Images of Latin American *mestizaje* and the politics of comparison

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In a presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, Gary Nash (1995) reveals 'the hidden history of mestizo America' (by which he in fact means North America). The emergence of what might have been 'a mixed-race American republic' was blocked by 'prejudice and violence' (1995: 945), but in particular situations, racial and cultural mixture existed, was recognised and even valued. Nash bemoans 'today's multicultural wars' in which multiculturalism is often construed simply as 'multiracialism' leading towards 'a definitional absolutism that has unwittingly defeated egalitarian and humanitarian goals by smothering inequalities of class and fuelling interethnic and interracial tensions that give more powerful groups opportunities to manipulate these divisions' (1995: 961). He concludes that what is needed is a 'pan-ethnic, pan-racial, antiracist sensibility'; he thinks that 'only through hybridity – not only in physical race crossing but in our minds as a shared pride in and identity with hybridity – can our nation break the "stranglehold that racialist hermeneutics has over cultural identity"' (1995: 962, citing Klor de Alva).

Nash uses Latin America as an explicit counterpoint in his argument, stating that in Spanish America there were 'no prohibitions against interracial contact and interracial marriage' (1995: 951) – which is in fact quite wrong (Martinez-Alier, 1974; Mörner, 1967). Still, he cautions it would be 'foolish to overromanticize this mixing of blood' (1995: 952) and recognises the existence of racism in the *casta* paintings of eighteenth-century Mexico that depicted mixed-race types. Yet he also sees *mestizaje* (he uses the Spanish word for racial and cultural mixture) as the enemy of 'racial absolutism' (1995: 961) and states that 'racial blending is undermining the master idea that race is an irreducible marker among diverse peoples' (1995: 960).

Other have also recently invoked Latin American *mestizaje* (or *mestiçagem* in Portuguese) as an antidote to US-style logics of racial categorisation. Some of this comes from the literature (much of it US-based) on mixed-race people, which shares with Nash a desire to reassess and relocate mixture in US society (Root, 1992, 1996; Spickard, 1989, 2001; Zack, 1995). Fernández, for example, while acknowledging that racism exists in some form in Mexico and Brazil, nevertheless contends that 'customary forms of discrimination based on actual ancestry have been rendered impotent' by centuries of mixture (Fernández, 1992: 132). As a result, Mexicans in the USA may be

able to disrupt and even 'neutralize' the US racial system by affirming their own mixed racial identities. Indeed, 'mestizaje…as a social norm…can free us all from the limits of ethnocentrism' (Fernández, 1992: 139, 140). Alcoff does not go so far as to claim that mestizo identity might neutralise racial categories, but she does invoke Latin American history and experience as an example of the development of identities not based on concepts of purity (Alcoff, 1995). Anzaldúa's well-known work is also part of this trend, with an even more explicit valorisation of *mestizaje* as a positive force for the future in terms reminiscent of José Vasconcelos's invocation of the *raza cósmica* (Anzaldúa, 1987; Vasconcelos, 1997 [1925]).

Latin America has often served as a counterpoint in comparative ponderings about race, especially in the Americas. The hoary notion of a Latin American 'racial democracy' has been subject to devastating critique, yet we see that Latin American *mestizaje* is still, amazingly, being held up by some as an example from which the rest of the world (particularly the USA) could learn. This trend is linked to a broader post-colonialist interest in processes of mixture and hybridity, which casts Latin American processes of *mestizaje* in a positive light. It should be clear that over-optimistic assessments of hybridity need to learn from the Latin American experience, and over-optimistic assessments of Latin American *mestizaje* need reminding of some home truths about racism in Latin America.

