Civilisations

Revue internationale d'anthropologie et de sciences humaines

60-1 | 2011

Mobilisations et dynamiques identitaires en Amérique andine

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/civilisations/2743>

DOI : 10.4000/civilisations.2743

ISSN : 2032-0442

Éditeur

Institut de sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 31 décembre 2011

Pagination : 59-80

ISBN : 2-87263-035-X

ISSN : 0009-8140

Référence électronique

Jean Muteba Rahier, « Hypersexual Black Women in the Ecuadorian 'Common Sense' », *Civilisations* [En ligne], 60-1 | 2011, mis en ligne le 12 février 2015, consulté le 19 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/civilisations/2743> ; DOI : 10.4000/civilisations.2743

Hypersexual Black Women in the Ecuadorian 'Common Sense'

An Examination of Visual and Other Representations

Jean Muteba RAHIER

Abstract: *In this essay, I contribute to the examination of racism and discrimination in Andean societies, and particularly in Ecuador, by focusing on the reproduction of stereotypical representations of black women as hypersexual beings in ordinary Ecuadorian society. I pay careful attention to visual images and their accompanying written texts in the Ecuadorian press and in other media. This allows for a consideration of ideological continuities across different periods of Ecuadorian history. Stereotypes about blackness, black bodies, and black sexuality abound in Ecuador. They share similarities with comparable representations in other Latin American contexts or on the transnational scene. They work to evoke black uncontrolled sexuality as the trope per excellence for 'savagery' at the same time that they suggest black female body's availability for white-mestizo male consumption/penetration. I propose an analysis of the recurrence of these images with respect for the specificities of the recent history of the Ecuadorian national context.*

Keywords: blackness, women, Ecuador, stereotypes, representations, hyper-sexuality.

Résumé : *Dans cet essai, je contribue à l'examen du racisme et de la discrimination dans les sociétés andines, et en particulier en Équateur, en me concentrant sur la reproduction des représentations stéréotypées des femmes noires comme êtres hypersexuels dans la société équatorienne ordinaire. Je paie une attention particulière aux images visuelles et aux textes écrits dans la presse équatorienne et dans d'autres médias qui les accompagnent. Cette approche permet de considérer les continuités idéologiques au travers des différentes périodes de l'histoire équatorienne. Les stéréotypes sur l'identité, les corps, et la sexualité noires abondent en Équateur. Ils sont similaires aux représentations comparables dans d'autres contextes latino-américains ou sur la scène transnationale. Ils évoquent une supposée sexualité incontrôlée noire comme "démonstration par excellence" de leur "sauvagerie" en même temps qu'ils suggèrent la disponibilité des corps féminins noirs pour la consommation/pénétration masculine blanche-métisse. Je propose une analyse de la récurrence de ces images dans le respect des spécificités de l'histoire récente du contexte national équatorien.*

Mots-clés : identité noire, femmes, Équateur, stéréotypes, représentations, hyper-sexualité.

Stereotypes about blackness, black bodies, and black sexuality abound in Ecuador. They share similarities with comparable representations in other Latin American national contexts or on the global scene. They work to evoke black uncontrolled sexuality as the trope per excellence for ‘savagery’ at the same time that they suggest black female bodies’ availability for white-mestizo male consumption/penetration.

In August 1999 in a plane that was bringing me from Miami to Quito, I met an Ecuadorian white-mestizo man, an acquaintance of mine whom I had not seen for years. He is an architect who was working at the time in the office of Quito’s mayor. He explained that he had been traveling in the U.S. with some of his colleagues to look for funding for one of the Mayor’s construction projects. It was an evening flight, the plane was half empty, and we had been drinking wine with dinner. After requesting some more wine from the flight attendant, he asked me why I was going to Ecuador this time. I responded that I was working on a research project. He wanted more details and I went on to explain that the project focused on black women’s sexuality in Quito, as well as on the ways the Ecuadorian racial order was, or was not, a major factor in the shaping of black peoples’, and in this specific case, black women’s sexuality.

I wanted to go further in my explanation when he suddenly interrupted me to share his views on the matter. Making abstraction of my own blackness, he proceeded to theorize that unlike white people and “Indians”, black people wherever they are found, never repress their sexuality; they have a much freer rapport to their bodies; their sexuality and their natural sensuality are important and normal parts of their daily lives. That is why they dance the way they dance, with lascivious body movements; even the way they walk..., even the way they walk (he repeated). From watching the facial expression he had at that precise moment, his wine glass in hand, his eyes lost on the ceiling of the plane’s cabin, I wondered if he was nostalgically remembering an agitated night with a black lover, a domestic employee, or perhaps a sexual worker in a not-too-far-away past, or if he were just day dreaming about one of his phantasms. (I know his white-mestizo wife). For him, this ‘sexual permissiveness’—as he seemed to suggest—explained the particularity of many of black people’s daily behaviors. His authoritative monologue was beginning to irritate me when, thank goodness, one of his colleagues asked him to join their group a few rows away. The relatively quiet violence of his “common-sensical comments” goes to the heart of what I am trying to accomplish in this paper. It shows what some have call “racial thinking” at work:

Racial thinking is not simply a catalogue of human difference; it also encompasses beliefs about the very nature of difference. When imagining the world in racial terms, people are also making judgements about the inner and the nonobvious. Some of these beliefs enjoy the cachet of modern science (e.g. the genetic basis of the distribution of sickle-cell anemia), but most lack any rigorous footing outside of common sense. (Hirschfeld 1996: 1)

