

# Blackness, the Racial/Spatial Order, Migrations, and Miss Ecuador 1995-96

IN ECUADOR, as elsewhere in Latin America (Gould 1993), the official imagination of national identity has been constructed since the colonial period by the white and white-mestizo elites around the notion of *mestizaje* (race mixing); it is "an ideology of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) within the globalizing framework of *mestizaje*."<sup>1</sup> Despite its obvious intention to render racial and ethnic diversity invisible, this Ecuadorian ideology of national identity imposes a racist reading on the map of national territory, which consists of conceiving rural areas as places of racial inferiority, indolence, backwardness (if not savagery), and cultural deprivation. These areas, mostly populated by nonwhites, are seen as nothing but burdens and challenges to the full development of the nation toward the ideals of modernity.

In this essay my intent is to locate blackness within the cultural topography of Ecuadorian society, or what I call its racial/spatial order. Rather than considering blackness as essentialized identity, defined once and for all, frozen in time and space, which Paul Gilroy calls an "ethnic absolutism" and which implies the adoption of the concept of a "racialized and sovereign self" (1995), I opt for a concept of self as a fragmented and problematic entity. Such an approach requires that we view blackness in terms of personal, social, cultural, political, and economic processes embedded in particular time/space contexts, which are constituted within local, regional, national, and transnational dimensions.

My discussion shows how, in the logic of the racial/spatial order, the migration of Ecuadorian blacks from the rural areas of the Andean Chota-Mira Valley and the coastal province of Esmeraldas into the urban centers represents a threat for white-mestizo Ecuadorian society. The presence of Afro-Ecuadorians has greatly

changed in the urban society, when compared to the "invisibility" of blackness of 25 years ago. Blacks are physically present, and their numbers can no longer be ignored. Despite the refusal of many whites and white mestizos to consider them as such, they have become an integral part of the landscape of the two major urban areas of the country: Quito and Guayaquil. These are the centers of political and economic power where "Ecuadorianidad" is imagined and reimagined and whence it is projected and imposed upon the national space.

Migration of blacks to urban centers continues to be seen as a threat even when blacks are moving up the socioeconomic ladder and do not act according to racist stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Racism quickly puts an end to their hopes and aspirations.

## Blackness and the Racial Order

Since the beginning of the republican history of the country, the white and white-mestizo elite have reproduced an Ecuadorian ideology of national identity which proclaims the mestizo as the prototype of modern citizenship. For the purpose of the present discussion, *mestizo* is defined as a "mixed race" individual who has both European (Spanish) and indigenous ancestry, a child of the Old and New Worlds.<sup>3</sup>

For Erika Silva (1995), two myths provide the ground within which the ideology of "Ecuadorianness" takes root. The first one, the "Myth of the Dominion on the Soil," has to do with territoriality. It presents Ecuador as a country rich in natural resources, with a varied environment blessed by nature. It also emphasizes the "crazy geography that the indigenous people could not dominate" (Silva 1995:13).<sup>4</sup> Only the Spanish conquistadors were able to vanquish the rebellious nature from their initial settlement in Quito, from which they launched their enterprise of discovery and colonization. Numerous texts from Ecuadorian historiography and

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literature mythify Quito as the "heart of the mother country," "the hub," the command center of the national life and history (Silva 1995:13).

The second myth is the "Myth of the Vanquished Race." The various Ecuadorian indigenous communities constitute a vanquished race because they were the victims of a triple conquest: the conquest of geography, the conquest of the Inca, and the Spanish conquest. The latter conquest, "by defeating them, brought the possibility of the emergence of the nationality, because it gave birth to a new product: the mestizo, viewed as the unique and genuine son of the land of the Americas" (Silva 1995:9). Mestizaje is understood as the very beginning of Ecuadorian history. It is the essence of Ecuadorianidad.

These myths are based on a belief in the indigenous population's inferiority and on an unconditional admiration and identification with occidental civilization. The Spanish conquest opened the road of national resurrection. As Norman Whitten (1984) indicated when he explained the significance of the process of blanqueamiento in Ecuadorian society, this ideology of Ecuadorianess as a "mestizo-ness" does not suggest that the white is "Indianizing" himself but, on the contrary, that the Indian "whitens" himself racially (*métissage*, or race mixing) and culturally.

In this imagination of Ecuadorianess, there is logically no place for blacks; they remain invisible. Afro-Ecuadorians constitute the ultimate Other, some sort of a historical aberration, a noise in the ideological system of nationality, a pollution in the genetic pool, the only true alien, the "noncitizen" par excellence; they are not part of mestizaje (Stutzman 1981:63).