More fundamentally, I argue that there is an essential element to ideas about mixture which means that it can never simply be put in a relation of opposition to racial absolutes, or portrayed as necessarily destabilising them. *Mestizaje*, while it appears to erase origins and primordial categories of race and culture, actually continually reconstructs them. It depends on the idea of original or parent races and cultures to constitute the very possibility of mixture. All identities are constituted relationally and depend on others to exist, and mestizo identities are no exception. They may be deployed to different effects in different contexts, but to exist at all, they must invoke origins. The reconstitution of racial origins is an inherent part of *mestizaje*. Blackness, whiteness and indigenousness are constantly being recreated as, in a real sense, racial absolutes with primordial origins. Mixture can not be simply set against original and essential identities. Instead, it recreates them and redeploys them and, in doing so, re-establishes the basis for racism. The recreation of blackness does not automatically mean that anti-black racism will be directed against that category, but the former is a necessary condition for the latter, if not a sufficient one. In short, to see mixture and hybridisation as inherently opposed to racial absolutism and essentialism is quite wrong.

Images of Latin American mixture as an antidote to racial absolutism

Brazil occupies centre stage in the comparative debates about race in Latin America and the USA. Gilberto Freyre was an important, if by no means the first or only, figure to use Brazil as a counterpoint to the USA's institutional racism (Andrews, 1996;

Siegel, 2001: ch. 3). As late as 1951 he could state that, 'Brazil stands today as a community from whose experiment in miscegenation other communities may profit. Probably in no other complex modern community are problems of race relations being solved in a more democratic or Christian way than in Portuguese America' (Freyre, 1951: 98–99). This statement coincided with the UNESCO studies of race in Brazil that began to undermine such confidence, although some of the scholars involved ended up reinforcing the idea of the USA and Brazil as polar opposites of each other in racial terms (Harris, 1974). For Freyre, it was clear that racial mixture was the key to solving 'problems of race relations' in a democratic way. For Harris, the social recognition in Brazil of mixed offspring as distinct from both parents – whereas in the USA, a mixed child was generally assigned the identity of the lower-status parent – was the key to undermining the clear racial categorisations that would permit systematic discrimination and segregation.

Recently the debate has moved on somewhat from the question of whether or not racism exists in Brazil and other Latin American countries. It is unquestionable that it does (Reichmann, 1999). It has also been widely argued that *mestizaje* as an ideology of national formation is far from benevolent, as it commonly combines with a powerful ideology of whitening (*blanqueamiento*, *branqueamento*), in which mixture, far from being a neutral process of the amalgamation of Africans, indigenous peoples and Europeans, is a value-loaded process of the elimination of blackness and indigenousness from the national body politic in favour of whiter types of mestizos (Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Rosemblatt, 2003; Stutzman, 1981).

Debate still exists about how Brazil and the USA compare. Some scholars have argued that, because of its racism, Brazil is more like the USA than once thought, although this is also partly because the nature of race ideology and relations in the USA has changed in notable ways since the early comparisons were made, with the dismantling of formal segregation and the massive influx of Latino populations who do not fit easily into the long-standing black-white opposition, whatever nuances this divide is now recognised to have had (Degler, 1986; Skidmore, 1993; Winant, 1994). Others have approached the study of Brazil with what is arguably a US perspective on race, tending to emphasise racism, highlight black-white oppositions and often characterising the Brazilian black social movement in terms of lack, weakness or failure (in evident contrast to the US movement) (Hanchard, 1994; Sheriff, 2001; Twine, 1998). Meanwhile, others have argued that Brazil has a *sui generis* character in which the ambiguity of racial identity and of racial exclusions make it significantly different from the USA; they accuse some scholars of a US-centric approach to Brazilian realities (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999; Da Matta, 1997; Ferreira da Silva, 1998; Fry, 2000). Such an 'anti-imperialist' approach runs the risk of portraying Brazilian race relations as benign (French, 2000; Siegel, 2001: 125–138), but it need not do so.

My aim is not to intervene directly in this particular debate. Brazil and the USA are clearly alike in some respects, different in others; they are variations on an American theme of slavery, race and class and need to be seen in a broader American context, that would include the Caribbean, other Latin American societies and other (post)colonial contexts (Hoetink, 1973; Marx, 1998). The comparison of the two

countries has a long history that shows how the comparative project has served different needs at different times (Siegel, 2001; see also Stoler, 2001). The comparison also serves to isolate the two places, overshadowing the constant communication between them and the mutual construction of their images (Siegel, 2001).