In this essay, I contribute to the examination of racism and discrimination in Andean societies, and particularly in Ecuador, by focusing on the reproduction of ordinary stereotypical representations of black women as hypersexualized beings. I pay careful attention to visual images and their accompanying written texts in the Ecuadorian press and in other media, which allows for a consideration of ideological continuities across different periods of Ecuadorian history. Indeed, I show that these visual and other representations that circulate

ordinarily in Ecuadorian society have a long trajectory in Ecuadorian history, going from the colonial period, through what we could call “monocultural *mestizaje*”, to contemporary multiculturalism. In a vicious circle of sort, they are both an expression of long held racist beliefs passed on from generation to generation at the same time that they also work as a powerful justification of these beliefs’ truthfulness, constituting in a way a of demonstration of their validity. They contribute to the construction of blacks as what I have called “the ultimate Other”, as a group of people who are not included in the “ideological biology of national identity” (Rahier 2003b, 2008a, 2008b). In Ecuador, and in other national contexts in the Andean region, blacks have remained outside of elites’ imaginings of national identity.

In the second part of the essay, with the reporting on conversations I have had with Afro-Ecuadorian women, I attempt to bring the reader’s attention to the unavoidable and devastating consequences that these stereotypical representations of black people, black bodies, and black sexuality have had on the concrete lives of human beings understood or categorized as ‘blacks’ and of Afro-Ecuadorian women in particular (see Rahier 2003b).

The Hypersexuality of Black Women as a Recurring Stereotype: *Señoras* versus *Mujeres*

My intention here is not to examine all representations of black women that can be found in the Ecuadorian press and on the Internet. Instead, I focus almost exclusively on an enduring stereotype that constructs black women as hypersexual beings.

This research follows the work of a variety of scholars who consider the connections between power and sexuality to be important because the relation that we have with ourselves as sexual beings is a fundamental component of modern identities. Giddens (1992: 15), for example, wrote, “Somehow... sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity, and social norms.” And before that, Foucault (1978: 103) had already stated that “sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality, useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.”

The work of Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), although problematic because of its characteristic peripheral treatment of black women, is conceptually fundamental here. For Fanon, sex and sexuality were not exclusively about personal or individual pleasures and desires. He approached sexual desires and sexual practices or performances as being highly responsive to social and historical circumstances. Where other intellectuals—such as Freud (see Diana Fuss 1995), Lévi-Strauss (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) had theorized about the body in such a way as to standardize the white male body into the norm in relation to which all other bodies had to be evaluated and imagined, Fanon powerfully introduced the notion of the (non-white male) racialized body, the black body, which is, he asserts, in colonial and “post-colonial” (neo-colonial) contexts, an ontological impossibility (see also Mohanram 1999). Where the formers reproduced the Western tradition that consists in “disembodying” the white male by standardizing his body, Fanon insisted upon the opposite: the “embodiment of blackness” or the fact that blackness is not but body. “Though he focuses on the dimension of racial subjectivity, his analysis of the individual is always rooted in the larger socioeconomic, material framework of colonialism. *Black Skin, White Masks* effects,

then, a paradigmatic shift that reconfigures psychoanalysis to account for racial identity and that enables a psychoanalytic critique of racism" (Bergner 1995: 10-11).

The expansion of Europe in non-European spaces came along with the otherization of "non-European" peoples and their transformation, from a eurocentric perspective, into "inferior races." Indeed, since the beginning of the Eighteenth Century, European imperialist discourses of "otherization" of non-European peoples very often used sexuality as a trope. In these discourses, sexuality is manipulated in two different ways, which are actually related to one another. References to sexuality serve either to construct brown and black peoples as savage-like individuals whose character is denoted by "immoral", "abnormal", and "obsessive" sexual practices or, by contrast, sexuality appears as the very metaphor of the imperial enterprises where white males conquer foreign and far away lands that are symbolized by available brown and black female bodies waiting to be penetrated.

Irvin Schick (1999) writes of "ethnopornography", the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries' anthropological or ethnographic discourse on Oriental sexuality, as well as some literary works, that were nothing but "an instrument of the exercise of geopolitical power." In many of these texts—particularly literary texts—foreign lands, which Schick calls "xenotopia", are profoundly sexualized; and we find in them abundant brown and black women—the "omnisexual Others"—who appear as symbols of the lands to be conquered by the white men. As Foucault wrote, "... discourses on sex did not multiply apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise" (1978: 32). In these discursive constructions of "non-Euro-American Others" through the theorizing about their sexuality, the stereotyping of black or Sub-Saharan women's sexuality has been quite edifying. This stereotyping must of course be understood in light of the contrast they make with the moral norms surrounding white women's "purity", bodies, and sexuality that first emerged in the Eighteenth Century. Black and brown women's bodies and sexuality have been construed as directly opposed to the way white European women's bodies and sexuality were imagined or reported, idealized and standardized as norms for proper female bodily characteristics and behaviors. We can recall here, for instance, the work of Sander Gilman (1985a, 1985b) on the tragedy of Sarah Baartman, the so called "Hottentot Venus", and the obsession of European medical doctors of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries for her vagina lips—and especially for her so called "vaginal apron"—and for her buttocks, which were compared to the same body parts of Italian prostitutes (abnormal or pathological white women), before reaching conclusions about the naturally enormous sexual appetite of black women in general.

