Dionysian Blacks

Sexuality, Body, and Racial Order in Colombia

by
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> Brown I am, because I was born from the rumba
> And the feeling I inherited from the rhythm
>
> —Bobby Valentin

In Colombia as in the rest of Latin America (Bastide, 1970; Wade, 1997; Muteba Rahier, 1998), the official image of national identity has been developed by the white and mestizo-white elites on the basis of the notion of *mestizaje*, understood as "whitening" through racial mixing that makes racial and ethnic diversity invisible. In this context, blackness has not been taken into account as an integral part of a hierarchy in Colombian society that places whiteness at the top and blackness at the bottom. In this article I will describe blackness[1] as an important element of the national cultural topography and Colombia as a multicultural and pluriethnic nation. In particular, I am interested in exploring the relations between blacks and nonblacks in Colombia through certain very revealing implicit facets of these relations: the imaginaries based on the eroticism and sensuality of black people in which not only nonblacks but also blacks participate in a game of multiple mirrors.

Much has been said about whites' fascination with black people and particularly with the eroticism and sensuality of black women. However, there has hardly ever been an examination of black people's views of this stereotype of them as Dionysians—fundamentally interested in sensual pleasure. Do they consider it negative, or do they give it positive value? And, if the latter, is this transformation to be interpreted as a form of resistance or as a reelaboration of racist conceptions?

To answer these questions, I will use information from two sources: the preliminary results of an investigation of the black identities of males from middle-class sectors of Quibdó, the capital of Chocó, one of the country's poorest regions and predominantly black, and the analysis of two group interviews[2] realized in Bogotá with Chocoan males (aged 20-36 years) and

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females (ages 18-26) who were pursuing or had acquired higher education. Including the latter was an attempt to understand the relation between blacks and nonblacks in a place where, as Claudia Mosquera (1998) says, repeating a phrase often heard in Bogotá, "Before, we never used to see blacks."

SEXUAL STEREOTYPES ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE

Stereotypes are anonymous and impersonal; their principles of classification are unverbalized (Sumpf and Hugues, 1973) and are transmitted and received through the mass media of communication or the social milieu. "Their first and most evident characteristic is their capacity to introduce themselves into daily life" (Barreto, quoted in Mosquera, 1998: 69). Although stereotypes are said to be homogeneous and resistant to change, in practice their homogeneity is only apparent.

Racial stereotypes and prejudices about black people have a long history not only in the Americas but also in Europe. As Pinzón and Garay (1997) argue, when the African slaves arrived in the Americas, they already occupied a position in the regional colonial imaginary. Even before the Spanish conquest this imaginary had been fed by images of blacks produced in Europe, rooted in the commercial journeys and conquests undertaken in Africa, and it was made more complicated by the experience of slavery. Christian symbolism also contributed to the association of black with bad and white with good. In Christian iconography the devil was represented with black skin, while saints, virgins, and angels were represented with white skin. At the same time, the sexual powers attributed to black people were perceived as a threat to the family and served as catalysts for body-spirit dualism (Borja, 1992).

Roger Bastide, in *Le prochain et le lointain* (1970 [1958]), refers to the sexual dimension of racial prejudice in a chapter suggestively subtitled "Vénus noires et Apollons noirs." He argues that it is precisely in these privileged moments of sexual relations or the courtship that precedes them that racism appears to be challenged and the unity of the human species is rediscovered. Racism, whether covert or explicit, is eluded. From his point of view, the meeting of two bodies takes place in a social context in which bodies are endowed with collective memory. Bastide suggests that interracial sexual encounters do not often take place in a context of respect and equality between the sexes. Instead, they are based on stereotypes about black women as objects of pleasure and easy victims for white men and about black men as more virile than whites.

We must ask ourselves, however, whether Bastide's assertions, based on his experience in Brazil in the 1970s, are valid for Colombia in the late 1990s. I agree with Peter Wade that Bastide's rhetoric is excessive when he describes the sexual encounter between blacks and whites as "the meeting of two races in a struggle to the death." Drawing on his study on interracial relations in Medellín, Wade argues that whereas in Brazil Bastide found that the question "race" always produced the answer "sex," in Colombia this association is possible but not obligatory. In contrast to the strong antagonism in interracial sexual relations to which Bastide refers, Wade reports many formal marriages in addition to the classic models of racial mixing in which white men informally live with black women or *mulatas*.[3] However, he acknowledges that in certain circumstances the ideas expressed about black sexuality "indicate a strong connection between race and sex in people's minds, particularly when white men refer to women" (1997: 365). It is also very common for nonblack males, including intellectuals, to speak of black males as being obsessed with sex. At the same time, it is undeniable that there are social hierarchies in the processes of racial mixing independent of the circumstances in which they take place.

From another perspective, it is important to take into account Anne-Marie Losonczy's (1997) report that people of African descent in certain rural areas of the Spanish-speaking American continent and parts of the Caribbean are distinguished from the mestizos, indigenous people, and whites who surround them in terms of body posture, gestures, and language rhythms that they themselves recognize as the most potent markers of their distinct identity. These also constitute the most resistant subtext of the Afro-American collective memory. Drinking seems to underlie all collective rites. It is seen and learned from an early age both in the areas of masculine socializing and in dances that are the privileged spaces for meetings between the sexes. Both tolerance of alcohol and generosity in offering it to others are considered signs of virility. The consumption of alcohol is inseparable from making conversation, listening to music, and dancing.