Throughout the history of modern Ecuador, Quito and Guayaquil have been the places where the institutions of the Ecuadorian state are located and where the important economic and political decisions are made by a white and white-mestizo national elite (Fernández 1994). The national elite controls the state's institutions and defines Ecuadorianess in terms of mestizo-ness. The national development plan sees the cities as epicenters from which civilization flows to the rural and frontier areas, where mainly ignorant, unskilled, indigenous, and black people live. The premise of this movement is that the illiterate, nonwhite, rural population constitutes nothing more than an obstacle on the road to national development. This ideology conceives the state as a large-scale planner that will lead the illiterate and backward rural people into greater participation in the national institutions. It first emerged in the political discourse during the liberal revolutions at the end of the 19th century and still serves the Ecuadorian elite.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Ecuadorian society is spatially constituted.<sup>6</sup> It is organized in a particular "cultural topography" (Wade 1993:50) within which different ethnic groups (indige-

nous people, blacks, mestizos, white mestizos, and whites) traditionally reside in specific places or regions (with particular histories), enjoy different concentrations of economic and political power, and occupy different positions on the national social ladder and in the racial order. Blacks and indigenous people are found at the bottom, and 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 the white and white-mestizo urban citizenry as places of violence, laziness, backwardness, and unconquered nature.

### Some Early Ethnographic Encounters

Many people from Quito (*quiteños*) spend their vacations a few miles south of the city of Esmeraldas, in the beach town of Atacames. Some of them have bought land to build second residences, small hotels, or restaurants near the beach. Here one can observe an antagonism between local inhabitants born in the village and these permanent or seasonal migrants known as *serranos*.<sup>7</sup> In most of the buildings under construction, no local worker is engaged. The labor is contracted in Quito for work periods of two weeks at a time. When asked why the workers are hired from so far away rather than locally, the persons in charge of the construction feel very comfortable in explaining that local workers (i.e., Afro-Esmeraldians) are lazy, untrustworthy thieves.

As an Afro-European man, I had the opportunity more than once to experience the existence of the racial order and the spatial dimensions within which it is constituted.<sup>8</sup> On numerous occasions, in Quito, white, white-mestizo, and mestizo persons, after learning about my Afro-Ecuadorianist research interest, spontaneously shared with me their negative views of Ecuadorian blacks. They described them as an uncivilized people living in remote areas outside of the scope of modernity, where hot climates gave shape to their innate laziness and violence, which they bring with them when they migrate. They did so without ever thinking that I might be offended. The idea that I, a black person from the "developed world," could identify with Ecuadorian blacks never entered their minds. Such an identification was simply not probable since, in their scale of cultural respectability, my "Europeanness" seemingly erased (most of) my blackness. When I pointed out that I myself was a black person, they invariably responded, sometimes interrupting me, saying that perhaps I was black, but I was a "fine black" (*un negro fino*), an "educated black." "Como así se va a comparar con esta gente pués? (How can you compare yourself with these people?)" they asked. My Europeanness was a powerful source of prestige.

During my 1990 fieldwork in the northern sector Esmeraldas Province, I taped an interview with a Quito nurse who self-identified as white mestiza. She was working as a staff member in a five-year development project funded by American and Dutch Protestant churches. This project had as its objective to teach "better health and spiritual practices" and to provide free basic health care to the Afro-Esmeraldian population of the region surrounding the small village of Santo Domingo de Onzole, deep in the Esmeraldian rain forest. Curious to know how a white mestiza from Quito would view the black people among whom she was working, I asked her how she had gotten involved in such a project. She enthusiastically responded,

More than a year ago, I met an American who was working in community development and who was a friend of my current boss. His name was Calvin. During my conversations with Calvin, he urged me to work on a development project, because he thought that I had an adventurous spirit. It is true that I like movement; I don't like to stay still in the same place for too long. Calvin's friend, Ron, was working in villages of the Cayapas River [in northern Esmeraldas Province]. As he was leaving Quito for a trip, I jokingly told him to take me with him. One day he took me with him, and I had the opportunity to meet black people. . . . Nothing happened to me, and this traveling at night in a canoe! I was the only woman among black men! Later, Calvin interviewed me, and I told him that I was interested in experiencing new things. Then the first thing he told me was that in Santo Domingo I would not meet white people, that the entire population is black. I told him that I was a little afraid. But he said that I had already overcome the fear. Then I told him that I wanted to go but that I was not 100 percent sure that I could stay in the project until the end, but that I wanted to make an attempt. He accepted my conditions. . . . Black kids are so active, so happy, so sweet, they are charming. . . . I am also very frightened by the snakes and the insects. . . . Apparently we have a vision of these black people as aggressive. They are so big, so strong, but they are so tender with kids. Now, I don't have fear anymore. This is my experience.

