

# Segregated Miscegenation

*On the Treatment of Racial Hybridity in  
the U.S. and Latin American Literary  
Traditions*

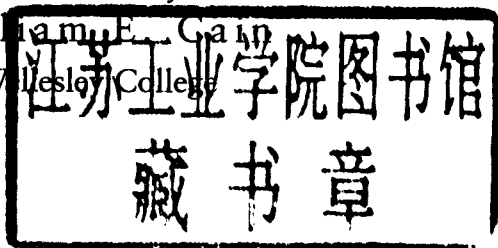


Carlos Hiraldo

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CULTURAL THEORY  
OUTSTANDING DISSERTATIONS

*edited by*

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**For Emma Llanos, mami**

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# Introduction

## Coloring Latinos, Coloring the United States

### THE NOVEL AS POPULAR CULTURE

Using the novel as a primary tool, my work traces broad patterns in how the U.S.<sup>1</sup> and Latin American<sup>2</sup> literary traditions have constructed race, and it examines how these traditions have standardized for their regions the accepted types of relations among characters of different races. The novel is crucial in this act of tracing because, as academics like Benedict Anderson and Fredric Jameson have argued, it was, until the relatively recent advent of movies and televisions, the product that most widely shaped and disseminated ways of thinking and acting, eventually establishing predominant cultural values in given nations and regions. Literary history and tradition cannot be divorced from the way mass numbers of human beings, from voracious readers to the illiterate, think of themselves as members of larger communities.

Asserting that the literary canon of national groups affects their respective masses does not imply that the identities of nations and ethnic groups are solely edicts from culture-producing elites, such as writers and scholars, and culture-approving elites, such as critics and philanthropists. As manifested in carnivals, dances, and popular songs, populations do not passively receive cultural beliefs from the elite; they also approve, disapprove, and reshape them to fit the experiences of their lives.

### RACE IN LATIN AMERICA

The phenomenon of the early-eighties song “Pavo Real” serves as a good illustration of how Latin America’s distinct notion of race, developed and disseminated through literary texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, manifests itself in that region’s masses. The lyrics to Venezuelan singer José Luis Rodríguez’s mega-hit, which celebrate black-white miscegenation, may not have been the make or break reason for its success. The

mass marketing of the sex symbol status of its light-brown singer and its now cheesy-sounding disco music may have had more to do with the appeal of the song than its wording. Yet the song was a mass phenomenon throughout the Spanish-speaking world. The song received a lot of airplay on Spanish radio stations in the United States. In vacation trips to the Dominican Republic around the same time, I discovered the song was equally popular on Dominican radio stations. José Luis Rodríguez was a constant in the variety shows of Mexico, which, despite its history of African slavery, sees itself as a Mestizo country rather than a mulatto nation, and Puerto Rico, which tends to acknowledge its African heritage. These variety shows, such as *Siempre en domingo* and *El show del medio día*, were exported to the United States and throughout Latin America, and reached millions of Spanish-speaking viewers.

If indeed the lyrics were not the main cause of the song's success, they were definitely not an impediment to it. With its celebratory stance on heterosexuality and race mixing, the song confirms what most Latin Americans would want to believe of themselves and their region:

I'm here to recommend  
 that you combine the colors  
 because the races are natural,  
 a black with a black  
 is like a night without moon  
 and a white with a white  
 is like milk in foam.  
 All blacks with nappy hair  
 should marry blondes,  
 so that the kids will be born  
 with peacock feathers.<sup>3</sup> (Pavo Real)

Songs like "Pavo Real" are pop-utopian visions that do not necessarily reflect the everyday lives of the darkest and the poorest in Latin America. The song's lyrics convey visions of a joyfully miscegenating Latin America where no one is discriminated against and people are allowed to act on their passions, at least without having to encounter racial taboos.

In part, "Pavo Real" was easily accepted in Latin American countries like the Dominican Republic because, even though it celebrates miscegenation, the song never questions the concept of racial hierarchies, nor does it problematize the notion of race itself. Miscegenation in Latin America is only celebrated when the desirable features of both black and white races survive within the hybrid. After all, the song invites blacks "with coarse hair" to marry blondes so that kids are born with presumably softer, though colorful, "peacock feathers." These lines implicitly reflect Latin Americans' disdain for the African features they deem undesirable, such as broader noses and coarser hair. Conversely, Latin Americans tend to laud the desirable mulatto/a type with cream-colored skin, with refined but not

too fine European-like noses and lips, and with straight hair. Thus, amidst a history of rampant miscegenation and behind the celebration of racial and cultural hybridity, a hierarchy that is not as clearly defined as the U.S. racial hierarchy remains to stratify people in Latin America according to the desirability of their racial phenotypes.

