THE STUDY OF LATIN AMERICAN "RACIAL FORMATIONS": Different Approaches and Different Contexts

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THE BLOOD OF GUATEMALA: A HISTORY OF RACE AND NATION. By Greg Grandin. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. Pp. 343. $54.95 cloth, $18.95 paper.)

COLORING THE NATION: RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC. By David Howard. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001. Pp. 227. $49.95 cloth, $19.95 paper.)

RACE AND POLITICS IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC. By Ernesto Sagás. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. Pp. 164. $49.95 cloth.)

A NATION FOR ALL: RACE, INEQUALITY, AND POLITICS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CUBA. By Alejandro de la Fuente. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. Pp. 449. $55.00 cloth, $19.95 paper.)

DREAMING EQUALITY: COLOR, RACE, AND RACISM IN URBAN BRAZIL. By Robin E. Sheriff. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001. Pp. 264. $22.00 paper.)

Mestizaje, mulataje, and other notions of "race" and cultural mixings have played a central role in "official" and dominant imaginations of Latin American national identities from the end of the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. These ideologies of national identities have usually downplayed the importance of contemporary racism by proclaiming the myth of "racial democracy" ("En nuestro país no hay racismo porque todos nosotros tenemos un poco de cada sangre en nuestras venas"; "In our country there is no racism because we all have a mixture of different bloods running in our veins"). At the same time, these ideologies have marginalized and marked as Others the individuals and communities that do not fit—phenotypically and culturally—the prototypical imagined, national, and hybridized (modern) identities.

A long tradition of scholarship on nationalism has emphasized the "homogenizing processes" of the ideologies of national identity from

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the end of the eighteenth through the first half of the twentieth centuries. According to Benedict Anderson, for example, "national cultures" help(ed) to accommodate and resolve differences by ideologically constructing a singular "national identity" (Anderson 1991 [1983]). Too often, scholars writing on nationalism have failed to recognize a contingent phenomenon of nationalism that elides a superficial reading and that contradicts its homogenizing ambition: the creation of one or various "Others" within and without the limits of the "national space." Indeed, to secure unity and to make their own history, the dominating powers have always worked best with practices that differentiate and classify. Their ability to select or construct differences that serve their purposes has depended upon the possibilities for exploitation that emerge in the dangers contained in situations of ambiguity (see Asad 1993, 17). Discrimination against the colonized subject became refined as distinction based on excellence and as an ideology deployed against the colonized and dominated subject, socially and culturally constructed as inferior and different, if not repugnant and obscene.

An archaeology of such Latin American ideologies of national identity shows that despite their self-proclaimed antiracism and apparent promotion of integration and harmonious homogeneity (Quijada 2000), they constitute little more than narratives of white supremacy that always come with an attendant concept of whitening (*blanqueamiento* or *branqueamento*). Early 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 nineteenth-century Europe and North America. These texts were usually inspired by Spencerian positivism, unilineal evolutionism, polygenism, eugenics, and social Darwinism. Their arguments were based on an understanding of society as a social organism, which functioned similarly to biological organisms. Latin American (white, white-*mestizo*, and Ladino) intellectuals, who were convinced of the superiority of the so-called white race vis à vis blacks and "reds," deployed organistic notions and ideas of diseases and infection to support their claim to the inferiority and dysfunctionality of black and indigenous populations in their societies.

Many Latin American intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared the idea that race mixing between "superior" and "inferior" races was unnatural. Lourdes Martínez-Echazabal has summarized the Latin American racialized discourses on identity, development, and progress, and nationalisms (1998). 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 judgment 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. (1998, 30)

In the twentieth century, many 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." This was the golden age of Indigenism. 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 possibilities yet to come and a new image of the "inferior races" eventually emerged. 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 briefly summarized ideological history took, of course, different shapes in different national contexts, at different times. *Mestizaje* and *mulataje* are polysemic; they mean different things, at different times, in different places (Rahier 2003). Although it was first coined for the study of the U.S. racial order, Michael Omi's and Howard Winant's notion of "racial formation" (i.e., "racially structured social formations") captures well the idea of race as a polysemic signifier in Latin American national contexts:

We define *racial formation* as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.