To comprehend the situation of black women in the Ecuadorian racial ordering of things and people, one must keep in mind that black women's femininity and sexuality have been imagined and ideologically constructed in direct relation, if not definitive opposition, to the femininity and sexuality of two other categories of females: the white females (including so called white-mestizo females), and the indigenous females. For the purpose of this discussion, we could limit the ideological landscape of Ecuadorian femininities to a simplified situation where we have, without mentioning masculinities for now, three fundamental actors: white (and white-mestizo) females, indigenous females, and black or Afro-Ecuadorian females. A brief description of this ideological landscape allows me to explain, in passing, two—racially informed—fundamental socio-cultural categories that are also at work in other Latin American and Caribbean contexts (see Brettell 1995; Douglass 1992; Melhuus &

Stolen 1996; Ulysse 1999): the categories of “Lady” or *Señora* on the one hand, and the category of “Woman” or *Mujer* on the other.

The ideological outsidership of blacks in the biology of national identity is denoted in the discourse about black women’s bodies and sexuality. Emma Cervone (2000) has written on the characteristic masculinity of the Ecuadorian elites’ voice and imagination of *mestizaje*. The latter logically leads to the conception of (hopefully blond and blue eyed) white and white-mestizo females and their sexuality as aesthetically and morally ideal. These ideals constitute more or less violent standards that every woman should try to attain at all costs. This standardization and its attendant construction of “Other bodies” have been encrypted in various aspects of the Ecuadorian landscape: everyday vocabulary and conversations; written and visual representations in the media; texts of songs and popular culture; and literature. Elsewhere, I have written on the place of blackness in the national and other Ecuadorian beauty contests, in which black beauty queens altered the color of their eyes as well as the color and the consistency of their hair to attempt an embodiment of these standards (Rahier 1998, 1999d).

The examination of the conceptual distinction between “Lady” or *señora* and “Woman” or *mujer* helps understand the ideological contrast made by, on one side, white and white-mestizo female bodies and sexuality and black bodies and sexuality on the other. For the purpose of this essay, we could discuss the two concepts this way: A *señora*, *dama*, or lady will be white or white-mestiza; she will be educated and espouse all the signs of “social respectability;” she will be viewed as being dedicated to having children and will not be associated—in male conversations—with sexual pleasure; her body will be well covered and never exposed in the public space; she will not be employed (until the recent economic crises) and will have at least one maid to take care of her house; she will attend social events in the evening, often accompanied by her husband. Her sexuality is not exposed on the public space. She is “pure” maternity. She almost seems to have children without engaging in sexual intercourse. Her icon is the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ.

By contrast, a *mujer* or “woman” will be black or dark skinned; she will be thought of as being of easy sexual access to men; she will be uncovering her body in public spaces in “indecent ways;” she will eventually have sets of children from different men; she will be uneducated and employed as a maid or a cook; her mannerism will be said to be “un-refined;” her body shape will be voluptuous, almost conceived as being naturally obscene or vulgar; she will be the occasional lover of white, white-mestizo and white-mulatto married men, who will comment with loquacity in male gatherings on “black women’s sexual prowess” and the curves of their body parts with expressions such as *una buena negra* (a good looking black woman), *una negra caliente* (a hot black woman), or even by referring to specific body parts more explicitly (usually the buttocks and the legs). In contradistinction with the *señora*, the body of the *mujer* is often associated with the Devil (see below). It is interesting to note here that just as it has been the case in other Latin American contexts, Twentieth Century writers from regions associated with blackness have reproduced these stereotypes about black women’s bodies and sexuality in their poems.

From the perspective of modern, urban Ecuadorian society, Indigenous or “Indian” female bodies and sexuality have been construed as if they exist off to one side of the fundamental opposition described above between white and black females. If in many ways, Indigenous females do unequivocally enter in the category of “women” with the black females, unlike

the latter they do not appear in the same position when references to physical attractiveness and exotic sexuality are made. In fact, in the popular iconography, as well as in written texts, Indigenous women very often appear as non-sexual beings who supposedly smell bad, who are submissively working all the time to raise their children, work the fields and sell in the markets, and who often beg at the traffic light with their most recently born child tied to their backs. Their bodies are usually represented as un-attractively small, and deprived of the curves that characterize black women bodies in the popular imaginary. An exception should be made here about Indigenous women from Otavalo and their changing representations (see de la Torre 1996; Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999).

This relative “attractiveness” of black women when compared to the similar processes of imagination and cultural construction of indigenous females’ femininity, bodies, and sexuality should not be simplistically interpreted as a positive feature within the racial order because, as Lola Young (1999: 81) wrote,

For the black women who have been deemed beautiful and objectified by a white masculinist gaze, their distance from the white feminine ideal has not produced [an] unambiguous revulsion ...: rather, it has been a substantial part of their appeal. However, this attraction, based on the exoticism of otherness, is just as problematic as the racism from which it has emerged.