Her statements show the racial/spatial order at work. From her quiteño self, she expresses her fear of blacks, whom she identifies as strange, strong, and aggressive and as people who live in an untamable nature filled with numerous wild insects and animals. Her recent experiences, of interacting with blacks on their land, however, seem to have alleviated her fear, although she persists in objectifying and infantilizing them. The fact that she shamelessly shared these views with me is indicative of her awareness of the spatial dimensions of blackness. She associated me more with Calvin and Ron, white Americans for whom she had great respect, than with the poor, rural Afro-Esmeraldians with whom she was working. Again, my European-ness was attenuating my blackness. Conversely, no

Afro-Ecuadorian could ever hope to be, in her eyes, anything more than a *negrito* ("a sweet little black").

## The Racist Comments of Two White-Mestizo Police Colonels

On September 5, 1995, the daily Quito newspaper *Hoy*, usually regarded as a progressive paper, reported on several criminal events. The first one had taken place right after a black music festival organized by black groups and funded by the municipality of Quito:

While many were still present on the plaza, gunshots killed four people. According to witnesses, everything began when a couple and their four-month-old son were assailed by gang members near the bus stop. One of the assailants stabbed the child to death, and in retaliation the father shot his son's murderer. The gang members responded by firing in all directions. Almost at the same time, machine-gun fire was heard at another corner of the plaza. According to witnesses, an unknown individual, who was driving a Suzuki Forza, was turning around as if he was waiting for the end of the cultural event. Around 9:00 p.m., the driver of the Forza came out of his vehicle with a machine gun and began to shoot into the crowd, as if he wanted to kill everybody who was there. . . . The criminal, presumably disturbed, escaped in his car and is being sought by the police. [*Hoy* 1995a:12B]

Under the subtitle "Kidnapping, Suicides and Something More," the journalist continued describing more crimes.

In addition to this, other violent events occurred. There was, for instance, an attempted kidnapping. The young woman María Bernarda Bonilla (16 years old), who was driving a new Jeep Trooper, was attacked by *people of color* [*sujetos de color*] who wanted to kidnap her. Finally the teenager escaped, but she was very frightened. [*Hoy* 1995a:12B, emphasis added]

I include these passages because they are informative about those events that set off a chain of reactions and counterreactions from different sectors of Ecuadorian society and also because they illustrate the process of reproduction of stereotypical images of blacks in the Ecuadorian press. The only time a racial identification is mentioned is when the criminals are black and the victims are nonblacks. In both morning and afternoon newspapers, when the ethnic or racial identity of a person involved in a crime is mentioned, it is always a black (*moreno*, *raza morena*, *persona de color*, and so forth), and he is always the aggressor, the criminal, the beast, the savage. There is no mention of the racial identity of the aggressors in the incidents that preceded and followed the kidnapping attempt. The journalist remains silent as well on the identity of the victims of the first two crimes. We will learn later, in another article,

that in fact they were black. This article, which racializes criminals only when they are black men victimizing nonblacks, was written in the spirit of the Ecuadorian racial order, which equates blackness with crimes, murders, rapes, and violence. Some journalists, however, speak out against that accepted racial order.

On Saturday, September 9, 1995, Sylvia Mejía reported in *Hoy* various interviews she conducted on that story with the police colonel who heads the Oficina de Investigación del Delito, or OID (Bureau of Investigation of Crime), a sort of local FBI, and the colonel/commandant of the police regiment "Quito." "Is it the fault of the blacks?" Mejía asks the reader.

Both the chief of the OID and the commandant of the regiment "Quito" have their own theories about the cause of this outbreak of violence. . . . The four persons who were murdered on Saturday, as well as the majority of the wounded, were of the black race. Perhaps that is why the two colonels do not hesitate to propose an unusual version of the genesis of this "wave of violence": "*This migration of blacks has attacked the city,*" says the chief of the OID . . . while the commandant of the regiment "Quito" offers a more extended explanation: "*There is a type of race that is inclined toward delinquency, to commit horrible acts . . . that is the black race [raza morena] that is taking over the urban centers of the country, forming belts of poverty conducive to delinquency because of their ignorance and their audacity.*"<sup>9</sup> [Mejía 1995b:5B, emphasis added]

The "black race" of the victims makes them automatically suspect. On September 21, 1995, *Hoy* presented a series of protests from various organizations: the Human Rights Committee of Esmeraldas, the Department of Afro-Ecuadorian Pastoral of the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference, and the dance company Azúcar, created by young blacks residing in Quito. Azúcar presented the following manifesto:

How is it possible that police authorities, in charge of guaranteeing peace and order, maintain racist prejudices [and] encourage with their statements racial discrimination, a situation that causes social violence? . . . Do not generalize. . . . Do not try to offend people, do not try to hide the incompetence or the impotence of a state and its institutions, behind the blacks, the Indians, the poor, and the different. Are the high officials involved in the garbage of corruption in the police, in the congress, and even in the national government black? [Mejía 1995a:5]

Ricardo Garcés, representative of the Grupo de Pastoral Negra de San Lorenzo (a Catholic organization from Esmeraldas Province), and Renán Tadeo, member of the Quito-based Centro Cultural Afro-Ecuatoriano, protested as well against the racist statements of the colonels. They commented on the segregation black people have to suffer in urban areas:

We are well aware of the racism that surrounds us. We have been feeling it all of our lives in the buses, in high schools,

in the street. . . . The press specifies "person of the black race," when a black person has committed a crime, but they do not use [this type of] adjective in the other cases; they do not say "of a mestizo race" or "of a white race." . . . There are still high schools or night clubs where blacks may not go. Have you yet seen a black cashier in a bank? Blacks are hired, but as guards. It's still common that, when we try to rent an apartment, the owners tell us that it is already rented because they do not want to rent to blacks. Here, there is still a sneaky racism. [Mejía 1995a:5]

On September 24, 1995, *Hoy* printed a letter sent by the general commandant of the national police to the editor, in which he complains about the alleged distortions in Sylvia Mejía's printed interviews with the two police colonels. At his letter's end, the general tries to validate the idea that blacks are more involved in violent criminal activities than others. This is the case, he adds, because of the negative influence of Colombian delinquents.

According to the statistics, a percentage of national delinquents, influenced by the delinquents of other neighboring countries, are black men [*hombres morenos*] who commit crimes with firearms. In these commentaries, one can appreciate that the police identified victims of the violence, as well as others who committed it, as members of the black race. If this indication, presumably offensive, has hurt the sentimental fiber of a respectable group of Ecuadorians, I fulfill my obligation by giving them my personal and institutional amends, with the assurance that there never existed, not even remotely, a stinging intention and consequently a shade of separation between the national police and the Ecuadorian civil population. [*Hoy* 1995b:9A, emphasis added]

None of the journalists who covered the story after the publication of the general's letter questioned the value of the statistical information that he vaguely referred to: "According to the statistics, a percentage of national delinquents . . . are black men who commit crimes with firearms." Statistics are never presented to identify what this percentage is.<sup>10</sup>

The geographical and ideological exclusion of Ecuadorian blacks from national identity is reaffirmed in the statements of the police colonels and the general commandant, the quote from the nurse, the comments I have been receiving from white-mestizo and mestizo Ecuadorians, the segregation experienced in urban context, and the reluctance to hire local workers in Atacames. They clearly indicate the place of Ecuadorian blacks in the racial order and within the cultural topography of the country. Black immigration in Quito is described as a calamity, a plague that dangerously "attacks" the city and civilization at large. Blackness, "naturally bad," is even more negatively viewed when it does not stay in its "places."<sup>11</sup> The racial order and the police leaders' statements refuse to consider black

migrants as an integral part of Quito's populations. They should not be there in the first place. They cannot consider Afro-Ecuadorians as an important and valuable part of Ecuadorian history or, more specifically, as a respectable and undeniable component of the ever-changing identities of Quito's populations. The out-of-placeness of black migrants represents a threat to the racial/spatial order.

Most of the blacks who migrated to Quito and are employed in the formal economy are nannies, cooks, maids, and factory workers (women), or guardians, drivers, gardeners, and construction or factory workers (men). Many others are engaged in the informal or subemployed sector: traveling sales with a little stand, shoe cleaning, temporary work, prostitution, and so forth. Nevertheless, despite the hardship caused by the virulence of the racial order, a few have been able to develop small businesses (such as bars, restaurants, and boutiques), to finish a high school and sometimes university education, and to obtain a stable state or municipal job, which eventually allows them to move upwardly on the social ladder. Among this last group and their children, we can find the leaders of the various political and cultural black organizations that protested against the racism of the colonels' statements. They are the ones who understand and can better fight the state's institutions. They are engaged in the production of a counterhegemonic discourse and lead political activities aimed at defending the rights of the various Afro-Ecuadorian populations (Whitten and Quiroga 1995: 312–313) by demanding their share of national resources. They participate in political debates and combat the malignant invisibility of blackness and the myths of Ecuadorianity that still pollute the national common sense.

