexual order of the world. This system operates in stark contrast to the way gender and sexuality operated in Indigenous societies. Firstly, Indigenous societies were sharply anti-patriarchal; in fact, they routinely featured womxn as the community decision-makers. Andrea Smith (2006) argues that “in order to colonize peoples whose societies are not based on social hierarchy, colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy... Just as the patriarchs rule the family, the elites of the nation-state rule their citizens.” Furthermore, as Jacobs,

Thomas, and Lang (1997) state, “genders and sexualities are not always fixed into two marked categories... In Native North America, there were and still are cultures in which more than two gender categories are marked.” The settlers’ invasion forcibly erased much of this history; Deborah Miranda (2010) refers to this process as “gendercide,” wherein the colonizers “with a deep abhorrence of what they viewed as homosexual relationships” attempted to destroy Indigenous gender variance “through active, conscious, violent extermination.” This landscape is what all colonized peoples deal with, and Mestizx people in the United States are no exception.

Again, there can be no moving forward from colonization without healing from cisheteropatriarchy. I am a queer Mestizo man; I have seen firsthand how it renders our communities. Our culture, our elders, and my peers taught me that my place as a leader of our people was to be unquestioned, even as they told young Mestizas that their place was to follow. All of patriarchy’s violences large and small—from the normalization of sexual assault by men, to the imposition of inequitable labor in the home, to the suppression of womxn’s and queer people’s sexuality—run rampant in our hoods. In addition to internalizing the lie of men’s supremacy, our people have taken up the lie of the settlers’ cissexism and heterosexism as well, rejecting queer and transgender Mestizx people and making our lives hell. Deborah Miranda (2013) provides a poignant example of the ugliness of gendercide in the California Indigenous context, writing, “they called us monsters...in the missions we were stripped bare, whipped...cursed... worst of all, threatened with beatings, our own husbands disowned us, children grew to fear us, and our sisters, oh, our sisters turned us away.” She continues with the bitter pronouncement that, as the settler gender and sexuality systems took root, “we became jotos. Our families despised us, old women gossiped about us. If our mothers fought to protect us, they were called joterass” (Miranda, 2013). Let

me be very clear: this violence is the result of a colonial imposition, but our people—particularly Mestizo men—must be held accountable for how we perpetuate it. Only in this way will our people be able to move forward.

### **A Sacred Role: Two-Spirit Indigenous People, Hood Feminism, and the Liberatory Struggle**

For Indigenous peoples, the presence of people outside of the settler confines of binary gender and heterosexuality was not only celebrated but sacred; the modern English self-appellation for these people is Two-Spirit. Qwo-Li Driskill (2010) explains that the term Two-Spirit is a translation of an Algonquin term that “claims Native traditions as precedents for understanding gender and sexuality,” and that it “asserts ceremonial and spiritual communities and traditions and relationships with medicine as central in constituting various identities.” The Two-Spirit notion is thus distinct from settler notions of queerness and transness in that it is tied to a spiritual role within an Indigenous nation; examples include the role of taking care of children and protecting the village among the Cherokee (Driskill, 2011) and facilitating the transition of dead relatives into the next world among the Chumash (Miranda, 2013). This concept of having a sacred role for Two-Spirit Indigenous people parallels the role of queer and transgender Mestizx people in helping our communities heal. Two-Spirit people’s vital roles secure their Indigenous people’s future; on the reverse side, our Mestizx communities are under siege from ongoing colonization, and the people who resist these colonial brutalities hold our futures in their hands.

Just as Indigenous people resisted colonization from the start, hood Mestizas and queer and transgender Mestizx people as well as hood feminists more broadly have always resisted both the colonizers’ cisheteropatriarchy and the exclusionary nature of the mainstream cis white feminist movement. Jamie Nesbitt-Golden (2013) declares

that, “while Big Name Feminists are debating The End of Men, women on the margins—women like me—are sleeping at train stations and working double shifts for paltry wages. They are buying school supplies with rent money. They are fighting for citizenship because they aren’t the ‘right kind of immigrants.’” The Crunk Feminist Collective (2010) proclaims:

We have come of age in the era that has witnessed a past-in-present assault on our identities as women of color, one that harkens back to earlier assaults on our virtue and value during enslavement and imperialism...We have spent our twenties negotiating the uncompassionate conservatism of the Bush era, with its brand of fascism marauding as patriotism. We entered the workforce en masse in the era of boom and bust laissez faire capitalism, where we are still paid less than our white sisters, when we were employed at all, and where our places of employment still operate under a politics of surveillance and containment... We claim the right to resist the forces of racist, sexist, heterosexist domination by any means necessary. (Crunk Feminist Collective, 2010)

Hood feminism thus represents the very forefront of the struggle against colonialism; feminism provides the framework for conceptualizing and practicing anti-colonial action at the micro level as we go about establishing our new relationships with place and with Indigenous communities in our hoods. At the essence of hood feminism is the hope for better: the belief that healing is possible for our communities. The Crunk Feminist Collective (2010) urges men of color, “if you are with us, your life and your politics—and not just your rhetoric—will reflect a commitment to the health and wholeness of women, not just as sisters, as wives, as mothers, or as daughters. We don’t need protectors or providers; we need partners in (the) struggle,” and “we welcome thinking brothers who appreciate thinking sisters, brothers committed to strategizing with us for a gender-inclusive world.” Andrea Smith (2006) further reminds us that this commitment is

absolutely essential for a truly decolonial future, asserting that “any liberation struggle that does not challenge heteronormativity cannot substantially challenge colonialism or white supremacy” and will merely result in “secondary marginalization where the most elite class of these groups will further their aspirations on the backs of those most marginalized within the community.”

If securing freedom for our peoples is the most important goal of our lives’ work, then the role of propelling it forward is nothing less than sacred. In existing at the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle in our hoods, queer and transgender Mestizx people shield the balance of our peoples’ future, echoing the various sacred roles of Two-Spirit people among Indigenous peoples. We perform our role even while our colonized (primarily) cishetero Mestizo men do not recognize this fact as they enact violence on us. Make no mistake: this role is a heavy burden, and it is one that queer and transgender Mestizx people and hood feminists should not have to bear alone. I do not seek to romanticize our struggle within our communities, nor do I attempt to shrink from its pain; I too have caused this pain via internalized patriarchal attitudes and behaviors. All that remains for me is to hold myself accountable for causing this hurt and to live in the tradition of people hoping for better. I believe in the possibility of a truly decolonial future, and I embrace my spiritual role in making that future a reality.

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disciplines like ethnic studies. Alejandro's family and background further provide him with a drive to tie everything he does back to his home communities and to everyone who will never make it to academia. Alejandro is an organizer for Students for Quality Education and is involved with numerous campus organizations and community efforts, including MEXA and the Queer &/or Trans\* People of Color Collective. Above all, he is invested in the fight for a better world.

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