Following the racial preferences of miscegenated Latin America, “Pavo Real” asserts that the expected result of race mixing, bi-racial offspring with “peacock feathers” are desirable over seemingly racially pure children, categorized as white, like “milk in foam,” or black, like “night[s] without moon.” Indeed, the song not only claims that race-mixing is a personal and social good, it implies a quasi-racist stance in which hybrids are considered superior and more desirable to those seen as racially pure. Thus “Pavo Real’s” somewhat biased confirmation of miscegenation as preferable to racial purity is truly a Latin American phenomenon. If the lyrics had been in English, the song would have been anathema in the United States. Even today, when in many respects pop-culture in movies and videos feels a lot more comfortable showing, or rather hinting at, interracial couplings than it did in the early eighties, the song’s bold “recommendation” to blacks and whites is inconceivable within traditional, U.S. racial discourse.

#### LATINOS AS A U.S. RACE

If they understood “Pavo Real,” most people in the United States, who are not very familiar with Latin America, would probably ask, “why is the song referring to colors?” After all, aren’t Latin Americans one race, one ethnicity? In this country, they seem to be. According to the categories listed on many institutional application forms as well as the categorizations in most U.S. media representations, Latin Americans are one brown race.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of Latin Americans as one racial or ethnic group, ranging in skin color from light brown to dark brown, is still current in movies and on television shows made for a presumably black and white U.S. audience. This notion neglects the visible evidence of the varied Latino population in the United States, which includes people who look Native American, white, black, Asian, and combinations thereof. It ignores the fact that Latin American music, such as *salsa*, *merengue*, and *rancheras*, sometimes enthusiastically received by non-Latino audiences, is dominated by African rhythms with European and Native American contributions. It overlooks the reality that Latin American cuisine, also at times enthusiastically embraced by non-Latinos, contains European, African, Arabic, and East Asian elements. Indeed, Latin America, far from being the home of one ethnic group, is the battleground and the fertile bed of Native American, European, African, and Asian racial and cultural elements.

Slowly, in fits and starts, U.S. images of Latin Americans are being complicated on television and in movies, such as the nineties noir hit, *The Usual Suspects*, with its portrayal of a drug-dealing gang made up of Argentine WASPS. This kind of racially nuanced representation both reflects and helps create the more intricate view that other sections of U.S. society are beginning to adopt regarding its Latino segment. For example, some institutional and employment forms place the following interesting categories under the options for ethnicity and racial background: "white (not of Hispanic origin)" and "black (not of Hispanic origin)." After detailing the ethnic makeup of the United States as white, black, Asian, and Amerindian, the CIA's *World Factbook* explains that "a separate listing for Hispanic is not included because the U.S. Census Bureau considers Hispanic to mean a person of Latin American descent (especially of Cuban, Mexican, or Puerto Rican origin) living in the U.S. who may be of any race or ethnic group (white, black, Asian, etc.)" ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)). The creators of ethnographic forms for private institutions do not seem to be as extensively aware of the racial diversity of Latinos as public bureaucrats, because they seldom place the parenthetical remark "not of Hispanic origin" next to the terms "Asian" and "Native American." In creating a language and an ideology that comes close to capturing the true ethnic and racial diversity of the United States, the public sector appears to be ahead of the private sector.

The descriptive phrase "not of Hispanic origin" in employment and other institutional forms not only underscores cultural differences between Latin Americans and non-Latino U.S. citizens of similar hues, but it also implies perceived qualitative differences in their shared skin colors. This differentiation between non-Latino whites and blacks, and Latino whites and blacks reflects the main difference in how the two regions' view race. For the average, non-Latino U.S. citizen steep in discourses of racial purity in which "one drop" of African blood makes a person black regardless of color, Latin Americans, coming from a region where race mixing has been unexceptional, are seen as members of one big, hybrid race regardless of the actual color of certain individuals. Otherwise, these ethnographic forms, whose separate categories for Latin American nationalities usually identify individuals on the basis of both race and ethnicity, beg the question "why can't someone be white or black and of Hispanic origin?" The need to differentiate between colors that are "not of Hispanic origin" and colors that are implies that there is a racializing quality in being Hispanic or Latino.

