El pensamiento de Julia, 1991

Belkis Ramirez
Cover Art:
The Latino(a) Research Review (LRR) is a refereed interdisciplinary journal focusing on the experiences of the diverse Latino groups in the United States, and those of the populations of Latin America and the Caribbean regions. The journal publishes scholarly articles, research notes, and book reviews. LRR pays particular attention to research on (im)migration issues and the transnational hemispheric processes that link US Latinos(as) with their countries of origin.

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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

In our efforts to highlight some of the most interesting research that is being done about Latinas(os) in the hemisphere, this double issue of *LRR* has a special focus on “Afrolatinidades and Transnational Blackness.” Undoubtedly, the study of Latin American and Caribbean postcolonialities and the construction of layered identities among groups that have remained largely invisible in their countries’ national narratives is unveiling new realities that underscore the richness and complexities of the myriad of cultures, ethnoracial profiles, and social locations that comprise these regions. For a long time, issues of blackness were mostly associated with either the Caribbean region or Brazil. But in more recent years, several Latin American countries that have been generally defined by their indigenous or *mestizo* profile are now engaging in cultural redefinitions propelled by the emergence of organizations and social movements aimed at reclaiming the African presence and heritage. A similar process is taking place within the various Latino national groups in the United States.

In “Blackness in *Mestizo* America: The Cases of Mexico and Peru,” Christina Sue and Tanya Golash-Boza contribute to shifting the traditional focus of the study of blackness from the Caribbean and Brazil to countries in which the research on the African-descent populations has been almost non-existent, and these populations rendered invisible or consigned to the margins of the dominant cultural discourses and national narratives. A similar intellectual effort is behind Erynn Masi de Casanova’s study, “The Invisible Other: Prospects for Building a Black Social Movement in Ecuador,” which documents and analyzes a variety of emerging local and national efforts to deal with the racism and discrimination endured by Afro-Ecuadorians. The author also compares the prospects of an Afro-Ecuadorian black social movement with the situation of Afro-Columbians, who, despite their differences, share the same geographical region on the Pacific coast with Afro-Ecuadorians. While the Afro-Ecuadorian case represents incipient attempts to overcome this population’s national invisibility, Afro-Colombians have been able to develop a social movement and persuade the state to make important reforms that recognize the multicultural composition of the nation. Alyssa Garcia takes on issues of race and racism among the Cuban community in the United States by analyzing the experiences of Afro-Cubans and how these have been articulated historically through *testimonios* and memoirs. She argues that the “exceptionalism” frequent-
ly used to characterize the U.S. Cuban experience, also has been used to
distance Cubans from racial solidarity with other groups of color.

Besides the articles that fall within the realm of the special focus of
this journal issue, Christine E. Bose and Lina Rincón’s study on “Latino
Migration from New York City to Albany, NY,” provide another exam-
ple of the continuous geographic movement and dispersion of the
Latino population throughout the United States, and the formation of
new communities that are forcing Latino Studies scholars to pay more
attention to local shifts and patterns, as well as the wide range of moti-
vations behind these migrations. Latinos(as) decide to migrate internal-
ly within New York State for several primary reasons—finding better
jobs, improving one’s lifestyle, or re-connecting with friends and family
members. But not everyone has the same motivation, and there are “cul-
tures of migration” that vary according to one’s gender, nationality, and
socioeconomic status. A comparison of Latinos(as) status in the larger
sending city and the smaller receiving city suggests that some of these
motivations are well founded in actual opportunities and others are not.

Finally, as it has been this journal’s practice since its inception, the
work of artist Belkis Ramírez, which has been selected for the cover of
this issue, is highlighted by Efraín Barradas’ essay. He persuasively shows
how literature can be easily intertwined with the visual arts by the pow-
erful and inspiring influence of the writings of Puerto Rican feminist
poet Julia de Burgos on the artistic creative expression of three promi-
nent Dominican artists: Belkis Ramírez, Chiqui Vicioso, and Julia
Álvarez, uncovering, as he correctly argues, those strong Caribbean
connections that are not always readily apparent.

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The Invisible Other: Prospects for Building a Black Social Movement in Ecuador

Erynn Masi de Casanova

Introduction

On March 30, 2006, after years of starts and stops, Ecuador’s national Congress approved a law specifically outlining and guaranteeing the rights of the country’s black citizens (El Comercio 2006). The “Law of Collective Rights of Black or Afro-Ecuadorian Peoples” paved the way for the inclusion of a similar set of rights in the country’s new constitution, adopted in September of 2008. Whereas the rights of indigenous people had been increasingly institutionalized by the Ecuadorian government in previous decades, most notably in the constitution of 1998, Afro-Ecuadorians are only now being given the opportunity for equal protection and collective rights. Interestingly, and in contrast to the indigenous case, the new laws seem to be a “top-down” project proposed by politicians, including Afro-Ecuadorian legislators, as opposed to a proposal in response to strong grassroots pressure.

Based on a review of journalistic reports since 2002 and the academic literature, this paper describes the obstacles and challenges that have inhibited the formation of a coherent national social movement among black people in Ecuador, where indigenous movements have been seen as uniquely influential. People of African descent in neighboring Colombia have mobilized in large numbers and their movements are quite visible; so, why not Ecuador? When compared to other racial/ethnic identity-based movements in Ecuador and nearby countries, the relative lack of movement is striking. I argue that this situation can be explained by: 1) geographical, historical-political, and cultural barriers to black social movement activity and 2) the ambivalent (and sometimes contentious) relationships between Afro-Ecuadorian and indigenous Ecuadorian activists and organizations. A comparison with more successful Afro-Colombian movements helps illuminate the situation of black activists in Ecuador.
Theoretical Considerations

Most black and indigenous social movements in Latin America fit Hale’s definition of identity politics as “collective sensibilities and actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity” (1997, 568). The social “location” of a group can be interpreted as historical ties, common ethnic identifications, or similar status. Tension between the concepts of the universal and the particular is necessary for identity politics, and this tension characterizes political debates in most contemporary democracies.

However, movements aligned with identity politics (identity-based movements) do not necessarily press for the privileging of the particular over the universal. These movements arise in nations and societies in which the supposedly universal principles of democracy are applied to some residents but not others. According to Laclau, within contemporary social struggles, “universalism as a horizon is expanded at the same time as its necessary attachment to any particular content is broken” (1996, 57). Identity-based movements do not seek to abandon universal values, but instead attempt to “retain the universal dimension while widening the spheres of its application” (Laclau 1996, 57). This can be seen clearly in Latin American ethnic or feminist movements, which often couch demands in claims to citizenship, struggling against the government as members of the nation, rather than disputing the concept of the nation itself.

The weakening of central governments of developing countries with the penetration of global capitalism and the challenges posed by new social movements lead to changes in the national social order. Chief among these is a shift in state policy (or at least state discourse) toward multiculturalism and inclusion. In Latin America, as elsewhere in the world, states are attempting to “accommodate cultural diversity” and celebrate the ideals of multiculturalism and inclusion (Wilmsen 1996, 17; Hale 1997, 574). Some social scientists argue that contemporary states actually encourage the development of ethnic movements because “the politics of identity that result are easily contained...they rest on key premises of the bourgeois edifice that they purport to challenge, and...they derail much more potent forms of class-based antisystemic struggle” (Hale 1997, 575). In the case of Ecuador, the government may not have encouraged the growth of indigenous social movements, but neither did it act decisively to prevent their rise; the government has displayed a willingness to engage in dialogue with ethnic political actors, perhaps for the reasons Hale suggests.
Although there are many possible theoretical approaches to studying social movements, scholars distinguish between two dominant orientations. They may be called old and new, structural and cultural, or “materialist and discursive” (Hale 1997). Some argue convincingly that newer theoretical approaches (collectively known as “new social movements theory” or NSM theory) correspond to new types of movements or changes in the structure of collective action (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, 3; Calderón et al. 1992, 29). Those who favor a NSM approach claim that older approaches (for example, those arising from Marxist theory) are too structural, whereas structuralists complain that NSM theories leave aside the material conditions of movement participants. Approaches that address both discursive and material conditions of movements are needed to understand ethnic movements in Latin America, where demands for cultural acceptance and the right to be different are often combined with concrete demands for land ownership or access to educational or other institutions.

Finally, scholars of social movements point to the importance of studying ethnic movements in relation to other movements (including other ethnic movements). As Mouffe puts it, “the progressive character of a struggle does not depend on its place of origin… but rather on its link with other struggles” (quoted in Pieterse 1996, 42). It is not identity or ethnicity “per se” upon which contemporary Latin American social movements are based, but instead “a strategic politicization of difference” (Walsh 2002, 63). An understanding of relations between groups is thus crucial to contemporary definitions of ethnicity. For Comaroff, ethnic and other identities “are not things but relations” (1996, 165). While studies of race and ethnicity in Latin America have tended to examine black and indigenous people separately, Peter Wade argues that “Afro-Latins have to be studied in a frame that includes whiteness and indigenousness” (2006, 106). This holistic view, while rarely used to examine social movements, is useful for understanding collective actions in context, as will be seen in my discussion of the links that tie Afro-Ecuadorian movements to indigenous Ecuadorian movements.

**Ecuador’s Racial Order**

Of Ecuador’s approximately 13 million people, a majority are *mestizo.* The sizable indigenous population, with many subgroups and ethnicities, has been estimated to comprise as much as one third of the population (Korovkin 2001). Ecuador’s small population of whites (of European descent) holds tremendous economic and political power.
While the last census in 2001 placed the percentage of Ecuadorians of African descent at 4.9 percent (INEC Website), most scholars estimate the Afro-Ecuadorian population to be between 5 and 10 percent (Whitten 1997; Halpern and Twine 2000).

The official version of Ecuadorian national identity has been based on the concept of mestizaje (race mixture), a discourse that explicitly glorifies the miscegenation that led to the proliferation of mestizo people in Ecuador. The practical implication of mestizaje-based nationalism is to exclude non-mestizos (i.e., indigenous and African-origin people) as “peripheral” (Stutzman 1981; Wade 1997). The rhetoric of mestizaje can be seen as masking the ideal of cultural blanqueamiento (whitening), which encourages Ecuadorians to adjust their religious and social behavior, and even their appearance, to European-oriented standards (Wade 1997). While indigenous people are recognized to have contributed to the lineage of modern-day mestizos, there is no place for black people in the mestizaje myth. This denial of blackness seems more pronounced in Ecuador, as compared to neighboring Colombia, where black people are seen and acknowledged as part of the ethnic/racial/genetic mix.

If we think of the racial arrangement of race in Ecuador as a pyramid, whites would find themselves at the top, mestizos (the numerical majority) would occupy most of the space in the middle, and indigenous people and Afro-Ecuadorians (many of whom do not identify themselves using this term) would each take a corner at the bottom (see Whitten 1999). The occupants of these two bottom extremes of the pyramid are often marginalized in popular and official accounts of national identity (Muratorio 1981; Rahier 1998).

Geographical regions are assigned racialized identities in the Ecuadorian popular imagination, and are “stereotypically associated with certain moral, emotional, motivational, and spiritual characteristics” (Stutzman 1981, 59). These regional stereotypes are also supported by the spatial distribution of racially and ethnically marked populations, or the “racial-spatial order” (Rahier 1998). Until recently, most black Ecuadorians lived in a single province, Esmeraldas, and most indigenous people continue to reside in the Sierra (García Serrano 2006, 4). Racial stereotypes help to justify inequality among different racial/ethnic groups and to maintain a racially ordered socioeconomic hierarchy with whites and lighter-skinned mestizos at the top.

Black and indigenous Ecuadorians tend to be poor and experience high levels of discrimination. Data from the most recent census (conducted in 2001) show that nine out of ten self-defined indigenous
people are poor, and seven out of ten black people are poor. This is higher than the overall national poverty rate of 61 percent (García Serrano 2006, 6). Afro-Ecuadorians’ real incomes are about 20 percent below those of other workers (Ingalls 2006, 14). Esmeraldas, the province with the highest percentage of black residents, is among the poorest regions of the country, with an average annual per capita income of $600, only one third of the national average (Halpern and Twine 2000, 22). Blacks have an average of 5.8 years of schooling (6.5 years for those who define themselves as mulatto), indigenous people have an average of 3.3 years, mestizos average 7.3 years, and whites average 9.2 years (García Serrano 2006, 7). According to a recent survey by the Inter-American Development Bank and the Ecuadorian national census institute (INEC), racial discrimination affects blacks more than indigenous people: 88 percent of Afro-Ecuadorians surveyed reported having been affected by discrimination, compared to 71 percent of indigenous respondents (Aguirre 2005). Urban blacks have the highest rates of unemployment of all Ecuadorians, at 15 percent (Secretaría Técnica 2004). Many job announcements state that the employers are seeking a person con buena presencia (literally, good presence), a phrase that euphemistically excludes both indigenous and black Ecuadorians (Quintero Touma 2006).

In recent years, the official discourse of Ecuadorian nationalism has been adapted to include a definition of Ecuador as a multicultural nation including Afro-Ecuadorians and indigenous “nationalities.” This language was incorporated into the 1998 version of the constitution as a result of pressure from the indigenous movement, and is also present in the 2008 constitution. President Rafael Correa acknowledges the contributions of these groups in speeches and government promotional materials, and he is known for wearing clothing with indigenous motifs, a change from white-mestizo politicians’ habit of wearing suits and ties or guayabera shirts. Westwood (2001), using Charles Taylor’s concept, claims that in Ecuador, a “politics of recognition” has developed. There is room for skepticism about the extent to which multiculturalist rhetoric from the government has led to concrete improvements in living conditions for Ecuadorians who are not white or mestizo. As Wade puts it, “multiculturalism is a new tool for establishing governance, taking over where mestizaje left off” (2006, 116). The multiculturalist turn has, however, led to the institutionalization of some collective rights for indigenous and African-origin Ecuadorians and has allowed more members of these minorities—especially indigenous men—to become elected representatives at various levels of government.
Ecuador’s national indigenous movement, the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE; Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), was created in 1984 when three regional indigenous federations joined forces. The movement staged a major uprising (levantamiento) in 1990, marking its entrance as a major player in national politics. Today the movement is a force in national politics and one of the most influential indigenous movements in Latin America. In 1997, CONAIE moved into the arena of electoral politics with the creation of a political party, Pachakutik, from which it has since distanced itself to some degree (Pallares 2006, 25). In the cultural arena, the indigenous movement has increased the number of people who call themselves indigenous and has begun to change the way in which indigenous people are viewed (Walsh 2002, 69).

Obstacles to Movement

When discussing the absence of a coherent national Afro-Ecuadorian social movement, a commonsense explanation would point to population size. The black population is estimated to be between 5 and 10 percent. Even the national census, which probably undercounts Afro-Ecuadorians and in which people may hesitate to identify as black, estimates the African-descended (black and mulatto) population at 4.9 percent (Ecuadorian Census website: www.inec.gov.ec). This is a small population in 2001, numbering about 604,000 of Ecuador’s then 12 million people (today Ecuador’s population stands at 13.9 million). However, just because an ethnic population is small does not mean that it cannot affect national politics or be successful. In Brazil, indigenous people comprise less than 0.5 percent of the national population (between 450,000 and 700,000 people), yet their movement is quite visible and has resulted in the adoption of some of the most pro-indigenous laws in the hemisphere (McMahon 2006). Numbers alone cannot explain the existence or strength of an ethnic social movement.

Geography

The regions and provinces of Ecuador are highly racialized in the popular imagination, and racialized regional stereotypes feed into and are fueled by political rivalries and conflicts. As Rahier puts it, “the Ecuadorian ideology of national identity results in a racist map of national territory” (2003, 299). In Ecuadorian nationalist conceptions of the nation, “there is no place for blacks: they must remain peripheral...they are the ultimate Other” (Rahier 2003, 300). Afro-Ecuadorians
are not even seen as remote, historical contributors to the modern mestizo nation, as are indigenous peoples. The marginalization of black Ecuadorians in official nationalist visions is paralleled by the peripheral location of traditional areas of black settlement. Above all, Afro-Ecuadorians are associated with the northern coastal province of Esmeraldas; indeed, to refer to a person as esmeraldeño(a) is to conjure up the image of a black man or woman.

There is some truth to this association. Esmeraldas is the first place that blacks settled in Ecuador, after a Spanish slave ship ran aground in 1553. By the end of the 1500s the area was a relatively autonomous black-controlled territory known as La República de Zambos or the Zambo Republic (Whitten and Quiroga 1998, 80). Other areas to which black slaves were sent, and where sizable black populations still reside, include the Chota-Mira Valley and Loja (Whitten and Quiroga 1998, 80-82). Esmeraldas is the cultural capital of black Ecuador, and is the region where black people have the most political and social influence. It is also the center of contemporary black social movement organization and activity.

According to data from the most recent census in 2001, 25.5 percent of Afro-Ecuadorians lived in Esmeraldas, which was 40 percent black, making it the province with the highest percentage of black inhabitants. Migration to the cities has to some extent changed the geographical distribution of black Ecuadorians. The census reports that a full 40 percent of Afro-Ecuadorians live in the province of Guayas (home to the country's largest city, Guayaquil), 25.5 percent in Esmeraldas, and 13 percent in the province of Pichincha (which includes the capital, Quito) (García Serrano 2006, 4). Despite the fact that there are now more black people in Guayas, the association of blacks with Esmeraldas remains strong; indeed, many if not most of the Afro-Ecuadorians in urban areas are migrants from Esmeraldas.

Esmeraldas is a province that is neglected in terms of social services and infrastructure, a situation that could be attributed to various factors, including: the relative lack of prized natural resources compared to some other regions (although there are shrimp, banana, and timber industries); its geographical remoteness from the two urban centers of the country; the concentration of political power in Quito and Guayaquil; and institutional racism. All of these factors work to inhibit the formation of a strong regional or national black social movement. Both figuratively and geographically, black Ecuadorians stand outside the nation.
History and Politics

In addition to the somewhat accurate perception that blacks live in peripheral areas, Afro-Ecuadorians are kept out of national politics by a historical legacy of differential treatment of ethnic minorities by the state. As Wade has shown, indigenous peoples have had an institutionalized (albeit ambivalent) relationship with the state since the conquest, whereas the enslaved state of blacks meant that they were not the subject of state policies in the same way. Thus, “native Americans have from a very early date occupied the institutional position of Other...whereas the descendents of black Africans have been located much more ambiguously, as both inside and outside the society of their masters and observers” (Wade 1997, 3). While indigenous people were, in theory at least, “to be protected as well as exploited,” laws dealing with African-descent people were “piecemeal and uneven” and more concerned with controlling this group than protecting it (Wade 1997, 27). “Indian” was a census and administrative category in the colonial period, but the category of “slave” did not apply to all black Latin Americans, as by the 1700’s manumission had led to relatively large populations and settlements of free blacks (Wade 1997, 27-8).

In the late colonial and early nationalist periods, indigenous people were seen as superior to blacks; for example, in some places, marriage between whites and indigenous people was permitted while marriage between whites and blacks or mulattoes was prohibited (Wade 1997, 30). In contemporary Ecuador, the state has viewed indigenous people as a population that must be administered (for example, through the creation of special ministries of indigenous affairs), whereas negotiations with black groups are intermittent and provoke less government interest. This situation seems to be changing, but change is slow. These different types of links to state power lead to what scholars have called the “invisibility” of black populations in Latin American societies (Wade 1997, 35; Halpern and Twine, 2000; Walsh and García, 2002).

Culture

The invisibility of Afro-Ecuadorians goes beyond the political sphere. They are nearly absent in Ecuadorian popular culture. Television rarely portrays people of African descent. Those that do appear tend to be African Americans from the U.S., who are seen as “better” than Ecuadorian blacks (Casanova 2003; Rahier 1997). On Ecuadorian-produced television programs today, it is not uncommon for white or
mestizo actors in blackface to mock supposedly “black” characteristics and behaviors, including stereotypes of blacks as unintelligent, hypersexual, criminal, and loud. When a black woman was selected as Miss Ecuador in 1995, the decision became a topic of controversy and debate, as most Ecuadorians (including many blacks) believed that an Afro-Ecuadorian could not represent Ecuadorian femininity (Rahier 1998). Ecuador’s most popular magazine, Vístazo, has demonstrated a pattern of extremely negative depictions of blacks, who are rarely the subject of attention in its photographs or articles (Rahier 1999).

While a majority of the members of the Ecuadorian national soccer team are black, their blackness is often described in degrading terms by announcers, who emphasize the physical superiority and imply the intellectual inferiority of the players. The blackness of the players seems to be highlighted especially when they are playing well. When midfielder Edison Méndez scored the winning goal against Croatia in the 2002 World Cup (resulting in the Ecuadorian team’s only win), the Ecuadorian announcer shouted, “¡Negro lindo! ¡Negro de oro!” (Beautiful black! Golden black!). The nickname “negro de oro” has stuck with this player and is used by other journalists as well as fans of the team. It is ironic that a country in which black Ecuadorians are largely invisible in politics and media is represented in the premier world sporting event by a mostly-black team.3

The denial of blackness as part of Ecuadorian nationalism and the negative stereotypes associated with black people go hand in hand with discrimination at the macro and micro levels. According to one black community leader, Afro-Ecuadorian students are often turned away by schools and not permitted to enroll (www.alainet.org). People living in urban areas who identify as black suffer higher unemployment rates than any other racial/ethnic group—including indigenous people—with nearly 15 percent unemployed (Secretaría Técnica del Frente Social 2004, 59). Employed Afro-Ecuadorians tend to work in agriculture, commerce (including informal trading and vending), and “other services” (which presumably includes domestic work) (Secretaría Técnica del Frente Social 2004, 57). In practice, blacks are often excluded from office and government jobs, although such discrimination is illegal.

Because of the negative stereotypes associated with blacks, the economic and social exclusion of blacks, and the ideal of blanqueamiento, those who have African ancestry and are categorized by others as black have strong incentives to deny their blackness. Using the word “negro/negra” (black) to refer to someone is considered an insult; in polite con-
versation, whites and mestizos use the term “moreno(a)” (dark-skinned), which is also used in black communities (Medina Vallejo 1996, 121). One Afro-Ecuadorian woman interviewed for a Guayaquil newspaper said that before becoming active in a black organization, she preferred to be called “morenita or even negrita” rather than negra (Ortiz 2003). The hesitance to identify as black and the pressure to whiten or “mejorar la raza” by marrying a non-black or lighter-skinned person makes the assertion of positive black identities and the creation of a widespread black social movement extremely difficult in Ecuador.

Black Activism and Organization in Ecuador

Despite the lack of a national black social movement in Ecuador, local and community organizations are working to improve the lives of Afro-Ecuadorians (Walsh and García 2002, 320). It is difficult to estimate the number of Afro-Ecuadorian organizations because some are quite local. In 2002, a meeting held to discuss Afro-Ecuadorian concerns drew 350 organizations from around the country (El Universo 2002). Funding for Afro-Ecuadorian organizations comes from the Catholic church and NGOs (García Serrano 2006).

In Esmeraldas, there are at least 200 local organizations, called “palenques locales”4 which are coordinated by the Comarca Afroecuatoriana del Norte de Esmeraldas (CANE; Afroecuadorian Region of North Esmeraldas) (García Serrano 2006, 9). Another umbrella organization is the Consejo Regional de Palenques (Regional Council of Palenques; Walsh and García 2002, 320). Esmeraldas is also home to other groups, the most visible of which is El Proceso de Comunidades Negras (The Process of Black Communities), led by Pablo de la Torre (Halpern and Twine 2000). Other organizations in Esmeraldas include the Federación Provincial de Mujeres Afroecuatorianas (Provincial Federation of Afro-Ecuadorian Women) and the Asociación de Norteños Residentes en Esmeraldas (Association of Northern Residents of Esmeralda; Santos 2002).

Esmeraldeños(as) have begun Afro-Ecuadorian organizations in other parts of the country, such as the Asociación de Esmeraldeños Residentes en Santo Domingo de los Colorados (Association of Esmeraldans Residing in Santo Domingo de los Colorados), the Fundación de Desarrollo Integral para el Negro Ecuatoriano (Foundation for the Integral Development of Ecuadorian Blacks) and the Asociación de Mujeres Negras del Guayas Cinco de Agosto (Fifth of August Association of Black Women of Guayas), both based in Guayaquil (www.alainet.org; Coello 2003;
Ortiz 2003). There is at least one Afro-Ecuadorian women’s organization in Quito (Walsh and García 2002, 319). An organization called Alianza Equidad (Equity Alliance) aims to stem corruption in government in order to free up more funds for Afro-Ecuadorian communities (Ingalls 2006, 14).

Two groups with national and international visibility are funded by the Catholic church: Movimiento Afroecuatoriano Conciencia (“Conciencia” Afro-Ecuadorian Movement) with offices in Esmeraldas, Guayaquil, and Quito, and the Centro Cultural Afroecuatoriano (Afro-Ecuadorian Cultural Center) in Quito. The Centro Cultural Afroecuatoriano focuses on publicizing Afro-Ecuadorian culture, including music, poetry and folklore, and it also serves to support black activism. The Center publishes a monthly newsletter, Palenque, which presents the results of academic research projects on black communities, historical information, events and activities related to black social movements, and news from the global African diaspora.

The objectives and demands of these organizations are varied and diverse. Women’s organizations tend to focus on problems of inadequate housing, lack of infrastructure and social services, and domestic violence. Local organizations address diverse concerns in rural and urban areas. One demand of some rural and urban black Ecuadorians is that of the Afro-Ecuadorian equivalent of indigenous bilingual education, or “ethnoeducation.” According to one intellectual and activist, the inclusion of black history in educational institutions is important for black youth because “when learning becomes meaningful, the people free themselves, develop, and sustain themselves” (Walsh and García 2002, 323). In Esmeraldas, many organizations are concerned with land rights, especially obtaining the enforcement of collective land rights guaranteed by law (Walsh and García 2002).

The most comprehensive land rights proposal by Afro-Ecuadorian groups is the drive to create the Gran Comarca (Great Territory), a section of Esmeraldas that would be administered and controlled by Afro-Esmeraldeños(as) in which land would be held collectively (Halpern and Twine 2000; Walsh and García 2002). This territory is needed, say activists, because only 42 percent of black ancestral lands remain in the hands of black people; the Gran Comarca would be “a model of territorial, political, and ethnic-community organization…to achieve the human development to which we have a right” (Walsh and García 2002, 321). Such autonomy has already been granted to indigenous Ecuadorians.
The Absence of a National Movement

How can the absence of a national black social movement be explained, especially in light of the vigorous, though underfunded, local and regional organizing of black Ecuadorians? Some scholars claim that such a movement is “emerging” (Walsh and García 2002), although there is no black organization along the lines of CONAIE or other national indigenous groups. There have been attempts at creating a national movement or organization, but, according to one Afro-Ecuadorian intellectual, “lo andado es insuficiente y el ritmo es lento” (we have not come far enough and the pace is slow) (Walsh and García 2002, 324). At least two national organizations have been launched and later fizzled out: the Coordinadora Nacional de Grupos Negros Ecuatorianos (National Coordinator of Black Ecuadorian Groups; 1989-1990) and the Confederación Nacional Afroecuatoriana (CNA; National Afro-Ecuadorian Confederation; 2002-2003) (www.alainet.org; García Serrano 2006; Walsh and García 2002).

There are differences (i.e., regional and rural/urban) within the Afro-Ecuadorian population that would have to be addressed in the creation of a national movement. Black people who have moved to the cities, says one scholar, “no longer have the collective vision” of Afro-Ecuadorians, and they do not feel connected to rural blacks (Santos 2002). The Gran Comarca proposal, for example, may not interest black residents of Guayaquil or Quito, both because they live in cities (where land ownership for agricultural purposes is not an issue), and because the Comarca would be in distant Esmeraldas. This ambivalence of Afro-Ecuadorian activists toward territorial demands is discussed by Walsh and García (2002). The geographical remoteness of traditional areas of black settlement also inhibits black organizing; the lack of infrastructure in some parts of Esmeraldas conspires to keep people from coming together and moving between black communities (Halpern and Twine 2000, 22-23).

One major impediment is the lack of funding from NGOs. Compared to their indigenous counterparts, black Ecuadorian activists have been less successful in forming links with international donors (García Serrano 2006, 11; cf. Ingalls 2006 for a recent exception). The problem of funding is not unique to Afro-Ecuadorians; throughout Latin America, “NGOs were and are also absent from the regions where Blacks are concentrated, as well as from Black-led political movements and economic projects” (Halpern and Twine 2000, 20).

The lack of leadership is another obstacle cited by Afro-Ecuadorians and scholars. Halpern and Twine mention the lack of a substantial num-
ber of black professionals and college graduates who might lead an Afro-Ecuadorian movement (2000, 22). It seems that the handful of black intellectuals in Ecuador tend to be active in Afro-Ecuadorian projects, but more leaders are needed (Walsh and García 2002, 324).