I am more interested in how the process of mixture appears in the debate. Mixture, or rather its social recognition, often emerges as a key aspect of the character of Brazilian race relations; the absence of its social recognition underlies the US system. Many people have criticised Degler's concept of 'the mulatto escape hatch' which held that the social recognition of mixed race offspring ('mulattoes') as occupying categories intermediate between black and white (or, one might add, indigenous) also involved preferential treatment for them (Degler, 1971). Using census data, it has been shown that 'mulattoes' (a difficult category to pin down statistically) are very similar to 'blacks' in socio-economic profile and suffer as much discrimination as them (Lovell, 1994; Silva, 1985; Silva and Hasenbalg, 1999). No one now argues that the key to Brazilian racial relations is preferential treatment for 'mulattoes'.

In a variation on the role of the 'mulatto', earlier accounts emphasised that the social recognition of mixture made Brazilian racial identities ambiguous and made political solidarity difficult: lighter-skinned Afro-Brazilians were often characterised as attempting to flee blackness and not identify themselves with a racial consciousness. Toplin (1971) and Degler (1971) made the contrast with the USA where, however much mixed race people were recognised as distinct within the category of African-Americans (Hanchard, 1994: 38; Spickard, 1989; Toplin, 1981), the category 'black' became a point of collective identification and political action. Later analyses described how, in the context of a growing black social movement, some light-skinned Brazilian blacks were happier to identify as 'blacks' (Burdick, 1998; Turner, 1985). This coincided with the beginning of the statistical studies that showed marked similarities between 'blacks' and 'mulattoes' and appeared to justify thinking of them as one category.

Yet scholars are still alive to the impact of ideas about mixture in Brazil. Hanchard bases his analysis mainly on the idea of a racial hegemony in Brazil, where myths about the non-existence of racial discrimination co-exist with a) the enactment of racism; b) continuous symbolic denigration of blackness and valorisation of whiteness, leading to low self-esteem and the aversion to political action among Afro-Brazilians; and c) coercive and pre-emptive action against those who challenge the system (Hanchard, 1994: 56–67). All this and 'the difficulty of distinguishing racist acts from other forms of oppression' (1994: 8) – that is, the coincidence of race and class hierarchies – cripple black political action. Yet, quoting Skidmore (1985: 13), Hanchard also locates the beginnings of the ideology of 'racial democracy and its attendant racist ideology of whitening [in] "the elite's struggle to reconcile Brazil's actual social relations – *the absence of a clear line between white and non-white* – with the doctrines of scientific racism that had penetrated Brazil from abroad"' (Hanchard, 1994: 8, emphasis added). He also revisits Degler's mulatto escape hatch, not to rehabilitate it, but to argue that, if it is not true that mixed race people receive preferential treatment in Brazil, it remains that case that many Brazilians think they do and perceive significant

differences between different shades of blackness (and whiteness).[1] This could 'partially explain the difficulties of joint social and political mobilization of *negros* and *pardos*' (Hanchard, 1994: 39).

Winant takes a similar line, making the same comments on the idea of the escape hatch as a social if not a statistical reality (Winant, 1994: 135). He reiterates the contrast between the USA, where a white-black distinction, despite complexities and challenges, was 'articulated in national terms,' and Brazil 'where there was and is the most extensive development of *racial ambivalence*' (1994: 155). By this, he means 'the partial and often denied awareness of race' and he observes that 'Perhaps nowhere else in the world is it more difficult to achieve a clear understanding of who one is according to the prevailing system of social categorization. Perhaps in no other country is it as arduous to assess the significance of race in everyday life. [...] In no other country is the *salience* of race so uncertain' (1994: 155, 154). Although he is not explicit about it, it seems clear that the social categories of race in Brazil, which recognise and classify mixture, create a system in which it is difficult to know who one is, racially speaking. For Winant, 'The public articulation and exploration of *racial dualism* would itself be a major advance' in Brazil (1994: 156). This more explicit recognition of blackness as a collective identity is part of what the activists of the black social movement in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America are seeking to achieve.