A Critical Look at Visual Representations of ‘Hypersexual Black Women’

To illustrate the persistence of the stereotypical representations in focus in this essay, I have selected a few images that were published in what is certainly the most popular Ecuadorian magazine: *Vistazo*. The first three come from advertisements. Erving Goffman (1979) has dealt with representations of gender and sex roles, sexual stereotypes, social values, and social structure in advertisements. Although he doesn’t deal with race and racial depictions per se, his observations and discussions are useful here. He shows that although advertisements do not depict how men and women actually behave in the real world, they nevertheless have the function to convince viewers that this is how women and men are, want to be, or should be. They work through the identification of the viewer with one of the characters represented in the images, and in that way they greatly contribute to the reproduction of social values and social orders. The pictures Goffman uses as illustrations and his remarks about them are quite useful for my own descriptive interpretations of the illustrations I present below. Goffman shows that in advertisements a woman is taller than a man only when the man is her social inferior; a woman’s hands are seen just barely touching or caressing—very rarely grasping or manipulating; when a photograph illustrates instruction, the man is always instructing the woman; when an advertisement requires someone to sit or lie on a bed, the person is almost always a woman or child; and women are repeatedly shown mentally drifting from the scene while in close physical touch with a man. Goffman’s analyses demonstrate a link between the images of women and the behavior of children, whereas women are frequently shown acting and looking like children. Lastly, Goffman points out that men tend to wear their clothes, whatever they are, seriously, while what women wear often appears as a costume. When we see a woman wearing formal or informal, business or sports clothes, we feel that we are watching a model play-acting.

Figure 1 is an early 1980s’ advertisement for a brand of men shirts called *Él*. The text says: “Get emotions putting your shirt on, get emotions taking it off. A creation by and for

men. And we talk convinced that our shirts are perfect for the conquering and aggressive contemporary man.” Here, the people who designed the add have found nothing better, or stronger, than the image of a naked, available black woman who offers herself to the white conquering man, enticing him to undress, to evoke the level of manhood, conquering strength and accompanying sexual emotions...

Figure 1

Figures 2 and 3 are two advertisements for a brand of tires, which occupied each time an entire page, in the magazine *Vistazo*, in the early 1980s. They were part of a series of similar advertisements. Here, the play of word is between *negra*, “black woman”, and “tire”, also called *negra*. The thick lips and thick thighs recall some of the most important aspects of the stereotype of hypersexuality discussed in this essay, just as do the adjectives that are applied to the tire/black woman: *rendidora* (“good performing”), *confiable* (“reliable”), and *servicial* (“Obsequious, diligent, obliging, compliant, friendly, accommodating, serviceable”).

Figures 2 & 3

Figure 4 comes from an article published in the *Vistazo* magazine, which was focused on the carnival in Trinidad & Tobago. The title reads “With the Devil in the Body.” The subtitle continues: “The three days before Ash Wednesday the spirit of the festival reigns and intends to replace the time of repentance and mysticism” (*Vistazo* 1986). The idea here is that the liminal time of carnival is in fact dominated by the Devil. How to better represent that than with the image of a black woman wining in front of a black man?

Figure 5 comes from an article published in the *Vistazo* magazine focused that was focused on an Anglican priest in London, the U.K., who paints nude women. The particular sensational attraction of this news here is, obviously, the fact that the priest uses black women for models. The photograph from the back of the nude black model most certainly drew attention to the article. Is he playing with the Devil?

Figure 4

Figure 5
"The priest who paints nudes" (Vistazo 1980).

The Passage from Monocultural *Mestizaje* to Multiculturalism

In Ecuador, as in other Latin American contexts, white and white-mestizo urban and national elites have imagined or invented the national identity around the notion of *mestizaje* (race mixing). These elites have reproduced an ‘Ecuadorian ideology’ of national identity that proclaims the mestizo (mixed race individual who has both European [Spanish] and indigenous ancestry) as the prototype of modern Ecuadorian citizenship. This ideology is based on a belief in the indigenous population’s inferiority, and on an unconditional—although sometimes contradictory—admiration and identification with occidental civilization (see among others Whitten 1981, Stutzman 1981, Silva 1995).

Despite this hegemonic attempt at racial and ethnic homogenization, the Ecuadorian ideology of national identity results in a racist map of national territory: urban centers (mostly Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca) are associated with modernity, while rural areas are viewed as places of racial inferiority, violence, backwardness, savagery, and cultural deprivation. These areas, mostly inhabited by non-whites or non-white-mestizos, have been viewed by the elites as representing major challenges to the full national development toward the ideals of modernity. *Mestizaje*, as Norman Whitten explained for Ecuador, does not mean that the white indianizes himself or herself but that, on the contrary, the Indian whitens himself ‘racially’ and culturally: the official imagination of Ecuadorian national identity “[is] an ideology of *blanqueamiento* within the globalizing framework of *mestizaje*” (Whitten, personal communication).

In this official imagination of Ecuadorian-ness, there is logically no place for blacks: they must remain peripheral. Afro-Ecuadorians—who represent between five and ten percent of the national population—constitute the ultimate Other, some sort of a historical accident, a noise in the ideological system of nationality, a pollution in the Ecuadorian genetic pool. The best example of ‘non-citizenship’, they are not part of official *mestizaje*, unlike Indigenous peoples¹ (see Muratorio 1994). In the logic of the national racial/spatial order, the two ‘traditional’ regions of blackness (both developed during the colonial period), the Province of Esmeraldas and the Chota-Mira Valley, are looked down upon by whites and white-mestizos—this is what Peter Wade calls “cultural topography” (Wade 1993).