. . . racial formation is a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.

[We] think of racial formation processes as occurring through a linkage between structure and representation. Racial *projects* do the ideological "work" of making these links. *A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines*. Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning. (1994, 55–56)

The ideology of white supremacy at work in all Latin American racial formations behind the cover of "all-inclusive *mestizaje*" is

undergirded by "signifying practices that essentialize and naturalize human identities" (Winant 2001, 317). The racialization of these identities is produced out of understandings of hierarchical biological difference. It is against this ideology of white supremacy that Latin American indigenous and black movements have been struggling—more successfully in the past two decades perhaps—by voicing their opposition to "official *mestizaje*" (see, among others, Whitten 2003; Sheriff 2003; Scott and Mijeski 2000).

The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation, by Greg Grandin, requires that the general introductory comments I presented above be made less dichotomic and more subtle, since this study examines the astute ways in which the K'iche' elite in the city of Quetzaltenango maneuvered to preserve their position of prestige and power over the course of more than two centuries, despite the advent of significant obstacles and changes such as the Bourbon Reforms, independence, the transition from conservative to liberal rule, and the arrival of coffee capitalism in the late 1800s. It is because they became effective brokers in an "indirect rule" system between, at first, Indian peasants and the Spanish colonial government and, later, Indian workers and the Guatemalan (Ladino-controlled) state that the K'iche' elite (elders and community leaders) were able to retain their position. Thus, beyond the story of K'iche' *principales* in Quetzaltenango, Grandin's book is also about the processes of Indian identity making in relation to state power solidification and the development of Guatemalan nationalism. Grandin, in fact, demonstrates that two versions of Guatemalan nationalism coexisted throughout the country's history: a Ladino, anti-Indian nationalism—of the type I refer to in the preceding pages—and an Indian nationalism which was opening a space for Ladinos and Indians to live side by side.

In order to occupy a kind of "hybrid position" as Indians and as elites, the K'iche' *principales* had to remain legitimate in the eyes of both the Indian commoners and the Spanish, Creole, and Ladino elites in control of the state institutions. They did so by embracing modernity, associated with the Ladino world, at the same time that they celebrated the "traditional Indian world." The strategies they adopted denoted a very good understanding of Spanish, Creole, and Ladino "racial projects" expressed, among other things, in their stereotyping of Indian populations. On the one hand, they welcomed the construction of the railroad, used the telegraph, sent their children to Spanish-speaking schools, and exhibited photographs of themselves (the men) in European-style clothes; on the other they displayed photographs of their women dressed in "traditional garb," erected monuments celebrating Indian culture, and held Mayan beauty pageants. The Indian nationalism developed by the K'iche' elites consisted in proposing another "racial project" that was not revolution-

izing the one advanced by the Ladino elites: they claimed that Indian peasants and workers were necessary for the building of a modern, coffee-producing country. Such a project allowed them to retain control over local resources and indigenous labor, and in that way appear as indispensable to the Ladino elites.

Grandin ends the book with an examination of the 1954 outbreak of civil war, which put an end to the "ten years of spring" (1944–54). The latter was characterized by the alteration of the "traditional" power structure when Indian commoners began to acquire lands thanks to the agrarian reform of the early 1950s. The K'iche' elites felt threatened. They stopped brokering and allied themselves with anticommunist groups that were vehemently opposed to reform. In doing so, the K'iche' elites assumed their class position while walking away from "ethnic solidarity" by turning against other Indians. Grandin is convinced that both the massacre of Indian villages in the Highlands and the Pan-Mayan movements that emerged around the same time are the direct results of the influence of the K'iche' elite-brokering throughout the history of Guatemalan nation-building. Grandin's book emphasizes the importance of race (and to a lesser extent gender) for class-based analysis of social transformations and nation-building.