The lack of leadership is also reflected in the dearth of Afro-Ecuadorian elected representatives. The broaching of Afro-Ecuadorian demands at the national level is made difficult by their lack of formal political representation, an important contrast with the indigenous movement. In 2006, only five deputies in Ecuador’s unicameral, 100-member Congress were Afro-Ecuadorian. Nationwide, only five out of 216 mayors were Afro-Ecuadorian (García Serrano 2006, 15). Since traditional political parties do not address the needs of black communities, and since there is almost no black representation in Congress and other governmental bodies, the demands of this population are neglected.

A government agency designed to address the needs of black citizens, the Corporación de Desarrollo Afroecuatoriano (CODAE; Corporation for Afro-Ecuadorian Development) drew controversy in recent years for its lack of funding, dissatisfaction with leaders, and misappropriation of funds (El Universo 2003; El Universo 2004; El Mercurio 2006). An Afro-Ecuadorian activist/intellectual complained in a newspaper column that CODAE was a “dead body that has not started to stink”; writing that “afroecuatorianos do not feel that those who are in charge…represent us or have the slightest concern for the neighborhoods that suffer anguish and calamity” (Montaño Escobar 2006).

A promising and influential Afro-Ecuadorian politician, Jaime Hurtado, who led a political party called the Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD; Popular Democratic Movement), and had even run for president in 1983, was assassinated in 1998. The government is suspected to have been behind the murder. Not only did this event provide a strong disincentive for Afro-Ecuadorians considering political careers, but also, “with Hurtado’s murder, Black Ecuadorians lost an important spokesperson, thus increasing Black Ecuadorian marginalization in the Ecuadorian political system” (Halpern and Twine 2000, 28).

Party politics also serves to divide black voters and to downplay racial issues; former president Abdalá Bucaram’s PRE was especially adept at manipulating black communities for its own gain (Walsh and García 2002, 320). Even when black politicians do achieve positions of influence, as happened under Bucaram, these individuals do not necessarily represent the interests of the community. Bucaram, by “incorporating black politicians from his party who had no community base...estab-
lished a model of representation that has continued to hinder Afro unity and the formation of a national Afro-Ecuadorian organization” (Walsh 2002, 79). The leader of a black organization in Esmeraldas complained to a reporter that “the majority of black candidates do not express the wish to be representatives of their race” (Santos 2002). Lack of political representation, especially at the national level, works to hamper the development of a national black movement, and to prevent the passage of laws favorable to Afro-Ecuadorians.

**Links with the Indigenous Movement**

In the early days of the indigenous movement, Afro-Ecuadorians participated in manifestations, protests, and other activities alongside indigenous Ecuadorians. It may be true that because there was a space for Afro-Ecuadorians (and, to some extent, their concerns) in the indigenous movement, they tended not to develop their own organizations and movements. Afro-Ecuadorians also benefited from the gains of the indigenous movement, as in the constitution of 1998 and subsequent laws that named Afro-Ecuadorians and granted them similar rights to indigenous people, including the right to own land collectively (Walsh 2002, 75). When the indigenous movement founded its own political party, Pachakutik-Nuevo País, Afro-Ecuadorians were part of its base (Walsh 2002, 72).

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a black-indigenous political alliance was forged, based on the strategic use of identity politics and “a coming-together in response to the coloniality of power that had traditionally separated the groups and put them in competition for resources” (Walsh 2002, 73). The World Bank funded a joint development project to benefit the two minority groups. The Proyecto de Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas y Negros del Ecuador (PRODEPINE; Project for the Development of Indigenous and Black Peoples of Ecuador) was an investment of more than $50 million between 1998 and 2002 (García Serrano 2006, 12; Walsh 2002, 73). The project was the result of direct negotiations between the indigenous movement, a newly-created government institution called CONPLADEIN (National Council of Planning and Development of Indigenous and Black Peoples), and international donors (Walsh 2002, 72-73). One black activist has stated that “black people have always struggled and searched out alliances with other groups, because we have been conscious of our weakness and also of our relatively low numbers...on our own we will not be able to achieve [our goals]” (www.alainet.org).
In the late 1990s, indigenous and black leaders and activists began pursuing separate processes of negotiation with the state. CON-PLADEIN was replaced with an indigenous-only institution, CODENPE (Council for the Development of the Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador), “excluding blacks and establishing a new form of governance based not on organizational participation but on the election of representatives from each of the nacionalidades and pueblos” (Walsh 2002, 76). The assertion of some social movement scholars that the state benefits from separate groups pursuing their own identity politics seems to apply to this situation: Walsh writes that the state’s strategy is one of “incorporation and division” (2002, 79). The historical tradition of institutionalizing the administration of indigenous populations and invisibilizing black populations by excluding them from political negotiations meant that once Afro-Ecuadorians split from the indigenous movement, their demands and needs were sidelined.

Even within black-indigenous alliances, indigenous leaders have tended to make most decisions and Afro-Ecuadorians have been expected to follow. In this way, “indigenous leaders relegate blacks to an inferior position and, some say, cast them as the racialized other” (Walsh 2002, 73; cf. Walsh and García 2002). Thus the invisibility of blacks has been perpetuated even within a progressive identity-based movement. Afro-Ecuadorians were sidelined by the indigenous movement because they lacked “an organized national entity or program, the hegemonic indigenous paradigm” (Walsh 2002, 73). The strong national indigenous movement had begun before most of the Afro-Ecuadorian organizations, and it benefited from joining together three existing regional federations. The geographically dispersed black population did not and does not have such regional networks in place as a basis for national organization.

Instead of benefitting from a new willingness on the part of the government to hear ethnic communities’ demands, Afro-Ecuadorian activists described a climate of “indomanía” (indophilia) that prioritized indigenous over black interests (Walsh and García 2002, 319). One study noted that it is only in comparison to the indigenous movement, and by its standards, that Afro-Ecuadorians appear “weak and fragmented” (Walsh and García 2002, 319). An Afro-Ecuadorian leader has pointed to “organizational weakness” as a primary obstacle to a national front, while his colleague has suggested that rather than emulating the indigenous movement, blacks should “create their own ‘political spaces’” (Ingalls 2006, 15).
Because of the indigenous movement’s success in dealing with the government and the relatively positive disposition of the state toward hearing indigenous demands, black organizations began framing their movements as indigenous movements. According to the leaders of El Proceso de Comunidades Negras, “blacks are indigenous to the coast and foothills of Esmeraldas, much as the Huaorani [a lowland indigenous tribe] are indigenous to…the Amazon basin” (Halpern and Twine 2000, 27). By highlighting their long residence in certain areas and emphasizing their responsible stewardship of natural resources, black movements are “indigenizing” themselves (cf. Restrepo 2004 for the Afro-Colombian case). Wade says that this “indigenization of blackness” results from exchanges between indigenous and black movements, whereby Afro-Latin Americans “learn to pose their claims in forms that the state is accustomed to hearing” (2006, 113). Some scholars argue that “what is needed is to reconceptualize and expand national definitions of ‘indigenous’ to include people of African descent” (Halpern and Twine 2002, 29). Perhaps in the Ecuadorian case it is not necessary to call black people indigenous, since the indigenous movement and the state have already popularized the term “nationalities and peoples,” which has been applied to Afro-Ecuadorians.

Comparison to Afro-Colombian Movements

There are similarities and differences in the contexts and outcomes of black organizing in Colombia and Ecuador. Afro-Colombians on the Pacific coast and Afro-Ecuadorians share similar customs, traditions, and natural environments. These groups are actually part of one large cultural and geographic region that reaches from the southern Panama to northern Ecuador (Wade 2002, 11). In the case of Colombia, changes to the constitution that moved the state toward a more multiculturalist stance allowed for the emergence of Afro-Colombian social movements. In the process of reforming the Constitution in 1991, indigenous and black organizations were successful in achieving the inclusion of articles that “addressed their rights as ‘ethnic groups’” (Wade 2002, 7). When the rights of blacks were proposed as an addition to the constitution in the early 1990s, there was “an organizational boom” (Restrepo 2004, 706). Law 70, which guaranteed collective land ownership to black communities on the Pacific coast, was passed in 1993, and led to further social movement activity as groups organized to claim their new rights (Wade 2002, 7, 8).

There are strong connections between Afro-Colombian and Afro-Ecuadorian activists, and there have been several encuentros (meetings)
between black organizations from the two countries (García Serrano 2006, 11; Walsh and García 2002, 320). Afro-Ecuadorian organizations use the success of Afro-Colombian groups as inspiration, and when Law 70 passed in 1993, the Afro-Ecuadorian periodical *Palenque* reprinted much of its text, noting that the organization of Afro-Colombian communities had “achieved great results” (*Palenque* 1993, 3).

Another similarity lies in the regional connotations of race, and the racial connotations of region, in Colombia and Ecuador. The Pacific region is “the ‘black region’ par excellence in Colombia,” despite the fact that most Afro-Colombians live outside this area (Wade 2002, 5). In the same way, Esmeraldas serves as a symbol of blackness in Ecuador, although Afro-Ecuadorians are increasingly found in other regions of the country. This association with peripheral, agricultural, economically underdeveloped areas is a challenge that Afro-Ecuadorian and Afro-Colombian movements share.

Nonetheless, it also can be argued that Colombian and Ecuadorian blacks have more differences than similarities. First, there is the disparity in population size, which alone does not account for or determine the visibility of social movements, as mentioned previously. The Colombian government estimates that black people comprise 26 percent of the national population (Wade 2002, 108). Ecuador’s black population is officially about 5 percent of the total, and is almost certainly no larger than 10 percent. But population figures are less important than the different treatment of blacks in Colombian and Ecuadorian versions of nationalism. Afro-Colombians have occupied a symbolic and cultural position both within and outside the nation since colonial times, whereas Afro-Ecuadorians have been consistently marginalized and treated as non-nationals (Wade 1997). Since contemporary identity politics is based on claims to national citizenship and national identity, this situation places Afro-Ecuadorian movements at a distinct disadvantage.

In both Colombia and Ecuador, there has been an increasing tendency to “indigenize” blacks in political discourse. In Ecuador, this indigenization of black populations is a strategy on the part of social movements themselves (Halpern and Twine 2000). In Colombia, the government participates in this construction, likening black people to indigenous people. Law 70, for example, defines blackness like indigenousness, “in terms of bounded, rural communities, based on so-called traditional production practices rooted in the land” (Wade 2002, 8). It is unclear whether the Ecuadorian government will echo the language of some black activists’ claims that blacks are also indigenous because of their long presence in certain areas and their attachment to their land and culture.
Conclusion

While the Ecuadorian indigenous movement has garnered the attention of the government, academics, and international donors, the political activities of Afro-Ecuadorians are roundly ignored. Obstacles to the formation of a national black social movement along the lines of the indigenous CONAIE include the (assumed and actual) geographical marginality of black populations, the different institutionalized identities of indigenous and black people, and widespread racism and discrimination against blacks, which has not been tempered by the growth in popularity of multiculturalist discourse.

The alliance that previously existed between Afro-Ecuadorian and indigenous activists has been broken, a situation that ultimately benefits the state by allowing it to divide and conquer identity-based movements. Afro-Ecuadorian organizations have, however, learned from the successes of indigenous groups, and are implementing a strategy of indigenizing black populations in order to claim rights similar to those granted to indigenous communities, such as territorial autonomy. Framing these demands in a way that the state understands may prove beneficial. It is important to recognize that there are black organizations working to improve the lives of Afro-Ecuadorians in their communities, cities, and regions, even in the absence of a national movement. These movements are hurt primarily by the absence of black elected officials to help support them and push through favorable legislation. In government, as in popular culture, Afro-Ecuadorians are largely invisible.

It is worth debating whether or not Afro-Ecuadorians need a national social movement. Perhaps their needs are better met by the current strategy of pursuing local and regional goals. Walsh and García (2002) seem to suggest this, arguing that the indigenous model of the CONAIE is not applicable to black organizations, which should develop their own standards and strategies. However, as long as the state continues to be the primary interlocutor for ethnic movements in Latin America, and as long as Ecuador’s government remains highly centralized, Afro-Ecuadorians will likely continue seeking to create a national social movement through which to voice their demands.

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Notes

1 *Mestizo* means a person of mixed (indigenous and European) ancestry. According to the 2001 National Population Census, conducted by the Ecuadorian government, 77 percent of Ecuadorians identify themselves as *mestizo*.

2 The term *zambo* was historically used to mean black or may refer to a person of mixed black/indigenous descent. Interestingly, in contemporary Ecuador *zambo* is also used to describe curly hair in black or non-black people.

3 For a fascinating discussion of the portrayal of black athletes in Ecuadorian media that goes beyond these personal observations, see Rahier (2008).

4 The word *palenque* refers to a community established by runaway slaves.

5 There is one Afro-Colombian community, located in Palenque de San Basilio, that has a distinct language, whereas Afro-Ecuadorians speak Spanish. The linguistic distinctiveness of a small segment of the Afro-Colombian population has helped to facilitate the “indigenization” of this population in a way not possible for its Ecuadorian counterpart (Wade 1995, 344).

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Blackness in *Mestizo* America: The Cases of Mexico and Peru

Christina A. Sue and Tanya Golash-Boza

Since the late 1980s, there has been an explosion in diaspora studies across the globe, giving rise to debates within this nascent field of inquiry (Brubaker 2005). Diaspora scholars are struggling to address the complicated questions of how to define the diaspora, how to understand the diasporic experience, and whether or not we can speak about such an experience in any unifying sense. In this article, through an analysis of the experiences of members of the so-called African diaspora in Mexico and Peru, we contribute to these debates by challenging a series of fundamental assumptions embedded in portions of this literature. We problematize the assumption that individuals of a particular diaspora will share a common identity or hold a diasporic consciousness. Furthermore, we argue against the idea of a linear relationship between memories of slavery, understandings of ancestry, and constructions of racial identity. Finally, we contend that forces such as urbanization and globalization or even exposure to the greater diaspora will not automatically lead to a diasporic consciousness.

We draw on qualitative data to address the relationship between slavery, racial ancestry, and racial identity among populations of African descent in Mexico and Peru. We ask: *How do Mexicans and Peruvians of African descent construct their notions of slavery, ancestry, and contemporary identities, and how are these constructions understood in relation to an African diaspora?* In the following sections, we address the relevant literature and discuss our selection of the cases of Mexico and Peru. We then provide a brief background of each case, discuss our methodological approach, and present our findings.

### Theoretical Overview

Within the diaspora literature, there is controversy regarding how best to define diaspora and how to determine who qualifies as a member of a particular diaspora. Prominent conceptualizations focus on dispersion in space or orientation to a common homeland (Brubaker 2005). The dispersion definition is most commonly used by scholars (Brown 2006), many of whom seek to uncover a thread of unity or collective experience among individuals of a certain diaspora. Critics argue this...
definition is overly expansive and has little analytic power to capture a distinct experience (Brubaker 2005). Furthermore, they are concerned that a focus on commonalities between African-origin populations overlooks important differences (Campt 2006; Lewis 2000; Yelvington 2006).

Over the past few decades, there has been substantial scholarly writing on the African diaspora in Latin America. However, broad definitions of diaspora have obscured the wide range of experiences and identities of individuals of African descent in this region. To speak of what it means to be “black” in contemporary Latin America generally involves making invalid generalizations about a diverse population in a vast and variegated region. Like Hoffman (2006), we are wary of imposing categories which assume a black identity or common experience. Therefore, we focus on “strong” definitions of diaspora (e.g. orientation to homeland) that emphasize diaspora as a social form (Brubaker 2005). Despite the importance of investigating orientations to homeland among the descendants of African slaves, minimal research has been conducted on this topic in Latin America. Furthermore, few scholars have explored the relationship between orientations to homeland, memory of slavery, understandings of ancestry, and identity construction.

In scholarly accounts of the African diaspora, it is frequently implied, if not directly stated, that there is a strong interconnection between notions of slavery, ancestry, and identity. It is oftentimes presumed that communities of African descent will retain collective memories of slavery and connect these memories to their own ancestries and identities. For example, Paul Gilroy (1993) attributes many aspects of black diasporic cultural production to the memory of slavery and contends that the memory of slavery is a key cultural resource for people in the African diaspora. However, in this article, we take a step back, asking: Is the memory of slavery always preserved? Is it always important or central to the construction of identity and culture?

We take the perspective that, although persons of African descent in the Americas may share similar conceptions of slavery, ancestry, and identity, it cannot be assumed that they necessarily will. Similar to Herman Bennett (2000, 112), instead of assuming that all persons of African descent will retain a memory of slavery, claim African ancestry, and develop black identities, we pose a fundamental question: Under what circumstances will conditions of slavery and oppression produce a black consciousness? This perspective moves us away from essentialistic thinking that equates African ancestry with memories of slavery and collective
blackness (Vinson 2006). In taking this stance, we do not intend to distance persons of African descent from the conditions of a brutal past and discriminatory present, but instead, we want to stress that these conditions may produce various outcomes in terms of understandings of slavery, ancestry, and identity. As such, we are interested in interrogating the meaning and construction of memories of slavery, ancestral ties, and self-identification for persons of African descent.

Scholars have primarily addressed issues of slavery and ancestral ties in Brazil, Colombia, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. For example, Twine (1998) found that Brazilians of African descent tend to distance themselves intentionally from “the degradation of slavery” by claiming their ancestors were not slaves (116). Similarly, in Colombia, many people of African descent attempt to distance themselves from slavery (Restrepo 2004) and construct their ancestry as being Colombian as opposed to African (Losonczy 1999). In the Dominican Republic, individuals also distance themselves from African ancestry by defining Haitians, not Dominicans, as Africans (Howard 2001). In terms of identity, scholars have found low levels of black consciousness and a rejection of a black identity in Brazil (Burdick 1998; Hanchard 1994; Telles 2004; Twine 1998), Venezuela (Wright 1990), Colombia (Wade 1993, 1997), Puerto Rico (Godreau 2000, 2006) and the Dominican Republic (Howard 2001). Recently, however, researchers have found, in countries such as Brazil, that some individuals are embracing a black identity (McCallum 2005; Sansone 2003; Sheriff 2001).

Although the aforementioned studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of the multiple meanings of blackness in Latin America, most of the work has been conducted in a few select countries in the region. Furthermore, although slavery, ancestry, and identity have been addressed to some degree, scholars often have emphasized only one or two of these components, as opposed to the interconnection of all three. To begin to fill these gaps in the literature, in this study we address the intersection between memories of slavery, understandings of ancestry, and constructions of identity for individuals of African descent in the understudied contexts of Mexico and Peru.

Case Selection

Within Latin America, scholars have categorized countries into two main types: Afro-Latin America and mestizo America (Mörner 1967). Afro-Latin America includes countries such as Brazil and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, which exhibit a black/white racial continuum and
have a history of plantation-based slavery. Mestizo America refers to Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, among other countries, where the primary ethnic or racial dynamic involves the Indian/mestizo (mixed-race person) distinction (Mörner 1967; Harris 1964; Wade 1997). In this article, as opposed to focusing on racial classification systems or racial demographics to make the Afro-Latin America versus mestizo America distinction, we focus on race-based national ideologies. Consequently, we define Afro-Latin American countries as those where blackness has been recognized in the image of the nation and mestizo American countries as those where the indigenous narrative has been dominant.

In Afro-Latin America, blackness is oftentimes considered to be an integral part of national culture (Oboler and Dzidzienyo 2005). In cases such as Brazil and Cuba, blackness periodically has been framed as something positive at the national level (de la Fuente 2001; Marx 1998; Telles 2004). In countries such as Colombia and Venezuela, blacks have been included in symbolic constructions of the nation, albeit to a lesser extent, and in more consistently disparaging ways (Wade 1993, 1997; Wright 1990). Traditionally, the literature on blackness has focused on Afro-Latin America; the African-origin communities of mestizo America have received less attention.

In mestizo America, the indigenous contribution to race mixture and national culture has been central to narratives of the nation, oftentimes coinciding with the exclusion of the African element (de la Cadena 2000; Foote 2004; Hernández-Cuevas 2004; Vaughn 2001). This was especially apparent in the early twentieth century when national ideologies and race-mixing projects defined the dominant mixture as indigenous and European. The marginalization of the African-origin population occurred not only in the realm of ideology but was also present in the academic literature. As Arocha and Maya (2008) note, “Despite advances in studies about Latin America and the Caribbean, scholars in the North continue to associate indigenous America with Mexico and Peru, and Afro-America with Cuba and Brazil” (401); this has led to a traditional lack of research on the issue of blackness in mestizo American countries.

Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in scholarly work on the history of slavery and the influence of African culture in some countries of mestizo America, such as Mexico. However, less attention has been paid to identity construction and the contemporary experience of individuals of African descent. In Mexico, of the studies that do exist, most focus on the Costa Chica, with minimal attention
being paid to other regions with African-origin populations, such as Veracruz. In the case of Peru, to the best of our knowledge, there are no published studies on this topic. Because of the relative neglect of blackness in mestizo America, we still do not have a solid understanding of important questions such as: *What does it mean to be black or of African origin in regions where blackness is largely excluded from the image of the nation?*

We present the mestizo American case studies of Mexico and Peru to shed light on this question and related issues. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mexico and Peru were the largest importers of African slaves in Spanish America (Palmer 1976). Therefore, contemporary Mexicans and Peruvians of African descent frequently have ancestors who arrived via the Atlantic slave trade. The Mexico-Peru contrast was used by Mallon (1985) to address peasant struggles in these two regions. She argued that the main distinction between these countries was that Mexico was able to incorporate indigenous demands into their agenda via the rhetoric of mestizaje whereas Peruvian elites tended to repress the indigenous population. Despite these differences, Mexico and Peru are similar in that indigenous/mestizo narratives have played and continue to play a central role in national ideology (de la Cadena 2000; Knight 1990; Urias Horcasitas 2007). Furthermore, elites in both countries have historically denied the African-origin presence in their countries and generally have assumed that persons of African-descent have “disappeared” (Aguirre Beltrán 1970; Bowser 1974; van den Berghe 1967; Vaughn 2005).

**Background on Mexico**

Shortly after the Spanish conquest, there was a sharp decline in the indigenous population and a consequent need for labor, which spurred the importation of Africans to Mexico (Vaughn 2001). Slaves were brought to Mexico throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries with the majority of imports occurring during the seventeenth century (Aguirre Beltrán 1944). The generally accepted view is that about 200,000 African slaves reached Mexico’s shores, although the number may have been higher since many slaves were imported illegally (Aguirre Beltrán 1944; Vaughn 2001). Slaves usually were imported through Veracruz and Acapulco and later migrated throughout Mexico (Aguirre Beltrán [1946] 1989; Martínez Montiel 1997; van den Berghe 1967). They primarily worked in mines, on sugar haciendas, or as domestic servants. When the slave system collapsed in the early 1700s, the biological
integration of the population increased. Mexico’s African-origin population lost its identity as a separate racial category and increasingly mixed with the Indian and Spanish groups (Cope 1994).

In the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Mexican elites strongly promoted race mixture and deemed the mestizo the national symbol of Mexico (Knight 1990). During this time, mestizaje was defined as representing the mixture between Spaniards and Indians which marginalized the historical presence of blacks in the country (Vaughn 2005). The erasure of the African element in Mexico continued during the “cultural phase” of the Mexican Revolution (1920-1986) (Hernández-Cuevas 2004, 2005). Largely due to narratives of integration, by this time, it was generally assumed that the African-origin population in Mexico had disappeared.

**Background on Peru**

Between 1528 and 1821, more than 100,000 African slaves were brought to Peru (Aguirre 2005); they were mainly imported to meet labor needs, principally in coastal agriculture. The African-origin population in the country grew steadily throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fueled by the expanding slave trade (Schlüppman 1991). Notably, not all individuals of African descent were slaves—of the approximately 80,000 blacks and mulattoes in Peru in 1591, only 40,000 were enslaved (Castillo Román 1977). By the seventeenth century, the colony could not operate without Africans and their descendants (Bowser 1974). Slaves and free blacks worked on the coastal haciendas and played an important role in the urban economy, working as cooks, servants, butchers, wet nurses, bricklayers, blacksmiths, tailors, laundresses, and in other occupations (Aldana 1989; Bowser 1974).

Peru gained its independence from Spain in 1821, yet nation-building projects were not very successful until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Larson 2004). When efforts to build the new nation took off, the focus was primarily on the “Indian problem,” with little attention paid to Afro-Peruvians. Peruvian leaders proposed educational reform as a solution to the “Indian problem” in the early twentieth century, but did not propose similar programs for the black population. In fact, blacks were imagined out of the nation—Peruvian officials downplayed the numbers of blacks in Peru, an effort reflected in official counts of the black population during this time. Whereas elites focused on integrating the indigenous population, with regard to blacks, the primary goal was elimination.
Methods

For the Mexican case, we draw on 112 semi-structured interviews and participant observation, conducted by the first author, over the course of twelve months in 2004 and 2005 in the Port of Veracruz (population 512,310), the major city in the state of Veracruz which is situated on the Gulf of Mexico. The Port of Veracruz was once the richest port within the Spanish colonial empire and the major port of entry and incorporation of African slaves to the plantations (Carroll 2001). Today it is a major sea port and a key component of the circum-Caribbean region (Hoffman forthcoming). Not only does the Port of Veracruz have a historical African slave presence, Caribbean immigrants settled in the city during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hoffman forthcoming), although African slaves were a much stronger demographic force.

For the Peruvian case, we draw on fifty semi-structured interviews and participant observation with African-descended Peruvians, conducted by the second author, over the course of nine months between 2002 and 2007 in Ingenio de Buenos Aires (approximate population 2,500). Ingenio is located in north coastal Peru and lies in a valley in the foothills of the Andes. The majority of the inhabitants of Ingenio are descendants of African slaves. Today, most families in Ingenio own a plot of land, from which they can eke out a meager existence. Villagers’ livelihoods are tied to the production of rice for the national market. The Port of Veracruz-Ingenio contrast captures both an urban and rural dynamic. The Port of Veracruz represents the epitome of an international city with exposure to globalized notions of blackness, whereas Ingenio is typical of a rural “black” town within mestizo America.

Findings for the Port of Veracruz, Mexico

Understandings of Slavery. Roughly 70 percent of the 112 Veracruz respondents were aware, to some degree, of Mexico’s history of African slavery. Most reported having learned about slavery through their elementary school training but did not attribute much importance to this history and frequently would minimize it. For example, one respondent described the study of slavery as unimportant but “obligatory” reading for school children. In addition to the lack of interest in learning about slavery, there was a conceptual disconnect between the historical presence of African slaves in the region and Veracruz’s contemporary African-origin population. In other words, most Veracruzanos, while aware of the slave history, did not usually think of Veracruzanos of
African origin as being the living embodiment of this history. This applied to respondents of African- and non-African origin alike. When Veracruzanos of African descent were asked about slavery, most struggled to recall abstract details from their elementary school days; their responses were largely devoid of a personal connection between slavery and their own ancestry. The meaning and significance of slavery was far removed from their identity constructions.

**Racial Ancestry.** Most respondents of African descent implied or directly stated that they were of mixed heritage, although often they were not aware of the particular components of their heritage. In these cases, they sometimes resorted to the local narrative of *mestizaje* in Veracruz—the mixture of “three roots” (Spanish, Indigenous, and African). For example, when Bernardo, a 43-year-old professor of psychology who self-identified as *negro* (black), was asked about his racial background, he responded: “Here in Veracruz there are three races which are the Spanish, the black and obviously, what is it called here in Veracruz? The Totonaca, the indigenous.” Bernardo, like others, constructed his heritage based on his understanding of the racial mixture in the region.

The majority of Veracruzanos of African descent did claim some form of black ancestry (they preferred the term *negro* or Cuban and rarely voiced a connection to Africa). However, this heritage did not appear to be particularly meaningful for respondents and was only mentioned after some probing during the interviews. About half of the respondents who claimed black heritage spoke about it in terms of their personal, familial lineage, whereas the other half discussed their heritage in the context of the ancestral roots of Veracruz. In nearly all cases, respondents demonstrated either a weak understanding or a complete lack of knowledge regarding the specifics of their African or black heritage.

The lack of specific knowledge regarding the respondents’ African or black heritage is understandable given that most of them could not recall any conversations within their family about such ancestry. The absence of generational transfer of ancestral information about African heritage can be seen in this statement made by Alfredo, a 56-year-old fisherman who self-identified as *mestizo*:

Alfredo: Yes, many slaves stayed here and I believe that we are descended from them, including myself. I believe that probably, I descend from the slave race.

CS: From Africans?
Alfredo: I imagine so...I never asked my dad about race—I don’t know, out of embarrassment or respect, I don’t know.