Since the early 1990s, following the adoption of multicultural policies specifically targeting Indigenous and African diasporic populations by institutions of international development and global governance (the United Nations, the World Health Organizations, etc.) (Hale 2004, 2006), and also as a result of the political activism of Indigenous and African diasporic communities (de la Torre 2006a), many Latin American nation-states revised their Constitutions and sometimes passed special laws that express a concern for greater inclusion of African diasporic and Indigenous populations. That is in that context that emerged what Charles Hale (2004) called *el indio permitido* (literally the “allowed Indian”, or the “permitted Indian identity”) and that Latin American African diasporic populations gained relative greater agency in comparison to the marked exclusion or construction as (ultimate) Others (see Rahier 1998, 1999b) that characterized their situation during what could be called ‘monocultural *mestizaje*’ (Silva 1995, Polo 2002, Espinosa Apolo 2003, Ibarra Dávila 2002), which roughly extends, for Ecuador, from the early 20th century until

1. It is worth noting that the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement has been notoriously opposing that ideology of national identity that celebrates *mestizaje* throughout the 1990s and beyond.

the major *levantamientos indígenas* (indigenous uprisings) of the early 1990s (see Whitten, *et al.* 2003; Clark and Becker 2007), which culminated in the adoption of a Constitution that celebrates multiculturalism in 1998 by the National Constitutional Assembly. A new Constitution, which is seen as going even further in the direction of multiculturalism, was adopted by another Constituent Assembly in 2008 (see Rahier 2008a, 2008b, Forthcoming).

As evidenced by the analysis of representations I engage in below, the place of blackness within/outside Ecuadorian national identity continues to be ambiguous despite the multicultural turn formally officialized with the adoption of the 1998 Constitution (see Rahier 2008a). With the analyses of visual representations of black women, I refer to the long history of black exclusion from the dominant Ecuadorian understanding of the nation during monocultural *mestizaje* and its metamorphosis into multiculturalism, which provides a genealogy for today's spontaneous representations of Ecuadorian and other black women that can be found on the Internet and in the daily press. I reach the conclusion that even though some notable changes have occurred since the "multicultural turn", there are also profound ideological continuities. Elsewhere, I have argued that in fact with multiculturalism, *mestizaje*—as an ideological technology of the state and as a project of the Ecuadorian elites—has not disappeared from the political landscape but instead continues to do its work both within and around multiculturalism (see Rahier 2008a, 2008b). The point I am making, then, is that for Afro-Ecuadorians, the passage of the official or national stance from 'monocultural *mestizaje*' to 'multiculturalism' has not been accompanied by the transformations that the change of vocabulary might suggest. Instead, it has re-inscribed the prevalent racial order in a 'new' narration of the nation (see Bhabha 1990): Ecuadorian multiculturalism constructs society as composed of a growing and dominant homogeneous majority (the mestizos) that faces a number of small resilient minorities, which often occupy the margins of national territory, and which are organized in distinct communities with their own cultures. These 'small' minorities must be "understood, accepted and basically left alone—since their differences are compatible with the hegemonic culture—in order for the society to have harmonious relations" (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992: 158, see also Comercio 2004). In Ecuador, since the 1990s, the 'small minorities'—mostly the indigenous movement and the communities of Afrodescendants—have become important or visible political agents.

In passing, I also make the case that unlike what was going on during monocultural *mestizaje*, when ideological *mestizaje* was the only national narrative that could be heard, the present situation is in fact characterized by daily confrontations among various narrations of the nation: *mestizaje* is not alone anymore in the ideological arena. These conflicting narratives are grounded on different definitions of what the national community is and emphasize the difficulty of bringing about the unity of the nation by pointing to multiculturalism's unsettled nature.

The material I use here are articles and images published in the Ecuadorian press and on the Internet, as well as some ethnographic data from my work in Ecuador along the years since 1984. My focus is more on mainstream (white and white-mestizo) relatively spontaneous printed expressions about, and visual representations of black people, and particularly women, as a discursive process, and on the impact that these have been having on the lives of Afro-Ecuadorian women.

My discussion follows the work of Barnor Hesse (1999, 2000) when he differentiates between the "multicultural" and "multiculturalism" (see also Hall 2000), where the latter refers

to particular discourses and social forms that attempt to incorporate visible cultural differences and distinct ethnicities into one single national formation—in that sense, “multiculturalism can be named, valued, celebrated, and repudiated from many different political perspectives” (Hesse 2000: 2)—and where the former, the *multicultural*, is constitutive of that political configuration and is a signifier of the unsettled meanings of cultural differences in relation to multiculturalism. In this conceptual framework, multiculturalism is the attempt to fix the meaning of cultural differences in national imaginaries. The multicultural is therefore always embedded in a context characterized by a dichotomy between the West and the Non-West, the global north and the global south, the ‘civilized’ and the ‘savage’, which shapes the cross-cultural processes that establish the meanings of the often (if not always) racially marked instances of contested cultural differences. The multicultural is thus central to the transnational processes that Diaspora formations constitute and which deeply unsettle the idea of self-contained, culturally independent and self-sufficient nationalist identities. The multicultural also involves—always—processes of cultural entanglements often called creolization (see Rahier 1999a, 2008c), which question the notion that national forms are coherent and tidy. Thus, the dynamic of the multicultural is to unsettle supposedly well-established modern societies through processes of what Hesse calls “transruption”, which bring multiculturalism into contested political focus.

