Introduction

Mestizaje, Mulataje, Mestiçagem in Latin American Ideologies of National Identities

There is a certain trend in North American and European postmodern scholarly discourse that focuses on métissage, creolization, hybridity, and other concepts that evoke cross-cultural movements and fertility. In the numerous publications, lectures, communications, and other texts that deal with these issues, there is a tendency towards a somewhat naïve enthusiasm for the end of white supremacy and all other forms of racism, segregation, and intolerance. These come with a celebration of what is seen as the definitive attack against the oppressiveness of Western nation-states and their accompanying elitist, hegemonic definitions and categorizations. Such enthusiasm comes with the hope that those processes of hybridization, increasingly evident at the turn of the millennium, will produce a blurring of genres, borders, categories, and “normal” citizenships, thus heralding the end of hierarchies between and among cultures, groups, and individuals. This would usher a sort of utopian general equality into a world that is progressively more integrated and global, where cultures, ideas, and goods circulate in all directions at an increasing pace.

In the introduction of a recently published collection entitled Performing Hybridity, May Joseph, one of the book’s two editors, provides a good example of such fervor. Indeed, she begins the essay with the following statement:

The discourse of hybridity has numerous international points of emergence. It emerges in the twentieth century alongside autochthonous nationalisms in the struggles for territorial and cultural sovereignty across Francophone, Lusophone, Iberian, Dutch, German, and Anglophone colonies. Although the foundational discourses of hybridity lie in the anthropological and biological discourses of conquest and colonization, the modern move to deploy hybridity as a disruptive democratic discourse of cultural citizenship is a distinctly anti-imperial and anti-authoritarian development. [Joseph 1999:1]

Joseph definitely identifies “hybridity” with postcolonial, progressive, and democratic politics. There is a clear anti-imperialist and, in a sense, anarchist tendency in her formulations.
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In the essay “The Politics and Aesthetics of Métissage,” the literary critic Françoise Lionnet presented métissage this way:

For me, métissage is a praxis and cannot be subsumed under a fully elaborated theoretical system. Métissage is a form of bricolage, in the sense used by Claude Lévi-Strauss, but as an aesthetic concept it encompasses far more: it brings together biology and history, anthropology and philosophy, linguistics and literature. Above all, it is a reading practice that allows me to bring out the interreferential nature of a particular set of texts, which I believe to be of fundamental importance for the understanding of many postcolonial cultures. If...identity is a strategy, then métissage is the fertile ground of our heterogeneous and heteronomous identities as postcolonial subjects. [Lionnet 1989:8]

Métissage is for her a subversive paradigm because it undermines the premises of arguments based on racial purity and because it creates the conditions for individuals and nations to move beyond racial and cultural essentialisms (Lionnet 1989:16).

In a lecture in which he talked about the state of art in performance studies at the turn of the 21st century given at Florida International University in February 2000, Richard Schechner followed this tendency when he predicted that hybrid forms would be the major characteristic of 21st century cultural performances. This hybridity, he enthusiastically said, evokes a multidirectional cultural fecundity, which goes against pre-established categories and genres conceived as frozen and monolithic, as well as against the hierarchy of “highbrow” and “lowlbrow” cultures.

We also find this thesis in a variety of other texts, including, for example, Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere by Jean-Loup Amselle (1998), which in many ways follows the work of Edouard Glissant and other French philosophers, and Néstor García Canclini’s Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity (1995).

Scholarly texts about métissage, creolization, hybridization, and its variants have a certain appeal. As an African diaspora studies scholar, I have myself engaged in the
understanding of blackness and African diaspora cultures as creolization processes (Rahier 1999a). But from the perspective of Latin Americanist scholars, this intellectual fashion for celebrating cultural and “racial” mixings tends to obfuscate the oppressive ideological realities and histories of the societies they study (Beck 2000; see also Whitten and Sheriff, this volume). In doing so, it can sometimes support the arguments of the local ladino elite in their opposition to the demands of indigenous or Indian populations for equality and justice (see Hale 1994, 1999).

Mestizaje, mulataje, and other notions of “race” and cultural mixings have played a central role in “official” and hegemonic imaginations of Latin American and Caribbean national identities from the end of the 19th century to the 21st. These ideologies of national identities have usually downplayed the importance of contemporary racism by proclaiming the myth of “racial democracy.” At the same time, they have marginalized and marked as Others the individuals and communities that do not fit the prototypical imagined hybridized identities.