CS: You haven’t asked him?

Alfredo: Nor do I ask him about color, my father [pause]. Because he was negro...Not negro, negro, negro. No. He was negro, negro, negro African negro, I don’t know what. Really big. The negro race.

CS: But you never talked about it?

Alfredo: No, he never told us.

This passage reveals the social silence that frequently surrounds issues of blackness, which consequently impacts understandings of individuals’ ancestral background.

In contrast to black heritage, Veracruzanos of African descent demonstrated a much greater awareness of and concerted effort to discuss their European heritage. Knowledge of this heritage is frequently circulated within families. Consequently, European ancestors were consistently highlighted in respondents’ genealogical discussions. In addition, conversations which the interviewer initiated about non-European ancestors were oftentimes redirected by respondents to a discussion of their European heritage. For example, Vanesa, a 30-year-old working-class housewife who self-identified as morena (brown-skinned), described her phenotype as resembling that of her father who she characterized as having “a flat nose, big eyes, and curly hair.” However, she did not connect these features to a black ancestry until the interviewer probed, at which time she said her parents were of Cuban and Spanish descent. She then quickly launched into a discussion about her grandpa who was “blanco (white) with blue/green eyes” and her great grandparents who were “blancos with blue eyes.” Throughout the remainder of the conversation, there was no more mention of Vanesa’s Cuban ancestors. A racial hierarchy was clearly evident in the reconstruction of genealogical histories.

Racial Identity. The claiming of black ancestry by some respondents of African descent did not translate into a clear and consistent assertion of a black racial identity. The case of Veracruz seems to follow the broader pattern of what we know about race in Latin America—ancestry does not determine racial identity. Therefore, although many Veracruzanos chose to claim black heritage, this did not necessitate them identifying as black. Furthermore, the majority of respondents of African origin struggled with identifying themselves racially. They were much more
comfortable identifying in color categories, such as moreno (brown-skinned). In terms of race, a black identity did occasionally surface, but in inconsistent and contradictory ways.

Black identity for Veracruzanos of African descent is fluid and ambiguous, making it the epitome of a social construction. For example, Rodrigo, a 37-year-old fisherman, self-identified as moreno but is referred to by fellow fishermen as “very negro.” During an interview, Rodrigo demonstrated a very complex position on blackness. He described his ancestors as being from the “dark” race and his phenotype as representing the negro race. However, Rodrigo stressed that he was not negro, although he alluded to his “negro blood.” At one point, he shared his love for music and dance and then proceeded to justify this affinity:

The instinct, the instinct—do you know that the black race (raza negra) invented the music? The slaves and all of that, right? On some occasions there are songs that have a message about the slavery of the past...well more or less we [the family] identify like that and we consider that we have some mixture or something in the blood of that black race that existed before and continues to exist.

Following this remark Rodrigo clarified that his family was not “really negro,” but a mixture of races with darker skin. Rodrigo’s ambivalence between associating himself with and distancing himself from blackness was typical of many respondents of African descent in Veracruz.

In another case, María, a 54-year-old daycare worker, expressed her racial identity indirectly by telling the interviewer that there are morenos like herself who are “almost, almost negros.” In a separate conversation, María referred to her blackness when talking about Memín Pinguín, a black Mexican comic book character:

CS: Can you remember a time when you thought about your color and what it means in society?

María: Well, I didn’t do what Memín Pinguín did, cover my face with powder—or like the negrita in the movie,15 of putting powder on myself. What for? The blackness isn’t going to come off of a person.

Despite this comment suggesting an acceptance of blackness, when the interviewer asked María if she could take her picture, she consented but then disappeared into her bedroom, emerging with her face covered in a foundation so light that it gave the appearance of a white mask.
In another example of the ambiguity surrounding a black identity, Carlos, a 54-year-old high school teacher, responded to an interview question about his racial identification indirectly by referring to how others classify him, which, in turn, led him to describing himself as *negro*:

Carlos: Okay...In my house, they have called me *negro* since I was born, but well, that is...

CS: They called you that?

Carlos: *Negro*. But that is what it is like. My mom was *blanca* like you or even more so maybe and my dad was *moreno*, but well, I am *negro* and I have a brother who is whiter and that is that...Lots of mixture. There is not an established definition among us all...my sisters, have blonde hair, which is natural, not dyed, and green eyes.

Although Carlos did eventually self-identify as *negro*, he then turned to emphasizing the whiteness of his family. In another part of the conversation, he clarified that he considers himself to be *negro* in terms of color but *mestizo* in a racial sense, demonstrating the broader trend that individuals are particularly reluctant to identify as racially black. Carlos justified his dark skin as being due to sun exposure, again distancing himself from black racial connotations. In part of the conversation not included here, Carlos did claim black heritage, but in a way that implied that black ancestry is common to all Veracruzanos.

**Findings for Ingenio, Peru**

*Understandings of Slavery*. In Ingenio, respondents were very open to talking about slavery and the cruelties it engendered. Although interview questions were designed to gauge collective memories of the enslavement of Africans, respondents frequently referred to more general notions of exploitation when asked about slavery, describing the cruel treatment of hacienda workers in the region. Very few residents of Ingenio were aware that chattel slavery had been an institution particular to Africans and their descendants. For example, Alfonso, a self-identified *moreno* (brown-skinned) born in 1915, reflected on his experience as a young boy:

When I first came here, we still had slavery. Poor people were treated very badly. The *hacendado* would say “we don’t need donkeys as long as we have poor people.” He would say that as he hit people. Since the *hacendado* had people as slaves, he would whip them.
Like Alfonso, many residents of Ingenio conflated slavery with sharecropping and other forms of exploitation. Residents of Ingenio defined slavery as working for little to no wages, corporal punishment, or forced labor, conditions not particular to African-descent peoples. Consequently, most perceived slavery as existing well into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{16}

Part of the reason residents of Ingenio may not think of slavery in relation to African slavery is because, when chattel slavery was outlawed in 1854, many former slaves continued to work on the plantations, and their life conditions changed little.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, African slavery and its abolition are not a significant part of the collective memory in Ingenio. In addition to a lack of a collective memory of African slavery, most people in Ingenio did not see themselves as having ancestral roots in Africa.

\textbf{Ancestry.} Although many of the interviewees self-identified as negro (black), very few believed they had African ancestry. For example, Liliana, a morena clara (light-brown skinned woman) in her fifties stated: “My father was very dark-skinned, very negro but we were never told that we were Africans.” Of the 51 Ingenio interviewees, only twelve claimed African ancestry. In contrast, 13 reported being unsure if they had African ancestry and 26 asserted they did not have African ancestry. Residents self-identified as Peruvians and generally were unaware of (1) how or when their ancestors had come to live in Peru, (2) that, prior to 1492, there were most likely no people of African descent in the Americas, and (3) that Africans were primarily brought to Peru as slaves.

The vast majority of interviewees also indicated that they did not have European, indigenous, or Asian ancestry. An example of this can be seen with Perla, a 50-year-old mother of seven who referred to herself and her children as negros. Perla was born in the neighboring village, but had spent all of her married life in Ingenio, with the exception of a few visits to her daughter, Fiorela, who lives and works in Lima. Below is an excerpt from her interview:

\begin{quote}
TGB: So, your great-great grandparents also were born here?
Perla: All of them.
TGB: Ah, all of them. And, do you know how they got here, to Ingenio?
Perla: No, I don’t know, no.
TGB: You don’t have any idea?
Perla: No, I don’t have any idea how and why they came, no.
TGB: You don’t know if you have African ancestry or ancestors who came from Africa?
\end{quote}
Perla: No.
TGB: And, do you know if you have indigenous ancestry, or ancestors who are indigenous to Peru?
Perla: No, I don’t either.
TGB: European or Spanish ancestors?
Perla: No.
TGB: Asian?
Perla: No, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.18
TGB: Do you know what your roots are, or where your ancestors came from? Apart from that they are from here, you don’t know?
Perla: No, I don’t know.
TGB: And, ah, have you heard; do you know the history of how Africans came to Peru?
Perla: I don’t know, no.

Perla’s conception of her ancestry is an example of a more general pattern in Ingenio—people’s knowledge of their ancestry is based on the family members they know personally since most villagers reported that they had not heard stories from their elders about their own ancestry.

Like Veracruzanos, many Ingenio residents described their ancestry as “black, but not African.” For example, Diana, a young woman who self-identified as *morena* and *negra*, when asked if she had African ancestors, responded that she was aware that her ancestors were black, but did not think they were African. Fabio, Perla’s husband, a 50-year-old agricultural worker who self-identified as *negro*, gave a similar response although he is atypical of most respondents in that he has been involved sporadically in a black social movement. When asked about his roots, Fabio stated, “We are blacks.” Upon further probing, he reported that blacks came from Yapatera, a nearby village, where they were brought as slaves by different plantation owners. In his narrative, Fabio demonstrated that he was aware that Africans were brought to Peru as slaves. Nevertheless, despite knowing about Peru’s history of African slavery, being aware that Africans were black, and self-identifying as *negro*, Fabio did not identify his ancestral roots as African. Like most interviewees, he denied Spanish or indigenous ancestry as well, and claimed a black ancestry. Fabio’s simultaneous denial of Spanish and indigenous ancestry makes it less likely that his claiming of black ancestry is an attempt to distance himself from African roots; more plausibly, he is simply unaware of any familial connections to Africa.
As mentioned above, the least common response among interviewees was to claim African ancestry. Armando, a 43-year-old agricultural worker, who self-identified as negro, was one of the few respondents who traced his family lineage back to Africa. Armando was by far the most well-read of the Ingenio respondents. Most of what he had learned had come from books; he developed a love for reading as a small child and read every book he could get his hands on. In an interview, he described the experiences of African slaves and directly connected his family history to that experience.

Armando: The labor power which was, the negros, people that were brought from Africa, or, slaves, to work in the fields. So, around here, Alto Piura, there was a place where primarily negros settled, Yapatera. So, from this black race (raza negra) that arrived there, from these slaves, since independence came, these people stayed there. They no longer moved, and with freedom, they had access to own land, a piece of land, and began to move to other places and other towns. As such, the race spread out. So, my grandfather met my grandmother in Chulucanas, in an annex close to Yapatera. So, my grandfather was moreno, negro, and, well, they got married.

Armando’s understanding of his ancestry was not based on the transmission of knowledge from his elders, but through his own investigations and reading about Africa and the slave trade. However, Armando was a rare case; most people from Ingenio did not claim African ancestry although this did not prevent them from embracing a black identity.

**Racial Identity.** Most of the Ingenio respondents described themselves as negro or moreno, or a combination of these identifiers. According to most interviewees, what distinguishes a negro from a moreno is skin color; negros are darker than morenos, although a person could be both moreno and negro, depending on the context. Residents generally did not display aversion to the black (negro) label. Some identified strongly with the label, others indicated that they were socially viewed as black, and only a very few insisted that black was not an accurate description of them, because of their light skin color. When the 51 interviewees were asked how other Peruvians would describe them, 28 responded that others would classify them as negro. The other 23 interviewees felt they were socially viewed as moreno or zambo. However, these racial classifications are complex. For example, Diana, the young woman referenced previously, initially said that others viewed her as morena but later claimed that
negro and moreno meant the same thing. Furthermore, she stated that she would not be offended if someone called her negra, demonstrating that her self-description as morena is not necessarily an attempt to distance herself from blackness or to avoid the black label. Of the 23 interviewees who did not identify as negro, six said that moreno and negro meant the same thing but that others would describe them as moreno. An additional 7 indicated that they were from black families. Finally, 7 interviewees rejected the black label, arguing that blacks are dark-skinned (which they are not). Thus, of the 51 interviewees, only a small minority completely disassociated themselves from the black category; these 7 respondents felt they were best classified as moreno or zambo.

Carmen, a woman in her late forties, is a typical example of a respondent who did not consider herself to be black because of her light skin color. She is married to Germán, a man in his mid-fifties. Together they own a small corner store and a plot of land. In the interview, Germán self-identified as moreno but said his wife calls him negro as a term of endearment. When asked how people might refer to her, Carmen was not sure how to respond. She said she was probably morena, clarifying that blanca (white) referred to people with very fair skin, and that she was not blanca because she is not light-skinned enough. However, she also asserted that no one refers to her as negra and she does not think of herself as such because she does not have dark skin. In contemplating her racial identity, Carmen never considered her ancestry; the discussion revolved around her color. This dynamic can also be seen with Fabiola, a teenage girl with very fair skin and straight brown hair. Fabiola is identified by many villagers as blanca, although no one considered her parents to be blancos, due to their slightly darker skin.

Identity construction in Ingenio depends heavily on color and very little on ancestral background. A final example of the salience of color and the non-deterministic nature of ancestry in identity construction is Fabio and his wife, referenced previously. Both identify as negros but Fabio describes two of their children as trigueños (literally, wheat-colored), since they have lighter skin than their parents. This indicates that, despite Fabio’s consciousness of his black roots, he defines blackness based on skin color. Like Fabio, residents of Ingenio understand that blackness can be transmitted inter-generationally, but do not believe that it must be transmitted inter-generationally. Skin color is privileged in constructions of blackness; blacks are defined as individuals with dark skin. For many residents, a black identity exists devoid of knowledge of African ancestry or awareness of the history of African slavery in the region.
Case Comparison

In examining the Port of Veracruz and Ingenio cases, we notice some interesting similarities and differences. In both contexts, a strong connection to a collective memory of slavery or African ancestry is absent. Our findings suggest that the marginalization of discourses of slavery and African ancestry may be due to a lack of concrete knowledge about the African slave trade and/or one’s ancestors as opposed to an intentional denial of this information, as has been posited in previous studies. Furthermore, when comparing these two cases we found an interesting oppositional dynamic—in the Port of Veracruz we see the phenomenon of “black ancestry without black identity” and in Ingenio “black identity without African ancestry.” Although seemingly contradictory, these two manifestations of a relationship between ancestry and identity actually demonstrate an underlying similarity—the privileging of color in identity construction. Finally, the Port of Veracruz-Ingenio comparison revealed that respondents from Ingenio embraced a black identity, which was not the case in the Port of Veracruz. In this section, we will address these major findings in more depth.

The cases of the Port of Veracruz and Ingenio demonstrate that persons of African descent in these regions either do not retain the memory of chattel slavery (Ingenio) or retain this memory but do not ascribe meaning to this memory as it relates to their own ancestries and identities (Veracruz). The weak link to slavery that we have seen in these two cases may be due to the absence of state-endorsed efforts in mestizo America to retain memories of slavery and connect this history to the ancestral origins of the nation’s population. In the absence of these state-sponsored efforts, genealogical histories are constructed locally; these constructions are determined by the racial hierarchy in a given site, the tradition of passing down ancestral information, and the degree of ancestral knowledge held by earlier generations. In the case of Veracruz, individuals privilege European ancestral information and readily transmit this knowledge. In contrast, they generally downplay or do not transmit ancestral knowledge related to African ancestry. In the case of Ingenio, there is a general lack of passing on knowledge about ancestors whether they be European, Indigenous, or African. In both cases, there appears to be little to no familial knowledge of ancestry related to Africa.

Our findings complicate the literature on blackness in the region. Scholars have previously described the reported lack of knowledge about African ancestry by individuals of African descent as “denial,” “avoidance” or “willful forgetting” of such heritage (Twine 1998; Winant...
2001). However, our findings suggest an alternative interpretation. In the case of Veracruz, respondents who did not report being of African ancestry generally did not appear to be intentionally hiding information about their African heritage; however, when respondents were aware of such heritage, there was a tendency to downplay it. Therefore, it is possible that, instead of denying such heritage, respondents simply lack knowledge about African ancestors. Although it is difficult to uncover the actual degree of knowledge of respondents, our interpretation is supported by other scholars’ findings. For example, Cruz Carretero (1989) found that in Mata Clara, a rural town in the state of Veracruz, 56 percent of respondents were unsure about why there are blacks in the region or where they came from (94). Furthermore, Martínez Montiel (1993) notes that in Mexico there is not a conscious negation of African heritage but a tradition of inheritance which has excluded discussion of African ancestors (157). Therefore, denial by previous generations might have evolved into a lack of knowledge for newer generations as the denial may have manifested in the lack of passing down ancestral information. The interpretation of a lack of knowledge as opposed to denial is most strongly supported by the case of Ingenio, where there is an absence of knowledge of ancestral roots across the board, including that of European ancestors.

Regarding the relationship between ancestry and identity, the cases of the Port of Veracruz and Ingenio demonstrate seemingly opposite trends. In the Port of Veracruz there is “ancestry without blackness”—a claim of black or African ancestry which does not usually translate into a black identity. However, in the case of Ingenio, we saw the opposite trend of “blackness without ancestry,” where individuals self-identify as black without associating this identity with African heritage; a black identity exists devoid of any notion of ancestral connection to Africa or memory of slavery. Although our two cases provide seemingly conflicting findings, an underlying dynamic explains both manifestations of the relationship between ancestry and identity—the importance of phenotype.

In Veracruz, the black label is conservatively applied and is reserved for those at the darkest end of the color continuum. Therefore, individuals with African ancestry but whose phenotypes do not represent the “blackest” component of the population are often not considered black in society. Phenotype overpowers ancestry in racial identity construction. In Ingenio, phenotype is also very important and largely determines who is considered black; however, these designations take place in
the absence of connotations of African ancestry. Again, phenotype is more salient than ancestry. In Veracruz, notions of black or African ancestry are flexible and do not neatly overlap with a black identity. In Ingenio, black identities are expansive and generally do not overlap with or necessitate an understanding of African ancestry. In both cases, phenotype is the main factor in identity construction.

In terms of identity, respondents in Ingenio were much more likely to claim a consistent black identity compared to Veracruz respondents. The findings from Ingenio challenge much of the literature on Latin Americans of African descent which presents an image of shunning contemporary blackness and avoidance of the black category (Degler 1971; Hanchard 1994; Harris 1952; Twine 1998; Winant 2001). Our findings from both cases demonstrate that the avoidance of blackness, while sometimes occurring, is not the whole story; individuals of African descent exhibit myriad identities ranging from complete avoidance of blackness to embracing it. Returning to our comparison, the fact that black identities were more likely to surface in Ingenio, a rural, isolated setting, compared to the Port of Veracruz, an urban, international setting, challenges some existing assumptions about how and where black identities are most likely to form. We will address this final point in the conclusion.

Conclusion

In this article we have used qualitative data to shed light on the understudied phenomenon of the experiences of individuals of African origin in parts of mestizo America. Mexico and Peru represent cases in mestizo America in which the collective memory of slavery and contemporary blackness are largely absent from national discourse. This contrasts sharply with many Afro-Latin American countries where national ideologies centralize slave histories, the African contribution to national culture, and the African “root” of the population. In mestizo America, when there is an absence of national-level discourses addressing blackness, local constructions of slavery, ancestry, and identity become more important. As such, it is necessary to interrogate the multiple manifestations of local understandings of blackness, both in historical and contemporary terms. In this article we addressed the mestizo American countries of Mexico and Peru.

Our findings have led us to make three principal arguments that contribute to the literature on blackness in Latin America and the broader literature on diasporas. First, we argue that many differences exist with-
in the broadly defined “African diaspora” in Latin America and that it is important to take locality into account when interrogating these dynamics. We have adopted the perspective articulated by Clarke and Thomas (2006) that “identities remain bounded by local experiences” (27) and that “context is everything” when addressing the process of racial formation (32). In particular, we argue that scholars need to pay attention to the nations of mestizo America which have been understudied in the literature. Second, we argue that scholars need to spend more time interrogating the complicated relationship (or lack of) between notions of collective memory of slavery, ancestry, and identity, as opposed to assuming a linear relationship. Finally, by examining both rural and urban settings, we are able to demonstrate how the formation of a black consciousness is not necessarily stimulated by an urban environment, exposure to other individuals of African descent, or African diaspora ideologies and culture.

Related to our first point, we argue that scholars should not treat all African-origin communities as analytically similar, a frequent occurrence when discussing the “African diaspora.” For example, in reference to this diaspora, Hamilton et al. (2007) describe the “dispersed peoples of African descent” as “communities of consciousness” (31). Critiquing this approach, Campt problematizes “diaspora as the requisite approach or theoretical model through which one should (or perhaps must) understand all formations of black community, regardless of historical, geographical, or cultural context” (2006, 108). Others such as Hoffman (2006) and Brubaker (2005) problematize the outside imposition of the African diaspora concept on those who do not exhibit a black consciousness or whose identity is not associated with Africa as a homeland. The imposition of a diaspora label largely neglects the experience of individuals of African descent who feel little or no connection to Africa or a black identity.

So, to what degree should we think of these populations, which assert no connection to Africa, as being part of the African diaspora? If we define diaspora using strong definitions which emphasize orientation to a homeland and a collective black identity (Brubaker 2005), the populations of the Port of Veracruz and Ingenio would be only marginally, if at all, considered part of an African diaspora, since they exhibit a weak to non-existent memory of slavery, minimal orientation to Africa as an ancestral homeland, and lack a black identity that is connected to Africa or other blacks. Therefore, their social reality does not encourage these populations’ inclusion in the broader diaspora category. However, if
diaspora is treated as a stance aimed at remaking the world (e.g. creating a diasporic consciousness) as opposed to describing it (Brubaker 2005), then there may be a more legitimate basis for including these cases under the umbrella term “diaspora.”

On our second point, many scholars presume that the enslavement of Africans over four hundred years has inevitably left an indelible mark on the lives of people of African descent in the Americas. In some cases, this is true. In the U.S. context, the collective memory of slavery has played a vital role in the formation of an African American shared identity (Clarke 2006; Eyerman 2004; Gilroy 1993). However, the retention of the memory of slavery is by no means an inevitable outcome for descendants of slaves. Therefore, we encourage scholars to focus their efforts on uncovering the processes by which slavery is remembered (if at all) and how this influences understandings of ancestry and identity.

In both the Port of Veracruz and Ingenio cases, we found that a collective memory of slavery is only sometimes retained and, when retained, is largely devoid of personal meaning to those of African descent. Thus the relationship between memories of slavery, ancestry, and identity is far from linear—in the case of Veracruz, the memory of slavery exists and is loosely connected to understandings of African ancestry, but this has not led to the development of a strong black identity. In the case of Ingenio, a black identity exists in the absence of a memory of slavery and claiming of African ancestry. Consequently, a black identity does not necessarily imply knowledge of slavery or an understanding of African ancestry, and, simultaneously, knowledge of slavery and the claiming of African ancestry do not necessarily translate into a black identity. Given these findings, which contrast with some of the less nuanced accounts of blackness seen in the literature, scholars should continue to explore the relationship between slavery, ancestry, and identity, especially in the context of mestizo America.

A final argument we put forth is that urban environments and exposure to elements of the African diaspora do not necessarily lead to a black consciousness or identity. In other words, we critique the implicit logic forwarded in the literature that a black consciousness is more likely to surface in urban areas due to connections with a global diaspora. For example, Vaughn (2001), researching individuals of African descent residing in a rural region in Mexico, found a lack of a diasporic consciousness. However, he predicted that increased travel, access to mass media, and exposure to black social movements would likely lead to the development of a black identity. His prediction is not completely
unfounded as capitalism and mass media have played an important role in the late twentieth century development of pan-Africanism, for example (Clarke 2006). However, our findings demonstrate that in the Port of Veracruz, an urban setting with important historical and contemporary connections to the African diaspora via the Caribbean and a history of exposure to mass media, an African consciousness is weak to nonexistent. In contrast, in Ingenio, a small rural, isolated setting with little to no connection to globalized notions of blackness, there is a much stronger black identity, albeit devoid of connotations of African ancestry. Therefore, a simple explanation of degree of “exposure” to blackness or an African diaspora is not sufficient for understanding the dynamics of black identity construction.

In Latin America, where race is largely conceptualized on a color continuum, exposure to a global population of individuals of African descent can, in fact, lead to a distancing from blackness. This is true of the case of the Port of Veracruz where the connection to the African diaspora and globalized blackness has served as a way for Veracruzanos, living in a nation where blackness is highly stigmatized, to define blackness as something foreign. Veracruzanos distance themselves from blackness by defining blacks as individuals from Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the United States. In this case, exposure to the African diaspora has led to the exportation of blackness. In contrast, in the rural setting of Ingenio, where blackness is also stigmatized, the “othering” of blackness outside of Ingenio is more difficult given its isolated setting. This may be a reason residents are more likely to adopt a black identity. In the case of less-globalized regions such as Ingenio, the color continuum is comprised of phenotypes within the local population; residents make up the entire continuum, including the “black” end of the spectrum. Hence, a rural setting can, under certain circumstances, foster the creation of a black identity. This is not to say that connections and exposure to the African diaspora cannot lead to a black consciousness. However, consistent with the broader theme of this article, we argue that scholars need to be cautious in assuming that particular circumstances will automatically lead to a particular outcome.

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Notes

1 For examples see Andrews 2004; Arocha and Maya 2008; Conniff and Davis 2002; Davis 1995; Hoetink 1973; Mosquera, Pardo, and Hoffman 2002; Nuñez 1980; Peréz Sarduy and Stubbs 1995; Rout 1976; Wade 2006; Whitten and Torres 1998.

2 Andrews (2004) defines Afro-Latin America as countries where people of African ancestry make up 5-10 percent or more of the population (4).

3 Euro-America refers to countries in the southern cone (Argentina, Uruguay, and Southern Chile), the zone which has received the largest wave of European immigrants within the past 100 years (Mörner 1967).


6 For exceptions see Cruz Carretero 1989; Martínez Maranto 1997; Sue 2009.

7 The slave trade ended in 1817.

8 The supposed disappearance of this population was questioned when, in the 1940s, Aguirre Beltrán ([1946] 1989, 1958) studied a “black” population in the Costa Chica.

9 For example, in 1884, there were 18,320 documented blacks and mulattos in Lima (Cuche 1981), yet by 1908 the official count had dropped to 6,763 (Stokes 1987). Although there may have been declines in black fertility, or increases in black mortality, this precipitous decline in the black population cannot be explained by demographics alone.

10 About one fifth of the respondents were of African descent.

11 Research was also conducted in Boca del Río (population 141,906) which is geographically merged and socially well-integrated with the Port of Veracruz.

12 Approximately 2,716 Cuban individuals arrived to Mexico between 1870 and 1900, which roughly represents the “great wave” of Cuban migration (García Díaz 2002). This compares to the approximately 200,000 slaves which arrived to Mexico.
In the sections on ancestry and identity, we only focus on respondents of African descent.

Veracruzanos often use Cuban as a codeword for blackness.

She is referring to the film Angelitos Negros which she watched as part of a focus group exercise.

Slavery in Peru ended in 1854 and the hacienda system came to an end with agrarian reforms in the early 1970s (Cuche 1981).

This seems to have been common across Peru. Cuche (1981) presents evidence that some slaves were unaware of emancipation and that life continued as it had prior to abolition and Aguirre (2005) contends that conditions for slaves did not change drastically after abolition.

Many of the interviewees laughed when asked if they had Asian ancestry. We interpret this laughter as meaning that it is obvious that they do not have Asian ancestry.

Zambo is a colonial classification that means a black-Indian mixture. In Ingenio, it was most often used to refer to tightly curled hair.

They classified their mother, father, siblings, or children as negros.

This finding is consistent with research in cases such as Brazil, where many people who do not self-identify as black claim African ancestry (Telles 2004).

This has been documented in some cases (Anderson 2005; Sansone 2003; Sawyer 2006).

References


Situating Race, Navigating Belongings: Mapping Afro-Cuban Identities in the United States

Alyssa Garcia

Introduction

The traditional exile paradigm of studying the experiences of Cubans in the United States presents a homogeneous and exceptional view of this community, privileges the experiences of the so called Golden exiles, avoids analysis outside of the enclave, distances and overlooks Cubans in relation to other groups, and obscures the salience of race within the community itself. In this essay, I examine the experience of Afro-Cubans in an effort to go beyond the exile model and demystify constructions of Cuban exceptionalism. I focus on the narrative and testimonio of Carlos, an Afro-Cuban from Chicago, Illinois, as a point of departure to think about negotiations of racial/ethnic identity in the United States.1

This paper resituates race and racism within discussions of Cubans in the United States to consider the implications of how the Cuban community is imagined as white. By demonstrating how race is a marginalizing and discriminating mechanism, I show that the exceptionalism model does not aptly apply to Afro-Cubans. I examine how race and the Cuban exceptionalism model mediate Cuban relationships with other U.S. minorities to illuminate Afro-Cuban negotiation and manipulation of racial and ethnic identity in relation to other communities. On one hand race serves as a medium to build and foster latinidad and/or racial solidarity; and yet, on the other hand, the Cuban exceptionalism model is still utilized as source of cultural capital to distance and/or prevent the formation of solidarity with other groups of color.