A multicultural transruption is constituted by the recurrent exposure of discrepancies in the post-colonial settlement. It comprises any series of contestatory cultural and theoretical interventions which, in their impact as cultural differences, unsettle social norms and threaten to dismantle hegemonic concepts and practices. Transruptions transcend or overcome any initiative to dismiss their relevance, and continually slice through, cut across and disarticulate the logic of discourses that seek to repress, trivialize or silence them. In the absence of effective or satisfactory resolutions, multicultural transruptions are simply recurrent. (the author’s emphasis, Hesse 2000: 17)

In this essay, the best example of transruption is perhaps the case referred to by Saída below, when she shares with the reader the rallying of members of Afro-Ecuadorian women organizations in front of an advertisement for a brand of rum they found offensive because depicting the racialized body of an objectified black woman. Such actions by black activists disrupt the multiculturalist myth about the Ecuadorian nation-state.

When looked at within this theoretical setting, liberal and neo-liberal multiculturalism appears as a re-inscription of the hegemonic social and racial ordering of things which existed before its advent, and which is now formulated in a somewhat different political configuration with the help of a ‘new’ vocabulary. Charles Hale emphasized the links between neo-liberal economic reforms and multiculturalism in Central America (Hale 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006). His remarks are pertinent for Andean South America, particularly when he writes that neoliberal governance has included a

(...) limited recognition of cultural rights, the strengthening of civil society, and (the) endorsement of the principle of intercultural equality. When combined with neoliberal economic policies, these progressive measures have unexpected effects, including a deepened state capacity to shape and neutralize political opposition, and a remaking of racial hierarchies across the region. (Hale 2005: 10)

Visual Representations of National Identity during Monocultural *Mestizaje*

Today's ideological constructions of the Ecuadorian nation, which come with their attendant visual representations of Afro-Ecuadorians as—at best—ambiguous citizens who are both within and without dominant definitions of Ecuadorian-ness, should be interpreted at the light of the history of Ecuadorian elites' imaginings.

Media representations provide a privileged space wherein ideological formations and mostly white and white-mestizo voices on blacks and on 'national identity' crystallize and are recorded (see Rahier 1999c, 1999b).

In an article published in the magazine *Vistazo*, and entitled "How many are we? Who are we?", (*Vistazo* 1963) a journalist comments upon the 1962 Ecuadorian census. After noting the growth of the population to 4.5 millions, particularly in urban areas, and the faster growth of the population of the coast in relation to the population of the *sierra* or Andes, the journalist writes about the third region of the country, the *Oriente* or "Ecuadorian Amazon", which was then thought of as the last frontier: "The creation of new provinces in the Oriente brought about an impressive growth of the urban nuclei's populations. ...[A] lot still remains to be done, however, despite the bitter experience of 1941 [a frontier war with Peru, which Ecuador lost], to revitalize these areas, and to bring them a wave of civilization and progress" (*Vistazo* 1963: 71). In a section entitled *La conformación étnica y la discriminación racial* ("Ethnic Composition and Racial Discrimination"), the journalist continues: "It would seem that in a country like ours, which clearly has a defined ethnic composition, the issue of racial prejudices would be out of place. This unfortunately is not the case" (*Vistazo* 1963: 72). After situating the objective of the article in line with a then recent initiative against racism promoted by the UNESCO, and after lamenting the continued existence of the "bacterias of racism that reached us by contamination from the old World", the journalist adds:

As we have repeated at numerous occasions, we are a mestizo country. And the census that was just completed gives us the opportunity to insist upon the issue, which never loses its relevance, or its dogmatic and visible force.

First were the Indians, the Aborigines, the Autochthones, the lords of the virgin territory of the Americas. Then came the whites, who in the initial phase, in the orgy of blood and sensuality, which made them fabulously rich, "when Spain and its women were far away", they had sex (se unieron) with indigenous women without prejudice of any kind. Later came the blacks, brought by the erroneous kindness of Fray Bartolome de las Casas. (...)

The small group of white adventurers in the immensity of America [the Americas]—because, that's all they were: a small group—feared that if they united, the two enslaved races, the Indians and the blacks, could create a new entity that, by its numeric importance, and because of love and kinship, could conquer them with time.

*That is how emerged, as a reaction to this fear, and as one can observe in the archives of the Municipality of Quito, the first law of separation of the races, that had been elaborated with the typical cruelty of the time: "The black man found having sexual intercourse with an Indian woman will have his genitals (companiones) cut." (my emphasis; (*Vistazo* 1963: 72)*

The journalist then concludes that according to his or her calculations, 42% of the national population is mestiza, 38% are Indians, 14% white, and 6% black. He or she goes on to celebrate the mixed origin of various politicians and notables whose names were often pronounced after the adjective "Indian" like the "Indian Alfaro" for Eloy Alfaro (the leader

of the liberal revolution in Ecuador, at the end of the 19th century) and the “Indian Espejo” for an important figure of the colonial period, Eugenio Espejo (see Vargas 1968, Minchom 1994, Miño 1995):

Marvelous Indians! Indians like the Aztec Cuauhtémoc, like Rumiñahui and Pintag, like Caupolicán and Lautaro, your blood, when it became one with the Spanish blood, became a guide for our people, the symbols of the cosmic race dreamed about by Vasconcelos. (Vistazo 1963: 72)