Bastide (1970), Losonczy (1997), and Wade (1997), among others, point out that, historically, music, dance, and religious celebrations have been important cultural foci for black people. In Colombia, music and dance have been constitutive nuclei of black identity and elements by which black people have been perceived and judged by mestizos and mestizo-whites from the interior of the country. Although black music has been incorporated into the musical repertoire of Colombian society and is particularly attractive for its Dionysian impulse, this does not mean that the relationship between white and black society is unambivalent. On one hand the black world is considered

primitive, underdeveloped, and morally inferior, but on the other hand it is considered powerful and superior in the areas of dance, music, and the amatory arts. However, this superiority refers to areas that have been devalued from various perspectives: morally, because the body has been considered a territory of sin; materially, because these skills do not generate economic wealth; and symbolically, because on the dominant value scale the physical is inferior to the spiritual.

Therefore, let us look at some of the responses of our interviewees to the imaginary constructed around them, taking into account the attraction of white society to some characteristics of the black world and the responses of black people within a context of domination-resistance—that is, the superior position of white society from the economic and political point of view and the use of music and dance by black people as cultural forms of resistance to white domination (Wade, 1997).

SEXUAL STEREOTYPES AND RACIAL IDENTITY

"THE FEELING IS IN THE BLOOD"

The interviewees, men and women, report that the need to dance and the talent for it are in their blood, a distinctive feature of their life.[4] With regard to the strength and importance of this image, it is important to take into account the role of physical and bodily aspects in the construction of racial discourse and the ideology of racism. It would appear that there is no way to escape from this essentialization of racial identity and "naturalization" of difference. However, as is suggested by Wade, this performance is essentially socially constructed and not genetically produced.

Many of the interviewees expressed some satisfaction with regard to characteristics that appear to confer on them a certain superiority, which are seen as some compensation for their depreciated image in the national context. They asked: "Don't you like to be complimented? Don't you like to feel flattered?" and continued: "It's something genetic, it's in the blood, it's how we are. The thing is that we black people have the feeling." One of them described the Chocoanos' ability to dance as natural or learned through experience:

> One dances because it is the feeling that one has in the blood. From when we are small, we are born in a country of different folklores, and that strengthens learning how to dance, to move the body. From when we are children we already know how to move our waists. . . . One sees dancing as recreation in our

> country, as something spontaneous, something that is called the feeling—"That guy has the feeling"—and it's like a profession.

Interviewees relate to this imaginary by converting it into a positive attribute (cf. Agier, 1992), thereby inverting the roles of domination. Thus, the ability to dance and to make music is transformed into a source of superiority with regard to the management of the body. This resource, used by dominated groups throughout history (for example, the feminist movement in nineteenth-century Europe), is what Agier calls the utilization of "formal homologies of inversion and over-naturalization of identity." Dionysian tendencies that up to now have been seen as the opposite of progress and work are transformed into a festive competition of races that produces culture and marketable diversions (Agier, 1992). This process, which allows for the constitution of a positive collective identity, is what interviewees are engaging in when they convert the term *niche*, a pejorative term used by whites to refer to blacks, into a sign of unity and solidarity among black people and when they reclaim the term "race" in order to praise the black race's physical, mental, and artistic qualities. In the same way, the association of "black" with "primitive" is converted into an expression of pure nature, with all the evocative force that this image can have.

When the interviewees idealize the way of life of their grandparents, saying that they lived sane and happy lives in a paradise and demonstrated their sexual capacities by being able to live with various partners and have large numbers of children even in their later years, they are reclaiming a romantic vision of nature and ideas of the "noble savage." In this connection, one of them said, "Before, at least in the Chocó, the men were more ardent. In the countryside, a man had three or four women, and he satisfied all of them, and he had children with all of them. . . . I have a grandfather who is 96, and the last daughter, I don't know if she is his, is 15 years old, and he still looks good, and we are about 80 grandchildren." The interviewees speak with nostalgia of a rural past in which black men displayed their "natural" ardor and consumed natural food[5] (without chemical additives) that maintained their physical and sexual potency, which was superior to that of whites.

> Before, in the countryside, the old people over there, all their food was natural. If they wanted a tomato they used to say, "Go over there and pick a tomato for me from the roof," as we say over there in the Chocó. Nowadays they have started to use pesticides in cultivation, and those are chemicals and that is going to affect a cell from the virile part one way or the other. I believe that [virility] has been diminishing little by little . . . but here comes Viagra . . . [laughter] and that has influenced the way of eating.