I begin by considering the ways in which discourses of Cuban nationhood treat issues of race and subsume differences for the sake of national unification to situate Cuban pre-arrival notions of race. Next, I explore the ways relations between black and white Cubans have been historically constructed to consider how black Cubans have been situated amongst the larger Cuban community, and the ways in which racial dynamics play out among Cubans themselves. I then address how racial dynamics affect relations between Cubans and other ethnic/racial...
groups, particularly Mexican, Puerto Rican, and African-American communities. Afro-Cuban narratives are utilized to highlight complex negotiations of blackness, and how racial and ethnic identity are fluid and situationally manipulated, negotiated, and contested in relation to sentiments of belonging. By examining how Afro-Cubans negotiate racial and ethnic identity in the United States, this study highlights how racialized power differentials emerge within the notion of “Cuban success” and cultural capital in local spaces amongst interracial Cuban, Pan-Latino, and Black diasporic communities.

The Exile/Exceptionalism Model: Expanding Frameworks, Considering Race

Cubans have come to be the immigrant success story among Latino diasporic groups in the United States. They are seen as the exception to and model for Latin America and Caribbean immigrants today. They are portrayed as model immigrants, celebrated for their heroism and patriotism, and representatives of an Horatio Alger’s “rags to riches” story; immigrants who came with nothing and achieved everything. Unlike other Latinos(as), Cubans are seen as a privileged minority who had been afforded special immigration status because of their symbolic value in the Cold War struggles of the United States against communism (Torres 1999, 43). As María de los Angeles Torres writes, “Newspaper and magazine accounts have heralded ‘Those Amazing Cuban Exiles’—hard-working refugees from Communism making it in the Land of Opportunity. ‘Horatio’ the Latin Alger—became a convenient symbol of the failure of the [Cuban] Revolution and the renewal of the American dream, in which non-white immigrants pull themselves up by their bootstraps” (Torres 1998, 393).

It has been widely argued that “never has there been a large non-English speaking immigrant group in this country that has exhibited more rapid upward socioeconomic mobility than the Cubans...they pulled at the heart of American patriotism and sense of justice and compassion and were welcomed with open arms and generous federal assistance (Boswell 1984, 3-4).” Many have argued that Cubans have been the most well received of any U.S. immigrant group in recent history given that their flight from communism and the iron clad rule of Castro struck a responsive chord in Americans. This narrative of “success” and “exceptionalism” that develops from the “exile model” has been predominantly utilized for studying the experiences of Cubans in the United States.
Yet, this model and “success story” privileges the history and experience of the “Golden” exiles cohort of Cuban immigration, which arrived in the early 1960s. This wave left Castro’s revolution early, cited political reasons for coming to the United States, were white and of upper-middle class professionally educated backgrounds. Many were reunited with their families, received substantial U.S. federal aid, and settled in Miami (as well as New Jersey) to establish Cuban enclaves. However, their reception stands in stark opposition to the treatment their compatriots later received. The Mariel Boatlift refugees (often referred to as *Marielitos*), who arrived in the 1980s remain one of the most stigmatized immigrant groups in American history. They were not granted refugee status, nor celebrated.\(^2\) Whereas early U.S. policies toward refugees reflected ideological and foreign policy priorities, favoring those from communist countries, under the 1980 Refugee Act, those who arrived in the Mariel Boatlift were not considered legitimate refugees. Not only were few eligible for aid, but many were to remain in prison indefinitely until deported.\(^3\) The *balseros* or rafters, who departed from Cuba in the late 1990s, also received differential status upon arrival to the United States. In 1994 President Clinton suspended what was left of the preferential treatment towards Cubans. The *balseros* were immediately sent to Guantanamo base, were no longer automatically allowed in the United States, and were treated in the same way as immigrants of other nationalities.

The Mariel Boatlift Cubans, along with the *balseros*, were ideologically marked as unwanted by both U.S. society and the Cuban exile community. Older émigrés worried that these new immigrants raised under a socialist/authoritarian regime would never adapt to the democratic institutions and the free enterprise system (García 1996, 72). Formed under the revolutionary regime experience, their sociocultural and idiosyncratic characteristics set them apart from earlier exiles. They were shunned by Americans and their fellow compatriots, encountering hostility and discrimination wherever they settled. They also were disinherit ed from the enterprising legacy of their Cuban exile precursors. The characteristics of these waves, being younger, darker, and less educated, made them victims of strong stigmatization. They more closely resembled the typical profile of other economic refugees and immigrants and remained bound to low paying jobs and displacement. The arrival and settlement experiences of the Mariel and *balsero* Cubans were hardly the same conditions as their predecessors. Any “special” status and aid did not apply to these and other ensuing migrations from Cuba. Therefore we must be careful in applying the exile/exceptionalism model to all
Cubans in U.S. society. The perpetuated model of Cuban exceptionalism, which obscures and silences their diversity and racialized experiences, should be contextualized in the specific experiences of a particular migration of Cubans.

In addition, the majority of studies about Cubans in the U.S. have focused primarily on the Miami and New Jersey enclaves, concretizing the exile paradigm and stressing the cultural resiliency of the community amidst their enclave. As González-Pando (1998) notes, reliance on informal networks, the private sector and personal contacts has provided the largely segregated enclave with a degree of economic self-sufficiency (123). Little attention has been paid to Cubans outside the social and economic context of this self-sustaining enclave. Eliana Rivero’s recollection of “decubanization” (1995), as she moved away from the cultural enclave of Miami and out to the larger territory of the U.S. mainstream, suggests that the experiences of Cubans outside the enclave are significantly different.

These studies also pay little attention to who is excluded from these enclave communities. For example, a 1982 article on ethnic enclaves compared the drastic differences between the Cuban and Black economies in Miami (Wilson and Martin 1982). Yet, where do Afro-Cubans fit into a racially and residentially segregated Miami when the opportunities and success available to Afro-Cubans are significantly affected by their residential location? Too often racial segregation and exclusion are overlooked in discussions of the “successful” and “exceptional” Cuban enclave.

Few studies of Cubans have involved a thoughtful examination of Cubans in relation to other Latina/o or ethnic/racial groups. While studies have compared Cuban immigration with that of other immigrant groups (Portes and Bach 1985; Duany 1992) few outside of literature and/or personal narratives have considered the interaction of the Cuban community with other ethnic/racial groups or the fact that Cuban communities do not live in isolation.

The emphasis of the exile model on political rationale for migration and minimization of the fine line and/or overlap between voluntary/economic vs. involuntary/political immigration motivations, prevent a thoughtful examination of Cubans in relation to other groups. Overlooking the economic reasons for Cuban immigration, which are similar to other Latino migrations to the United States, works to deemphasize the political factors motivating the migrations of other groups and ultimately serves to distance Cubans and situate them amidst the similarities
they share with other minorities. As González-Pando (1998) notes, the conviction of being political exiles, not an immigrant minority, may have kept Cubans from identifying with civil rights groups.

Recognizing the commonalities Cubans share with other Latinos(as) and other minority groups in U.S. society is beneficial not only in terms of coalition building and political mobilizations, but also in dismantling the exile paradigm itself. María de los Angeles Torres (1998) argues that the burden of Cuban exceptionalism, is somehow lessened by understanding that there are comparable situations faced by all minority groups. Highlighting the success of Cubans not only blurs the picture of their true situations, but it also desensitizes them, incurring hidden costs of success and isolating them from other American minorities (Mirabal 2003). Thus constructions of Cuban exceptionalism that have separated and purportedly differentiated Cubans from other U.S. minorities must be demystified.

Nationality and Blackness:
Cuban Ideologies of Race

Before attempting to examine the experiences of Afro-Cubans in the United States one must consider ideologies of race and nation in Cuba. Discussions about Afro-Cuban identity formation need to be set against nationalist discourses and constructions of the Cuban nation. Cuban national and cultural identity is jointly tied to the concept of *mestizaje* (Morejón 1993). *Mestizaje* refers to the history of racial mixing on the island, and this has been affirmed as the heritage of the Cuban nation. Ostensibly, to be Cuban is to have a dynamic racial equilibrium balanced between the black African and white Spaniard (Entralgo 1966); and an equal but constant interaction between these two cultures has created a new independent Cuban culture (Ortiz 1993). This syncretic concept of race is inculcated into Cuban national consciousness. Racial purity is not believed to exist. Under the ideology of *mestizaje* only one racial identity exists. As Cuban revolutionary martyr José Martí proclaimed, “there is only one race…the Cuban race (Martí 1977).”

Cuba’s nation building struggles, like other countries, fostered symbols with which Cubans across class and racial lines could identify. Nationalist ideologies propagated symbols of internal “oneness” based on concepts of racial classification (Torres and Whitten 1998, 7). As Alejandro de la Fuente (1998) mentions, Cuba’s colonial struggle against Spain invented “revolutionary traditions” that proclaimed all Cubans to
be equal. The existence of races was seen as a social reality, but only within an encompassing notion of Cubanness that subsumed and erased racial identities (12).

Not only does the construction of Cuban nationality officially silence issues of race, but it also allows for the survival and reproduction of racial ideologies. Such hegemonic ideologies assign overriding significance to nationality. Consequently, nationality singularly and effectively eliminates the need for other identities (de la Fuente 1998). Strong interpretations of Cuban nationalism posit the divisiveness and dangers involved in the discussion of a subject that might threaten national unity and Cuba’s racial fraternity. For example, when the Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color) formed in Cuba in 1908 with the goals to ensure that Afro-Cubans received full and equitable participation in postwar expansion government and services, advocating to end racial discrimination and demanding full equality for all Cubans, members were designated as black nationalists by the state. In turn, Cuban blacks were prohibited from coming together and were accused of racism, culminating in government repression and the 1912 massacre, with over 3,000 blacks killed (Helg 1990, 1995).

Cubanness became then an uncontested identity, one validated by white-black mestizaje and nationalism. For that reason, there is often a tendency among Cubans to identify themselves nationally first, then racially or ethnically. Any change in identification or racial relations is considered to undermine national pride. Black identity is viewed as resistance and national unity has historically transcended racial identification or solidarity in Cuban history. Afro-Cuban scholar María Zielina (2000) highlights how black identity is suffocated or silenced by Cuban national identity. Zielina notes that the distinctive component of being Cuban precludes black Cubans from the possibility of becoming “brothers” to any other black Cuban or group on the basis of skin color or ethnicity. The accepted rhetoric of nationalism perpetuates a reliance on destructively discrete categories by defining the ways in which nations must be constructed. Most black Cubans want to be seen as Cubans because that it what is recognized and accepted in their society, by the government and by hegemonic forces.6

These ideologies of mestizaje and nationalism have been reproduced and reinforced throughout Cuban history. During the nineteenth century wars of independence against Spain, the cooperation and involvement of Cubans from all racial groups was used to support the claim of racial equality on the island. The massive incorporation of blacks in the inde-
pendence movement is purported to be an important step in the national integration of blacks and whites. Afterwards, during the early years of the republic, the labor movement was seen as working toward a common goal for all Cubans, blurring divisions and race-based statuses among the multiracial composition of workers. Workers’ federations stressed the need for all workers to unite regardless of race or national origin. The strength and development of the labor movement came from ignoring racial divisions and uniting under the context of class (De la Fuente 1997).

The triumph of Fidel Castro’s socialist revolution in 1959 also brought promises and claims of equality. Under socialist principles, the egalitarian foundation of sharing and dividing resources equally promised racial equity and integration. The regime focused on eradicating discrimination through policies like an Agrarian Reform, a Literacy Campaign, an Urban Housing Reform, and the nationalization of the educational and health care systems.

Issues of race have been pervasively erased, silenced, or obscured throughout Cuban history. If, ideologically, race “does not exist,” then it can be argued that racism also does not exist. This rhetoric of racelessness and the repudiation of racial identification has been essential to the creation of Cuban national identity. In Cuba, as in many other Latin American and Caribbean countries, silence about race can be viewed as a form of social control in which subtle hegemonic deception enables racial inequality by pretending that race does not exist, thereby disabling the capacity to mobilize resistance against racism.

These discourses, ideologies, and practices migrate to the United States and are evident in discussions about the experiences of Cuban immigrants. As Mirabal notes, an “unspoken” aspect of the process of Cuban exile identity formation, is that race is often subsumed under the theoretical rubric of culture, both fostering and reinforcing the belief that all Cubans in the United States share the same experiences regardless of race (2003, 13). The continuing silence around issues of race allows for little discussion of difference within the Cuban community. This “cultural baggage” affects how migrants situate themselves collectively and individually upon their arrival.

White Cubans and Afro-Cubans in U.S. Society

In a June 2000 New York Times article, “Best of Friends, Worlds Apart,” Orjito describes how Joel Ruiz, an Afro-Cuban, and Achmed Valdez, a white Cuban, grew up together in Cuba, but have grown apart
since arriving in the United States in 1994. Although they live only four miles apart from one another in Miami, the two have drifted apart. Skin color has come to define the outline of their lives in U.S. society. Ruiz still feels Cuban, but also has become part of a black world, in which he is constantly conscious of race. Valdez lives in an all white neighborhood and socializes with white Cuban friends. He believes American blacks are to be avoided because they are delinquent, dangerous, and resentful of whites. The article concludes that while Ruiz and Valdez say they remain good friends, there is little that binds them anymore.

The unraveling of the friendship of Ruiz and Valdez’s upon arrival to the United States provides a poignant example that a change of space and place did not necessarily provide for a dismantling of inherited Cuban or Latin American racist ideologies. As Silvio Torres-Saillant (2002, 2003) points out, Latinos(as) inherit a racist imaginary from both Latin and Anglo America. We should not underestimate the attitudes and racial hang-ups immigrants bring with them from their homeland. Negrophobia and anti-black sentiments formed part of their “education” on matters related to nation and cultural identity, and play themselves out in multifaceted ways upon arrival. Torres-Saillant calls for a critical analysis of identity discourses and the ways they obscure intra-Latino injustices.

Examining historical and contemporary examples of white Cuban and Afro-Cuban relations in the United States will reveal that a shared culture and nationality have not obviated racial hierarchies and privileges within the Cuban community. The exile/exceptionalism framework pays no attention to these racial hierarchies, and obscures inter-community injustices and differential experiences that ensure that Afro-Cubans do not neatly fit the Cuban success story. Racism has divisive, paralyzing, and inequitable consequences that Afro-Cubans negotiate within U.S. Cuban communities.

From the late 1880s, Ybor City, Florida, known today as Tampa, was a multicultural enclave consisting of Spaniards, Cubans, Italians, Chinese, Jews, and African Americans that developed as a thriving cigar industry and an important site of Cuban labor activism and political activity for the Cuban independence movement. Many early narratives about Ybor City posit that black and white Cubans were treated and saw each other as equals, due to their significant interactions and common cultural backgrounds. These narratives suggest that an idyllic camaraderie existed between white and black Cubans given their similarities in language and culture, as well as their shared employment and resi-
dence. Black and white Cubans, they suggest, “coexisted in racial harmony and friendship (Pizzo 1985, 145)” and “racial prejudice never existed” among them (Muñoz 1958, 128). The social etiquette within Cuban discourses of nationality continued to gloss over matters of race, ignoring its reality and relevance.

However, relations between white Cubans and Afro-Cubans during this period were far from cordial. Afro-Cubans were not equal to their white counterparts in Ybor City. Because they were black, they suffered the harsh reality of the South and Jim Crow racism. The racial segregation of the South provided white Cubans a mechanism and justification to discriminate against their black countrymen and maintain their racist ideologies. As anthropologist Susan Greenbaum (1993) notes, there was little overt discrimination in the cigar industry as blacks participated heavily in both union and nationalist activities. However, Cuban racial attitudes and etiquette influenced tendencies to segregate and snub black Cuban dimensions over race and imagined racial slights which posed an ongoing threat to worker unity (Greenbaum 2002, 4).

Color lines were clearly drawn within the community. Black Cubans could not attend social functions or be hospitalized in Cuban and Spanish mutual aid societies (Iglesias 1985, 168) and most socializing occurred in the segregated clubs (Greenbaum 2002, 9-10). They were not allowed to live in the same neighborhoods, nor send their children to white schools (Méndez 1994, 169). Afro-Cuban males were the most likely to be laid off because unions alienated black Cubans and isolated them from marginal benefits (Mirabal 2003, 18). Meanwhile, in 1899, white Cubans formed the mutual aid society El Círculo Cubano (The Cuban Circle). While the purpose of the organization was to “bind all Cuban residents of Tampa into a fraternal group to offer assistance and help the sick,” they clearly differentiated ethnicity from race, making a point to restrict Afro-Cuban membership. The expulsion of black members from El Círculo further reinforced the existence of a color line among Cuban immigrants. Furthermore, although color was an ambiguous marker, some Cubans were deemed too dark for Círculo Cubano, yet they would not associate themselves with Afro-Cubans due to the stigma of blackness (Mirabal 2003, 121).

As Nancy Mirabal notes, “a nation may rise above race in the oratory of patriots, but words cannot evade the divisive and inequitable consequences of racism” (2003, 107). When Afro-Cubans finally formed their own mutual aid society in 1907, La Unión Martí-Maceo, many became bitter toward their white compatriots resulting in tense relations.
between the clubs. Accounts by Afro-Cubans indicate that white Cubans practiced active discrimination, reflected subtle racist attitudes in their interactions, and gained certain obvious advantages from the exclusion of blacks. As a resident recalled, “There was no such thing as Cuban integration. And then the [white] Cubans being that they were in a country where they had [legal] discrimination, they started discriminating against the black [too]” (Mirabal 2003, 108).

Although black and white Cubans belonged to the same national immigrant community, they were not treated equally, nor regarded as a single community. No matter how strong their sense of Cuban identity and culture was, in the eyes of larger Tampa and white Cubans, Afro-Cubans were seen in racial contexts. They were cut off from their own ethnic community, not only by laws that prohibited integration, but also by continuing racist social attitudes and customs (Greenbaum 2002). Race was extremely relevant in the lives of Afro-Cubans in Ybor City. Their skin stood in the way of their community being identified as Cuban. They continued to be faced with an imposition of race that did not take into consideration their immigrant status or ethnic identity (Mormino and Pozzetta 1987, 79). Afro-Cubans suffered active discrimination from both mainstream society as well as from their white Cuban counterparts.

Narratives from other geographic locales in different time periods also disclose similar racist tendencies among white Cubans toward Afro-Cubans. Mirabal’s work on New York in the 1920s-1930s shows that despite the lack of formal policies of segregation or black codes, Afro-Cuban migrants employed in the garment industry after the cigar industry began to falter, lived in black neighborhoods, frequented racially segregated clubs, and generally followed the racial protocol of the period (2003, 20). Accounts from the period provide another example of how race delineated, distinguished, and divided the Cuban community.

The testimonio of an Afro-Cuban woman, Melba Alvarado, exemplifies how being black determined what type of Cuban club she would become involved in, people she would interact and work with, and inevitably the community she came from (Mirabal 2003, 21). Alvarado’s account calls attention to how racial separation was not dictated by formal institutional policies, but rather by everyday practices. She states, “When they were of color, they were of color. It didn’t matter what race you were. This being the case, Black Cubans interacted with Black Americans. They couldn’t be with the whites. There have always been their differences between the white and black Cubans (Mirabal 2003, 22).”
According to Alvarado, everyday practices, customs, and interactions were infused by racial politics. For example, she recounts an incident in which a once integrated annual celebration of *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, the patron saint of Cuba, soon became organized around race. The recently emigrated white Cubans began to have their own celebratory masses apart from Afro-Cubans (Mirabal 2003, 22). As Mirabal notes, the exclusion of Afro-Cubans from a distinctly Cuban cultural and religious event that articulates racial and cultural meaning, forced a rethinking of what constituted “community.” Her description of New York in the 1930s further reveals the multiple and complex workings of race among Cubans, the negotiation of blackness, the privileging of whiteness, and the changing meaning of Cubanness in the United States (2003, 22-23).

Another study on recently arrived Cubans in Chicago in 1969 also reveals the everyday racist attitudes, prejudices, and concerns of white Cuban émigrés. While the majority of respondents in Fox’s (1979) study asserted that there never had been any racial discrimination in Cuba before the revolution, they also expressed that in those days the black had stayed “in his place,” and blacks were kept separate from whites, and excluded from certain social activities and recreational centers. Interviewees revealed their assumptions of black racial inferiority with comments such as: “The black and white should be in his true place separate and apart in all social and educational activities,” or “where there are blacks there is uproar...because the black is a thief, he’s *vicioso* (addicted to vices), uh he is a very poor worker, everything bad, he’s got some of everything” (Fox 1979, 65-66). Fox points out that the émigrés believed that there was no economic or racial discrimination against blacks in Cuba, and that their disenfranchised status was a result of their racial inferiority (i.e., blacks did not have good jobs because they were not qualified for them). The interviews also revealed that informants considered it uncouth even to mention racial differences. Fox’s investigation reiterates that white Cubans transplanted their racist attitudes and prejudices from the island to the United States.

I will now turn to a contemporary parallel to demonstrate the continued salience of race within U.S. Cuban communities. I utilize excerpts from a 2003 interview with Carlos Rodríguez, an Afro-Cuban residing in Chicago to highlight the ways in which race and ethnicity can be harshly negotiated and provide examples in which race takes precedence over Cuban national identity. At the time of interview, Carlos was a forty-seven year old Afro-Cuban who had been born in Cuba and came
to the United States in the early 1960s at the age of seven, part of the Golden exile cohort. Upon arrival in Chicago, his family settled in the south side of the city, today the Little Village, but at the time an Italian neighborhood. Since his childhood, Carlos remembers how he and his brothers dealt with ethnic and racial conflict on a daily basis. He was badly received by white society, especially in his all white school where he would often get beaten up. He recounts:

We used to get our asses kicked every day... we used to have bats behind our doors, so when my brother would be let out, so I would run since I was small. Both my parents were working, so I would run home, grab the bats, and run back to school, but by that time my brothers were being picked up off the floor being put in a paddy wagon, a police van, and taken to the police station.

While temporally and geographically far from the southern Jim Crow segregation of Ybor City in the 1900s, as Afro-Cubans, Carlos and his brothers still suffered from racial violence growing up in Chicago. Perhaps an experience uncharacteristic of the “warm welcome” that his “Golden Exile” counterparts received, Carlos faced the prospect of physical violence everyday in school.

Carlos also recalls the distance and racism he felt at the hands of white Cubans. He believes there always has been a discrepancy between white and black Cubans. For example, he never had Cuban friends. Neither he nor his brothers ever dated Cuban women. While there were some attempts he notes, “The Cuban families wouldn’t have us, any of us, date their daughters because in the Cuban community you never marry down.” Carlos discusses how white Cubans pushed away black Cubans socially. He explains their rationale:

Yeah sure they [white Cubans] did [push us away]..., because you wouldn’t invite me to your house if you lived in a white neighborhood... if you bring a Black friend over, cuz then the neighbors would say: “she was okay but now she’s bringing Black people over, we gotta keep an eye on her”... they [white Cubans] used to tell me the same thing, “oh, you’re okay, but people like you are f*cked up!... but why are you allowing me?... no, because I know you, I know you’re not bad people... but just because they are colored you can’t say they’re bad?! ... but most of them for the most part are bad.”

On several other occasions, Carlos expressed frustration about his lack of acceptance by white Cubans. For example, during a trip to Miami, he
caught on that other Cubans would not talk to him in Spanish. At McDonald’s, when he ordered in Spanish to a Cuban employee, he responded to him in English, refusing to speak to him in Spanish. Carlos left frustrated and questioned why they would not speak to him in Spanish, and ultimately interpreted the act as an effort to not recognize him as part of the Cuban community. Carlos’ experiences with white Cubans draw clear parallels with Ybor City. Despite a shared social or work space and a common heritage, white Cubans clearly drew lines of distinction between themselves and black Cubans. Whether it was not being able to date a white Cuban woman, tokenization, or not speaking Spanish at McDonald’s, Carlos confronted these less overt subtle prejudices and discrimination from white Cubans. The social etiquette of racial slights and snubs Carlos was subjected to, reflect the continuity of damaging racist attitudes among white Cubans. Carlos’ interactions with white Cubans reveal that race still plays a major factor in defining a “Cuban community.” Despite a shared culture, history, and language, Carlos’ skin color stood in the way of being identified as Cuban.

Carlos also observed racism even within his own mixed race Cuban family.

In our families because of mixed culture we have the white family member and the black family member…the black family member always got screwed and the white family member within the same family structure, same father and mother, el canito (light hair) always had the best clothes the privileges and the negrito… they always paid less attention to him, he got the worst education, sort of slighted…there existed this discrimination…the black ones [Cubans] they’re not accepted.

Carlos expresses confusion and resentment at how he was treated in his own family and his own culture. Like other Cubans he was expected to uphold notions of blanqueamiento (whitening) and to “marry up” to “adelantar la raza” (advance the race). He comments:

My mom used to always tell me recoge la bamba…sort of pick up your mouth because African Americans tend to sometimes leave their mouths open and then their bottom lip tends to hang…walking around with your mouth open…(he acts it out)…recoge la bamba, párate el cepillo en ese pelo…para tener pelo bueno, (close your mouth, pick up your lower hanging lip, pass a brush through that hair…so you can have “good hair”). What the fuck is pelo bueno?…you tell me, I can do anything with my hair…but it’s that psyche, that mentality so much
Ingrained brainwashing that Afro-Cubans also profess and perpetuate, that embeddedness of discrimination...of saying you gotta look a certain way, no te cases con ese negro, cástate con esa mulata (don’t marry that black, marry that mulata); [here] los mulatos are white. There’s a certain type of stereotypical image of what a Cuban is or should look like, and you always tend to upgrade yourself, not downgrade yourself.

In the intimate space of familial reflections, Carlos also deals with the pressure of racist attitudes. Within his own family, racial ideologies of black inferiority and biological racial differences are entrenched. Even amidst the context of familial love, damaging conceptions of blacks are still present. Yet despite his resentment and frustration with blanqueamiento and pigmentocracy within the Cuban community and his own family, Carlos admits to giving in to these ideologies himself commenting, “That’s why I married a light skinned African American woman who looks like she’s a Latina.” Carlos’ response exhibits, as Nadine Fernández (1996) notes, how race relations move from abstract interactions between groups into the most intimate relations.

Carlos’ narrative, as well as the examples mentioned, show that Cubans inherit a racist imaginary from both Latin and Anglo America, and these dynamics play themselves out within the Cuban community and even our own families. From Ybor City in the 1900s, to New York City in the 1920s and 30s, to contemporary Chicago, Cubans were neither treated alike nor regarded as part of the same community by society at large, nor did they treat each other as equals. Afro-Cubans faced the constant imposition of race that did not take into account their ethnic identities. Race has and continues to be extremely salient in the lives of Afro-Cubans, playing a significant role in their differential treatment from their white compatriots. Therefore, not only does the exile/exceptionalism framework not apply to Afro-Cubans in these cases, but it was actually the exclusion of blacks from the Cuban community that allowed white Cubans to gain certain advantages and social mobility. In this sense, the exile/exceptionalism model was predicated upon the discrimination against Afro-Cubans.

Afro-Cuban and Inter-Latina(o) Relations

Frances Aparicio (2000) notes that very little attention has been paid to the ways Latinas(os) group themselves across national boundaries within the United States. I will continue using Carlos’ narrative to explore his negotiation of racial and ethnic identity in relation to other
Latinas(os), and explore how power differentials of “Cuban success” emerge in Chicago’s local spaces of inter-Latina(o) relations. Chicago has been recognized as a space where Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have had to strategically negotiate their Latina(o) identities (Rúa 2001; Zayas-Ramos 2003; DeGenova 2003; Padilla 1985). As Mérida Rúa notes (2001), Chicago exemplifies how diverse Latina(o) groups create an existence together in a U.S. urban context. Carlos’ narrative highlights the effect of his rejection from the Cuban community, as well as moments of discord and affinity with other Latinas(os).

Carlos expressed frustration and resentment about how he was treated and refused membership into the Cuban community. His race and its ensuing marginalization provided him with an introspective lens with which to criticize the Cuban community itself. He comments,

They were more racist/bigots than the white Americans in this country. That’s how come there isn’t a Cuban neighborhood in Chicago. They don’t want to identify with the Latino communities in the U.S. They don’t want to be a minority, Hispanic, or be equated with Mexican or Puerto Ricans on that scale…they want to be Americans…they’ve assimilated into the white culture, they don’t want to be anything other than that…and they can pass… You think that in the million Latino march in D.C.…there wasn’t one Cuban, everyone was there except the Cuban community. They’re not up to that!