Accusing both Winant and Hanchard of ethnocentric universalism and of using the USA as a benchmark against which to judge racial consciousness and black mobilisation in Brazil, which makes it look like a 'problem case' in which the relative non-emergence of a black movement is a 'puzzle' to be solved, Ferreira da Silva sees Brazil as different in kind rather than degree, without denying Brazilian racism. The basis of the difference is the role played by the ideology of mixedness in constituting the nation (cf. Marx, 1998). Recalling many previous approaches, Ferreira da Silva says of Brazilian national discourse that, 'More than in any other instance, it speaks of a mixed racial "Spirit" to constitute national subjects'. This is reflected in a 'multipolar system of racial (colour) classification, which emerges out of a construction of race where racial division is not a presupposition' as it is in the USA. It also places 'racial differentiation in terms of phenotype rather than origin in accordance with the view that Brazilians of any colour share a common (mixed) racial origin' (Ferreira da Silva, 1998: 228).

Winant and Hanchard see mixture as part of the problem: it undermines collective identity and political solidarity. Ferreira da Silva sees it as a key part of Brazil's particularity. Whatever their differences, these authors agree that race mixture, as a socially recognised process, plays a role in constructing a society in which clear racial divisions and collective identities built on them are minimal. In this sense, although this is not an argument that these authors explicitly make, mixture is placed in opposition

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1 It also remains the case that although there is not much difference between 'mulattoes' and 'blacks' in socio-economic profile, there is some (Silva 1985). For Colombia, I argue that there is a structural relationship between upward mobility and whitening, which is not dependent on supposedly preferential treatment for lighter-skinned Afro-Colombians (Wade, 1993: 295–300).

to what one might call pure or essential identity: the former undoes the latter, whether for good or for ill.

Mestizaje, hybridity, diaspora and racial identity politics

Optimistic ideas about Latin American *mestizaje* clearly take some of their impulse from a general sense of discontent with US-style racial identity politics, which have been the subject of various critiques – many similar to Nash's complaint that an over-emphasis on racialist hermeneutics can play into the hands of those who would divide and rule and can distract attention from class politics and broader issues of social justice (Winant, 1993; Marable, 1995; see also Hollinger, 1997). Zizek (1999: 216), for example, sees multiculturalism generally as 'the ideal form of ideology of global capitalism.'

Some authors see hybridity and mixture as undoing and destabilising the fundamentalist purities of racial (and other) absolutism. The divided and separate camps of US racial identity politics and the official multiculturalisms that recognise cultural difference only to divide it up into neat pigeon holes are the targets of various theorists such as Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak who together appear to confirm that 'At the broadest level of conceptual debate there seems to be a consensus over the utility of hybridity as antidote to essentialist subjectivity' (Papastergiadis, 1997: 273). Gilroy sees diaspora as a challenge to 'camp-thinking' (2000: 84) or the racial and other absolutisms that divide people into rigid and exclusive camps. Diaspora is not the same as mixture, but Gilroy sees the two as closely related in that identities based on diasporic processes are 'creolised, syncretized, hybridised and chronically impure cultural forms' (2000: 129).

Other scholars subject the vaunting of hybridity to the same critique suffered by multiculturalism, which is ironic given that hybridity is often seen as an antidote to multiculturalism in its 'camp-thinking' mode. Friedman (1997) and Zizek (1999: 220) both see hybridity as valuable only for a cosmopolitan elite. Hardt and Negri (2000: 143–146) see it as collusive with current forms of global capitalism, which seem to thrive precisely on decentred networks of production and power, rather than simple binary divisions. García Canclini is more circumspect: the cultural hybridisations that occur in the Latin American city can relativise and dehierarchise, but can also reinforce old inequalities (1995: 227–8). In the hybrid border areas and cultures that characterise the US-Mexican frontier, conflicts and inequalities are not erased, but they are placed in a 'different register' which is multifocal, more tolerant and carries smaller fundamentalist risks (1995: 239, 241).