In this article, the journalist assumes as a matter-of-factly the perspective of the white man adventurer and feels quite comfortable to reproduce the romantic imagining of white-Indian inter-racial sex characteristic of *indigenismo*, which attempts to cover over the issue of the relation between sex and power in colonial context: “Then came the whites, who in the initial phase, in the orgy of blood and sensuality, which made them fabulously rich, ‘when Spain and its women were far away’, they had sex (*se unieron*) with indigenous women without prejudice of any kind” (72). Not a word about the indigenous women’s agency, desire or revulsion. In any case, sex with them is presented as understandable only because of the absence of Spanish women. The silence in this text—which is in fact a version of the Ecuadorian myth of national formation—about the possibility of sex between white adventurers and black women is also informative and contributes to the construction of blacks as ‘national outsiders’ who are not part of official *mestizaje*. The focus of the article shifts quickly to the danger of sex between members of subaltern populations that would not be mediated by the powerful white (see Whitten 2003). The photographs that accompany the article are quite edifying in their illustration of *mestizaje* as a white supremacist ideology grounded on 19th century racist anthropology (Rahier 2003a): A series of portraits of mestizo men entitled *los mestizos geniales* (“the brilliant mestizos”) are accompanied by each represented mestizo’s last name: Espejo, Montalvo, Alfaro. A second series of photographs recalls the anthropology of types of the late 19th and early 20th century, and is entitled *tipos étnicos de la población ecuatoriana* (“ethnic types of the Ecuadorian population”). It does not come with last names but with the qualification of the represented individuals’ types: “Indian from the Chimborazo Province”, “black man from Esmeraldas Province”, “Jibaro from Zamora Province”, and “mulatto from Guayas Province” (see figure 6).

A 1981 advertisement for audio cassettes with the *historia hablada del Ecuador* (“the spoken history of Ecuador” based on the work of celebrated Ecuadorian historian Alfredo Pareja Diezcanseco) (Vistazo 1981: 33), provides another illustrative representation of “national identity” during hegemonic *mestizaje* (see figure 7). It features as principal motif in the middle of the page, the heads of three male heroes of official Ecuadorian history: on the left, the Indian “general” who led the resistance against Spanish conquistadors, Rumiñahui; at the center José María Velasco Ibarra, a populist (white-mestizo) politician who was President of Ecuador in 1934-1935, 1944-1947, 1952-1956, and 1960-1961 (see de la Torre 1992, Becker 2007); and on the right the *Mariscal* Sucre, standing for the Spanish origin: he led the military campaigns for Independence in what was then called Gran Colombia. The machoist and heteronormative image is straightforward and the marginalization of Afro-Ecuadorians obvious: the coming together of Indians and Europeans gave place to who ‘we’ are today: (white-)mestizos!

Figure 6

It is composed of two series of photographs taken from a Vistazo article published in January 1963 (n. 68). The series of photographs at the top, and the photographs at the bottom were taken, respectively, from the article's page 72 and 73 (Vistazo 1963).

Figure 7

(Vistazo 1981).

Conversations with Afro-Ecuadorian Women

Let's listen to two Afro-Ecuadorian women, Salomé and Saída², who live in Quito and whom I have interviewed in the early 2000s. I asked them to share with me their views on the stereotypes that exist in Ecuadorian society about black women's bodies and sexuality.

I met Salomé for the first time in 1996, during a party organized in Quito by a friend we had in common. Thanks to the financial help of her older brother, who was then single and who was working as a government employee, she graduated from a local university with the equivalent of a Bachelor of Arts degree. She now works for a foreign NGO. She was born in Quito from working class parents who migrated from the Chota-Mira Valley. We progressively became good friends and we meet on numerous occasions every time I visit the country.

Saída was born in Quito in 1970 from Afro-Choteño parents. Her mother was visiting relatives in Quito at the end of her pregnancy. Saída is the last one of her mother's six children. Shortly after her birth, they moved to the Chota Valley, where they lived until she became of age to attend primary school. She went to primary and secondary school as well as to college in Ibarra, where she lived with her mother. They visited the Valley almost every weekend and every holiday, particularly when it was harvest season. Although she physically spent a lot of time in Ibarra, she always kept in contact with the Valley and grew up in Afro-Choteño environments. She obtained the equivalent of a Bachelor degree in Education as a natural sciences teacher from Ibarra's *Universidad del Norte*.

-Salomé: I was an attractive adolescent. They called me rompe corazones, "heart breaker." There were quite a few white and white-mestizo boys chasing after me, because I was born and I grew up among white-mestizos, in Quito. Until adolescence I didn't really have black friends. The only black people around me were my relatives, but they lived far away, in the [Chota] Valley. When walking in unknown white-mestizo neighborhoods, I experimented racist aggression. If I crossed the street where some white-mestizo male kids were hanging out, they immediately shouted things like negra rica, "delicious black woman", "how attractive this black woman is", and things like that. Very often, they insist on the curves of black women's legs and behinds by saying: "That black woman has a nice butt!" I was able to understand that what they were saying were not simply compliments, but that on the contrary it was profoundly disrespectful. That is when I began feeling my condition as a black woman and as a sexual object. They have so many mottos about the fact that men can cure illnesses by having sex with black women, like to cure the kidneys. They say that black women have a lot of sexual energy ... I realized that what they were really after was my body, they just wanted to have sex with me. It would be quite strange, in fact, to see a white or white-mestizo Ecuadorian man wanting to be with a black woman as a partner for life.