Carlos acknowledges the implications of Cuban exceptionalism for the construction of latinidad (Latinoness), as well as for identity politics, and movements seeking social justice. As Silvio Torres-Saillant (2002) recognizes, Latinas(os) in general, and, I would argue, Cubans especially, are hesitant and less assertive of their alterity vis-à-vis whiteness. Not only is this politically debilitating, but also it allows intra-Latina(o) injustice to persist and does not address or combat the white supremacist legacies of both the United States and Latin America.

In this example, Cuban exceptionalism rejects Carlos because of his blackness and distances white Cubans from other Latinas(os). But precisely because it does not apply to Carlos, it foregrounds his awareness of, and connections between himself and other Latinas(os) in Chicago, particularly Mexican and Puerto Rican. Thus while race was a point of rupture within the Cuban community, it also served as a mechanism to build affinity with other groups. For example, Carlos notes that when his family moved into a Puerto Rican area, he felt they were more accepting of him. He states:
I look like them, I acted like them, I talked a little like them, my Cuban accent wasn’t real strong...so I learned Puerto Rican...I’ve been mostly raised around Puerto Rican communities...because of that diaspora, black Puerto Ricans...I felt very comfortable. I saw that Puerto Ricans also had a lot of African...so I know Puerto Rican like the back of my hand, I’m probably a lot more Puerto Rican than most Puerto Ricans.

In this example race enabled a sense of comfort and belonging with Puerto Ricans for Carlos that he was denied with other Cubans because of race. In this instance racial identity took precedence over individual nationalities, as well as a pan-Latina(o) identity. For Carlos, race mediated his sense of belonging with the Puerto Rican community. In this context, he negotiated his racial and ethnic identity. Through ambiguous racialized social practices, he identified and “passed” as Puerto Rican as a strategy to conceal his true ethnic background, and to “fit in.”

Yet as Rúa (2001) notes, we need to theorize *latinidad* from lived experiences and its everyday constructions, not just search for *latinidad* in consensus, but also consider its tensions. In this light, while Carlos was able to insert himself into particular spaces and claim multiplicity, he was not always comfortable with it. For example, later he attests to how his experiences within the Puerto Rican community were not without their tensions. According to Carlos, the Puerto Ricans were also racist toward him in their own way.

They’d call to me “oye negrito,” “San Martín de Porres,” and I’m like, ‘what are you talking about? San Martín was a black saint in Puerto Rico. You know curly hair, dark complexion.’ And they’d call me that. And I’d say, ‘don’t call me nigger, I’ll kick your ass!’

Thus it seems that while race allowed for a sense of affinity with Puerto Ricans for Carlos, it did not cease to be problematic for him. Being affiliated or associated with blacks could be both celebratory and antagonistic. As Rúa (2001) reminds us, the way people negotiate nationalist tendencies and racial identities within inter-Latina(o) spaces is never played out evenly. In addition, ironically, while Carlos clung to race to create an affinity with Puerto Ricans, he simultaneously grasps onto the ethnic paradigm of Cuban exceptionalism to posit himself above the Mexicans and Puerto Ricans he interacted with. In fact he almost justifies why Cubans should not associate with Puerto Ricans. For example, in his description of Puerto Ricans he states:
In the early 1970s a Cuban neighborhood existed in Chicago, but they moved further north. They didn’t want to be next to the Puerto Ricans. The Puerto Ricans were kind of ignorant. They had an opportunity that we Cubans didn’t have. They were citizens. They could barely speak Spanish, but they could barely speak English. They didn’t take advantage of all the educational opportunities…they were very short wick.

His following portrayal of Mexicans is not much more positive: At the least the Mexican was very consistent and they, you know, were docile in the sense of ‘mande.’ They’d look down at you, they don’t look into your eyes, they’re very respectful…more tolerable…Mexicans are always in front of a statue of Christ talking about the Aztecs. The Cuban assimilated in a more appropriate way and therefore, como se hace asimilado en una manera más apropiada, han tenido más avances económicos que los otros pueblos latinoamericanos (since they have assimilated in a more appropriate manner, they have had better economic advancement than other Latin Americans)…..

While Puerto Ricans and Mexicans remain among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups within the U.S. Latino population, Carlos does not acknowledge the legacy and continued implications of their historic and contemporary relationship to colonialism. Rather, for Carlos, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are inferior to a certain extent because of their culture. Carlos exhibits a typical “culture of poverty” stance of cultural determinism. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans either “choose” not to succeed or cannot move forward because their culture holds them back. Not only does he equate “success” with assimilation, but he argues that Cubans are more suitable for such success. Carlos makes sure to differentiate Cubans from other Latinas(os) and situate them as an exception to other groups. Not only does he believe that Cubans advance in more “appropriate” ways, but they had it worse because they were not citizens like Puerto Ricans.

Carlos reaffirms the dominant framework that Cubans, who he regards as ethnically superior or exceptional, pulled themselves up from their bootstraps, and unlike other minorities are successful because of their determinism and disciplined work ethic. As usual, the enormous amount of U.S. federal aid that Cubans received in relation to their “success” remains unmentioned.11

In line with Félix Padilla’s (1985) study of Puerto Rican-Mexican relations in Chicago, as an Afro-Cuban, Carlos collaborated and bond-
ed with Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, developing a sense of appreciation for them. However, this did not preclude conflicts, cliques, tensions, and contradictions from emerging. Carlos’ narrative helps to illuminate the complexity of the Cuban exceptionalism model. Although his life is far from the proclaimed “Cuban success story,” and although Cuban exceptionalism does not apply to him, he still seeks to grasp on to the perceived privilege that “Cubanness” carries. One must wonder if in emphasizing his Cubanness, Carlos seeks to neutralize his blackness and/or access white Cuban privilege. If so, then considering Cuban/Afro-Cuban relations with other Latinas(os), requires us to consider power and privilege, and who benefits from such intergroup conflict.

Afro-Cubans and African Americans

When Latinas(os) surpassed African-Americans as the largest minority group in the United States, it was portrayed in the media as a potential resource race war, as “they”—the Latinas(os)—were now going to take away “our” African American resources because of sheer numbers. Being Latina(o) or Hispanic has become accepted as something separate and distinct and in opposition to “blackness.” Thus it raises a question about the place of Afro-Latinas(os) in these resource wars. This section will explore how Afro-Cubans negotiate their blackness with their latinidad by discussing the various ways that race, ethnicity, and culture surface amongst Afro-Cuban and African American relationships by drawing on the work of Susan Greenbaum, John Egerton, and Evelio Grillo.

If we return to examples from Ybor City in the early 1900s, we see that although Afro-Cubans were situated as black within the black/white segregated Jim Crow south, there was also a self-distancing from blackness. While Afro-Cubans faced discrimination from both Anglo society and their white Cuban colleagues, they did not necessarily find an affinity with other blacks. In fact, when Afro-Cubans were kicked out of the white Cuban mutual aid society and formed their own mutual aid society, La Unión Martí-Maceo, they explicitly denied membership to African Americans.

As Susan Greenbaum (2002) notes, the Ybor City hierarchy and distribution of power was based not only on color. The common denominator of blackness did not imply a shared status. Rather, ethnicity mitigated the racial status of Afro-Cubans in such a way that they had access to privileges, protections, and resources not available to African Americans. Thus there was little incentive for Afro-Cubans to form affiliations or alliances with African Americans. Many whites at the time...
explained that Afro-Cubans were always “a little better” than African Americans. Afro-Cubans were seen as industrious law-abiding immigrants who also happened to be black, thus implying that there was something essentially inferior about African American culture. The alleged virtues of Afro-Cubans became fodder for demagogic pronouncements about African Americans (Greenbaum 2002). Thus although African Americans and Afro-Cubans were forced to live together and bore the brunt of Jim Crow laws, a muted racism still existed. Given these issues of power, privilege, and status, Afro-Cubans resisted assimilating into the African American community. In his memoir *Black Cuban, Black American*, Evelio Grillo (2000) recounts how he was socialized to differentiate and distance himself from African Americans. He recalls, “we were always taught that although we were black we weren’t supposed to do the things the black Americans do, because we were better than black Americans” (224).

Family and gender issues also played a significant role in maintaining this distance. Afro-Cubans disparaged the family values of African American parental control and responsibility. Their “lack” of male authority over their women was the essential conservative explanation of black poverty drawn sharply against the patriarchal traditions of Cubans. Race and gender became inextricably intertwined as gendered respectability generated an aura of superiority that secured Afro-Cuban distinctions from African Americans and entitled them to special treatment (Greenbaum 2002). These racial and cultural power struggles often played themselves out on the bodies of women of color in both communities.

Egerton’s study (1969) also sheds further light on Afro-Cuban perceptions and distancing of/from African Americans. Afro-Cuban displeasure at the overt expression of African American protest movements is heard openly and frequently throughout his study. For example, an Afro-Cuban commented, “the Negros waited too late to resist discrimination here, in Cuba we never let it get started, all this demonstrating is too late” (21). Egerton noted that the Cubans looked upon the American Negro as a people flirting with communism. Such perceptions insinuate that Cubans were hard working and earned their position in society, while African Americans deserved their low status because they were lazy and wanted benefits “handed to them.” An African American in Egerton’s study expressed frustration about the inability of the Cubans to identify or empathize with their struggle for equality. He notes,

The Cubans who have seen the result of inequities and discontent in their own country still can’t see the need to relieve the discontent in the black community here. They say we want too much too soon, but we’ve been waiting 350 years and they just
got here. They’re hypnotized to believe they’re freedom fighters and in time they could use those arms against the blacks (Egerton 1979, 18).

These examples demonstrate that blackness does not necessarily create an affinity between Afro-Cuban and African American communities, nor signify an equal status for these groups. Thus it seems that Cuban exceptionalism works against African Americans as a form of ideological cultural capital, or unconscious values and preferences that mark distinctions and subtle credentials that anoint privilege and rationalize hierarchies. Similar to Carlos’ views about Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, Cuban exceptionalism is arrayed against African Americans in Greenbaum’s and Egerton’s examples in Ybor City and Miami. Cuban exceptionalism again functions as a racialized aura of superiority that attributes virtues to Cubans and condemns other minority groups, serving as a pernicious explanation for why these groups remain among the most disadvantaged in U.S. society. Still, we cannot assume that if Afro-Cubans did not invoke Cuban exceptionalism and instead, they had identified with, or sought a racial affinity with African Americans, hoping to acculturate with them, that the relationship between Afro-Cubans and African Americans would have taken place without tensions.

Cultural Differences and Authentic Blackness

The historical specificity and different experiences of blackness are crucial to understanding the positioning of black immigrants and émigrés in the United States and the negotiations they must endure. Just because Afro-Cubans and African Americans are black does not imply that they share the same culture, or accept each other’s cultural differences.

In More Than Black Susan (2002), Greenbaum reminds us that it is essential to keep in mind how blacks lack the freedom to choose the way larger society configures their ethnic/cultural affiliation. We must question our assumptions of blackness and interrogate the implications of ignoring the cultural diversity of the black diaspora and blacks within U.S. society, where racial solidarity provides the capacity to mobilize along racial lines. Nonetheless, the space of identity politics can be limited, if it only provides for a prescribed black identity that erases or subsumes cultural/ethnic differences. The vast diversity of the black population and of their experiences is not sufficiently acknowledged. While other “racial” groups such as Asians, Latinas(os), or Native Americans may often be questioned about their country of origin,
nationality, or tribal affiliation in their day-to-day life, most blacks are rarely questioned for such information. Ethnicity becomes conflated with race under the rubric of blackness. As Greenbaum (2002) poignantly notes, the distinction between race and ethnicity is not simply drawn. There is often the presumption and/or assumption that blacks and African Americans have no culture (10).

Recognizing this diversity is important in the consideration of Afro-Cuban and African American relations. Just because they were all black, does not mean they all “get along.” In fact, differences in language and culture have been formidable impediments to the full integration of black Cubans with black Americans. We should not assume that African Americans welcomed any integration with Afro-Cubans. Again their ethnicity mitigated their blackness in this realm as well. Returning to Carlos’ narrative, African Americans did not welcome him with open arms into their community. In fact, Carlos found them antagonistic because they questioned the legitimacy of his blackness. Carlos angrily recalled his lack of acceptance by African Americans during his college years. He states,

I used to listen to soul music when I thought I was African American, but the African Americans didn’t accept me either. I’m black, how black do you have to be to be African American? I said the only difference between you and me is that in that big ass boat that they were bringing [us] in the Atlantic, they dropped my ass in the Caribbean and dropped your ass off in the mainland. That’s the only god damn difference….

Carlos’ narrative regarding the “authenticity” of one’s blackness resonates with Cruz-Jansen’s experiences. In her article “Latinegras,” Cruz-Jansen (2001) discusses how she was obliged to prove her blackness to African Americans. Despite her attempts at wearing an afro hairstyle and African clothing, she was constantly the victim of jokes by African Americans. At other moments, she was told that she was ashamed of her African heritage because she tried to conceal it by speaking Spanish. She writes, “they insisted that blacks were foremost a single people, regardless of where they found themselves or what languages they spoke.”

Issues of authentic blackness and the lack of Afro-Cuban acceptance also surface in the memoirs of Evelio Grillo (2000). As a child Grillo recalled being labeled “tallywops” by African American youth, a combination of two terms of derision applied to Italians, “tally” and “wop.” He explains that his blackness was always put into question. For exam-
ple, on one occasion he blurted out “you Negros!” in laughter within a group of other black youth. He recalls,

> Coming from anyone else in the group this would have been understood as the charade played out almost daily by black people imitating white people. Yet a student went to the teacher as indication that I really did not consider myself black, raising the question regarding my identity as a black. I was an easy target for I had the permanent status of a newcomer and an outsider (Grillo 66-67).

Grillo’s memoirs echo the experience of Cruz-Jansen, always having to convince African Americans of his racial legitimacy throughout his childhood. Grillo often felt uneasy amongst his black friends. He felt isolated whenever he was confronted with some aspect of black American life that was commonplace for his black American friends but new and different to him. He often felt embarrassed, awkward, and alone. While in general his classmates regarded him as “just another black boy,” there was always still uneasiness about him. Comments from an African American attorney in Egerton’s study (1979) further demonstrate the hesitancy and lack of trust towards Afro-Cubans. He states, “the Cubans are seen by most Negros as just another white group in our midst, a coalition wouldn’t be useful…coalitions are for people who have the same grievances” (20).

These examples demonstrate that a commonality in blackness did not necessarily immediately foster positive relations or collaborations between Afro-Cubans and African Americans. Power, privilege, and status distinctions were real between the two groups and cultural differences were by no means superficial. Yet such differences and tensions did not preclude alliances or integrations, either.

### Building Racial Solidarity

Despite the many cultural and experiential differences between Afro-Cubans and African Americans, these groups still have much in common. Both communities are descendants of contrasting, but linked systems of slavery. Even with the distinctive circumstances and abstract dualities of race in the Americas, the outcome of racism has been the same in both the United States and Cuba, conferring disadvantage on those who were dark-skinned (Greenbaum 2002, 14). In the early 1900s, Jim Crow laws in Ybor City failed to recognize degrees of blackness. Whether they wanted to or not, Afro-Cubans were forced to live with African Americans, attend the same schools, and shared limited spaces of leisure.
As Greenbaum (2002) highlights, Afro-Cubans shared not only a space with African Americans, but also a common indignity. Eventually external forces like migration and urban renewal affected the identity construction and practices of Afro-Cubans, and helped promote relationships with African Americans. With migration after the Great Depression, the Afro-Cuban community was losing its capacity to provide for their own and Ybor City slowly transitioned into a black neighborhood. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Movement created a bond in joint opposition to conditions that oppressed both groups. Afro-Cubans came to discover and embrace the commonalities that linked them with African Americans. In addition, growing post-World War II disparities based on color and the influx of the Golden Exiles further pushed Afro-Cubans in closer relationship with African Americans. La Unión Martí-Maceo eventually changed its insularity and permitted African American membership.

Moreover, Grillo’s memoir posits that solidarity with African Americans was crucial to Afro-Cuban success in U.S. society. Grillo proclaims, “our choices became clear: to swim in black American society or drown in Latin ghettos never to be an integral part of American life…the two options were joining black American society with its rich roots deep in this country or have no American roots at all” (2000, 12). Grillo attributes his consciousness, inspiration, and black pride to the guidance and teachings of African American teachers in elementary and high school. He reflects that it was his black teachers that led him to develop a comfort with a black identity. He notes,

Schools could not teach us black culture, could not help us understand our past as children of slaves, to handle the rage we harbored in the face of the inequities, the humiliations we faced on a daily basis in a totally segregated society. They could not help us to feel black….I built dependent relationships with black Americans, especially teachers. Our identity as black Americans developed strongly. I had no photographs in my home of historically significant Cuban blacks. My heart belonged to Nat Turner, Fred Douglas, etc….for all our sharing of language, culture, and religion with white Cubans, we black Cubans were black. When the school bell rang we joined the streams of children headed toward the ‘colored’ schools. School resolved all of my confusion about my color, my Spanish tongue, and my culture. I was a black boy. That’s what was important (2000, 39-44).

Furthermore, Grillo would never have had an opportunity to attend college without the support and sponsorship of the African American
middle class. It was Mr. Martin, a local African American in Ybor City that saw Evelio’s potential and took him up north. Even his travels to Xavier College with Mr. Martin exhibited how African Americans felt a close connection to Evelio and were invested in his success. Kitchen staff along the trip wanted to meet him, congratulate, and encourage him. They would tell him “what you are about to do is important for all of us, go up there and show them what a southern colored boy can do (Grillo 2000, 57).” With the support of the African American community he was able to be proud of his blackness and, in turn, the African American community was proud of him. These examples demonstrate moments in which his ethnicity as a Cuban did not interfere with his affinity for African Americans or vice versa. It was the African American community that finally made Grillo comfortable with his racial identity. In detailing his college years in Washington, DC, he tellingly states,

For the first time in my life I did not have to walk the Black Cuban-Black American cultural tightrope…I was considered simply a black boy. I had the freedom to move about the ghetto and enjoy the marvels that blacks could enjoy, most of all I was free to be unambiguously black (2000, 61).

Conclusion

Throughout the interview with Carlos, he expressed to me that he never felt comfortable fitting in. Everyone always kept asking him “Where are you from?” and his answer never seemed good enough. He explained that, “the Black Cubans they tend to be a little lost…I used to get my ass kicked cuz I was black, and I was discriminated by blacks cuz I was Latino, and because I was black and Latino, I was discriminated by white America.” Carlos’ narrative is a story of constant identity struggle, exclusion, isolation, and displacement; a struggle to find a rightful sense of self and belonging. While his experience perhaps spawns more questions than answers to issues surrounding the negotiation and shifting of the situational identity of Afro-Latinas(os), we can conclude that the construction of Carlos’ identity, like many others, is fragmented and reconstructed through very painful exclusionary and conflictive elements through which it was constituted and lived.

It is clear that no single broad statement can encompass or describe the relationship between Afro-Cubans and their white Cuban, African American, and Latina(o) counterparts. The examples of Afro-Cubans mentioned in this essay demonstrate the ongoing complex dynamics, processes, and transformations that Afro-Latina(o) identity formation
entails. Race is central to the U.S. Latina(o) experience and problematizes the model of Cuban exceptionalism. The black-white paradigm of race relations in U.S. society often renders the racialized experiences of Latinas(os) invisible. Their indeterminate racial identity and the conflation of their race with ethnicity obscure the ways in which Latinas(os) are not exempt from discrimination, and the oppression perpetuated by the dominant white hierarchy.

At the same time, one must also acknowledge the way in which the indeterminate racial status of Latinas(os) has contributed to the maintenance of racial hierarchies. The myth or model of Cuban exceptionalism is merely one example of the complicity (either acknowledged or concealed) of Latina(os) in the maintenance of white supremacy and the advantages white Latinas(os) can in turn acquire from it. As Torres-Saillant notes, given the ways in which Latinas(os) compare and/or subscribe to hierarchical differential systems of racism, many of them accept too quickly the view that the Spanish-speaking world has a less racialized and more humane understanding of difference among human beings (2002, 441). Latinas(os) hardly conceal their pride at the thought that their culture is less racist than that of the Anglos (442).

However, while this language of unity becomes an instrument of survival for an oppressed group, it should not preclude the analysis of how these identity discourses obscure intra-Latina(o) injustices. The multiracial composition and discourse of Latinas(os) has not obviated racial hierarchies, nor has their panethnic/panracial rhetoric brought attention to them. Thus we must pay attention to how such claims conceal tensions, inequities, and injustices, while also legitimizing the absence of black Latina(o) representations and silencing any open recognition or discussion of race/racism (Torres-Saillant 2002). Latinismo, as Félix Padilla (1985) notes, is an identity that can be activated and deactivated at will. Thus it is important to tease out the contradictions and asymmetries of power in these contexts of identity formation.

I have begun to explore the power differentials of race/racism between Afro-Cubans and the Cuban community, and the larger Latina(o) and African American communities to situate how the notion of race and the process of racialization are both ongoing and changing, and manifest in varied and often unexpected ways within U.S. society. Much work remains to be done in situating, documenting, and analyzing the experiences of Afro-Latinas(os). Such investigations and knowledge might reduce the sense that they have to choose between their race and their ethnicity, and perhaps provide them the space to be both black and
Latina(o) without walking the cultural/racial tightrope; a space where one can find accomplished individuals like Sammy Davis Jr., Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, and Carmelo Anthony as inspirational for Latinas(os), Afro-Latinos, and African Americans alike.

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Notes

1 While not a representative study, I situate Carlos’s narrative in the tradition of testimonio and counterstorytelling as a medium to engage in analysis of negotiations of race, ethnicity, and power in the U.S. As critical race theorists highlight, counter-storytelling is utilized as a tool of resistance, empowerment, and self-representation, a mode of “talking back” to power. (Delgado 1989). In its pioneering Latin American and Caribbean form, the testimonio was animated by a will for political change through consciousness-raising. The testimonio serves as a “a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 2). In this light I invoke Carlos’s narrative as a form of “truth telling from personal knowledge.” In addition, this attention to Cubans in Chicago also expands the regional orientation predominant in Latino studies, while also broadening our understanding of the Chicago Latino community beyond its Puerto Rican and Mexican members.

2 The characteristics of the Mariel cohort drastically differed from earlier waves. They were about ten years younger, averaged thirty years of age, were fifteen to forty percent black and mulatto, seventy percent male, and predominantly from working class backgrounds (García 1996).

3 The 1980 Refugee Act relegated “neutral” ideological criteria for admitting refugees. This act severely limited the number of Cubans allowed to legally enter the country and required them to apply in the same manner as non-refugees for entrance on an individual basis. Labeled with the ambiguous term of “entrant” and not “clearly entitled” to be in the United States, the Mariel refugees were deemed “excludable aliens” under a fiction created by the Supreme Court. In turn they were not legally in the United States and therefore not protected under the due process clause of the constitution (García 1996, 68-75).

4 Few works have considered Cubans who have relocated to areas other than Florida and New Jersey. See Prohías’s survey about Cubans in Indianapolis, Carballo about Cubans in New Orleans, Portes about Cubans in Milwaukee, Prieto about Cubans in Union City, and Duany for Cubans in Puerto Rico.

5 Two out of every three Cuban exiles currently live in Florida (González-Pando 1998, 121).
Zielina (2000) goes on to further recognize that Blackness is an ideology which has been measured through feelings of morale with respect to Africa. The awakening of ethnic consciousness is conveyed in solidarity with other groups that have been subjected to prejudice and discrimination. This solidarity is under erasure in Cuba. The ideology of mestizaje has been so successfully internalized and systematically professed that blackness as an entity, a race, and a heritage is not viewed to exist independently. Thus, Afro-Cubans are not generally socialized into a self-image other than Cubanness (Zielina 2000).

The name of the organization, La Unión Martí-Maceo, incorporates the values of racial equality and social justice that were espoused by both José Martí and Antonio Maceo in their pursuit of Cuban independence in the late nineteenth century. Martí, a white Cuban, poet and essayist who founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party in New York, advocated for “one race, the Cuban race” in his efforts to unite Cubans in the war for independence. Antonio Maceo, a mulatto, was a general in the Cuban Liberation Army, celebrated for bravery in battle, but also known for his ideals and ethical principles. Both Martí and Maceo were martyrs of the independence struggle. They were both killed in battle and embodied the dual ancestry of Cuba and ideals of racial unity, social justice, and equality. La Unión Martí-Maceo also highlights the contradictions and tensions created by the expulsion of black members from El Círculo Cubano, an organization who did not uphold Martí’s and Maceo’s vision of racial unification under a nationalist banner.

The name has been changed to maintain anonymity. Carlos was interviewed by the author, a light skinned Latina of Cuban/Dominican descent. Carlos and the interviewee had become acquainted over several years via their mutual interest in issues related to Latina(o) college students. Given that a personal connection was already well established when the author asked Carlos to share his testimonio, and Carlos’s frankness in sharing his views, the author does not believe pigmentocracy affected the interview.

The concept of blanqueamiento refers to ethnic, cultural, and racial “whitening” or bleaching. It is an ideology as well as a social practice, and is a major form of racism in Latin America. Blanqueamiento involves a system of beliefs that places socioeconomic advancement and success in relation to racial “development.” “Whitening” is viewed as an adaptive strategy, physically or culturally, and a precursor to upward mobility.

While the term negrito could be understood as a term of endearment in Puerto Rican culture, Carlos interprets the term and the way in which it was directed toward him in a racist and hostile way.

Due to this study’s limitations, the perceptions of Cubans by other groups were not included. Duany (1992) describes how Cubans in Puerto Rico are portrayed as aggressive and without scruples in their struggle for their own survival, and as unconditional supporters of the United States, cynically colonialist, and fierce enemies of Puerto Rico’s national sovereignty. He notes that they are also criticized because of their popular association with
the white elite on the island. Further research is needed to explore how non-
Cuban groups, Latinas(os) and African Americans perceive Cubans and Cuban
exceptionalism.

12 Grillo writes, “When they wanted to tease us, our black American schoolmates
called us ‘tallywops.’ That phrase, a combination of two slang terms applied to
Italians rang out in the schoolyard whenever black Cuban children were being
addressed derisively. Our schoolmates found it difficult to distinguish between
Spanish and Italian languages, so since we sounded Italian to their ears, they
attached the misnomers to us (39).”

13 When Latinos(as) were proclaimed the largest minority in the U.S. in 2003,
the media predicted “struggles of power and influence” and “political one-
upmanship” between Latino and African American populations. Some articles
(Nasser 2003; de Vries 2003) emphasized the ways in which these communi-
ties were pitted against each other, calling attention to frictions and tensions
that arose from disputes over jobs, political power, schools, and lifestyle to bat-
tles over funding school programs in English as a second language.

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Blackness?: Latinos, Race and Earnings in the USA.” Applied Economics


GARCIA/SITUATING RACE, NAVIGATING BELONGINGS: MAPPING AFRO-CUBAN IDENTITIES IN THE UNITED STATES


Latino Migration from New York City to Albany, NY: Motivations, Socioeconomic Outcomes, and Incorporation Challenges

Christine E. Bose and Lina Rincón

This study builds on the internal migration literature, and especially on the rapidly growing number of studies about the waves of migrants settling in new destinations throughout the United States (Durand et al. 2005; Kritz and Nogle 1994; Kritz and Gurak 2001; Suro and Singer 2002). Most of the prior studies of Latino internal migration have focused on the larger, macro-structural factors pushing or pulling people to migrate. In this study, we instead focus on individual migration motivations and how they enhance explanations solely based on socioeconomic outcomes, as well as our understanding of the challenges to and opportunities for immigrant integration.

Our goal is to compare how self-reported migration motivations relate to or diverge from the comparative socioeconomic outcomes for Latinos(as), based on twenty semi-structured interviews conducted with Latinos(as) who, within the last ten years, have migrated from New York City to the relatively newer destination of Albany, NY. We show that Latinos(as) migrating to the Albany area are not only driven by economic opportunities, such as available jobs or possibilities for upward mobility, but also by other factors directly linked to their life course expectations. These expectations are dictated by values and beliefs shaped by sociocultural configurations that are meaningful among Latinos(as), such as raising children or reconnecting with friends and family, as well as by gender and national origin.

More specifically, we see this research as a contribution to understanding migration motivations from a cultural perspective, highlighting what Cornelius (1992) has labeled a culture of migration or “a set of interrelated perceptions, attitudinal orientations, socialization processes and social structure, including transnational social networks, growing out of the international migratory experience, which constantly encourage, validate and facilitate participation in this movement” (92). As studies on migrants’ experiences have shown, individual and household level decision making processes shape the ways in which migrants’ integration
to new locations might occur. Hence, assessing migrants’ expectations and experiences for the New York state case becomes relevant not only because New York City is one of the main traditional international migrant gateways, but also because race dynamics within New York state contrast with some of the other new destinations such as Kennett Square, Pennsylvania or the Shenandoah Valley in Harrisburg, Virginia (Lattanzi 2005; Zarrugh 2008).