In *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* and *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic,* David Howard and Ernesto Sagás, respectively, focus on the particularities of the Dominican racial formation. As Torres-Saillant indicates in his preface to Howard's book (vii–x), the objective here is not to condemn Dominicans for not identifying and for not relating to "Blackness" in the same way as most U.S.-born African Americans do. Torres-Saillant cites Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—especially in his documentary film, *Wonders of the African World*—as a good example of the condemnation of people who do not follow the U.S. African American way of relating to and conceiving of race (referring to Gates's arrival in Zanzibar and Dar-Es-Salaam, and his cynical treatment of various dark-skinned individuals whom he interviews and who self-identify as Arabs instead of as black Africans). As David Howard states in his introduction, it is impossible to comprehend Dominican society without grasping "the importance of race for the understanding of nation and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic." (1) What surprised me when reading these two books, as a non-specialist of the Dominican Republic who is based in the United States, is the way both authors define "ethnicity" and understand its relationship to "race." The American Anthropological Association (AAA) indicates on various pages of its website[1] that

1. See http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm, http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/race.htm, and http://www.aaanet.org/gvt/ombdraft.htm.

"race" and "racial differences" should be understood as social and cultural constructs that took shape in specific historical contexts characterized by European colonialisms and imperialisms and their legacies. The AAA concludes that in the United States, "race" has been broadly understood for the past few decades as synonymous of "physical appearance," and "ethnicity" has been defined as "the socio-cultural heritage" of a group of people. These definitions bring most Latin Americanist researchers who have worked in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, or multi-"national" contexts, for example, to understand that within a particular "racial group," the Indians or indigenous peoples of Ecuador or Peru, to name only two examples, there exists a series of ethnic (that is to say, linguistic and other socio-cultural) differences. Far from adopting this view, both Howard and Sagás posit the existence of one single Dominican ethnicity, which would include the Dominicans of all social classes and of all skin tones. Although Sagás does so in a somewhat suggestive and indirect manner, Howard assumes this position much more explicitly when he writes:

> Ethnicity is an umbrella term under which to group shared identities and the commonalities of race, nation, religion, aesthetics, language, and kinship. Race, as a component of ethnicity, is created by attaching social and cultural significance to physical features or color, and then by grouping individuals according to phenotype. (2–3)

Since I am not a Dominicanist, it is challenging for me to propose an alternative way to approach the realities of race and ethnicity in Dominican society. However, the perspectives of Howard and Sagás appear to contradict the argumentation developed by Paul Austerlitz in *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* (1997). In the latter, Austerlitz (a musicologist who is also a professional drummer) attempts to reconstruct the various historical processes that lead to the emergence of *merengue* as a symbol of Dominican national identity. In doing so, he underlines the existence of a Dominican national racial/spatial order or "cultural topography" (see Wade 1993). In the Cibao region, its imagined whiteness and its musical forms have been prominent in that official history of merengue in contradistinction to the southern region, its more visible blackness, and its more clearly Afro-Dominican drumming styles. The differences between the Cibao and the southern regions, adds Austerlitz, are not limited to musical styles and evoke what some could decide to call "different ethnicities." The first paragraph of Austerlitz's conclusion underscores this cultural or ethnic tension between the two regions:

> Although merengue is central to Dominican life and identity, some argue that it is not a representative symbol of the Dominican Republic, home to a wealth of African-derived drumming styles whose cultural importance and sheer beauty are denied by the country's dominant Hispanophilic ideology. (1997, 149)

Austerlitz then goes on to refer to musical groups (such as Convite and Asa-Difé) that perform Afro-Dominican musics in urban areas, and who suggest that *palos* drumming be adopted as national music, or that Dominican musical forms of greater African influence than merengue become national symbols of national identity in order to reflect more accurately the nature of Dominican society. "Considering the music in local, national, and transnational perspectives," writes Austerlitz, "this book argues that Dominicans have used merengue *cibaeño* as a national symbol precisely because its syncretic quality appeals to the prevailing African-derived aesthetic without offending the prevailing Hispanophilism" (149).

The distance I see between Howard and Sagás, on one side, and Austerlitz, on the other, denotes a fundamental difference in research strategy and focus. The former authors are mostly concerned with deconstructing dominant Dominican elites' narratives of national identity (which somehow they take for granted) by emphasizing the central place occupied by anti-Haitianism in these narratives that reproduce the "racial project" of the Dominican elites. Blackness is the fundamental characteristic of the Haitian Other and is situated outside the ideological biology of national identity, which is conceived as a mixing of European, Indian ancestry (the Taínos), and eventually "African blood." This great anxiety of the Dominican racial formation vis-à-vis blackness and African ancestry is at work, for example, when individuals who in other Latin American contexts might call themselves "*mulatos*" prefer to self-identify as "*indios*" (see both Howard and Sagás), or when a national political figure's dark skin is used by his political opponents as a mark of outsiderness that should make the voters doubt his real patriotic commitments (see Sagás).