During December 1995 and January 1996, while revisiting Ecuador, I shared with friends who are Ecuadorian white-mestizo social scientists my amazement regarding the stronger presence of blacks in Quito and in "national society" in general and the relatively greater acceptance of blackness that seems to exist in comparison with the situation of only six years ago. Most of the reactions that I gathered tended to explain the present situation as the direct and exclusive result of the history of the indigenous movement, which was and still is quite important in Ecuador, therefore minimizing the history of the political activism of black organizations and their relative success. If it is true that the recent history of indigenous resistance bears a major responsibility in the above-mentioned changes, it is unrealistic to conceive black resistance as nonexistent or, at best, as secondary and unimportant. The variety of black organizations demonstrates the strength of black resistance.

## Miss Ecuador 1995–96

On the evening of November 9, 1995, in the Theater Bolívar in Quito, an event occurred that took everybody by surprise. A black woman born in Quito, the daughter of two black migrants, an Afro-Esmeraldian mother and an Afro-Choteño father, was elected Miss Ecuador 1995–96.<sup>12</sup> Her election was a bombshell in Ecuadorian society. During the following weeks, the issues of racism and national identity were passionately debated in the press.

The decision of the pageant jury provoked strong negative responses.<sup>13</sup> ¿Como así una mujer negra va a representar al Ecuador? (How can a black woman represent Ecuador?). The first time a black woman participates in the Miss Ecuador beauty pageant, she wins and becomes a symbol of Ecuadorianity for a year! To explain this aberration, a rumor circulated: the jury had decided to elect Mónica Chalá because the next Miss Universe contest, at which the new Miss Ecuador would represent the country, was to be held in South Africa. Therefore, to augment Ecuador's chances to win and to please Nelson Mandela, his government, and the Miss Universe jury, they had chosen the black candidate. The possibility that she had been elected because she was the best contestant was not raised because of the weight of the unease and anxiety provoked by what was seen as the awkwardness of the situation: a black woman as symbol of Ecuadorian femininity. This position was until then exclusively occupied by young women whose racial identity and physical features could unequivocally celebrate white-mestizo-ness as the standard of beauty, in accordance with the hegemonic ideology of mestizaje.

The election of Mónica Chalá made the edifice of the racial order tremble. People who usually did not regard the Miss Ecuador contest with interest, academics for instance, were brought into the discussion. An article by Jaime Bejarano in *El Comercio* (the major daily news of Quito) on November 21, 1995, expresses the malaise caused by Mónica Chalá's election among whites and white mestizos. Its tone reveals the strong intention of whites and white mestizos to domesticate Chalá's crowning by attenuating its defiance of the official ideology of national identity and by manipulating the significance of her election in order to reaffirm the validity of the official imagination of Ecuadorianidad. The author refers to Mónica Chalá's blackness and beauty in contradictory ways. On the one hand, he celebrates the ideology of mestizaje. On the other, probably because he wanted to present himself as a tolerant person capable of detecting aesthetic qualities in other "races," he explains the beauty of the "black Venus" by her "noncontaminated race," that is, by the fact that she

is dark-skinned and that she has not been polluted by "race mixing."

A tall and curvy young woman of the black race triumphed in a national beauty contest. . . . The actual interracial consensus, although it is only in the matter of aesthetic appreciation, cannot be but the result of an acknowledgment by the majority that Ecuador is a crucible of a variety of pigments, oversubtle mixture of ancestral lineages, amalgamated in a symbiosis with diverse epidermic contributions from other continents. . . . The silhouette and features of Mónica go beyond the frivolous and prosaic concept (of "sexual symbol"). She transmits, with her own radiation or osmosis, an ingenuous gentle breeze that her race, still virgin from external contamination, keeps original and without damage. . . . Mónica Chalá is a Venus of ebony and jet, of the ones engendered the nights of the full moon, conceived when the light shines in the penumbra. [Bejarano 1995:C5]

Various black political activists and black public figures, such as soccer and basketball players, joined by progressive nonblack sectors of society, made statements reproduced in the press in support of the jury's vote. They also condemned the racism behind the comments that questioned Mónica Chalá's election.<sup>14</sup> During an interview published in an article entitled "I Am neither Lesser nor Better than Anybody Else because of the Color of My Skin," the new Miss Ecuador did, in a sense because of her "race," justify her new symbolic position (*Hoy* 1995c). It was something that, of course, none of the previous beauty queens ever had to do.

Beauty contests provide the space where a national, regional, or local group reemphasizes the values, concepts, and behaviors which it considers fundamental for its sense of itself and its survival. "The beauty contest stage is where . . . identities and cultures can be—and frequently are—made public and visible" (Cohen and Wilk 1996:2). That is the reason why they are of great interest for the ruling elites who usually organize them. These elites create and maintain their hegemonic order through the manipulation and display of the female body.