Before discussing our findings, we briefly explore the relevant literature on internal migration and new destinations for Latinos(as) in the United States, compare the socioeconomic context of the specific sending (NYC) and receiving (Albany) cities we researched, and describe our methodology and sample. Then we present our findings on pre-migration motivations and the decision-making process—organized into the three main themes that our data revealed—moving for job opportunities, lifestyle change, and/or connecting with friends and family—and on post-migration reactions that shed light on settlement experiences and socioeconomic outcomes.

Literature on Internal Migration and New Destinations

This study builds upon and extends the literatures on U.S. internal migration and on new migrant destinations. First, our work adds depth to the understanding of internal migration motivations, especially as they relate to life course expectations for Latinos(as) in New York state. While Padilla (1998) has linked life course expectations to migrant motivations in a study of internal migration among multiple Latino groups in California, our project also contrasts migrant expectations with likely socioeconomic outcomes. This comparison allows us to highlight the challenges and opportunities that can occur for migrant integration into new geographic settings.

In addition, our research contributes to the literature on new destinations by considering the push and pull factors that make new migrant destinations more attractive, leading to resettlement in these areas. We are able to explore shifts in the culture of migration by asking Latinos(as) to compare their pre-migration motivations with their post-migration experiences, which is an innovative contribution to some of the new destinations literature that generally mostly focuses on settlement experiences, and not necessarily on individual level motivations to engage in internal migration (Lattanzi Shutika 2005). Despite the fact that literature on internal migration has stressed the macro level and demographic
patterns of internal mobility, developments in this area are still few and often overshadowed by extended focus on international migration. This is especially true for New York state because New York City is one of the main international migrant gateways to the United States (McHugh 1989; Sassen 1988). Nonetheless, most research to date on internal and intrastate migration is found on the Northeast region and especially on New York state.

Some authors (McHugh 1989) argue that because new international migrants are not familiar with the United States, and their language skills are not good, they tend to “concentrate in ethnic enclaves for social and economic support” (438), which does suggest the possible importance of social networks for the consolidation of similar enclaves in new destinations. Others (Borjas, et al. 1992) argue that people are more likely to migrate internally when their skills do not match their current location; and, thus, in order to maximize income, migrants must reside in a location that rewards their skills.

As Kritz and Nogle (2001) have stressed, internal migration is not only driven by increased job opportunities or by a social network phenomenon, but also by a history of migration. For example, there are push and pull factors that can be explained from a macro level perspective (Sassen 1988). These include immigration policies, such as the U.S. Bracero Program or the Immigrant Reform and Control Act (IRCA) that have encouraged or discouraged international migration as well as subsequent internal migratory movements, or major economic shifts, such as the industrialization of the Sunbelt and the decline of industry in the Midwest and Northeast during the 1970s that encouraged an increase in undocumented migration (Jones 1995).

Other factors that count as pull factors in the internal migration literature are more focused on the micro-level social and emotional ties that are associated with particular groups including Latinos(as). This body of literature claims that a common pull factor is the existence of social networks that bring co-ethnics or co-nationals to a particular new destination or settlement area, and that social networks might emerge in cities where there is a growing labor demand for a particular job or industry. In several studies on internal migration and the life course, it has been argued that family networks are powerful factors that can influence many young Latino families and heads of households to reunite and relocate, not always resulting in significant upward mobility, when measured in terms of higher wages (Padilla 1998; Lattanzi Shutika 2005; Zarrugh 2008).
Perceived pull factors, such as acquiring a more affordable lifestyle, better education opportunities, and quieter or safer places to live in the receiving locations, also count when deciding to migrate internally. Among Latinos(as), internal migration is often seen as a way to start a family in a fresh new environment where children can get a more personalized education, be raised in a quieter and safer environment, and in cities where living conditions are more favorable and affordable (Camayd-Freixas 2006; Padilla 1998).

Kritz and Nogle (1994) argue that New York state residents are 32 percent more likely to migrate within the state compared to other states in the country. This argument is supported by evidence drawn from U.S. Census data in the 1980s and 1990s. They also note that increased internal migration is more prominent among the foreign-born. Since these migrants already have a migration history and experience, they are more willing “to leave social capital behind and seek opportunity elsewhere” (1994, 511).

Despite the fact that New York City is a major gateway for Latino international migrants, this city has experienced an out-migration of the Latino population to other parts of the state and the country as argued by Acosta-Belén and Santiago (2006). They point out that there was a negative growth rate (-1.3 percent) of the Puerto Rican population in New York City between 1990 and 2000. Even though Latinos(as) are moving out of New York City, this metropolitan area still has the largest population of every major Latino nationality in the state (Bose 2006).

Suro and Singer (2002) argue that during the 1990-2000 period labor demand transferred to suburban areas and other areas on the fringes of metropolitan areas, especially for central cities such as New York, Washington DC, and Atlanta, among others. This phenomenon can be explained by a rising demand in low-skilled jobs, that Latinos(as) have traditionally filled, but also by other factors such as a more affordable lifestyle or increasing family networks that are pulling them to migrate to nearby locations (Padilla 1998).

The pattern that drives metropolitan to urban migration is explained by a growing demand in the construction, service, government, managerial, production, and technology jobs in these new areas. For instance, Bose (2006) argues that for New York state, in cities such as Albany and Rochester, managerial and government jobs are currently attracting educated and highly skilled Latinos(as), especially Cubans, and Central and South Americans.

While low skilled jobs do not appear to be in high demand in these New York state cities, this trend appears true for internal migration in Massa-
chusetts and the broader New England area. Of course, internal migration in Massachusetts is an older phenomenon than in New York state, dating back to the 1970s and 1980s when Puerto Ricans and Dominicans started migrating to the Lowell and Lawrence areas to work in textile and shoe companies (Borges-Méndez 1993). Internal migration history like that of Lowell and Lawrence, as well as in other cities in Massachusetts, speak of emerging and consolidated ethnic enclaves or immigrant communities that, in the long run, serve as factors which, along with labor demand, attract other Latinos(as) to migrate not only within the state but between states. Glaser (2006) argues that consolidated networks served as incentives for Dominicans to migrate to Waterbury, MA where they not only reunited with their families and helped an ethnic enclave grow, but they began to consolidate ethnic food businesses, sometimes compensating for lower wages in other service or production jobs in the geographic area.

As Padilla (1998) shows, when Latinos(as) engage in internal migration, motivated by joining an ethnic enclave or immigrant community, their chances of making better wages or moving up on the social ladder often are very low, and they do not significantly improve their economic status in contrast to others who stayed behind in the previous city. Therefore, we believe that a culture of migration helps to understand both migration motivations and their consequences.

In our research, we demonstrate how migration motivations and decision making processes for Latinos(as), who internally migrate in the state of New York, rely heavily on life course expectations that occur as part of a culture of migration in which they are immersed, as demonstrated by Padilla (1998) and Lattanzi Shutika (2005). Furthermore, following Kritz and Nogle (1994) we have chosen to undertake this study among Latinos(as) based on the assumption that they have a history of migration that makes them more likely to engage in internal migration given either their previous international migration or that of their family members. Finally, following Bose’s (2006) examination of the socioeconomic status of Latinos(as) in upstate New York, we focused on data about gender and national origin differences in migration motivations as they compared with actual socioeconomic outcomes.

**Migration Context: Characteristics of New York City and Albany**

For this project, we interviewed Latinos(as) who chose to migrate from New York City to Albany, NY sometime in the last one to ten years
(between 1998 and 2008). While our study focuses on the motivations these migrants cite for their decision, it is important to understand the actual economic and social context of both cities. Such data suggest in which location Latinos(as) might best achieve their goals, and whether or not the rationale for their relocation was grounded in fact. Therefore, Table 1 compares New York City and Albany on economic and social indicators in the year 2000, the time at which our interviewees began to move from a large “global city” with well-institutionalized Latino communities to a smaller state capital, whose population at that time was about 98,000 people. Due to the smaller numbers of the Albany Latino population (ranging from 961 Dominicans to 13,306 Puerto Ricans in 2000) and the relative lack of Hispanic cultural and social activities (when compared to New York City), our interviewees sometimes referred to Albany as “Smallbany.”

Albany became a new Latino destination over thirty years ago, but migration from New York City has been increasing, given the proximity between the two places and Albany’s role as the political center of the state. Albany attracts highly educated individuals to work in state government as well as those with less education to work in the service industry. Thus, Latinos(as) might migrate to Albany either to find higher-paying jobs or to reduce living costs (Bose 2006).

Table 1 reveals that actual economic improvements are most likely for Central and South Americans who move to Albany, because their percentage of professionals and managers and household median incomes are likely to be higher “upstate” than in New York City. Like non-Hispanic whites, the percentage of Central and South Americans living below the poverty level also is lower in Albany. Dominican households are likely to have higher incomes in Albany, but Puerto Rican households seem to fare slightly better in New York City on all four of the economic indicators in Table 1.

On the other hand, this table shows lifestyle advantages to living in Albany. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Central and South Americans all are much more likely to be college graduates when they live in Albany, in contrast to non-Hispanic whites whose BA degree rates are higher in New York City. This effect may be due to affirmative action hiring by the state over a long period of time. But, in addition, the percentage of owner-occupied homes and home ownership, generally were higher in Albany than in New York City (37.6 versus 30.2 percent). Indeed, the rates of owner occupied homes reached 51.7 percent, if one also includes all of Albany County (not shown). However, in spite of
Table 1: Economic and Lifestyle Indicators for NYC and Albany, 2000

**ECONOMIC INDICATORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>New York City</th>
<th>Albany, NY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Managerial-Professional Jobs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Central American</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Central American</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$27,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>$32,000</td>
<td>$48,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Central American</td>
<td>$42,200</td>
<td>$66,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
<td>$56,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Below Poverty Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Central American</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LIFESTYLE INDICATORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>New York City</th>
<th>Albany, NY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population Size in Each City</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>839,073</td>
<td>13,306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>424,847</td>
<td>961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Central American</td>
<td>379,196</td>
<td>2,080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% College Graduates/BA Holders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Central American</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Owner Occupied Homes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(City)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime Rate Per 100,000 People</td>
<td>3,722.6</td>
<td>7,235.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Sources:** Socioeconomic data is drawn from the 2000 U.S. Census (Source: Integrated Public Use Sample—data series or IPUMS. Crime data is drawn from the FBI Uniform Crime Data (Source: Table 8, http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/00cius.htm ).
its image as a quiet and educated place, Albany’s crime rate per 100,000 persons was almost twice as high as that for New York City.

Therefore this data suggest that Albany’s available housing and jobs for college-educated Latinos(as) might be significant pull factors; while absolute income levels might be less important in drawing most Latino groups, except Central and South Americans, to Albany. To learn what Latino internal migrants’ actual motivations were, we conducted the study described in the next section.

**Methodology**

**Sampling and Data Collection**

This research is based on respondent narratives about their migration motivations and experiences when settling in a new destination. The data were collected between May 2008 and May 2009 using semi-structured in-depth interviews of Latinos(as) who had migrated within New York state to Albany within the past ten years. We excluded college and graduate students since we wanted to locate people who had migrated to Albany to settle into jobs or with their families, and we assumed that students were not necessarily there to stay. However, we included participants who initially relocated to Albany to pursue their education and later chose to stay in Albany. In this article, we focus on the twenty migrants who originally had lived in New York City. We used quota sampling and a snowball recruitment technique. All participants were 18 years of age or older.

Each participant was asked questions about their migratory experiences, the decision-making process, and their current experience in Albany, as well as demographic information on past migration experiences, education, occupation, income, nationality, or migrant generation.

Additionally, we used 2000 Census data to compare major motivational themes, revealed by analyses of the interviews, with current socioeconomic outcomes and trends for Latinos(as) in Albany, NY. We make descriptive comparisons that reveal divergences between people’s initial motivations and the actual indicators of socioeconomic status mentioned above, such as educational attainment, income, or crime rates, among others.

**Data Analysis**

In analyzing the interviews we used a grounded theory approach in which we located common labels such as trends, categories, patterns, and relationships between them. First, data are classified through simple words that evoke common mental images, scenes, experiences, emotions,
or sensations; then, these words lead to creating categories that encompass more repetitive phenomena; finally, by putting and contrasting all categories together a set of concepts is developed. This final procedure ends up being the particular theoretical frame “that perfectly fits a set of data” (Glaser and Strauss 1975, 115).

We are aware that we should take our interviewees’ statements with a grain of salt, given that they are explaining their perceived motivations for having migrated within the last ten years. Thus, our findings regarding the migration decision-making process are perceptions, for which we utilize C. Wright Mills’ concept of “vocabularies of motive” to distinguish between perceived and actual reasons for migration (Mills 1940). The “vocabularies of motive” approach indicates that “motives are words” and therefore there is not necessarily a cause and effect relationship between motive and the action of migration (Mills 1940, 905). All the quotations used in the findings, below, to illustrate these motivations are reported using pseudonyms for the respondents.

**Description of Sample**

Our sample is composed of ten women and ten men, most of whom are Puerto Rican (45 percent), Dominican (30 percent), or South and Central American (20 percent). The remaining person identifies herself as Hispanic/Latina. Most of our sample (40 percent) are recent migrants, having arrived in Albany from New York City within the past one to three years, while 25 percent migrated within the last four to six years, and 35 percent within the last seven to ten years.

Most of the participants (45 percent) are between the ages of 36 and 45, with 30 percent being younger (between 26 and 35 years old) and even fewer (20 percent) who are 46 or older. Only 5 percent of the sample participants are between the ages of 18 and 25. The participants report a wide educational range, with 40 percent having a high school degree or less (8), 35 percent having completed some college (7), and 25 percent holding graduate degrees (5).

Moreover, 30 percent of our interviewees mentioned holding a professional job—project managers, financial jobs, professors, upper level secretaries, etc.—and most of the remaining people work in the service industry (i.e., cook, waiter, hair stylist, etc.).

Of those reporting an individual income, 50 percent (n=9) said they earned between $10,000 and $30,000, 22 percent (n=4) earned between $30,000 and $50,000, and 28 percent (n=5) earned $50,000 or more per year.
FINDINGS

Migrant Decision Making Processes: Motivations and Economics

Our grounded theory analysis of the qualitative interview data reveal three different themes that were the main bases for the participants’ decision-making process or served as their key motivation for internal migration. These were seeking: a) job opportunities and professional development, b) lifestyle changes, and c) connecting or reconnecting with family or friends.

All of these motivations are related to others found in research using a life course expectations approach, such as in Padilla’s (1998) study of U.S. Latino internal migration where respondents identified their material, emotional and social reasons for migrating and in Robinson et al.’s (2000) study of housing expectations and late midlife moves among whites.

While these vocabularies and expectations unveil some of the cultural expectations found among many Latinos(as), these motivations are not shared across each gender, education and income (social class), or national origin group. These differences are revealed in Table 2, which indicates the distribution of each of these demographic characteristics across the three migration motivation themes. First, men and women differ in interesting ways. Half of the women migrated to Albany for job opportunities, perhaps because of the professional opportunities for Latinas in New York state civil service. But fully half of the men moved for a lifestyle change—something more stereotypically associated with women.

Although the smallest group in our sample, Central and South Americans were most likely to move for jobs (75 percent), and this choice accurately reflects the successes of this group in Albany in 2000. Half of the Dominicans in our sample also migrated for jobs, accurately reflecting data on the higher 2000 incomes that Dominicans earned in Albany, as compared to New York City. However, the majority of Puerto Ricans (44 percent), who generally economically fare better in New York City than in Albany, not surprisingly moved for lifestyle changes rather than for job purposes. Thus the different motivational patterns found for varying national origin groups “make sense” in terms of the demographic data.

The patterns by education also are interesting: 50 percent of those with some college education or an associate’s degree, 44 percent of those
with a master’s or doctorate, but only 33 percent of those with high school or less migrate for jobs or a profession. Thus it appears that the non-professional Latinos(as) in our sample are more geared towards building a family through lifestyle changes and connecting with friends or relatives, while Latino professionals and those with some college are more openly career-oriented, which makes sense in a middle-class city like Albany. This same dynamic is reflected in the income patterns. About 67 percent of those earning less than $30,000 migrated for a lifestyle change, while 75 percent of those earning $30,000 to $50,000 and 60 percent of those earning more than $50,000 migrated for jobs and professional opportunities.

This table confirms that the particular life course realms (work, family, or lifestyle) in which Latinos(as) will do better after they migrate from New York City to Albany, vary contingent on their socioeconomic status, nationality, and gender. In the following subsections, we elaborate on how the interviewees specifically describe their motivations.

Table 2: Migrant Motivations and Associated Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex (%)</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Job Opportunities/Professional Development</th>
<th>Lifestyle Change</th>
<th>Re-connect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (Mean)</td>
<td></td>
<td>39.66</td>
<td>44.85</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than High School</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>$10,000 - $20,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 - $30,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000 - $40,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 - $50,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 or more</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Background/Nationality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and South American</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Job Opportunities / Professional Development

While we had expected that job opportunities would be one among several reasons for Latinos(as)’ internal migration in New York state, it actually was the primary motivation for 45 percent of the respondents (or nine of 20 people). The interviewees discussed these economic considerations as based either on perceived or actual job opportunities.

Perceived opportunities usually were developed through social networks in which our respondents were influenced by other internal migrants who already had created small networks of friends or of potential employers in the destination city. Carmen describes her husband’s long-distance search for a job in Albany this way:

El hermano le estaba buscando trabajo y entonces lo consiguió; fue como a los seis meses. Pero él en eso, yo me quedaba aquí, y él se iba a Nueva York a trabajar, y los dos días que él tenía libre pues venía para acá. Pero estuvimos, sí, en ese transcurso por seis meses hasta que él consiguió uno en Albany Nursing County. Yo no sé si has oído, que hay muchos viejitos, y ahí tienen que atenderlos, y cosas así. Pero tiene ahí tres años de estar trabajando (Carmen, 34, non-professional).

[His brother (her husband’s) was trying to find a job for him and he finally found one after six months. In the meantime, I would stay here in Albany, while he worked in New York City. We were like that for six months until he finally found a job at Albany County Nursing. I don’t know if you have heard of it, but there are a lot of elderly people there and you have to take care of them. But he has been working there three years].

Often, respondents reported that they would move to Albany and spend the first months without being able to find a job or relying on their friends’ networks. Eventually, they would find a low paying job and they would opt to find an additional one in order to make ends meet.

In contrast, participants holding associate or graduate degrees migrated to Albany after being offered a concrete job opportunity that, for all of those in the professional group, implied a promotion or a better salary. One person in this group came to Albany to pursue her graduate degree and settled in Albany promptly after completing it. Another describes his job offer as follows:

I came to Albany (some number of) years ago to work as an assistant professor. The reason to move to Albany was to take that job. More generally it was a decision to pursue an eco-
nomics opportunity, employment, after the process of getting a Ph.D. in (my field)... There was one Puerto Rican that was employed at the university who I knew from Puerto Rico. I came into contact with him at a professional conference and so... the possibility of coming to Albany was a result of his academic connection and his interest in helping bring more Latinos and Puerto Ricans to the university (George, 56, professional).

A third interviewee was able to transfer her work:

Como era posible, como trabajo para el gobierno, porque ésta es la capital, so, hice traslado y me vine para acá y entonces, como que Dios me puso ahí (Aleida, 42, professional).

[Because it was possible, since I work for the government and this is the capital (of the state), I was able to transfer over to another position and so, it is like God brought me here].

In these cases, the migration decision-making processes were based on existing professional networks or contacts, and were unrelated to friendships or reuniting with family. Instead, they were a step forward in their professional careers.

**Lifestyle Change**

Interviewees who came to Albany primarily for a lifestyle change tended to be older (averaging 45 years old) than those with other motivations, and often chose to migrate after a life course change. In addition, most people (71 percent, or 5 out of 7) with this primary motivation were men. Overwhelmingly, those participants who were not professionals reported coming to Albany seeking a place to raise a family or a place to settle and bring other family members. Albany was referred as “a quieter place to live”:

I like [Albany] a whole better than the city: it is a lot quieter, there is not a lot of violence like there is in the Bronx. I just want a better place to raise my children (Christian, 56, griller).

I didn’t want to raise my kids in the Bronx because of all the violence, all the drugs and everything, I just wanted to get away from that and I have a sister who owns a few restaurants here so she asked if I could come and manage her restaurants, so I thought that could be a good opportunity for me to leave the Bronx and come up here (Marcos, 42, non-professional).
Moreover, the fact that Albany is so close to New York, where the rest of their families and friends are settled, became an advantage when choosing it and not any other city in the more western part of the state. Albany’s affordability also was an advantage for those whose motivation was a lifestyle change.

Well because the truth is that I think there is more of a community here. Not just from Latinos but mainstream, you know. I was born and raised down there… I feel that there is a community that works and falls. And in Manhattan, things are extremely expensive. We have a lot of people coming in and out of the city. The majority of people who live in New York City are not from New York City. And, I just think, spending time with familiar people and places is what makes the community go. I actually, I wanted to be part of a community like Albany because I knew that people are not quite ready to get up and go like they were in Manhattan. Especially, when the prices are very cheap, including the homes; in the city of Albany they are very reasonable (John, 32, professional).

These quotes illustrate that a lifestyle change was not merely motivated by the desire to live in a smaller place, but by the participants’ perception that they were going to find better values in Albany than those found in New York City. They expected that there would be less violence in Albany, less influence of drugs on their children, and that they would have more ability to inculcate their kids with the “right values,” like not hanging out in the streets late at night, encouraging girls to dress “properly” and, in general, being a place where all children would be a good influence on each other. Ironically, the data in Table 1 show that the overall crime rate per 100,000 people is higher in Albany than in New York City as a whole.

In contrast, for Latino professionals, migration usually was arranged in the sending city and the main reason for the move was establishing oneself in a new job. Albany was a choice for their careers and it had a less direct relationship to any personal or emotional values. While also connected with life course expectations, this group is more driven by economic ties than by any lifestyle or family ties.

Reconnecting

Reconnecting was a primary motivation for only four participants, three of them women. All participants in the non-professional group
mentioned having some sort of connection with a friend or family member they briefly met in the city or someone with whom their ties were stronger (i.e. long term friendship, family reuniting, etc). Most women with this motivation came to Albany to reunite with their families, and especially with their daughters who settled in Albany after getting married, or after having sought a change within the past ten years. Men who mentioned this motivation came advised by friends they made in New York City, who had recently moved to Albany, or through friends who had other friends that were already in the area. Especially for men, it was easier to find an initial job due to their network connections.

Me mudé con mi hermana porque ella tenía niños y me mudé con ella para cuidarle los niños a ella. Para que ella trabajara y ella echara para adelante (Fabio, 45, non-profesional).

[I moved in with my sister because she had her kids, so I moved in with her to take care of her kids so she could work and move forward].

It is worth mentioning that some participants perceived Albany as an ideal city to start up independent businesses, such as restaurants or hair salons. In fact two of these migrants who were not professionals started successful businesses in the area and had kept them running for at least two or more years. Both mentioned being helped by family as well as bank loans to carry out their enterprises. These businesses primarily served the Latino and African American communities in Albany.

En mi país yo tuve negocios y al llegar aqui dije...tengo que probar aquí a ver que tal. Empecé. Vine a trabajar primero y luego vi la facilidad que tenía de yo poner uno (negocio), comencé y aquí estoy” (Cándida, 38, non-professional, business owner).

[In my country I owned different businesses and when I got here I said: I have to give it a try to see what happens. I started. I first came to work up here and I saw that it was easy to start a business so I did and here I am].

Thus, the women who moved in order to reconnect with people generally did so because of strong family ties, but the men who moved to Albany did so because of weaker friendship ties. While family ties occasionally helped obtain jobs, friendship ties tended to be more effective for employment.
Settlement Experiences and Outcomes: Isolation and Racism

After participants spoke about what they remembered of their migration motivations, we asked them how they assessed their current experience in Albany, after having lived there for some months or years. We wanted to capture whether their settlement processes had occurred smoothly, as well as if the goals they sought through migration had been achieved.

We were interested in assessing their lived processes while getting a grasp of how a culture of migration develops among Latinos(as). We believe this is especially important in order to expand the narrower definitions of “incorporation and settlement” usually found in U.S. immigration literature. Such studies tend to focus on economic and political indicators of assimilation like homeownership, political participation, or spatial assimilation (i.e. immigrants moving to white or wealthy neighborhoods) (Bean and Stevens 2003), but they often fail to account for the historical lived processes and the chain of events that migration entails. These historical lived processes “operate within the embodied person and within the networks of family and kinship relationships” (Wade 1992).

For all the participants in our sample, their settlement process contrasted with their initial expectations, because they experienced perceived racism in the workplace and in the Albany community overall. Many of them attributed any difficulties in gaining economic mobility to racism in the workplace. As a consequence, participants perceived either too much competition in reaching upper level job positions or a corporate preference to give these positions to the native born or native speakers. Unexpectedly, having more than one job appeared necessary to make ends meet or, as they put it: “to live a comfortable life in which you can have internet and cable TV for the family.”

Regarding the perceived racism issue, one of our participants said:

I believe that the whites are treated better, you know, both classes. Depending, you know, depending where you go. But it is like that. It’s hard to explain because it is something that I feel, you know. When I have to deal with that situation. It is not that everyone is like that, but there has (sic) been a lot of times where I’ve worked with people that you know, that they feel a certain type of way, you know, because you are not from here or they think you are something else (Harold, 41, griller).
Often, when interviewees declared their feelings of isolation and solitude, it made them wish for a stronger sense of community. The Latinos(as) who had migrated from New York City talked about missing the vibrancy of the Latino community back there: the restaurants, the people, and the social gatherings. Another group of Latinos(as), who came to Albany from other New York state cities (and who we interviewed, but are not part of the sample discussed here), mentioned a difficulty in relating to their co-workers and the surrounding community. They hoped for a more cultural and cosmopolitan atmosphere, like they had experienced in their home countries or in the cities they lived in before coming to Albany.

Lo que no me gusta de Albany es que yo encuentro mucho racismo en Albany. Lo veo tu sabes mucho en el trabajo, lo veo tu sabes cuando…en different places. Que no es, is not equal. Eso es lo único que yo puedo decir que no me gusta de Albany. No porque soy puertorriqueña, pero como…ellos muchos creen que yo soy morena, pero no lo soy. Tu sabes, soy puertorriqueña. Cuando yo, tu sabes, cuando los americanos me preguntan a mí que soy yo, tu sabes, yo digo que soy hispana. Yo veo que cambian. Pero cuando creen que soy morena, me dan, you know like an attitude…y me tratan diferente hasta que they get to know me (Gracia, 37, non-professional).

[What I don’t like about Albany is that I find a lot of racism. I see that a lot in my workplace, I see it in different places. You can tell that it is not equal (treatment). It is not because I am Puerto Rican but it is like they believe that I am black, but I am not. You know, I am Puerto Rican. When I, you know, when Americans ask me what I am, they give me…like an attitude, you know, they treat me differently until they get to know me].

Conclusions: International Migration from Cultural and Socioeconomic Standpoints

This exploratory study suggests that the main force motivating Latinos(as) to migrate from New York City to Albany is the need for change. Latinos(as) decide to migrate internally within New York state for several primary reasons—finding better jobs, improving their lifestyle, or reconnecting with friends and family members. More than individual change to obtain a particular goal—at least among our non-
professional respondents—change has to do with the social goal of building a family in a controlled environment or reuniting with friends. However, for the professional group, change—as suggested by the literature—is driven by a search for economic and professional opportunities. In other words, there are varying “cultures of migration,” and these motivations do not always follow traditionally gendered patterns. Among our respondents, women were the most likely (50 percent) to migrate for jobs, while men were the most likely to migrate for lifestyle change (50 percent)—possibly because as a state capital, there are many public sector white collar government jobs that often attract (and hire) women.

Furthermore, it is plausible to argue, contrary to Kritz and Nogle’s (1994) thesis about internal migrants leaving their social capital behind, that Latinos(as) coming to the Albany area from within the state are also reuniting with their families and friends through a process facilitated by emerging social networks. For the non-professional group, for example, connections to these social networks in perception and in actuality might help these Latinos(as) have a jump-start once they arrive in Albany and assure survival while they continue feeding the networks that help them and eventually will help others. However, professional Latinos(as) might indeed leave social capital behind since their priorities and mindsets allow them to do so, but they often gain new work connections.