-Saída: Obviously, and that is sad to say, we black women in Ecuador are looked at as sexual objects. At first they look at your figure, your body. Well, we must also say that in general, we black women have a voluptuous figure [una figura carnadita]: A small waist, long legs, and round buttocks. That is something that is true. Even the white-mestizo women, not only the white-mestizo men, are amazed by the body of black women. They even say "Wow, you have a beautiful body, I would love to be like that!"

2. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.

That's what some of them have told me. But when men look at you, you understand right away that they are undressing you and imagining you with them in bed.

*White-mestizo men look at you differently than do black men. They look at you as if a black woman is valued only for sex. With black men, it's different. Even if they think you are pretty and attractive, they don't objectify you the same way. Because it's normal for a man to appreciate a woman who has a good body. But white-mestizos go directly to the sexual thing; they say things like: *Que buena es esta negra para los riñones*, [this black woman is good for the kidneys]. I like to dress with tight clothes, but I don't do it often, because if I do I would be the target of vulgar comments in the street. When you get on the bus, as a black woman, you must be careful with the bus employees [los oficiales] who sell the tickets, because they will grab your behind, shamelessly; they'll even feel under your skirt. I have no problem with people telling a black woman that she is pretty, but there are ways of saying it. Many just say it while looking insistently at her buttocks. That is when you feel like a sexual object.*

Saída told me that at various occasions in her life, she was approached in the street in Quito by white-mestizo men who addressed her as if she were a sexual worker. She explained how surprised and hurt she felt the first time it happened; she was so amazed by it that she didn't know how or what to respond. Now, when somebody wants to ask anything in the street, she just walks away without paying any attention.

Saída also told me about one of her white-mestiza co-workers who seems to be obsessed by her buttocks, which made her feel racialized:

S: There is a white-mestiza at work to whom I have said a thousand times to stop touching my buttocks. One day I asked her if she liked women. And she responded no, that she is married, that my buttocks just amaze her. She must be around 35 years old; she is thin, and she has no butt whatsoever; she is flat as one can be. When I dress with pants, she comes and asks me if I put some cushions to augment the volume of my buttocks. Finally, I told her that if she wants to do so she can admire them, but from afar, without touching them. One day, she even told me that if she had a body like mine she would have a lot of men at her feet. I responded that a woman is much more than just a pair of buttocks. But then, she said that the first thing men look at is that, the body. And there, she's right.

In another conversation with Saída, she explained that she is member of the Pichincha Province black women's association. One day, various members of the association organized a small rally in front of a big advertisement, which consisted of a huge photograph of a nude, dark, black woman with a voluptuous body, and with particularly meaty buttocks. It was an advertisement for a brand of rum called Ron Negrita. The face of the black woman was not visible. The most important body parts for the advertisers were obviously her back and her buttocks: she appeared laying down, from the back, as if offering herself to the public. The text of the poster said *El Placer Líquido con la Cola Negra*, "The Liquid Pleasure [the rum] with the black cola [Coca Cola or Pepsi Cola]." The sexual play of words consisting in suggesting that the "black behind" (cola negra) does provoke "liquid pleasure" (ejaculation). They went in a group to complain to the managers of the company that produces the rum and demanded the immediate removal of the poster because of its offensiveness to black women. The managers promised to do so, but the poster was not removed. One afternoon, at a time of the day when many people stood in front of the advertisement, they stained the poster. The police intervened without arresting anybody. The poster was removed two days later.

Figure 8

The Advertisement for the Rhum Negrita referred to by Saïda. It was photographed on a building near the Gonzalez Suarez street, in Quito. The expression Placer Líquido is found near the image of the bottle.

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Conclusions

I have shown how pervasive the stereotype of hypersexuality of black women has been in Ecuadorian mainstream society. It continues to permeate in common-sensical and ordinary representations in the press, in advertisements, in television shows, in everyday conversations, on the Internet, etc. The abundance of repetitions of this stereotype works to express the state of mind of ordinary white-mestizo Ecuadorians at the same time that it works—as it were—as a proof of their veracity. This pervasiveness has survived the so-called multicultural turn that took place in Ecuador at the end of the 1990s with the adoption of a new Constitution (see Rahier 2008a, 2008b). The Ecuadorian ‘multicultural turn’ obviously denotes a change of attitude towards Afro-Ecuadorians (they are now named in the national Constitution), at the same time that it reaffirms their marginality and reinscribes their subalternity: the place of blackness within/outside Ecuadorian national identity continues to be ambiguous (Rahier 2008a, 2008b). Although an official rhetoric of multiculturalism was inaugurated with the 1998 Constitution, it has not fundamentally changed the dominant paradigm of *identidad nacional*. Official *mestizaje* continues to do its ideological work within and around multiculturalism, which has for direct consequence to continue to marginalize Afro-Ecuadorian citizens, despite their now greater visibility. Racialism and racism are still very much informing the hierarchy of differences in a social order that has a long history that began during the colonial period. These representations have a direct and devastating consequences in the lives of Afro-Ecuadorians, in the way they end up seeing themselves.

It is against this reaffirmation and this reinscription that Afro-Ecuadorian activists are mobilizing for greater social justice and inclusion. They make claims to cultural citizenship as an alternative to denied national belonging. And their political deployments are organized for the purpose of mobilization against the racial exclusionary practices of ‘modernity’. They will need to continue their transruptive noise if they want to receive unambiguously the comfortable place they deserve to have within the nation-state.

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