An archaeology of such ideologies shows that despite their self-proclaimed antiracism and apparent promotion of integration and harmonious homogeneity (Quijada 2000), they constitute narratives of white supremacy. Such narratives always come with an attendant concept of whitening (blanqueamiento or branqueamento). Earlier Latin American foundational texts about mestizaje, written by “white” and white-mestizo or ladino intellectuals, clearly demonstrate that the discussions of race and cultural mixings have been grounded on racist premises and theories that were very popular in 19th-century Europe and North America. These texts were usually inspired by Spencerian positivism, unilineal evolutionism, polygenism, eugenics, and social Darwinism. Such arguments were based on an understanding of society as a social organism, which functioned similarly to biological organisms. They were rooted in the idea of evolution suggested by Charles Darwin. The Brazilian movement of eugenics was actually grounded on Lamarkian hereditary notions (Stepan 1991). Latin American intellectuals, who were convinced of the superiority of the so-called white race vis-à-vis blacks and “reds,” deployed these organistic notions and ideas of diseases to support their claim to the inferiority and dysfunctionality of black and indigenous populations in their societies. The Argentine Domingo Sarmiento, for example, was entirely opposed to miscegenation, or race mixing, between European “civilized” people and indigenous “barbarians.” He advocated the extermination of the “barbarous or savage races” as a requisite for social and national progress. He argued that:

It may be terribly unjust to exterminate savages, to suffocate nascent civilizations, to conquer peoples who are in a privileged state of development; yet, thanks to these injustices [North] America, instead of remaining abandoned to savages, incapable of progress, is today occupied by the Caucasian race, the most perfect, the most intelligent, most beautiful and most progressive of races that populate the earth; thanks to these injustices. [cited in Martínez-Echazabal 1998:25]
Many Latin American intellectuals of the early 20th century shared the idea that race mixing between “superior” and “inferior” races is unnatural. Lourdes Martínez-Echazabal has summarized the Latin American racialized discourses on identity, development and progress, and nationalisms. She argues that the period between the 1850s and the 1910s was marked by an opposition between two “pseudo-polarities.” These were:

On one hand, the deterministic discourse of naturally “inferior” races accursed by the biblical judgement against Ham and grounded primarily in evolutionary theory and the “scientific” principles of social Darwinism and, on the other, a visionary faith in the political and social viability of increasingly hybridized populations. Advocates of the former equated miscegenation with barbarism and degeneration; adherents of the latter prescribed cross-racial breeding as the antidote to barbarism and the means to creating modern Latin American nation-states. Closer examination of these supposedly antithetical positions, however, reveals them to be differently nuanced variations of essentially the same ideology, one philosophically and politically grounded in European liberalism and positivism, whose role it was to “improve” the human race through “better breeding” and to support and encourage Western racial and cultural supremacy. [Martínez-Echazabal 1998:30]

In the 20th century, many Latin American intellectuals felt the need to proclaim both uniquely Latin American identities in contradistinction to European and North American identities, and the respectability of original “Latin American cultures.” Accordingly, in many Latin American nation-states, the idea of mestizaje became the “trope for the nation.” Mestizaje was seen as the source of all Latin American possibilities yet to come (with the exception of the Southern Cone; see Guano on Argentina, this volume). A new image of the “inferior races” eventually appeared. The racial and cultural mixing of inferior with superior races would provide Latin American nations with what would become their characteristic strength, superior even to the actual strength of the white race. This would become a fifth race, the “cosmic race,” as José Vasconcelos called it.

This ideological history took, of course, different shapes in different national contexts. In Brazil, for example, two notions, in fact, competed with one another. One belief held that “white blood” was stronger than “black blood”; therefore, in case of racial mixing, the white blood canceled out the “negative quality” of the black blood. According to the other belief, hybridization produced a sturdier “race” that was more adapted to the tropics than the white race. This special issue was born out of a session I organized for a meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), entitled “Mestizaje, Mulataje, and Other Race Mixings in Latin American and Caribbean Ideologies of National Identities” (Miami, March 2000). The idea for the session originated in conversations that some of the participants had begun around the ideologies...
of mestizaje in different Latin American and Caribbean nation-states. Many argued against the tendency of some Latin Americanists to generalize the knowledge they had acquired about the particular ideological processes taking place in specific national contexts (usually Central America and the Andean region) to the rest of the subcontinent. We became convinced of the necessity to include the realities of Caribbean countries, Argentina, and Brazil within the discussion on the polysemic nature of Latin American and Caribbean mestizajes, particularly in relation to elites’ discursive constructions of national identities. Clearly, our aim was to expand the field of comparison and to clarify previous discussions. Indeed, in his introduction to a 1996 special issue of the Journal of Latin American Anthropology (JLAA) dedicated to the theme of mestizaje, guest editor Charles Hale wrote:

There are several obvious empirical and analytical gaps in the material presented in this collection, to which we draw the reader’s attention from the outset. Most important, we analyze mestizaje almost exclusively as an ideology of race mixture involving Europeans and Indians, but not peoples of African descent. Though, in part, this is a function of the particular cases under consideration, the matter cannot be written off that simply. The same historical-ideological myth of harmonious mestizaje that covers over its tracks of violence, dispossession, racism and the like also systematically erases Black people from the mix. Who, for example, can now imagine Antigua, Guatemala as a significantly African colonial city, as historian Chris Lutz recently has demonstrated was the case? A second, perhaps more obvious omission is geographic, both in the sense of Latin American and Caribbean areas not covered, and more important, the “borderlands” to the north…We hope both these omissions will serve as provocation, in the best sense of the term, as invitations to continue the dialogue. [Hale 1996:2-3]

A great diversity of papers were presented during our double session at the LASA 2000 meeting. Because some of the session participants decided to publish their contributions elsewhere, only four of the session papers have been included—after a peer review process—in this special issue of the JLAA. Among the papers not published here, are the work of Emma Cervone on the macho-ist and gender-specific dimensions of the Ecuadorian ideology of national identity in terms of mestizaje (2000); Olivia Gall’s analysis of mestizaje as a racist tool in the history of the Mexican state’s cultural and political project from 1810 to 2000 (2000); Arlene Torres’ deconstruction of Puerto Rican elites’ ideologies of mestizaje and blanqueamiento which manipulate/hide blackness differently in distinct presentations of the nation (2000); Nadine Fernandez’s analysis of racism in socialist Cuba (2000); Yves Labuissière’s examination of the importance of the idéologie de couleurs in the making of Haitian society (2000); and Percy Hintzen’s paper, “Race and Creole Ethnicity in the Caribbean,” which focused on the English-speaking Caribbean and provided a valuable comparative dimension that is usually absent from Latin Americanist forums. Hintzen’s thesis
spoke directly to the somewhat naïve celebrations of métissage and creolizations I refer to above. For Hintzen, Caribbean identity occurs within the discursive space of the “creole.” To be “Caribbean” is to be “creolized” and this space accommodates all who, at any one time, constitute a (semi) permanent core of Caribbean society. Creolization brought with it notions of organic connection across boundaries of ethnicized and racialized difference. It was the mechanism through which colonial discourses of difference, necessary for its legitimation, were accommodated. Those located in its discursive space, whatever their diasporic origin, became transformed in a regime ofidentific solidarity. At the same time, the Creole construct is integrally inserted into a discourse of exclusion as a boundary-maintaining mechanism. Upholding a strict and rigid boundary between “Caribbean” and “non-Caribbean” (local versus foreign) has functioned strategically as a mechanism for manipulation in the maintenance of order and control. As its precedent, créolité has imposed upon Caribbean nationalism European aspirations that have become hidden behind the veil of anticolonialism (see Hintzen 2002; see also Condé 1999; Price and Price 1997).

The polysemic nature of mestizaje, hybridity, créolité, and creolization in Latin America and the Caribbean is, in part, due to the sometimes very different sociopolitical and economic histories of the different national and local contexts. In the Andean region, for instance—and particularly in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia—the terms mestizaje and mestizola refer exclusively to racial mixings involving Europeans and Indians. Other kinds of race mixings have been named differently: mulatola for the mixing of blacks and whites and zambola for the mixing of Indians and blacks (see Whitten 1999; Rueda Novoa 2001). Here, as Ronald Stutzman indicated some time ago, mestizaje becomes an “all inclusive ideology of exclusion” which otherizes Indians while at the same time including them in the “biology of national identity.” Blacks are unambiguously excluded. They are ideologically constructed as “ultimate Others” and not conceived as part of national mestizaje (Stutzman 1981; see also Rahier 1999b). In Brazil, on the other hand, the concepts of mestiçagem and mestiçola often appear as independent from specific racial ingredients, similar to the French terms métissage and métis, or métisse. However, these concepts have been employed mostly as synonymous with mulato/a. They have been connected historically to hegemonic constructions of Brazilianness which include blacks within the biology of national identity, while pushing Indians to the periphery (Warren 2001). These nonexhaustive terminological subtleties call for caution and render comparative discussions of mestizaje or mestiçagem among Latin Americanists difficult. They always require a previous conceptual clarification.