In the section of his conclusion quoted above, Austerlitz reproduces the voices of musicians and activists who are very much engaged in what Jordan and Weedon call "cultural politics" (1995, 5–6): they challenge the Dominican elites' narratives of national identity and their attendant "Hispanophilism" that devalue the contribution of dark-skinned Dominicans to the history of the country, and whose main objective is to re-center cultural practices associated with the black or darker-skinned populations of regions considered peripheral to the "Dominican cultural topography." These three authors underscore the fact that there is, in the Dominican Republic (just as it is the case elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean), a strong correlation between social class and skin color.

Howard's book shows an interest in finding out how specific Dominicans, from different social-class backgrounds and skin tones, who reside in very different neighborhoods, self-identify. He also examines how race, gender, and images of the body inform one another, and how

the formation of a transnational Dominican society eventually impacts the place of blackness in some individual self-identifications. One of his chapters presents an analysis of the working of race in key Dominican literary fictions in which narratives of national identity are deployed, and another chapter focuses more specifically on race and nation in Dominican politics.

In *Race and Politics*, Sagás, a political scientist, focuses almost exclusively on the perspectives of the dominants, the way they have been manipulating race in politics: the colonial origin of *antihaitianismo* and the fundamental ideological role it played throughout the twentieth century; the centrality of *antihaitianismo* in the state ideology during the Trujillo era; the manipulation of *antihaitianismo* by Trujillo as a useful tool to dominate and control darker-skinned Dominicans; and Joaqúin Balaguer and the cohabitation of *antihaitianismo* with democracy.

In *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*, Alejandro De La Fuente analyzes the effects of government policies, economic conditions, electoral politics, and social actions on the official discourse on race and on the characteristics of Cuban racial inequality from 1902 to 1999. His argumentation consists in proposing answers to some fundamental questions: how has racial inequality played out in education, employment, political power, and housing in Cuba's postcolonial society; what have been the roles of domestic factors and of foreign (particularly U.S.) influences in the positioning of Afro-Cubans in those areas; and what has been the impact of racial ideologies on the framing of race relations in Cuba.

De La Fuente—a Cuban who migrated to the United States to attend graduate school in the early 1990s—demonstrates that there exists in Cuba an official ideology of national identity that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and that continues to flourish. That dominant ideology, which emulates *mestizaje* (or more specifically *mulataje*) as the prototypical identity of the modern nation, has had contradictory social effects. On the one hand, it has contributed to the ignoring or the invisibilizing of specific Afro-Cuban claims for social justice and opened up possibilities for Afro-Cuban participation in the nation. The persistent racism of Cuban society throughout the three republics reinforced the association of certain social identities with specific "races," although the prevalent reluctance of political regimes to acknowledge the importance of the social implications of race (and this has particularly been the case after 1959) also encouraged the formation of new identities ("revolutionary," "people," etc.).

In his epilogue, De La Fuente cites two speeches given by two Cuban presidents who tried to define *cubanidad*. The first, President Carlos Prío, said in 1951: "Cuba has its own voice, which is neither white nor black. Just as Martí is white and Maceo is black, our culture is white

with Spain and black with Africa." Around fifty years later, Fidel Castro welcomed John Paul II in similar terms: "They [the Africans] made a remarkable contribution to the ethnic composition and the origins of our country's present population in which the cultures, the beliefs, and the blood of all participants . . . have been mixed" (335). As is the case in the Dominican Republic and in Puerto Rico, this ideology of *mulataje* pushes blackness away, relegating it to a distant past in the country's history. Indeed, the very governments (from the early republic on) who have proclaimed racial equality and celebrated *mulataje* have also implemented policies that reproduced racist understandings of blackness. The socialist government has not been an exception to the rule. In 1962 Castro proclaimed that racism had disappeared from the island with the eradication of class privileges and that the "racial problem" had been solved; he imposed a taboo or an institutionalization of silence on the public discussion on race. His government took a series of measures aimed at secularizing (or "folklorizing") Afro-Cuban rituals and legitimizing the usual association between blackness and backwardness. De La Fuente asserts that in the 1960s, "revolutionary authorities regarded Afro-Cuban religion as a cultural atavism incongruent with the construction of a modern, technically oriented socialist society—an obstacle of the past to be removed" (336).

