THE RACIAL DROPS OF CULTURE

As I began to write the introduction to this issue, just 2 weeks away from what is already a historic election in the United States, I recalled a conversation with two taxi drivers on my way to and from the NYC airport last spring. The first driver, a Dominican New Yorker, brought up the subject of Hillary versus Obama, and by the end of our trip, had explained to me why he, as one of the leaders of the significant Dominican community in the City, could guarantee that “la comunidad entera iba a votar por Hillary.” On the way home from the airport a few days later, the African-American taxi driver picked up on the same subject, saying: “We don’t have anything to worry about when it comes to the African American community coming out to vote. It’s the Latino community that I’m worried about. He, [Obama], needs their vote.”

Now, months later, the issue of Latino/as’ support for this most recent African-American icon is again on my mind. In spite of the sometimes heated and often useless political discussions on the national radio and television talk shows, the very real racism that still underlies US society and politics – and notwithstanding the surreal debates on who are the “real Americans” and the implications of the “Bradley” or “reverse Bradley” effects – the liberal and even some conservative representatives of the mainstream media are currently and almost unanimously predicting an Obama victory, if not a landslide. Moreover, with Hillary out of the race, and the Republicans out of favor largely as a result of their unequivocally anti-immigrant stance in 2006, various polls appear to be pointing to the growing support for Obama among US Latino/as. For many, it may be a tenuous support at best, due to the Obama campaign’s loud silence (which mirrors McCain’s) on, among other issues, the plight of the undocumented, racial profiling, the inhumane raids, the ongoing persecution of immigrants, the family separations, US relations with Latin America, the imitation of the Berlin wall, and the growing incarceration of Latino/as. Undoubtedly, anti-blackness still continues to permeate the Latino/a community. Nevertheless, Latino/as are leaning toward supporting Obama.

In analyzing the causes and implications of this tenuous – and temporary? – shift among Latino/as, specifically in terms of race relations in the United States, the point Roberto Lovato recently made when he was interviewed by Bill Moyers, is very much on target:

We’re going through a structural adjustment of our economy, but we’re also going through a structural adjustment of our ideas about race.

We’re not in a post-racial society by any means. I think the idea of

a post-racial society is dangerous. I think we're in flux, like a chrysalis, in the sense that the black-white paradigm, the black-white dichotomy that defined freedom, that defined democracy in the United States, is over. Clearly, I think Latinos, 45 million of us, are the embodiment of that, if you will. And I think whites in some parts of the United States, especially in the southwest, are having to adjust to the fact that they're minorities....

The Latino party for the GOP is over for perhaps a decade or more. And I think, going back to your question about what's at stake for Latinos, I think you're going to see Latinos increasingly rise up to the call of history in the United States. Latinos will have a fundamental and definitive role in shaping what becomes the United States. And I think we're going to give birth to a more global citizenship.¹

1 Cf. <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/10172008/transcript4.html>.

Together with what Lovato describes as the structural adjustment of our economy, and I would add of the global economic system itself, there is no doubt that these elections have forced the renewal of the "national discussion" of race, of Latino/as role and position in US society, as well as a re-examination of black-Latino/a relations which was largely unpredictable even a year ago. Concerns over the meaning of blackness are today high on the national agenda. It is certainly an issue that people of Latin American descent are forced to understand and address on a daily basis in US society – whether through racial profiling or cultural and linguistic stereotypes, and regardless of whether they are US-born citizens, naturalized residents, or documented or undocumented immigrants.

The understanding of blackness in the Americas takes many forms – certainly there are the traditional "visual props" –phenotype, color, "good" and "bad" hair, etc. But in the United States, and beyond the visibility of blackness, there is also the more subtle and not so subtle "darkening" of people who are not African Americans, or even dark-skinned. Racialization in this country ensures not that "one drop of white blood makes you white" (as is the case in Latin America), but rather that "one drop of black blood makes you black." Throughout the history of the United States, that clearly un-measurable, hypothetical and, frankly, ridiculous yet deeply ingrained belief in that "one drop," can suddenly make someone's skin look a little more than merely a "dark tan" (a la Richard Rodriguez, so many years ago), just as easily as it can permeate and misconstrue cultural and linguistic differences.

This issue of our Journal explores the ways that these racial and racializing dimensions are discussed in and through various forms of Latino/a cultural products, the role of alternative or traditional medicine in Latino/a communities, Latino/a novels, and humor as a cultural response. Yajaira Padilla's article focuses on the presence of Central Americans in the New Nuevo South, through her brilliant analysis of Marcos McPeck Villatoro's detective novel,

Home Killings. She points to the ways that the new and growing presence of Latino/as is today configuring the identities of Central Americans, their *Latinidad*, in the new southern US context in which traditional white-black paradigms have long prevailed. Laura Halperin's analysis of the relation between creativity and madness in Cristina Garcia's depiction of her main character, Celia, in *Dreaming in Cuban*, introduces a largely neglected dimension to the ongoing discussions of this novel. Halperin highlights the ways that Garcia's literary analysis of madness actually foregrounds not only gender, but also the ethnic and racial dimensions of Celia. Halperin argues that by also emphasizing racial and ethnic markings, Garcia's work complicates what to date has primarily been gender-based analyses of the figure of the archetypal "madwoman" and "portrays a troubling alliance among patriarchy, mental health care, and ethno-racial biases that pathologizes and represses *cubana* artistic expression." Karen Holliday's essay deconstructs the racialization of Latina/o health practices in the United States. Tracing the "difficult application of static interpretations of Latino cultural practices in public health," she examines the cultural connotations and implications of labels such as "folk," "traditional," "complementary," or "alternative" medicine. Evan Cooper's essay focuses on the issue of negative stereotypes of Latino/as. He examines why both Latino/a and non-Latino/a students in his study perceive Leguizamo's humor as portraying Latino/as in a negative light and were unable to see past the dominant cultural stereotypes of Latinos. Arguing that Leguizamo "exudes a working class perspective," Cooper discusses its consequences in relation to Latinos' lack of visibility in popular culture and the inherently problematic nature of culturally intimate humor.

In this issue, we also publish Kamala Platt's chilling warning about the presence of the intelligence community in academe. Finally, Silvio Torres Saillant's annual Páginas Recuperadas focuses on the "unlikely Latino/as" – Brazilians in the United States.

Saludos!

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