The four pieces included in this special issue illustrate quite well the diversity of social realities encompassed by the problematics of mestizaje in Latin America, as well as some of the current scholarly approaches adopted for their study.

Norman Whitten’s article focuses on recent forms of Ecuadorian Indians’ resistance to the hegemonic construction of national identity. The 1990s saw a formidable development of the Movimiento Indígena, and Whitten’s article emphasizes the fact
that Indian demands for Ecuador to be acknowledged as a pluricultural or intercultural or plurinational state often come along with symbolic inversions in which the mestizo appears—among other things—as a *longo acomplejado*, “Indian with an inferiority complex.” The resulting situation is one where mestizaje certainly exists as a national emblem and as a nationalist trope, although multiculturality has become “ascendant in national and regional contested arenas when classist and indigenous interests overthrow, for a while, elitist and developmentalist strategies and plans” (Whitten 2002:265).

In her article, Robin Sherrif intervenes in the debate on the nature of racial classification and racism in Brazil. Through a detailed ethnographic and sociolinguistic analysis, she focuses on the actual usage of race/color terms among African Brazilian informants, and challenges the notion that they divide themselves into separate, multiple racial categories. While poor African Brazilians recognize differences in color, they believe that all are members of the *raça negra*, “black race.” Sheriff’s sociolinguistic analysis suggests that scholars (of Brazil and Latin America generally) may have reified so-called racial categories—and missed the extent to which race/color terms serve a variety of rhetorical functions which have unexpected implications for the conceptualization of racial identity and belonging. The fact that poor Brazilians of color assert that they are all members of the *raça negra* underlines the ideological nature of Brazilian *mestiçagem* and represents their resistance to it (see also Sheriff 2001).

By focusing on concepts of performativity and pursuing an ethnography of professional mulatas, Natasha Pravaz deconstructs the ideological bases of the celebration of the mulata in Brazil. The strength of Pravaz’s article is in its demonstration both of the constructed nature of the figure of the mulata (performed by women of diverse skin colors) and the ambivalence with which these female entertainers negotiate and perform a public identity based on a highly ideologized cultural trope. Pravaz’s article emphasizes the performative aspect of identity and deconstructs the way in which individuals respond to nationalist concepts of hybridity. It would be too simplistic, she asserts, to interpret *mulatice* exclusively in terms of victimization of women of color “because of the immense delight women take in showcasing their talents, but most importantly, because mulatice is understood by many as a source of racial pride itself. If samba as a cultural form can be alternatively read as being both hybridly Brazilian and purely black, mulatice is also at the same time interpreted as mixture and recognized as blackness in disguise” (Pravaz 2002:265).

The last paper, by Emanuela Guano, introduces the case of Argentina in the debate over Latin American ideological manipulations (and rejection) of mestizaje. She argues that in Argentina mestizos are looked down upon by the urban middle class as backward, provincial Others, or even as foreigners. Although many Latin Americanist intellectuals have condemned Sarmiento’s writings for their blatant racism and their celebration of white supremacy, Sarmiento’s work is still very much at the
center of the narrative developed by middle-class Argentines about their national identity, and their participation in modernity, which they see as having no equivalent in any other Latin American nation-states. Guano’s ethnographic analysis describes how, recently, Sarmiento was the central rallying symbol for the strike of white, middle-class Argentines—mainly porteños—educators against the neoliberal policies of Carlos Saud Menem which threatened the funding of public education. Guano’s piece points to one of the last frontiers in Latin Americanist studies: the deconstruction of the many forms of Latin American whiteness.

These four pieces emphasize the fact that, although a fiction from the perspective of the biological sciences, race in Latin American elites’ nationalist discourses continues to be a social fact of great salience that negatively impacts the everyday lives of so many.

As Mary Weismantel recently wrote:

Race naturalizes economic inequality and establishes a social hierarchy that spans the continent. Within specific social contexts, it operates not merely as a negative principle—the ritual casting of aspersion upon one’s putative inferiors—but also as an expression of confidence that seals every successful consolidation of property and power with the name “white.” [Weismantel 2001: xxx]

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