By definition, beauty contests can also be controversial and provide a space for debates, discussions, and negotiations. That was the case of the Miss Ecuador 1995 contest. The controversy provoked by the election of Mónica Chalá was exclusively caused by her skin color, or "racial features." When looking more closely, one can understand that in fact all of the other aspects of her persona fit the format of the perfect woman for the role. The jury's decision makes sense because her personal qualities made her suitable for the position. Their vote must be understood within the context of greater transnational influences in postmodern Ecuadorian society.

If it is true that the decision of the jury denotes a certain tolerance of blackness, it is no less true that what Mónica Chalá's election celebrates are neither the values of the Afro-Ecuadorian traditions found in the periphery of the national territory nor the qualities of the average and usually poor black woman. On the contrary, it is quite clear that her election proclaims the standards and values of postmodern Ecuadorian society, which are strongly influenced by transnational ideals produced in the postindustrialized societies of western Europe and North America. In these powerful centers of production of televisual and cinematic images, the black female body is as much commodified as the white one. It is not invisible anymore. There is no television transmitted fashion parade, for instance, without black international models. And in the MTV and VH1 music videos that are received 24 hours a day through cable in Quito and Guayaquil, the visual presence of black women entertainers is quantitatively equal to, or even, in certain shows, greater than the presence of white women. The strong success of black artists on the world music scene ensures a firm presence of blackness in the transnational musical and televisual images consumed in Quito and Guayaquil. The black body, and most particularly the feminine one, is now a medium (when it respects ideal measurements and profile) used to proclaim an international standard of beauty that includes racial diversity. From an Ecuadorian perspective, the foreign origin of these images confers on them some sort of a respectability, a fashionable quality, and eventually presents them as models to be emulated. Thus it is not surprising that, in Ecuadorian television circles, specific black women with "good manners" and some education and with the appropriate body type (tall and skinny) can be seen as being *à la mode*.

The growth of transnational influences in urban Ecuadorian society during the past 20 years may be observed in the Ecuadorian television market. Since their creation, the television stations have provided an opening to the rest of the world. They adopted the American style of television, and the programs, which are frequently interrupted by commercials, consist of retransmitted American (and secondarily European) entertainment or news shows translated in Spanish. In these television series (e.g., *The Cosby Show*), blacks can be portrayed in a position quite different from the point of view of the Ecuadorian racial order (see Morley 1991).

In the early 1990s, because of the creation of a television cable company, the Ecuadorian stations began to compete more and more with foreign television channels. Every year, cable television expands its number of customers in Quito and Guayaquil. Most of the white and white-mestizo families are connected to cable, which gives access to more than 60 channels mostly



from the United States but also from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

Furthermore, the white and white-mestizo elite, which controls the national industries, sometimes socializes with the American and European managers. Most of them obtained a degree from a U.S. university, where they still send their children (mostly their sons). They visit the United States (Miami, in particular) relatively frequently to take care of businesses and to receive health care.

National beauty contests, which usually constitute only a step toward the participation in the Miss Universe beauty pageant, are occasions when regional, national, and international influences can eventually conflict. Each election of a national beauty queen is the result of a negotiation between these different sets of values and preoccupations. The fact that the contest for Miss Ecuador 1995–96 was organized by one of the most successful Ecuadorian television stations, the Quito-based Ecuavisa, certainly illuminates the understanding of the contest (and of the crowning of Mónica Chalá, for that matter) as the result of such a compromise between regional, national, and transnational norms and ideals.

In 1995 the Miss Ecuador jury was composed of seven members: Yolanda Torres, an Ecuavisa producer, as the jury's president; Jamil Mahuad, Quito's mayor; Gogó Anhalzer, clothing and jewelry designer; Gustavo Vallejo, president of the Ecuadorian Association of Advertisement Agencies; Lucía Fernandez, ex-Miss Ecuador; Scott Jeffrey, executive of event sponsor Colgate-Palmolive Ecuador; and Marisol Rosero, actor and television show host. With the exception of the Colgate-Palmolive executive, who is a U.S. citizen, all the members of the jury were, as is always the case, white or white mestizos. They resided in Quito or Guayaquil. They could all be included in the group of urban citizens who are more actively engaged in the transnational economy of goods, money, and ideas, and who probably studied television, communications, public relations, business, or another discipline in a U.S. University.<sup>15</sup>

The election of Miss Ecuador follows the international format of national beauty pageants as they are performed elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Before the night of the contest, all the candidates spent some time with the organizers in order to rehearse the various performances of the competition. The afternoon of the contest day, each one of them was interviewed by the judges. Later, during the show transmitted live on Ecuavisa, the candidates paraded several times, dressed in various outfits: cocktail dress, "typical dress," swim suit, and evening gown.<sup>17</sup> Between parades, they briefly responded to questions about their backgrounds, their personalities, and their future plans.