I think it is important to note that some of the more optimistic assessments of Latin American *mestizaje* cited above have emerged in the context of these broader debates about hybridity – debates which, even in the case of García Canclini, tend not to refer to the well-established literature on race and *mestizaje* as an ideology and practice of national and personal identity in Latin America. Some of the recent commentators on *mestizaje* have perhaps been listening to theorists of hybridity who are not well acquainted with *mestizaje* itself.

It seems salutary, therefore, to revisit *mestizaje* as a Latin American ideology and practice and to question whether mixture can *ever* be a simple antidote to racial absolutisms or whether, to the contrary, it is ultimately complicit in their reproduction.

Mestizaje and the reconstitution of origins

I agree with the critiques of hybridity, cited above, that come from a political economy perspective. I would add though that much depends on context. Mixture is not necessarily complicit with global capitalism, although the latter, with its usual predatory agility, may make use of ideas and practices of mixture to sell products and exploit resources – mixing old and new symbols of consumption, or old and new production practices, or creating interstitial spaces of power, perhaps using NGOs and other organisations of civil society as hybrid networks which diversify and decentre power relations between 'the State' and 'the People'. But mixture can also be deployed in different contexts, with different effects which challenge the status quo. It is a question of who deploys ideas and practices of mixture, in what context and to what effect.

In a similar way, the effect of *mestizaje* depends on context. Hale (1996) shows that in Guatemala, the term mestizo can be used in different ways. It can connote the classic nationalist process in which indigenous peoples are marginalised and even steadily eliminated (cf. Gould, 1998). In this sense, a more recent version of the mestizo nation recognises a certain multiplicity, but is still 'a familiar act of appropriation from above' (1996: 53), trying to contain the growing Maya indigenous rights movement. The idea of mestizo can also be used to critique the inherited colonial category of *ladino* which expresses a (whitened) white-indigenous mixed identity and is opposed to *indígena*; in this sense, mestizo connotes a mixture of ladino and indigenous and the indeterminacy of both categories in contemporary Guatemala. Finally, the idea of mestizo can also be used to critique or even delegitimate Maya activist essentialism, implying that Mayas are mixed and not really different from other mestizo Guatemalans (cf. Warren, 1998).

Fundamentally, however, *mestizaje* actively reconstitutes the racial origins that seem to vanish in its teleological progress. This means that it cannot stand in an inherent relation of opposition to racial essentialism or act as an antidote to it.

In Colombia, for example, I found a constant reiteration of indigenousness and blackness in twentieth-century texts about the Colombian nation and its processes of mixture (Wade, 2000). Although a whitened homogeneous future was, until the late twentieth century, held out as a desirable possibility, the images of *el indígena* and *el negro* were constantly in the narrative frame. With reference to Colombian popular music, I also found a persistent pattern, among literate commentators, folklorists and musicians, to disaggregate the music they listen to and play into racialised origins, attributing specific racial origins to specific musical traits. Typically drums are derived from Africa, language and often melody from Spain, while the indigenous past often acts as a more residual category, said to have contributed specific instruments, or a sense of melancholy. *Cumbia*, for example, is divided into elements deriving from Africa (drums), native America (the *gaita*, a vertical cane flute) and Europe (melody, clothing of the dancers).