Despite questions of racial "purity," most Latin Americans do not see themselves as members of a single race. They understand that they are not a mono-colored people (if there are any such people in the world). Most derive their different racial categories from the subtle shadings of their respective skin colors. However, as reflected in popular cultural products of the region, the idea of Latin Americans as a mixture of the world's races has strong currency within the region. It is an idea celebrated not only in

songs but also in literature and the visual media, such as paintings, photographs, movies, and television. The celebration of hybridity is reflected in the idealization of the mulatta in some Latin American novels, and is visible in soap operas where the romantic hero paired with the white-skinned starlet tends to be darker than his U.S. equivalent. Thus the notion of racial hybridity in Latin America is promoted by dominant elements of the elite, who control the means of cultural production, and by the majority of the populace, who either approves or disapproves of these products.

It is this kind of tracking and connecting of popularly held views with the discourses of race revealed in U.S. and Latin American literatures that I intend my work to perform. I will specifically concentrate on characters who are bi-racial, those biologically descended from black and white unions, and mulattos, those portrayed as consciously grappling with their bi-racialness, as markers of how the two literatures and their respective societies grapple with multiracialness. For reasons of space, coherency, and time, I will concentrate only on novels with overt concerns about race despite the fact that most novels of the two regions, even works that on the surface seem to have little or nothing to say about race, also disclose, question, and disseminate social presumptions on race relations. Illustrative of this point are Steinbeck's depression-era *The Grapes of Wrath* (1937), with its silence on Mexican and black farm-workers despite an extensive depiction of California grape-pickers,<sup>5</sup> and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), with Simon Bolivar ultimately revealed as a bi-racial character.

#### THE NOVEL IN THE DISSEMINATION AND RECONFIGURATION OF NOTIONS ABOUT RACE

In this work of disseminating ideas about issues such as race relations, novels do not only depend on popularly accepted notions, but also rely on the path set by previous texts, fiction and nonfiction alike. For example, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), in erasing their respective leading characters, tap into the racist ideas of nineteenth-century scholars like Robert Knox, who claimed the offspring of interracial liaisons were doomed to extinction. This is not to assert that Larsen and Faulkner had to have read the works of a Knox or a Josiah Nott before they wrote their novels. Rather, these nineteenth-century scholars engaged in, reshaped, and helped disseminate a racist, separatist discourse that Larsen and Faulkner in their respective ways tap into, re-shape, and disseminate.

However, a novel's engagement with a certain kind of discourse does not always follow the intentions of its author. As we shall see, scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács have demonstrated that the novel is a flexible, almost chaotic genre which swallows and reshapes elements of other literary genres such as epics and plays to create a more dialectic,

complex mimesis of life than any other form of literature. Incorporating other genres, the novel becomes a literary hybrid that without fragmenting can present a multiplicity of viewpoints within a seemingly cohesive structure. Just about every novel ultimately gives priority to certain values over others as it places preferential beliefs in the most appealing characterizations. Often the ideas and values set up as preferential tend to reflect the hegemonic order from which the novel and its author emanate. Yet as it aspires to imitate life in its open-ended structure, as it attempts to portray differing kinds of voices and views, the novel is not just a re-enforcer of perceived notions, but also invites the questioning of accepted values. After all, the reader is not a passive receptacle of an author's worldview, certain discourses and/or the hegemonic order. If that were the case, critical academic works such as this would be unnecessary.

The novel is a developing genre inviting interaction from its audiences. Because of its status as an evolving genre that attempts to capture the complexity, chaos, and instability of experience, the novel is best suited to reflect the racial confluence and divergence that is the Americas. It can reproduce the kinds of discourses that have sprung from the hopes and fears hybridity evokes in a hemisphere where different races from all corners of the earth have interacted in significant numbers for more than five hundred years.

My work will highlight examples that confirm the traditionally perceived differences between Latin American and U.S. novels in their fictionalization of race relations. U.S. novels such as *Light in August* have traditionally been perceived as condemning hybridity, standardizing depictions of a world where the races are happiest if pure and distinct. In the U.S. novel, those who cross the line of racial divide to engage in sexual and, in works like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), even social intimacy pay through ensuing depictions of misery and even death. The offspring of interracial liaisons also pay by being portrayed as tragically alienated and ultimately, in many instances, being eliminated from the fictional world of the text.