To participate in the Miss Ecuador contest, a young woman must first find, or be approached by, one or several private businesses that will sponsor her and that will take care of the expenses of her candidacy. She will then register with the organizing committee, as a representative of the province in which the city where she resides is located. One province may present more than one candidate. Since the contest is an event that mostly involves white and white-mestizo urban citizens, the provinces where the most important urban centers (Quito and Guayaquil) are located, Pichincha and Guayas Provinces, respectively, are usually represented by more than one candidate. The large businesses that can afford to be sponsors are established in these two cities. In the history of the contest, most of the elected beauty queens have been from either Pichincha or Guayas.

Mónica Chalá was born in Quito, the third of six children, to two black immigrants who came from the two traditional black communities of the country. Because she was born and living in Quito, she was one of the two representatives of the province of Pichincha. This was a point in her favor because of the regional bias that characterizes the Miss Ecuador contests in favor of Pichincha and Guayas. Claudia Acosta, queen of the third largest city, Cuenca, was convinced that "a similar black woman would not have won if she was representing the province of Esmeraldas or any other province, because of the regionalism" (*Hoy* 1995c:10).

Mónica Chalá's personal history presented a series of other advantages. She was already known in the urban public sphere because she is the sister of national athlete Liliana Chalá, who represented the country numerous times at international sports events. With her sister, Mónica had previously participated in fashion parades and television advertisements. From these experiences, she developed a flair for fashion modeling and registered in a modeling school in Quito. Before participating in the contest, she had done a television advertisement with Ecuadorian soccer hero Alex Aguinaga for a national bank. It was after the production of this advertisement that some people (she does not state whom) proposed to her that she participate in the Miss Ecuador contest. She was delighted by the idea (*Vistazo* 1995). According to the international and corporate standard of feminine beauty, Mónica Chalá has the physical characteristics expected from young women who want to succeed in modeling (tall and thin). She is aware of the market value of her body and takes her modeling career seriously (*Vistazo* 1995).

Very understandably, she interpreted her election as primarily the story of personal and familial success. If she became Miss Ecuador, she rightfully said, it was primarily because of her work, her determination, her efforts, her personal qualities, and not because the next Miss Universe contest would be organized in South

Africa. In various interviews she insisted on the victory that her election represented for black and indigenous people. But her political ambitions stopped there. She never chose to speak as a representative of Afro-Ecuadorian people. She did not attempt any critique of the racial order or the economic and political processes that work to reproduce the discrimination from which the bulk of Afro-Ecuadorians suffer. Her strongest idea about what a "good Miss Ecuador" should do seems to have been avoiding making waves. She was more preoccupied by "representing Ecuador as a whole" than echoing Afro-Ecuadorian voices. She received specific indications from Ecuavisa not to do so. The blackness with which she identifies is not the rural Ecuadorian blackness, which is totally foreign to her, but the blackness of international fashion shows, of MTV and VH1, the blackness of Janet Jackson and Whitney Houston, of Naomi Campbell and Iman.

Black political activists have mixed feelings about Mónica. On the one hand, they appreciate the affirmation of black presence that her election proclaims to Ecuadorian society and to the rest of the world. On the other hand, they resent Mónica for not identifying more with the Afro-Ecuadorian communities and their political struggle. On the night of her election, some say, she only spoke about her wanting to represent the entire country, "as if she was preoccupied with minimizing her blackness." In all her interviews she tended to insist on blackness as nothing but a skin color. Her most important message seems to have been that it is not because you are black that you cannot participate in modernity. She strongly identified with urban culture and never mentioned Afro-Choteño or Afro-Esmeraldian cultural traditions and histories of exploitation and resistance (see *Hoy* 1995c). Fundamentally, they resent her lack of rebellion against the processes of domestication which she has undergone.

Her election came as a surprise to most Afro-Ecuadorians, particularly to those who live in rural areas. Previous to the contest, she had not been in touch with the black organizations. Most blacks did not even know she was competing. Her victory was not directly theirs since they had not been involved in her candidacy.

When I left Ecuador in January 1996, there were some plans by black leaders to try to use Chalá as a public figure to give more notoriety to their struggle. They were talking about the organization of various events in Esmeraldas Province and the Chota-Mira Valley to which they would invite her and the press. The only question was: Will she accept the invitations? When I returned to Ecuador in November 1996, I found out that she had declined all offers.

If it is true that the election of Mónica Chalá expresses a greater tolerance toward blackness and black presence in urban Ecuadorian society, the sort of post-

modern multiculturalism that can be observed elsewhere, the story of her crowning does not fundamentally contradict important aspects of the Ecuadorian racial/spatial order. It demonstrates how the subversive fact of her election has been defused. The jury's decision, although opposed by many non-Afro-Ecuadorians, celebrates a form of domesticated blackness which does not really threaten the values of national society and the racial/spatial order, unlike the blackness of rural areas or the blackness found in various black political activists' discourses. The validity of the ideas of progress and development that spatially structure the national racial order were not questioned by Mónica's triumph or by Mónica herself.<sup>18</sup> Despite her black skin, she identified neither with the traditionally black places in the periphery of the national space nor with the hardship experienced by the black migrants in Quito.