A Nation for All evokes the almost apartheid-like regime of race relations in "private" social spaces and even in public spaces such as parks, promenades, and upscale hotels during the first two republics. De La Fuente emphasizes that with the 1959 revolution systematic efforts were taken by the government to destroy the institutional bulwarks of racial segregation on the island (private schools, social clubs, and recreational facilities). Within the framework of an ambitious project of social engineering, the government also began an extensive boarding-school system that removed youth from their families and exposed them to multiracial environments in which they learned the new socialist culture. The socialization of the means of production also eliminated most private economic activities. This opened doors for Afro-Cubans who began occupying jobs that had never been available to them before. De La Fuente underlines the importance of the impact of the changes that came along with the socialist regime.

However, citing George Fredrickson (1995), De La Fuente then goes on to state that the salience of ethnic status and consciousness depends on the power relationships between social groups perceived as racially or ethnically different. The access of a minority group to material resources, political power, and cultural recognition might improve its social status and "even gradually erode the ideological pillars of racism" (338); but the process is unfortunately reversible. For De La Fuente, the recent Cuban experience does nothing but confirm this reversability:

> The gradual reintroduction of market relations in the 1990s did not have to result in growing social polarization along racial lines. . . . That it did is indicative not just of how ingrained perceptions of race are in Cuba's social landscape or of the difficulties involved in uprooting racism from the social consciousness. It is also indicative of how politics and racially neutral government policies . . . can lead to growing racial inequality. (338–39)

He nevertheless ends his book with a note of hope: the education and political awareness gained by Afro-Cubans in the past few decades are such that Afro-Cubans will certainly—states De La Fuente—not allow the clock to go back to the situation of the first two republics.

In *Dreaming Equality: Color, Race, and Racism in Urban Brazil,* Robin Sheriff intervenes in the debate about the nature of racial classification and racism in Brazil, and engages in a critique of Marvin Harris's work and of the work of other Brazilianists such as Charles Wagley, Roger Sanjek, and Ruth Landes. Harris asserted that in the 1960s "As far as actual behavior is concerned, races do not exist for the Brazilians" (1964, 64). Sheriff 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: Harris elicited 492 terms; and Sanjek 116. Yet Sheriff's analysis suggests that scholars (of Brazil and of 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. Through a detailed ethnographic and socio-linguistic analysis (reflexive analyses of conversations she had with various people in the *favela* where she worked constitute the bulk of her ethnographic data), she finds that although poor African-Brazilians recognize differences in color, they nonetheless believe that all are members of the *raça negra,* or "black race," above and beyond the use of terms that evoke racial mixing. She argues that poor Brazilians of color asserting that they are all members of the *raça negra* underlines the ideological nature of Brazilian *mestiçagem,* and represents their resistance to it.

Sheriff also participates in recent analytical developments in the social sciences by including in her research endeavor the deconstruction of Brazilian "whiteness" and middle-class discourses, which she contrasts with the militant discourses of African-Brazilian political activists. The latter, just like so many indigenous peoples of Latin America, have been experiencing a renewal of ethnic identification. In a recently published review of this book, Peter Fry—one of the most visible Brazilianists—deplores the fact that such bipolar analysis on race in Brazil has been "hegemonic in academic discourse and the mass media, [and is] becoming increasingly prevalent throughout society without being necessarily ontologically 'basic'" (2003, 205).

Sheriff's analysis of Brazilian racism also involves an astute and original examination of the role of silence in the reproduction of the hegemonic racial order. Her book is of the greatest importance not only for Brazilianists and African-diaspora studies scholars, but for Latin Americanists in general.

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