When our participants contrasted their current experience with what they thought it was going to be like when migrating to Albany, the picture did not seem as positive. All participants referred to what they perceived as racism—a problem that affected them because they had migrated to a place where migrant minorities are not as prevalent. In addition, all participants experienced a sense of isolation, even when they were first attracted by the support of family and friends’ networks; many had hoped for more close-knit communities or simply people and activities surrounding them to which they could relate. Racism was identified more as located in the workplace and connected with being harder to move up in the economic ladder, than with being able to integrate into the Albany community or achieve social upward mobility. Therefore, the majority of the Latinos(as) we interviewed said they were planning to stay in Albany, since they felt comfortable with the family and friends around them (at least for those who had social ties in the area). Indeed, Albany does have a relatively large Puerto Rican community that is an asset to those who migrate for lifestyle or family connections reasons. Furthermore, despite analyses on the restricted job opportunities for
unskilled Latinos(as) in the region (Bose 2006), they keep migrating internally seeking those perceived economic and social opportunities. Indeed, some groups, especially Central and South Americans do achieve higher levels of economic success in Albany, and Dominicans tend to achieve higher incomes.

Future studies could easily extend our research to interview more participants, but also to include other migrant and minority groups who present similar cultural inclinations and motivations for migration. This kind of cultural approach also could be used to consider whether there are differences or similarities in the way migrant minorities face their life course expectations and the way natives do. Thus, it is possible to broaden and provide more in-depth understandings of how a culture of migration might unfold for future migratory movements, as well as how cultural expectations shape related decision-making processes.

This study also opens up new questions in migration research, including whether the linkage between Albany and New York City is consolidating as a migratory path or, on the contrary, whether a circular migration phenomenon is taking place. Finally, future exploration would be useful on the nature of the family and friendship networks that consolidate internal migration. For example, Bagchi’s analysis (2001) of strong and weak ties suggests a need to compare decision-making processes among non-professionals and professionals, which is especially relevant because Albany is a center for government jobs that might be attracting professional Latinos(as).

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Chiqui Vicioso, Belkis Ramírez y Julia Álvarez o Julia de Burgos como texto e imagen

Efraín Barradas

A. “Hay [una grabadora en] un país en el mundo…”

Aunque las artes visuales latinoamericanas viven un momento de vigor y grandes logros, a los interesados en este campo cultural se nos hace muy difícil o casi imposible estar al tanto de los pasos que en él se van dando, de los problemas que en él encara y de las cimas que alcanzan los artistas plásticos de los países que no sean el nuestro o aquellos que visitamos con cierta frecuencia. Es que, contrario a la música y a la literatura, las expresiones artísticas plásticas no se pueden conocer con facilidad: obviamente un cuadro, una escultura, una instalación y hasta un dibujo o un grabado son mucho más difíciles de transportar que un libro o una grabación musical, y la reproducción de una obra de arte visual en muy pocos casos sustituye al original. Por supuesto, hay artistas nuestros que se conocen en todos los países de América Latina y en el resto del mundo. Hoy la omnipresente Frida Kahlo es el ejemplo mayor, pero a su nombre se pueden añadir los de un puñado de artistas, como el de su esposo, Diego Rivera, y el de Rufino Tamayo, el del uruguayo Joaquín Torres García o el del cubano Wifredo Lam o el del colombiano Fernando Botero, entre otros. Todos reconocemos esos nombres y los asociamos a imágenes de su obra porque esos artistas han sido aceptados y consagrados en las metrópolis culturales que aun construyen nuestros cánones culturales. Nueva York, París o Madrid les han dado su bendición y, por eso, son reconocidos más allá de las fronteras de sus respectivos países. Pero, a pesar del optimismo de Walter Benjamin sobre el impacto positivo de la reproducción mecánica de la obra de arte, es probable que un latinoamericano culto que no sea mexicano desconozca, por ejemplo, la importantísima obra de Francisco Toledo, quien ha logrado fusionar magistralmente primitivismo y surrealismo, o quien no sea argentino no sabrá quién es Marcia Schwartz, la pintora bonaerense que ha nacionalizado y acrillado los logros del expresionismo alemán, o quien no sea boricua desconocerá la obra de Francisco Rodón, probablemente el retratista más valioso de América Latina hoy, como lo prueban sus cuadros de Borges, Rulfo y Alicia Alonso, entre otros.
Conocer a profundidad el arte latinoamericano de hoy es tarea que no se puede alcanzar, como el conocimiento de nuestras letras o de nuestra música, desde la comodidad de una lejana butaca. Para conocer nuestras artes visuales hay que estar en contacto directo con ellas.

En los últimos años he tenido la suerte de conocer de cerca la obra de la artista dominicana Belkis Ramírez (Santo Domingo, 1957), una de las más importantes de su país en el momento, probablemente la grabadora más innovadora en toda la historia del arte dominicano y, sin dudas, una pionera en su país en el género de las instalaciones. Estos logros llevan a Amable López Meléndez a considerar que “[l]a obra y la trayectoria profesional de Belkis Ramírez se tornan definitivamente emblemáticas en el contexto de la realidad artística dominicana de las últimas dos décadas”. Creo que la importancia de esta artista para el arte dominicano y el caribeño, en general, trascienden los límites de dos décadas. Por ello, estudiosos como Veerle Poupeye han apuntado ya sus proyecciones en el arte caribeño y han confirmado que su posición en el canon dominicano está ya asegurada y avalada por su extensa e innovadora producción en varios medios, sobre todo en el del grabado en madera.

Belkis Ramírez se formó como diseñadora gráfica y arquitecta en su país. Más tarde continuó estudios de gráfica en la Universidad de San José de Costa Rica. Este dato es iluminador porque, aunque Ramírez ha cultivado varios medios, sus mayores logros los ha alcanzado en la xilografía, forma expresiva que, gracias a la importantísima labor del maestro Francisco Amighetti (1907-98), ha alcanzado un cultivo ejemplar en Costa Rica. Aunque creo que se puede hablar de una influencia de Amighetti en la obra de Ramírez, ése no es el tema que ahora interesa; eso sí, se puede señalar sin duda alguna que ambos son cultivadores de mérito del grabado en madera y que el contacto de Ramírez con la obra de este gran maestro costarricense de la gráfica latinoamericana que experimentó con la xilografía de manera única en el continente y con el arte costarricense, en general, marcaron la carrera de la artista dominicana.

La obra de Belkis Ramírez se distingue por un aparente y falso primitivismo que aguda y finamente cultiva. Sus imágenes, en muchos casos femeninas, son esquemáticas y recuerdan los dibujos del estadounidense Saul Steinberg porque casi siempre hay algo de caricaturesco en sus diseños. Las líneas duras que definen sus figuras, que no dejan de rememorar los dibujos infantiles, y, sobre todo, la reducción de su paleta al blanco y negro del grabado contrastado, a veces, por un rojo violento o algunos tonos de terracotas caracterizan su obra. El
color—excepto el rojo que en su obra adquiere un sentido simbólico—está casi totalmente ausente de sus piezas y esa escasez cromática complementa la sencillez formal. La obra también se distingue por su abierta crítica social. Ramírez ataca frontalmente los problemas de su país. Mucha de su obra denuncia los males del machismo, especialmente en cuanto éstos afectan a la mujer. La violencia doméstica, el racismo internalizado, la emigración económica forzada, problemas vistos todos desde la perspectiva femenina, son temas que frecuentemente aparecen en la obra de Ramírez. Pero, a pesar de su profunda seriedad y su sincero compromiso social, su obra muchas veces muestra un gran sentido del humor que se refleja en la construcción de las piezas y, sobre todo, en sus títulos que juegan con expresiones hechas o con refranes.

Antes de entrar en ese importante aspecto de su obra hay que apuntar otro rasgo esencial de su producción gráfica. Belkis Ramírez recicla objetos para crear instalaciones y piezas escultóricas. Ese proceso de reciclaje comienza con su propia obra ya que tras imprimir una xilografía Ramírez puede volver a emplear la plancha, el taco o la matriz. Ramírez crea, a veces con la imagen del grabado, a veces acompañada por la matriz sola o con otros objetos, instalaciones. Más tarde, en ocasiones sin haber pasado por el proceso de la creación de la instalación, la matriz se separa del grabado y se convierte, con algunas modificaciones, en escultura independiente. Matriz, grabado, matriz transformada, matriz como parte de una instalación, matriz como escultura independiente o separada de la instalación: éstas son las piezas del interesante proceso que muchas veces sigue la exploración estética de Ramírez. Es éste un proceso de reciclaje que encuadra perfectamente bien con su defensa ecologista del medio ambiente y su visión feminista de nuestra sociedad caribeña: sus matrices se transforman y, al así hacerlo, siguen produciendo otras obras, aunque no reproduciendo impresiones de grabados original, su primera función. Recordemos que tradicionalmente los artistas gráficos cancelan, mutilan o hasta destruyen sus planchas o matrices para que no se puedan imprimir más copias de los grabados después que han cerrado la tirada. Hoy, por ello, las planchas de cobre de Rembrandt o los tacos de madera de Lorenzo Homar, por ejemplo, son raras obras de arte únicas en sí mismas, y se aprecian y se exhiben como tales. Pero lo que Ramírez hace es reciclar y transformar la matriz misma para convertirla en obra de arte independiente de la obra gráfica de la cual es origen.

Otro aspecto importante de la obra de Ramírez es su relación directa con la palabra. Ya había apuntado cómo muchos de los títulos de sus piezas juegan con frases hechas y refranes populares. Pero este juego va

B. Julia de Burgos, la nuestra y la de todos

Pero la obra de Belkis Ramírez tiene otros estrechos vínculos con la palabra, específicamente con la literatura. Ramírez ha ilustrado la obra de cuatro escritoras antillanas y, al hacerlo, ha establecido una relación especial con ellas y con su obra, relación que, creo, sirve para entender tanto la producción de esas autoras como la de Ramírez misma. Estas—tres dominicanas y una boricua—son Ángela Hernández, Sherezada (Chiqui) Vicioso³, Julia Álvarez y Julia de Burgos. Para entender esta relación entre imagen y palabra en la obra de Ramírez—lo que los estudiosos todavía denominan como “écfrasis”, la palabra de origen griego y aun debatible ortografía en español—hay que apuntar un importante dato de la biografía de Ramírez: su estrecha amistad con la poeta, ensayista y activista social Chiqui Vicioso quien, durante sus años de estudio en los Estados Unidos, estableció fuertes lazos estéticos e intelectuales con la cultura puertorriqueña. Esos contactos se concretaban en su amistad con los poetas Clemente Soto Vélez y Víctor Fernández Fragosco. A través de ellos, como ella misma declara, Vicioso llegó a la obra de Julia de Burgos: “una poeta puertorriqueña a la que conocí en Nueva York, a través de Víctor Fragosco y Clemente Soto Vélez, cuyos poemas tuvieron de iniciarme en la fraternal tradición del Antillanismo” (101).⁴

Es obvio que Julia de Burgos ha sido una poeta que ha marcado profundamente a Vicioso. En ella aprendió lecciones centrales sobre
estética, feminismo y política, especialmente sobre la vieja tradición del Pan-antillanismo que tiene sus orígenes en Ramón Emeterio Betances. Burgos está presente en su obra; es una constante preocupación en la misma. Vicioso ha publicado textos de importancia para conocer la vida y la obra de la poetía mayor. Fue ella quien logró que el amante dominicano de Burgos, Juan Isidro Jiménez Grullón, hablara públicamente de su relación con ella. También logró que Juan Bosch salvara algunos de sus recuerdos de Burgos. Estas entrevistas y varios ensayos de Vicioso sobre Burgos han sido recogidos en *Julia de Burgos, la nuestra* (2004), texto que habla claramente, desde su título, de la afinidad y el reclamo que siente la escritora dominicana por la gran poeta boricua quien asume en su obra el rol de fuente de ideas estéticas y actitudes vitales.

Es a través de Chiqui Vicioso que Belkis Ramírez llega a Julia de Burgos. Ramírez ilustra varios textos de su amiga e incluye en ellos imágenes de la poeta puertorriqueña. Pero la pieza clave para entender la relevancia de esta poeta en Ramírez es una xilografía de gran formato titulada “El pensamiento de Julia”, ejecutada en 1991 y revelada en Puerto Rico al año siguiente durante un congreso internacional dedicado a la poetía donde participaron la artista misma, Bosch y Vicioso. Esta, para mí, es una pieza seminal y clave en la producción de Ramírez que sirve para entender toda su relación con la literatura, al menos desde el punto de vista de la “écfrasis”.

“El pensamiento de Julia” es una obra representativa del estilo más típico de Ramírez. De forma esquemática, hasta primitiva, la artista presenta la cara de la poeta de manera frontal y con las manos cruzadas bajo la barbilla. La imagen, obviamente, juega con una de las fotos más conocidas de Julia de Burgos donde la poeta adopta una pose parecida. Pero más que la cara lo que importa en la xilografía es el pelo que cubre de manera irreal más de la cuatro quintas partes del grabado. Éste aparece en el grabado lleno de pequeñas imágenes—escaleras, flores, estrellas, sombrillas y corazones, uno de ellos más grande que todas las demás imágenes—que hacen referencia a versos de Burgos. Más que la asociación directa de esas imágenes a la poesía de la puertorriqueña lo que importa es la figura de ésta como un ser que en su imaginación refleja y resume un cosmos. Hay que recalcar también que el título de la pieza saca a Julia de Burgos del ámbito de la pasión y el sueño, donde tradicionalmente se le coloca, y la asocia al del pensamiento, al mundo de lo racional o, al menos, al de la imaginación. Ramírez usa el pelo en la imagen de la poeta para establecer una especie de puente con la realidad, puente que es en sí la realidad misma o, mejor, es la
representación gráfica de la poesía de Burgos. Hay que apuntar también un pequeño dato revelador sobre esta pieza de Ramírez: la matriz de este grabado fue adquirida por la escritora dominicano-americana Julia Álvarez quien la conserva en la sala de la casa de la hacienda cafetalera que tiene en las montañas de la República Dominicana.\(^6\) El dato, como espero se vea, es revelador.

C. Una taza de un amargo cafecito utópico

De todos los textos ilustrados por Belkis Ramírez el que mayor difusión ha tenido es *A Cafecito Story/El cuento del cafecito* (2001) de Julia Álvarez.\(^7\) En esta breve narración, que parece estar dirigida a lectores jóvenes, Álvarez relata la historia de un estadounidense que, en unas vacaciones en la República Dominicana, descubre el mundo del campesino de ese país y se ingeniaba un plan para establecer una hacienda cafetalera cooperativa donde los campesinos progresen sin dañar el medio ambiente. La narración, a pesar de su intento de presentar una visión optimista y de gran corrección política, es un texto fallido donde domina una visión paternalista—los extranjeros que vienen a enseñar y a salvar a los nativos—y hasta postula una falsa utopía que se alcanza sin la lucha de clase. Trenton Hickman, quien hasta el momento ha sido quien más atención le ha prestado a este texto menor en la amplia producción de Álvarez, muy atinadamente apunta las graves fallas ideológicas del mismo cuando señala que éste “... reinscribes the U.S. expansionist Project of Manifest Destiny as a white Nebraskan farmer, filled with yearning to carve his own homestead out of the “frontier,” does so by seizing control of what Alvarez genders as “female” coffee and land as part of a new paternalism” (70). El cuento, según Hickman, cabe perfectamente bien dentro de una larga y peligrosa corriente que ha marcado la literatura caribeña: “…generations of literary texts that mark tropical exoticism with similar plumage” (74). Este crítico acertadamente apunta cómo las fallas ideológicas afectan la estructura y los logros estéticos del cuento que “veers toward the romantic and the exotic” (74). Pero Hickman no nota como el cuento cierra con un truco literario que parece ser del agrado de Álvarez—la narradora que narra el proceso de narración—ya que lo emplea también en otros textos suyos, particularmente en su más reciente novela, *Saving the World* (2006), donde la voz narrativa cuenta dos historias paralelas pero distantes en el tiempo: la expedición científica de principios del siglo XIX para introducir en Hispanoamérica la vacuna de la viruela y la lucha en un campo dominicano de hoy contra una clínica de sida.
Este pequeño libro, *A Cafecito Story/El cuento del cafecito*, también incluye un revelador ensayo del esposo de Álvarez, Bill Eichner, donde se revela su versión de la historia de su hacienda cafetalera en la República Dominicana y su compromiso y el de su esposa por ayudar a los campesinos y su medio ambiente. Hay que añadir un pequeño dato a primera vista sin importancia pero que bien visto resulta relevante para nosotros: Belkis Ramírez diseñó la bolsa donde se empaque el “Café Alta Gracia”, como se llama el que se produce en esta cooperativa. La participación de Ramírez, pues, en este libro va más allá del texto mismo y la coloca como colaboradora del proceso literario y de la actividad económica y social de Álvarez, según se manifiesta y se concreta en este pequeño libro y en la empresa más amplia que al mismo se asocia: la hacienda cafetalera, la producción de café para la venta y el intento de ayudar a un grupo de campesinos dominicanos.

Pero lo que nos interesa ahora son las ilustraciones de Ramírez que adornan el libro de Álvarez. Éstas rompen un tanto con el estilo típico de sus grabados ya que son menos primitivas y en vez de presentar realidades amargas desde una perspectiva irónica, como usualmente hace, ilustran una hermosa historia con imágenes un tanto idealizadas. Sólo hay que ver las figuras de los campesinos que ilustran el texto para probar este punto: poco tienen que ver estas imágenes con la realidad del campesino dominicano. En éstas no se destacan los rasgos físicos tradicionales del dominicano sino que se crea una imagen idealizada o esquemática que tiende a negar esa realidad. Hay que apuntar que la representación de los rasgos físicos del dominicano ha sido muy importante en la obra de Ramírez quien, en obras como “De la misma madera” (1994), una instalación que incluye una pared de sus propios grabados en madera, ha explorado el tema de la diversidad y los problemas raciales en la República Dominicana. El tema es frecuente en su obra y siempre aparece con ironía y crítica mordaz. Pero esa aguda mirada al dominicano, su raza y su racismo, está ausente de las ilustraciones de este libro. Creo que el tono idealista y falsamente utópico de la narración de Álvarez afectó las ilustraciones de Ramírez. Hay un cierto tono dulzón en ellas, tono que coincide con el del texto pero no con el resto de la obra de la ilustradora.

De todas formas, hay que prestar atención especial a una de las ilustraciones, la principal, la que adorna la portada del libro y que Ramírez ha titulado exactamente como el texto de Álvarez, “A Cafecito Story”. En esta pieza la artista vuelve al mismo recurso pictórico que era la base del retrato de Julia de Burgos. Aquí se presenta una taza de café de la que
sale un humo que se llena de imágenes—un avión, una cafetera, una casita, un sol—imágenes que resumen la trama del cuento mismo. Aquí el humo sirve de puente entre la taza y una montaña, reducida en tamaño en proporción del recipiente y que sirve de contrapunto temático y contrapeso visual al mismo. La ilustración de Ramírez, como el texto de Álvarez, propone una metáfora que intenta definir todo el país: la nación dominicana queda resumida en su café. Como en “El pensamiento de Julia”, en esta ilustración la obra literaria queda sintetizada en pequeñas imágenes: aquí, en el humo y, allá, en el pelo. Así y aparentemente sin quererlo, la vieja imagen de Julia de Burgos queda renovada y ampliada en esta imagen de una taza humeante.

D. Todas las julias, Julia

Pero la coincidencia pictórica y la repetición de una táctica visual son más reveladoras de lo que a primera instancia parecería. Para entender lo que quiero apuntar hay que recordar algunos datos. Ya había señalado que Julia Álvarez es la dueña de la matriz del grabado “El pensamiento de Julia” y que lo exhibe en la casa de su hacienda cafetalera en las montañas de la República Dominicana. Hay otro dato revelador: la tarjeta de presentación profesional que Álvarez usa ahora y alguna de la información que se distribuye sobre sus publicaciones aparece con la imagen de este grabado de Ramírez. Es como si Julia Álvarez hubiera adoptado la imagen de su tocaya boricua, Julia de Burgos, según la presenta su ilustradora Belkis Ramírez. En la tarjeta se señala que la obra de arte que la ilustra es de Belkis Ramírez, pero no se apunta el título de la pieza misma; sólo se dice: “cover art by Belkis Ramírez”. No quiero sugerir con esta aseveración que crea que hay una especie de robo de identidad en esta reproducción y que Julia Álvarez intenta apropiarse de la imagen de Julia de Burgos como si fuera la suya. Pero el uso de la imagen de la obra de Ramírez que representa a Burgos claramente evidencia una red de identidades compartidas o del empleo de máscaras literarias y pictóricas que unen a tres artistas dominicanas—Julia Álvarez, Chiqui Vicioso y Belkis Ramírez—con la gran poeta puertorriqueña. Esta identificación es reveladora ya que, no sólo establece con claridad y fuerza la estrecha relación que hay entre las tres artistas dominicanas, sino que apunta al gran peso y la innegable influencia que ha tenido en todas ellas Julia de Burgos. Esto se veía claramente en la poesía y en la ensayística de Chiqui Vicioso y es fácil verlo y entenderlo en la gráfica de Belkis Ramírez. Pero esta evidencia sirve para revelar un nuevo filón de estudio en la obra de Julia Álvarez. Ahora los estudiosos de su narrativa,
su ensayística y, sobre todo, de su poesía tendrán que rastrear el impacto de Julia de Burgos en su obra. ¿La hay? La evidencia hasta el presente es indirecta y más visual que literaria. Y a ella se llega por la obra gráfica de Belkis Ramírez. Pero el hecho no nos deja de recordar que muchas veces para entender una obra literaria tenemos que recurrir a su contrapartida visual. Y, sobre todo, no nos deja de recordar que en el mundo cultural caribeño hay conexiones, fuertes pero aparentemente invisibles, como el humo de una taza de café que rememora el pelo de una poeta, y que une a creadoras con Chiqui Vicioso, Julia Álvarez y Belkis Ramírez con su madre y maestra, Julia de Burgos.

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Notas

1 Aunque todos estos términos son apropiados y se emplean indistintamente, usaré el término matriz para denominar la madera sobre la cual se talla la imagen para imprimir el grabado ya que este término en particular me sirve para recalcar los principios feministas que defiende la artista.

2 Sería interesante comparar esta instalación de Ramírez con la famosa pieza de Judy Chicago, “The Dinner Party” (1974-1979), una de las cumbres del arte feminista, ya que ambas plantean el mismo tema: la mesa servida como expresión de los problemas de la mujer. En el caso de Chicago se trata de la creación de un canon femenino y de la exaltación de los logros alcanzados por las mujeres a lo largo de la historia, mientras que la pieza de Ramírez nos dice que todavía hay que denunciar los males que afectan a la mujer dominicana. Quizás las obras reflejen dos momentos distintos en el proceso de creación del feminismo en los países de origen de las artistas. Pero no cabe duda de que la exaltación internacionalista y la denuncia de los problemas nacionales son dos funciones que las artistas feministas adoptan como suyas y necesarias y que se hacen patentes en la obra de estas dos mujeres.

3 Aunque su nombre de pila es Sherezada, la escritora es conocida como Chiqui y muchos de sus textos aparecen bajo ese apodo. Aquí uso el mismo para referirme a ella.

4 Estas palabras de Vicioso aparecen en un ensayo recogido en la segunda edición de Algo que decir.... Lo curioso del caso es un revelador desliz freudiano, por llamarlo con el término de circulación popular, que comete la autora ya que el texto es sobre Julia de Burgos pero erróneamente la autora titula el ensayo “Julia Álvarez y sus múltiples reencuentros: un puente hacia el interior”. Vicioso confunde aquí a las dos julias lo que demuestra cómo las asocia y cómo identifica a la dominicana con la boricua. En pocos casos un error en el título de un texto resulta tan
revelador. Aquí, como se verá, el error que lleva a la identificación errónea sirve para probar mi tesis sobre Julia de Burgos como matriz poética e ideológica de estas tres artistas dominicanas: Vicioso, Álvarez y Ramírez.

5 Por supuesto, las declaraciones de Jiménez Grullón respecto a su relación con Julia de Burgos son defensivas, tergiversadas y no retratan fielmente esa dolorosa unión con la poeta.

6 La información sobre la pertenencia de la matriz del grabado de Ramírez la obtuve en una conversación con la artista en su casa-taller. De este encuentro con la artista y su esposo surgió un ensayo que, aunque se centra en la obra de otro gran artista caribeño, Pepón Osorio, no deja de ser relevante para entender mejor a Ramírez y su obra. Refiero a los lectores a mi texto titulado “Con Belkis en La cama de Pepón”.

7 El cuento aparece en una edición bilingüe. La traducción es de Daisy Cocco de Filippis. El hecho retrata aún mejor esta red de conexiones e influencias. Cocco de Filippis, crítica y mentora literaria, ha fomentado la producción y el estudio de la obra de mujeres dominicanas, en la isla y especialmente en la ciudad de Nueva York. Es ella también una de las primeras y más importantes comentaristas de la obra de Julia Álvarez

8 Agradezco también a Ramírez este dato sobre la tarjeta de presentación de Álvarez.

Obra Citada


Efrain Barradas, “Con Belkis en La cama de Pepón”, Revista Domingo (El Nuevo Día) (San Juan), 12 de febrero de 2006, 4-6.


Amable López Meléndez, “Presistencia y transgresión” (http://www.artealdía.com) [Consultada el 27 de octubre de 2008].


Los Pollitos Come Home to Roost: Of Diaspora, Remigrants, Caribeño Counterstream, and Cultural Remittances

José L. Torres-Padilla

Juan Flores has earned a well-deserved reputation as a conscientious, thorough scholar and researcher who tackles big issues and delves into relatively unchartered terrain with customary intellectual vigor and an astute analytical eye. In Divided Borders (1993), he explored and analyzed issues and themes surrounding the problematic and vexing issue of Puerto Rican identity; From Bomba to Hip-Hop (2000) explored the hybrid cultural expressions forged by the interactions between African-American and Puerto Rican cultures in New York and used those to reconceptualize and reevaluate Latino studies in general. With this new book, The Diaspora Strikes Back, Flores continues on this trajectory, this time taking on the minimally studied and undertheorized return migrations of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans, and analyzing the “cultural remittances” these “remigrants” bring back “home.” The result is an accessibly written scholarly book, pleasurable to read, which provides a serious, illuminating discussion of the significant impact—the “diasporic counterstream”—that these returnees are having on the social, cultural, and political practices of their homelands. It is a book that also rethinks the way scholars have traditionally viewed return migration and thus opens new theoretical ground for diaspora and transnational studies.

In Part 1 of the book, “Conceptual Bearings,” Flores establishes the theoretical framework and foundation that grounds his approach to the material studied in this project. Much of the discussion is necessarily geared to redefining operating concepts and nomenclature and devising new ones given the dearth of theorization of return migrations, especially on the “cultural manifestations” of the returning diasporic populations in question. Gleaning and synthesizing from the work of such scholars
and theorists as Robin Cohen, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Robert C. Smith, Edouard Glissant, and Francesco Cerase, among others, Flores weaves together a theoretical framework that conceptualizes diaspora as a diacritical process which is “messy and ragged at the edges” (17); that comprehends the “prism of power,” or how economic and political power establishes hierarchical structures inherent in diaspora; and that sees a wave of “new diasporas” propagated by contemporary globalization. From this theoretical worldview, migration is viewed not as one-directional, but rather as a fluid, two-way process. Given the importance of this circularity in how migration is theorized, Flores employs Cerase’s idea of the “return of innovation,” which Flores argues has the “greatest relevance for contemporary, transnational analysis (35), to represent remigrants as individuals with “agency and creativity” who “view themselves as carriers of social change” (35). This is a representation of a remigrant who remits “cultural customs and practices ideological orientations, forms of artistic expression, and ideas of group identity acquired in diaspora settings” (44) to homeland societies. These “cultural remittances,” Flores argues, lead to a revision of national identity and a rethinking about issues related to class, gender, and race, and can serve as potential for social change.

It is important to note that, within Flores’ theoretical model, he privileges those cultural remittances that represent “views from below” and are also representative of “grassroots globalization.” Flores attempts to glean from the personal life stories, presented in Part 2, the type of narrative production that depicts the subaltern identity formulated within struggle. He coins the playful phrase, “Creolité in the Hood,” to describe the types of cultural manifestations, or remittances, which interest him the most. The phrase evokes youth, because, according to Flores, the most salient changes in diasporic life are often generated and propagated by the diasporic young people. The term “hood” serves as “indicator of class position, racialized marginality, and relative subalternity” (27). As for “creolité,” which evokes postcolonialist theory, especially the idea of hybridity, Flores writes that it

…situates the reference in the Caribbean without affixing it to that unique space, adapts a long-standing cultural discourse to contemporary conditions and centers the interpretive focus on culture and language (in the broad sense) and their insistence on particularity (29).
This definition of creolité marks Flores’ desire to utilize theoretical tools that can transcend any regional application, but the focus of the book, nonetheless, is on the migratory process of three populations from the Caribbean, so in Part 1, Chapter 3, he zooms in on the historical *caribeño* counterstream from the three countries studied. This informative chapter gives the reader a sweeping historical background of the diasporas involved in transforming the Caribbean into the rich, culturally hybridized area that it is today, and which serves as a context for the personal narratives in Part 2 and the discussion of “Style Transfers” in Part 3. Generally, this is a history that supports Flores’ claim that the Caribbean peoples represent “an exemplary case of cultural diaspora” (51) and that the Caribbean Latino experience, in particular, “makes for an ideal testing ground for the study of transnational cultural flows and interactions” (6).