For its part, the Latin American novel has been perceived by most U.S. and Latin American critics as celebrating miscegenation, predominantly in depictions of intermixing between white-identified males and darker females. Academics like Latin-Americanist Bobby Chamberlain have demonstrated how the portrayal of darker mulatto and black characters in works like Amado's *The Violent Land* (1945) and Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves* (1956) often contains social and economic hardships. However, they also point out that these portraits seldom if ever lead to the alienation and eventual destruction of hybrid characters that one encounters in U.S. novels. Thus I will also track how this broad understanding of the differences between the two literary regions' construction of race relations has been promoted by past scholars like John F. Matheus and has been re-

cently problematized, yet still confirmed, by critics like Chamberlain and Maria Carmen Zielina.

As readers engage my ideas, it should become clear to them, as it has for me, that the United States and Latin America have much to learn from each other and to critique about each other, when it comes to their racial views. In attempting to delineate the similarities and differences in how the U.S. and Latin American novels conceive the concepts of blackness, whiteness and miscegenation, I shall be careful to refrain as much as possible from asserting or implying the superiority of one literary tradition and racial system over another. Rather than engaging in arguments of good versus bad literary constructions of race and hybridity, I will mark where a certain attitude towards these concepts as reflected in one literary work or in a set of works is more benevolent or oppressive than its counterpart. Concurrently, I will problematize the popular notion that race relations are more benevolently constructed within mulatto Latin American societies than within the more hierarchical U.S. structure by highlighting literary examples of depictions that undermine this view such as William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1942) and Jorge Amado's *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* (1958).

In tracking, comparing, and contrasting the discourses of race reflected in U.S. and Latin American novels, I wish my work be read in light of past and current scholarship on the novel as genre, and as a disseminator of notions about race, imperialism, postcolonialism, and nationalism. Not only should this project be read as critical of misguided nineteenth-century notions of race proposed by writers like Knox and Joseph Arthur Gobineau, it should also be evident that it revisits and questions more appealing notions proposed by nineteenth-century progressive writers like José Martí and Martín Morúa Delgado, especially wherever their assumptions invite scrutiny. Furthermore, contemporary academics such as Anne McClintock, Robert J. C. Young, Sander Gilman, and Roberto Fernández Retamar among others are extensively discussed in order both to find common ground wherever possible with their respective approaches to literature, race, and empire, and to broaden and problematize their conceptions where necessary.

Finally, I would not want the reader to conclude that only those fictional and scholarly works that have been extensively quoted throughout the book were deemed necessary and/or useful for this project. Numerous fictional and academic works were read during this extensive project. Some have been comprehensively employed throughout the text. Others, because of practical concerns regarding the cohesiveness of my project and the time allotted by the current professional circumstances of the discipline, inform the background of the ideas within my work in a less tangible but still crucial manner. The ideas in this text engage in dialogue with relevant academic works on culture, race, nation, and postcolonialism, such as Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and Homi Bhabha's *Location of*

*Culture* (1994). They also engage theoretical works, such as Coco Fusco's *English Is Broken Here* (1993) and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's *Warrior for Gringostroika* (1993), that address the unique identity-issues of Latinos in the United States.



# Novel Concepts

## The Role of the Novel in Developing Ideas of Nation and Race in the Americas

### MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, GEORG LUKÁCS, AND THE “NEW WORLD” OF THE NOVEL

In his seminal work, the *Dialogical Imagination* (1981), Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin claims that the novel “best of all reflects the tendency of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it” (7). Bakhtin uses the term “new world” to name a historical era in which hierarchies are continually questioned, the boundaries among social groups and national cultures are often blurred, and the tensions between the individual’s need for acceptance within a group and his/her desire for self-determination characterize the contemporary psyche.

It is my contention that these general characteristics, which increasingly mark the “Modern Era,” the period from the rise of the Renaissance to the present day, have reached their zenith in the Americas. The Americas is the geographical home of Bakhtin’s “new world.” It is not “new” because after 1492 it became familiar to masses who were previously ignorant of its existence. Rather, because of colonization, the conquest of Native American territories, African slavery, immigration, and independence movements, the Americas has developed into and created a new world<sup>1</sup> that challenges perceived Old World<sup>2</sup> notions of pure, delineated categories.

This contrast between a new world of confluence in the Americas, and the hierarchies and social compartmentalization traced back to the geographic regions of the Old World does not intend to suggest that Europeans, Asians, and Africans were members of pure races and castes before arriving to the Americas. It is only a means of illustrating that the collective imagination of the populations in those respective regions more readily accepted notions of purity and distinctness because there was little to challenge these beliefs. In the Americas, the idea of racial purity is challenged by its hemispheric history as an ongoing laboratory where the planet’s