The domestication of Mónica Chalá by white-mestizo society also involved treating her as a second-class beauty queen. On April 18, 1997, for instance, the night of the election of her successor, Mónica Chalá and her mother were relegated to seats on the fourth line, with the rest of the audience, in contrast to what had been done in the past with previous queens. She was invited on the podium only a few minutes before the crowning of her successor (*Hoy* 1997).

The Miss Universe contest at which she participated did not take place in South Africa but in Las Vegas. For that setting, she underwent a change of look, which she has maintained until the present. She straightened her hair and wears tinted contact lenses, which transformed her naturally dark brown eyes to a light almond. This change of look is the embodiment of her domestication. It evokes the national ideology of blanqueamiento within the globalizing framework of mestizaje.

Ecuadorian racism is alive and well.

## Notes

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1. Norman Whitten, in his reviewer's report.

2. In urban areas blacks are much more exposed to the influences of ideas and cultural forms from what Gilroy has called the "Black Atlantic" (1993). In his book, unfortunately, Paul Gilroy did not write a great deal about the participation of black Latin America in the black Atlantic.

3. Demographic estimations about the racial and ethnic composition of the Ecuadorian population vary considerably.



National censuses do not inquire about racial and ethnic identity. Here is the estimation with which I work: of 10 million Ecuadorians, about 5 percent are Afro-Ecuadorians, 40 percent are indigenous people, 50 percent are mestizos and white mestizos, and about 5 percent are whites (and sometimes very proud to be able to trace their family origin back to Spain). The term *white mestizo* is very much in use in Ecuadorian society and among social scientists. The people called "mestizos" tend to have darker skin than the white mestizos and usually present physical features that clearly indicate indigenous ancestry. Most of the white mestizos are included in the local middle classes and in the national elite of entrepreneurs with the whites.

4. All translations are mine.

5. Andrade 1985; Hurtado 1981; Terán 1896. This ideology was reinforced in the 1970s (see Silva 1988; Stutzman 1981; Whitten 1981).

6. See Agnew and Duncan 1989; Duncan and Ley 1993; Giddens 1985; Gregory and Urry 1985; Massey 1985; Soja 1989.

7. In Ecuador the term *serrano* is generally used to refer to anybody who was born and lives in the Andean region (*la sierra*). Quite often, in the context of Atacames, *serrano* is synonymous with *quiteño* ("from Quito").

8. I was born in the Belgian Congo of a Congolese mother and a Belgian father and grew up in Belgium. I spent six years (1985–91) living in Ecuador.

9. In Ecuador the term *moreno* does not refer specifically to a lighter-skinned black person, as is the case in Brazil and elsewhere, but is synonymous with black. It is often used by whites and white mestizos as a more polite and respectful term than *negro*, just as is the case with *indígena* and *indio*, as if *negro* and *indio* were naturally insulting.

10. Even if such statistics about race and crime existed, a series of questions about how to interpret them would remain (see Knepper 1996).

11. Julio Estupiñán Tello, a white-mulatto freelance racist historian, who is a well-known member of the Esmeraldian elite, writes about the "black race" as being naturally violent. This violence, he explains, is the result of a (biologically) accumulated anger during the centuries of bad treatment slaves experienced in the Americas. Even if they were not bad before the trade (something he does not suggest), slavery made them the naturally violent people they now are (Estupiñán Tello 1983:25–34).

12. Blacks from the coastal province of Esmeraldas are called *afro-esmeraldeños* (Afro-Esmeraldians), and blacks from the inter-Andean Chota-Mira Valley are called *afro-choteños*. Their respective cultures and histories differ greatly.

13. On February 13, 1996, *Hoy* asked its readers if they agreed with the election of Chalá as Miss Ecuador. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents said no.

14. *Hoy* 1995c, 1995d, 1995e; *El Comercio* 1995.

15. Quito's mayor graduated from the Harvard Business School.

16. Faludi 1988; Jewell 1993; Moran 1996; Van Esterik 1996; Wilk 1996.

17. This is not in any way an ethnic dress, as the term seems to suggest. It usually consists of a short, informal skirt and a shirt.

18. I personally do not blame Mónica Chalá for not having been more politically involved in the plight of black Ecuador. I know she has been under a lot of pressure from all sides, and I am sensitive to her desire for recognition.

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