Sometimes this pattern would take a negative form. *Bambuco*, a strings-based style typical of the highland interior, was hailed at the turn of the nineteenth century as the musical spirit of the nation and subsequent debates turned on its racial origins, specifically the question of whether it had any African roots. Some vehemently denied this – Africanness fitted poorly with their image of the nation and even worse with that of the highland interior – others insisted it did (Ochoa, 1997; Wade, 2000: 51). Whatever the angle taken, blackness was a constant source of reference. Denying its influence in the case of *bambuco* simply reiterated its presence as an origin which clearly had influenced some aspects of Colombian culture and might have influenced any number of other aspects. Finally, I also found a tendency to talk at a very embodied level in terms of how a person is constituted in terms of having black, indigenous and white 'blood' or heritage. Personal traits and abilities – in relation, for example, to music and dance – are conceived in terms of racialised origins and characters expressing themselves in the body (Wade, 2002: 100–102). This is connected to the strongly racialised nature of the Colombian landscape, with racial images powerfully attached to particular regions – and regions having the power to racialise people and social processes (Wade, 1993). Being born and raised in a given region, and incorporating its racial essence through diet and climate, is a key mechanism for constituting the person. Yet no region is seen as entirely black or white or indigenous – with perhaps the exception of isolated parts of the Amazon (indigenous) or the Pacific coast region (black); whiteness is even less segregated, as wherever there are whites there are also black, indigenous and mestizo servants. Mixture occurs virtually everywhere. Mestizos are in a constant process of emergence, constituted by the genealogical intersections of their parental heritages and by living in mixed regional landscapes. But both genealogy and landscape are structured by constant reference to tri-partite racial origins.

In relation to this, it is worth mentioning, albeit in passing, the potential relevance of possession religions such as *candomblé* and *umbanda* in Brazil, Cuban *santería* and the Venezuelan María Lionza complex, which all involve individuals being possessed by spirits, many of whom have a clear racial identity, which is also often either 'original' (i.e. African, European or indigenous) or at least old (i.e. of colonial origin, such as *umbanda*'s old black slave man, the *preto velho*).[2] In these religions, original racial elements are being incorporated into the body and reiterated as part of popular national culture. It is also worth mentioning the recent work on genomics in Brazil, which, in attempting a '*retrato molecular do Brasil*' (a molecular portrait of Brazil), traces the percentages of blackness, indigenousness and whiteness in white Brazilian men, once again reconstituting racial origins while foregrounding an image of mixedness, this time in a genetic idiom (Pena et al., 2000; Santos and Maio, 2003).

If mixture reconstitutes origins, then it is not surprising that, as numerous studies of Latin America have made abundantly clear – a conclusion that bears repetition in view of the optimistic views of Nash and others cited above – racism has no trouble at all

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2   On the Venezuelan cult of María Lionza, see Placido (1998) and Taussig (1997). On the *preto velho* in Brazilian *umbanda*, see Hale (1997). On candomblé and Afro-Brazilian religion generally, see Bastide (1978). On Cuban *santería*, see Hagedorn (2001).

co-existing with ideologies and practices of mixture. Indeed racism feeds on these to mask its operation. Hardt and Negri criticise Bhabha because he assumes hybridity destabilises power regimes that rely on binary divides and dialectical processes of interaction between binary terms. They argue that hybridity and diasporic processes may sit easily with post-modern forms of power, which no longer rely on binary divisions and dialectical reconciliation (which they see as operating primarily within older colonial and nation-state contexts), but are themselves based on shifting and hybridizing networks (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 143–145). Similarly, racism does not rely on binary divides, but can operate quite effectively within and through processes of mixture. Nash and Fernandez, cited above, admit the existence of racism in Mexico and Brazil, but still naively hold to the view that *mestizaje* can undo racial essentialism; yet racism depends on some kind of racial essentialism, even if not US-style racial identity defined by quite precise ideas of ancestry and collective identity politics. Latin American studies of race demonstrate this very well (see, e.g., Hanchard, 1994; Reichmann, 1999; Sheriff, 2001; Wade, 1993; Whitten, 1986 [1974]).

Winant and Hanchard are right to argue that mixture is part of what makes collective identification and mobilisation as 'blacks' difficult in Brazil, and this indicates that mixture goes against the grain of collective movements of the US black-rights type that they would both like to see more of in Brazil. But it is vital to see that mixture does not undo racial essentialisms *per se*. Ideas of racial mixture cannot, in themselves, be set against racial absolutism, because they always recreate the images of racial origins which supply the basis for racist essentialisms. These continue to exist in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America and provide the basis for racism, as well as at least some of the basis for contestatory movements that vindicate black and indigenous rights. Although *mestizaje* might undermine a US-style racial identity politics, it does not promise to replace it with anything more acceptable in political and ethical terms, because racial essentialisms are also integral to its operation.

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