The personal “tales” in Part 2 are, by far, the most riveting, fascinating, and insightful part of the book. Each of the narratives focuses on what the returnee, or remigrant, learned in the diaspora; this “learning” inevitably led to some “turn” in the lives of these individuals, as the subtitle of the book suggests. Each story encapsulates an important issue related to race, gender, and class. The turn, in question, inevitably marks a point in the lives of these narrators when they take a more active role in confronting the problems raised by these issues and incorporate the knowledge learned in the diaspora in specific ways upon their return to the homeland. In the introduction to this section, in which he explains his ethnographic method, it is clear that Flores grappled with how to conduct and use these narratives. He opted to reshape the sequences of the narratives into “rewritten interviews,” staying faithful to what the interviewees said, “for the sake of narrative coherence and their inherent emblematic significance” (79). It is evident that Flores comes to this decision after much serious deliberation and consideration over his options and theoretical problems. Nonetheless, it is also clear that this method can raise valid concerns about who is speaking for the subaltern. In my view, Flores remains faithful to privileging “the view from below” by emphasizing, through these narratives, what Homi Bhabha calls in his influential essay, “DissemiNation,” “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life.” That is, Flores is privileging the “performative” discourse that writes a nation; the discourse that, indeed, comes “from below” as opposed to the “pedagogical” discourse coming from above. In remaining true to the words of these individuals, despite the altered sequences, Flores still provides us with an overview of the daily experiences of these
individuals as they struggled in the diaspora, and how they often found themselves encountering stiff resistance to their acquired knowledge, values, and adopted differences upon their return. Generally, the twenty-two individuals interviewed represent a microcosm of what Antonio Gramsci called “organic intellectuals” who provide a class with the conceptualizations, values, and raw ideological material needed for social change. However, the idea of social change coming easily to any one of the discussed societies after such activist agents return from the diaspora, is one that Flores readily discourages. In fact, he clearly states that it is hard to gauge the depth and extent of the impact of cultural remittances. But it is quite obvious that they do have some impact.

It is in Part 3 which Flores takes a closer look at those diasporic “aesthetic and stylistic flows of cultural expression,” created and propagated from below, and how these continue to influence and shape the homelands in question. He focuses on salsa, hip-hop, poetry, and the visual arts. In each case, necessarily focusing on those popular genres with the most lasting impact. Flores deftly weaves a selected handful of the interviewees and their narratives into the discussion of these genres as a way of accentuating the connection between theory and lived experience. I found these chapters engaging, if not completely convincing as to the significant change that cultural remittances are bringing to the respective homelands of the remigrants. When one considers that in the case of Salsa and the Taller Boricua, both Nuyorican cultural developments, the colonial elite coopted and considerably weakened the political power of both, it is hard to imagine how these augurs may change in the future. Popular genres do not always embrace the many more serious issues—involving race, class, and gender—outlined in the narratives of the returnees. This reviewer felt a disconnect between the discussion of those issues and, for instance, those chapters that provided historical accounts of how these popular forms were being incorporated into the cultural life of the homeland. There is also a danger when zooming in too narrowly on any one form of artistic expression. In particular, Flores seems to have an affinity for hip-hop poets and generally writers such as José Raúl González, Abraham Rodríguez, Jr., and others who write about the ghetto (and I may add, persistently from a narrow, negative perspective), perhaps because their emergence fits squarely his theoretical worldview. However, other diaspora writers—for example, a poet like Martín Espada—have consistently written powerfully about race, class, and gender issues and they seem to be marginalized or displaced because of this type of analysis.
Whatever quibbles I may have with some of the ideas in this book, though, there is no doubt that Flores, again, has produced a book worthy of admiration; a book that is an essential read to anyone interested in the fields of diaspora and transnational studies, Latina(o) and Caribbean studies, and cultural and postcolonial studies. The contributions in *The Diaspora Strikes Back* to the scholarship in these areas of study are, I believe, far-reaching and important.

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Speaking Puerto Rican: The Infinite Variety of the Diaspora’s Writing

Rafael Ocasio

This comprehensive collection of essays on the development of Puerto Rican literature in the United States treats a variety of themes, time periods, and geographic locations. In the introduction, “The Literature of the Puerto Rican Diaspora and Its Critical Practice,” José L. Torres-Padilla and Carmen Haydeé Rivera lay the foundations for the five thematic sections to follow: “Earlier Voices,” “Political and Historical,” “Identity and Place,” “Home,” and “Gender.” These broad classifications attempt to cover a complex series of migratory patterns, which exhibit different phases leading to the creation of the so-called diasporic Puerto Rican-American identity. The introduction effectively summarizes the history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States, with emphasis on the literature written in response to sociopolitical challenges that the Puerto Rican community was experiencing at various times. As the writers of the introduction state, the development of Puerto Ricanness, or the hyphenated Puerto Rican-American identity in literature, is a complex process, but not so compartmentalized as previous critics had viewed it. The use of new postcolonial theories, in conjunction with emerging critical readings inspired by “U.S. border studies,” makes this introduction useful for advanced study of Puerto Rican literary history in the United States.

Part I, “Earlier Voices,” follows the introduction’s well-defined historical survey of Puerto Rican literature. José M. Irizarry Rodríguez’s article, “Evolving Identities: Early Puerto Rican Writing in the United States and the Search of Puertorriqueñidad,” explores the earliest of the Puerto Rican writers in New York City: Jesús Colón, Pedro Juan Labarte, and Arturo A. Schomburg. It emphasizes their positions as traditionalist or as modern writers. In “For the Sake of Love: Luisa
Capetillo, Anarchy, and Boricua Literary History,” Lisa Sánchez-González presents an effective argument that includes the Puerto Rican anarchist and feminist Luisa Capetillo as one of the first Puerto Rican writers of the diaspora. José L. Torres-Padilla in “When ‘I’ Became Ethnic: Ethnogenesis and Three Early Puerto Rican Diaspora Writers” explores differences in the writers’ views of Puerto Rican ethnicity as an element of political unification, or the “ethno-nation.” That concept appears in distinctively different contents in the works of Puerto Rican writers born on the island and those raised and/or born in the United States. Torres-Padilla illustrates differences in his analyses of New York-based writers Jesús Colón, Pura Belpré, and Graciany Miranda Archilla.

Part II, “Political and Historical,” stresses the strong historical components associated with the Puerto Rican migratory waves and the impact of political events on diasporic literature. Ferda Asya’s “Anarchism in the Work of Aurora Levins Morales” explores this author’s feminist poetry as the product of her deeply-rooted Communist upbringing as the child of community activist parents in Puerto Rico. William Burgos examines sociopolitical components in the development of the hybridity of Puerto Rican-American “diasporan” culture in the essay “Puerto Rican Literature in a New Clave: Notes on the Emergence of DiaspoRican.” Strong elements of the Nuyorican poetry, which displays an iconoclastic rupture from the Puerto Rican literary canon, is the central theme of Trenton Hickman’s “The Political Left and the Development of Nuyorican Poetry,” which emphasizes the political scene of the Puerto Rican barrios during the 1970s.

Part III, “Identity and Place,” discusses preferred stages in Puerto Rican diasporic literature, mainly its connection with the barrio as a place of significant ethnographical value. Antonia Domínguez Miguela in “Literary Tropicalizations of the Barrio: Ernesto Quiñonez’s Bodega Dreams and Ed Vega’s Mendoza’s Dream” addresses characteristics associated with “ghetto literature,” with emphasis on trends present in the use of the barrio by Puerto Rican diasporic writers, especially the Nuyorican writers. Víctor Figueroa’s “Discordant Differences: Strategic Puerto Ricannness in Pedro Pietri’s Puerto Rican Obituary” examines the ethno-literary elements of Pietri’s major piece as the work of one of the “founding voices of Nuyorican literature.” A new geographic place of importance to Puerto Rican diasporic literature is Hawaii. Maritza Stanchich’s “‘Borinkee’ in Hawai’i: Rodney Morales Rides the Diaspora Wave to Transregional Imperial Struggle” looks at the work of this Honolulu-based Puerto Rican writer. The latter explores in his fiction.
the impact of the Puerto Rican migration to Hawaii, which started in 1900. The 2000 Census indicated 30,000 people of Puerto Rican descent living there. Migration patterns have imposed socioeconomic influences upon the Puerto Rican community in New York City. John Waldron’s “Tato Laviera’s Parody of La carreta: Reworking a Tradition of Docility” focuses on Laviera’s re-writing of one of the most acclaimed of Puerto Rican literary pieces dealing with migration to the United States.

The issue of representation of Puerto Rico as a literary stage is the focus of Part IV, “Home.” Kelli Lyon Johnson, in “Writing Home: Mapping Puerto Rican Collective Memory in The House on the Lagoon,” examines Puerto Rican-born fiction writer Rosario Ferré’s concept of “absent memory” as a determinant in her controversial decision to write her novel in English. Joanna Barszewksa Marshall’s essay, “Translating ‘Home’ in the Work of Judith Ortiz Cofer,” focuses on the ways in which the Georgia-based poet and fiction writer appropriates autobiographical memories in her construction of a Puerto Rican identity in her novel The Line of the Sun. Solimar Otero in “Getting There and Back: The Road, the Journey, and Home in Nuyorican Diaspora Literature” examines the journey, as an essential image in Puerto Rican literature and in Yoruba Santería-inspired literature by Nuyorican writers.

Part V, “Gender,” emphasizes issues of gender and sexual orientation as reflected in diasporic Puerto Rican literature. Enrique Morales-Díaz’s “Identity of ‘Diasporican’ Homosexual in the Literary Periphery” analyzes the work of three gay Puerto Rican writers, Robert Vázquez-Pacheco, Emanuel Xavier, and Larry La Fountain-Stokes, and their struggles against patriarchal machista conceptions, both within U.S. mainstream society and in what is described as a highly homophobic Puerto Rican cultural environment. Betsy A. Sandlin offers in “Manuel Ramos Otero’s Queer Metafictional Resurrection of Julia de Burgos” a well-developed argument of the “queering” of the iconic Puerto Rican-born poet and New York resident Julia de Burgos by the late fiction writer Otero, perhaps the best known Puerto Rican gay writer and a long-time resident of New York City. Mary Jane Suero-Elliott’s “Subverting the Mainland: Transmigratory Biculturalism in U.S. Puerto Rican Women’s Fiction” examines Alba Ambert’s novel, A Perfect Silent, and Esmeralda Santiago’s América’s Dream as examples of the development of a “transmigratory consciousness,” a result of the ease of contact (or back and forth travel) between the residents of the diaspora and those of the island of Puerto Rico.
This collection is highly recommended as an advanced book on the development of the earliest diasporic Puerto Rican literature. It includes reviews of works of current Puerto Rican/Boricua writers publishing today as best-sellers for mainstream publishing houses. Perhaps one of its weakest points is repetition in many articles of similar data in discussions of certain concepts, mainly information on the development of diasporic Puerto Rican literature and on critics’ comments on the development of what has been referred to as an ethnic literature. These repetitions are certainly almost unavoidable, however, in such a large anthology. On the other hand, this volume succeeds in including work grounded on current schools of literary criticism, such as postcolonialism and postmodernism. The handling of postcolonial theory is well balanced and it recognizes the controversial and ambiguous political relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States.

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**Bacalao proustiano**

Efraín Barradas

Aunque ciertos estudiosos—recordemos el caso ejemplar de Sylvia Molloy—nos han hecho ver que la autobiografía o las memorias—por el momento olvidemos las diferencias entre estas formas de la narrativa del yo—son más abundantes e importantes en las letras hispanoamericanas que lo que usualmente creemos, no cabe duda que los escritores latinos han recurrido a esas formas literarias más frecuentemente que los hispanoamericanos. Algunas de esas narrativas sirven hasta para definir la literatura latina en sí: pensemos en Piri Thomas, en Richard Rodríguez, en Gloria Alzandúa. Es que los escritores latinos establecen una relación muy directa entre su vida, que se convierte en ejemplar, y su comunidad. Se podría decir que la definen según se van definiendo así mismos. Pero eso no quiere decir que las narraciones del yo latinas sean predecibles o de una sola pieza.

En ese amplio y variado contexto hay que colocar *Tastes Like Cuba*, obra del dramaturgo cubanoamericano Eduardo Machado. (A pesar de que desde la portada aparece el nombre de Michael Domitrovich, aunque en letras más chicas que las del de Machado, éste es el centro de toda la narrativa, su narrador y su personaje; se hace, por ello, difícil ver cómo colaboraron los dos en la creación de este libro. Éste, entre otros temas, es uno que habrá que investigar en otro momento que se vuelva a estudiar la obra. Por el momento y sin querer disminuir la labor del coautor, me refiero al libro siempre como obra solo de Machado). Aquí se nos narra la vida del dramaturgo desde su idílica infancia en Cojimar, poblado a las afueras de La Habana, hasta el presente o el momento en que escribe la obra en Nueva York. Machado nos lleva por distintos ámbitos o ciudades en donde ha vivido: su Cojimar natal, el Miami de su primer exilio, el Los Angeles de su adolescencia y el Nueva York de su madurez. Pero el centro de toda la obra es siempre Cuba, específicamente La Habana. El ingenioso medio que emplea para ir narrando su vida es su relación con la comida, sobre todo la cubana, con
todos esos lugares donde se fue formando. Por eso cada capítulo termina o, mejor dicho, culmina con recetas que están directamente relacionadas con la trama del mismo. Aunque la comida como metáfora para representar una narración del yo no es una fórmula nueva—¡Proust, Proust, Proust!—Machado logra darle a sus memorias un tono de innovación ya que ésta se convierte aquí en una manera directa de retratar un momento de su vida. Por ejemplo, los horrores platos que servía una pariente suya con los ingredientes que el gobierno norteamericano les daba a los exilados en Miami es una forma muy eficiente de presentar el choque cultural de Machado y su hermano menor al llegar a los Estados Unidos en un vuelo de la llamada “Operación Peter Pan”. Cada capítulo queda encuadrado por las recetas que lo acompañan y, así, la comida se convierte en la metáfora o el símbolo perfecto de la identidad, la personal y la colectiva. Quizás el mejor momento en toda la obra donde esa ecuación queda firmemente establecida es justo al final de la obra cuando el personaje narrador entra a una cafetería dominicana en Nueva York y pide un plato de bacalao:

A few minutes later the waitress sets the big plate of food before me. I take a moment to savor the smell. The fish and salt and tomatoes fill my lungs. I grab the fork and scoop up a little bit of rice. A piece of flaky white fish on top. Dip it in some salty tomato sauce. When I take the first taste, I am overcome by visions of Cuba (258).

¡Más proustiano no puede ser este plato de bacalao! Pero éste no es un momento aislado; todo el libro está construido por momentos como éste donde la comida se convierte en la puerta a un recuerdo. Por ello hay en el libro personajes que quedan definidos por una receta: el abuelo por su forma de hacer arroz con pollo. Hay momentos en la vida del autor que los definen otras: los tamales y su regreso a Cuba después de años de ausencia. Pero más que nada en esta obra la comida define los lugares y éstos a su vez, la identidad. Por ello, un plato de bacalao consumido en una cafetería dominicana en Nueva York se convierte en una clave más para definir indirectamente un lugar (su Cuba) y, así, su identidad, su cubanía. Pero reducir este libro de Machado a esta relación ejemplarmente proustiana entre comida y lugar de origen, aunque ya de por sí ése sería un logro, limitaría demasiado los méritos de este libro.

Es que Tastes Like Cuba puede leerse desde distintas perspectivas, no sólo de ésta, la más obvia. Por ejemplo, el libro serviría para ayudar a entender a los lectores del teatro de Machado la estética que sustenta su obra en ese género ya que aquí se nos revela cómo el autor concibe sus
piezas teatrales. Por supuesto, hay que leer tales aclaraciones con un gran grano de sal porque es el autor mismo quien apunta sus supuestos secretos creativos. Y siempre cabe dudar si lo dice todo, si no hay una especie de visión romántica de sí mismo y de sus principios dramáticos en lo que nos cuenta.

También se pueden leer estas memorias como un documento más de las colectivas formadas por tantos textos escritos por cubanoamericanos que recuerdan su llegada a los Estados Unidos. La lectura del texto de Machado me hizo pensar en otro por desgracia casi completamente olvidado en nuestros días: _Contra viento y marea_ (1978), las memorias colectivas de los cubanoamericanos miembros del Grupo Areito. Otra lectura muy apropiada es la del texto como la manifestación de una identidad gay. Otra más, importante también, sería la de la transformación ideológica de Machado. Cada lector puede acercarse al texto en busca de una línea particular de narración, formal o ideológica, que le sirva para darle unidad al texto y a su lectura del mismo. La comida es la más obvia pero no la única ni, quizás, la más importante.

Mi lectura de _Tastes Like Cuba_ fue compleja porque quise seguir varias líneas narrativas a la vez. Por un lado, me atraía grandemente la metáfora central de la comida y sus recetas como forma de definir la identidad. Desde esa perspectiva uno de los aspectos que más me atrajeron al libro fue cómo el mismo reproduce sólo una zona culinaria cubana e identifica ésta con la cubanía en su totalidad. La referencia principal desde esa perspectiva la ofrece muy directamente Machado mismo en el texto: su visión de la comida cubana es esencialmente la que codificó Nitza Villapol en sus programas de televisión y en sus libros de cocina justo antes de la Revolución.

También me interesó mucho leer el texto como una construcción de la identidad sexual, concretamente gay en este caso. Esa lectura es problemática no porque el autor niegue sus preferencias sexuales sino porque, como narración, esa identidad se construye muy fragmentariamente. Por ejemplo, hay personajes importantísimos para ver el texto desde esa perspectiva que sencillamente desaparecen del mismo: el padre, la madre, el hermano menor. Esto hace del texto una narración incompleta. Para mí el libro se hace más problemático aun cuando emplea la metáfora de la comida para discutir la Cuba actual, la de las carestías, la del embargo, la de las tiendas en dólares y los paladares. A pesar de que el autor nos relata las dificultades a las que se enfrenta para conseguir ciertos alimentos en la Cuba de hoy, su descripción de algunas comedas hechas durante sus recientes visitas al país no deja de parecerme
contradictoria pues ignora a los que no tienen acceso a los ingredientes que él y sus amigos cubanos emplean para confeccionar esos platos que, para el autor, sirven para reconstruir su identidad, como individuo y como ente colectivo. Pero quizás ahí también resida parte del mérito de este texto: sus contradicciones sirven para crear un mejor retrato de su autor. Y ése es el propósito de una memoria, ¿no?

Aquí debía terminar mi comentario de la obra de Machado, pero me tienta finalizar apuntando lo que me sospecho es, si no un error, una falla en una de las recetas incluidas en el libro. En la que el autor ofrece para pollo al ajillo, receta que sigue la de un importante personaje menor en las memorias, Gladys, quien se convierte en el centro de una de sus más importantes obras de teatro, *The Cook* (2003), Machado nos dice que los doce dientes de ajo que la receta pide hay que picarlos muy pequeñitos. Con el perdón de Machado, de Domitrovich, quien me sospecho trascribió las recetas para publicación, y de Gladys misma, yo le recomendaría a quien quisiera seguirla que pusiera un poco más de ajo (pero eso depende del gusto de cada cual) y, sobre todo, que los machacara en un pilón o mortero, como se hace en la comida caribeña. Este es mi consejo culinario, pero recordemos que más que un libro de cocina ésta son memorias. Así que sigan los consejos de su autor-personajes y no los míos. Eso hará la receta una forma de llegar a ese mundo de la identidad personal y colectiva que es el propósito de este interesante libro.

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En la cocina con Procusto

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En un revelador pasaje de Down These Mean Streets (1967), la autobiografía novelada de Piri Thomas, el protagonista corre de la escuela a su casa en busca de protección por el acoso de unos chicos italoamericanos. Al llegar al edificio donde vive su familia Piri, el alter ego del autor, percibe el olor de la comida que prepara su madre: “Momma was cooking, and the smell of rice and beans was beating the smell of Parmesan cheese from the other apartments” (p. 36). Aquí, simbólicamente la comida salva al niño de la agresión de los otros y, también, se convierte en la encarnación del poder de la identidad colectiva y de los orígenes culturales frente a la cultura dominante y la posibilidad de asimilación. El pasaje no sólo resume en una metáfora—arroz y habichuelas contra queso parmesano—el conflicto de Piri sino que revela el sentido que la comida cumple en toda cultura: ésta es uno de los últimos rasgos que se pierden y, por ende, uno de los asideros más fuertes de los que un emigrante se vale.

Esta característica de baluarte cultural poderoso ante la cultura dominante y la importancia que se le atribuye como forma de conocer a un pueblo hacen de la comida un campo de estudio privilegiado por aquellos antropólogos que emplean el acercamiento de la retención de rasgos de la cultura madre. Pero, a la vez, ésta es un área a la que sólo muy recientemente otros investigadores, especialmente aquellos que se asocian al campo de los estudios culturales, le comienzan a prestar atención. Entre los estudiosos de la cultura latina en los Estados Unidos poca reflexión se le ha dedicado a la comida, aunque varios escritores y cocineros han recurrido a ésta para reconstruir sus memorias, individuales o colectivas. Sólo hay que recordar las de Eduardo Machado, Tastes Like Cuba (2007), y los múltiples recetarios que tratan de reconstruir la historia de algún grupo latino a través de recetas para ver cuán fuerte ha sido la conexión entre comida y memoria: Recipe of Memory: Five Generations of Mexican Cuisine (1995) de Víctor M. Valle y Mary Lau.
Valle y Memories of a Cuban Kitchen (1992) de Mary Urrutia Randelman y Joan Schwartz son ejemplos que prueban contundentemente el punto. Pero, más allá de memorias y recetarios, géneros que en muchos casos se funden, pocos han sido los estudios que se han acercado desde una perspectiva académica al tema. Sólo por ello hay que darle la bienvenida a este libro de Zilkia Janer, Latino Food Culture.

Este libro forma parte de una serie publicada por Greenwood Press dedicada al estudio de un área o una cultura gastronómica. De esta serie, he manejado los libros dedicados a México, al Caribe y a Sur América, muy distintos en cuanto a sus méritos pero idénticos en cuanto a su formato. Ahora los editores se disponen a estudiar las cocinas étnicas o regionales en los Estados Unidos y por ello han creado una nueva serie, “Food Culture in America.” El libro de Janer es parte de la misma y, como todos los que la componen, tiene exactamente la misma estructura. A los autores se les exige que traten los mismos temas y, por ello, los índices de todos los libros son idénticos. Este deseo de homogeneidad se convierte, en algunos casos, como en éste, en una camisa de fuerza que casi destruye la capacidad de imaginación de los autores. Janer cumple a perfección la encomienda de los editores pero, dado su tema, a veces su libro se convierte en una especie de catecismo, con pasajes repetitivos que pudieron evitarse. La culpa no es suya sino de los editores que les imponen a los textos el rígido formato de la serie. Pero hay también en el libro brillantes pasajes donde la autora puede desarrollar cuestiones de importancia y en los cuales demuestra su capacidad intelectual, su erudición, su conocimiento del tema y su imaginación como investigadora. Pero, además del formato impuesto por los editores, el tema mismo es limitante, porque no deja de ser problemático, aunque parezca, a primera vista, totalmente inocente. Obviamente, la mera existencia del libro presupone la del tema. A la vez, cabe preguntarse si existe tal fenómeno cultural, ése que llamamos cocina latina. La pregunta, por supuesto, nos llevaría a preguntarnos si se puede escribir un libro sobre este tema.

Hay muchas posibles respuestas a esta pregunta, pero la publicación de este libro presupone una muy directa—si, existe la cocina latina—pero ésta no es necesariamente la más correcta. Hay también la posibilidad de responder negativamente a la pregunta y, en ese caso, la respuesta igualmente tendría validez y valor. Pero, más que cualquier posible contestación, el carácter del tema mismo lo que es verdaderamente provechoso discutir y lo que Janer trata de hacer de manera indirecta, dada la imposición de un formato fijo para el libro. En el
fondo, su discusión está extremadamente limitada por la camisa de fuerza estructural que le impusieron los editores de la serie.

¿Por qué se puede hasta dudar que exista una comida latino-estadounidense? La duda surge porque el campo de la gastronomía, particularmente cuando éste se define en términos de una cultura nacional, se transforma muy lentamente. Toma siglos y distanciamiento de otras cocinas crear una comida nacional. Es por estas razones que éstas no mueren fácilmente pero, de igual forma, son difíciles de crear. Prueba de ello es la experiencia de los emigrantes que han llegado a los Estados Unidos y que han perdido su lengua materna y muchos otros rasgos de la cultura madre pero que han mantenido sus patrones alimenticios. Piénsese en los italianos, judíos o alemanes que llegaron a este país y se entenderá lo que postulo. La comida es uno de los rasgos culturales más estables y, por ello, tarda mucho en perderse. Si partimos de esta idea, podemos decir que, en cierto sentido, han sido sólo los mexicoamericanos, particularmente los de la región de Texas, quienes han logrado crear una cocina que se diferencia de la del país de origen. Por eso Diana Kennedy, la gran estudiosa de la comida mexicana, a quien Janer cita en su libro, estaba en un error cuando despreciaba la llamada comida “Tex-Mex” y la tildaba de desnaturalización de la mexicana. Y es que ésa sólo se puede entender como una comida regional mexicana o, mejor aun, aunque ella así no lo dice, como una que ya no es mexicana sino algo nuevo que podríamos llamar latino. En cambio, la comida de los emigrantes puertorriqueños, de los cubanos, de los salvadoreños y de todos los otros grupos que componen esa entidad que llamamos latinos se mantiene fielmente cercana a la tradición culinaria de origen. Tómese, por ejemplo, el libro de cocina de Oswald Rivera, *Puerto Rican Cuisine in America: Nuyorican and Bodega Recipes* (1993), y se verá que en él no hay nada que lo separe de la comida puertorriqueña de la isla. Por ello, la inmensa mayoría de las páginas del libro de Janer no versan sobre cocina latina sino sobre cocina latinoamericana. Estas son páginas excelentes pero no tratan, en verdad, el tema del libro si partimos de esta definición del mismo.

Pero hay otras posibles definiciones de la cocina latina. Ésta puede concebirse como el producto del flujo o la comunicación entre hábitos culinarios y patrones alimenticios de los distintos grupos de latinos. Vista de esta forma la misma puede definirse como la fusión que se da cuando latino-estadounidenses de distintos grupos tienen que convivir de cerca y comienzan a apreciar la comida ajena abandonar la propia. Los intentos de presentar en un mismo libro recetas boricuas y mexicanas y

Janer está plenamente consciente de estas problemáticas definiciones de su campo de estudio. Por ello establece que “Latino cooking is a pan-Latin American cuisine created in the United States,” aunque de inmediato advierte que “…a pan-Latino identity is being simultaneously created and contested”, (p. 56). A pesar de su claro entendimiento del problema esencial de la inexistencia o el carácter ambiguo del tema, la autora tiene muy pocas posibilidades de tratarlo directamente en estas páginas. Eso se debe, como ya he señalado, a la imposición de un formato fijo que se pide de todos los libros de esta serie. Pero también se debe a que, en nuestro interés por estudiar y celebrar nuestra cultura, a veces nos apresuramos a teorizar sobre algo que todavía está en proceso de creación. Creo que la solución, al menos para este libro, hubiera sido darle total libertad a la autora para discutir el tema sin imponerle una estructura fija a su meditación. El formato editorial que puede funcionar en el caso de otros libros de esta serie, especialmente aquellos que estudian tradiciones culinarias muy bien establecidas, se convierte aquí en un nuevo lecho de Procusto que deforma la realidad que estudia y que limita la imaginación y creatividad de la autora. A pesar de ello, hay que darle la bienvenida a este libro que viene a llenar un vacío intelectual. Espero que en un futuro cercano su autora pueda desarrollar plenamente las ideas originales que se esconden en estas páginas parcialmente deformadas por la naturaleza del tema y por los esquemas impuestos por los editores.

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