Some of the interviewees explained this supposed superiority not as a natural attribute but as a product of a culture that has been essentialized:

> In our culture, it is not like it is here [in Bogotá]. Over there [in the Chocó], if you like a girl, you tell her. It is not like here, where if you want to talk to a girl it has to be through a friend who introduces you to her, because if you do not know her, it is impossible to speak to her. On the other hand, over there, one sees a girl for the first time and if you like her, you tell her. One proposes and she makes herself available . . . and there it is. Over there, a diversion, or being with a girl, is normal, and one looks for the way to make her feel as good as possible. Over there, the people live like the climate: hot, agitated. One lives very agitated over there, and one speaks of "passion" (*arrechera*),[6] and that also influences the way of dressing. You know how everything enters through the eyes, what is seen, and the women over there walk around in mini-skirts, in shorts, in boob-tubes, and all of that influences things. Here in Bogotá one has to walk around covered up because of the climate. Here, with everything covered up, seeing someone doesn't evoke anything, it doesn't send any messages to the brain—it doesn't send the necessary information [laughter].

Similarly, another person explained:

> From the moment that one is born, from when one is a boy, one has knowledge of women. It is not like here, where the children have less knowledge and get to know about women from when they are about 12 or more. On the other hand, over there, from the time when one is a boy, one already has the curiosity to touch a girl, to touch a woman, from when one is about 10 years old [laughter].

"IT'S THOSE FROM THE INTERIOR THAT GIVE US THE FAME"

Not all the interviewees asserted this superiority with the same enthusiasm or wished to emphasize their differences from nonblack Colombians, and some of them insisted on pointing out that these supposed sexual and sensual powers were something attributed to them by others rather than an expression of their own point of view. It is important to remember that the interviewees were students from the Chocó who had lived in Bogotá for at least a year, having migrated to the capital looking for better educational and work opportunities. As one of them said, "I found out about this idea when I arrived in Bogotá. My study colleagues said that 'This black man is wild for everything,' but at times . . . while one is in one's own region it is something simple and normal, on the other hand for you people over here, it is something outside of the norm."

Another argued:

> It's not that we give ourselves the prestige. It's the other men, the men from the university, that are interested in us. They say that the black man is this or that. It's not that we feel that we have prestige, rather it's those from the interior that give us the fame. At times they exaggerate the fame that they give us. They're the ones that give us prestige, and the devaluation as well [lots of laughter].

At the same time, interviewees were conscious of the ambivalence of this image: "One meets with whites and they say, 'What you people know is how to dance,' and when they say that in that way, it's a form of disrespect. But when they say to you, 'You people dance very well,' in this context one takes it as a compliment. They devalue and also compliment one; it's both things." Often this is keeping black people at a distance, assigning them to the exotic and exciting. Some of the interviewees prefer to pursue the acceptance of their peers without underlining the differences that exist, achieving upward mobility by means of their academic standing, and they see this stereotype as an obstacle to their being valued in other areas:

> They know that one has many intellectual capacities, so many, and often they don't look at that. Instead rather they emphasize the dancing and sex and don't try to see what one is really like inside or what one is like as a person. When they want to devalue one, they say these things and more. They talk about you, not to your face but behind your back, things that are not true. I would like people to pay more attention to the intellectual capacities that we have.

"IF YOU DON'T STUDY, YOU DON'T BECOME SOMEBODY"

For the young people of the middle-class sectors of Quibdó, who are more familiar with egalitarian discourse between the sexes and more identified with the ideology of modernization and progress, some of these values have begun to lose their legitimacy. Instead, other social goals are seen as important (Viveros, 1998):

> I don't believe that the sexual element gives one prestige, because I believe one gains prestige and makes oneself respected for one's personality and for one's intellectual capacity. In life this [sexuality and dance] is not so positive. In terms of recreation, folklore can be positive, but in terms of one's development—that one needs to be prepared as a good citizen, to achieve status—looking at things from that point of view, sex does not provide one with prestige, because it does not go beyond folklore. . . . One has to prepare oneself intellectually to achieve status and prestige.

This reflection refers to a concrete context: a region isolated from certain development models in which poverty limits aspirations and critically restricts people's possibilities and professional opportunities for black peo-

ple are relatively recent. For this reason, many people from the region are pursuing training with the hope of breaking this isolation, defeating poverty and achieving recognition: "To be seen in another way, one has to demonstrate that one has abilities, that one is capable; one has to study. This is why we are here in Bogotá, to study so that tomorrow people will say, 'Over there is somebody who is an accountant or lawyer'—to be somebody. In Quibdó, if you don't study, you don't become somebody."

As some of the interviewees explained, this supposed superiority in the area of dance did not provide material advantages or modify their position within the Colombian socio-racial hierarchy:

> With regard to whether the ability to dance provides one with a higher social status, I would say no. You are only recognized in social spaces when you dance well, but in order to move up in social status, one has to earn that, study hard and try to improve oneself. In the Chocó, folklore is not profitable; it is not a business. There are many dancers who compete on a national level and win in many events—for example, the folklore group from the Chocó is a special guest in the CREA cultural week—but it does not stop being simply folklore. Over there everything is seen as folklore, and there is no such thing as a professional dancer in the Chocó. That is, I haven't seen that one can live from dance; it isn't profitable.

SEXUAL STEREOTYPES AND GENDER RELATIONS

"THEY EXPECT A LOT FROM ONE"

The men interviewed see themselves as superior to whites as lovers and say that women, white or black, prefer love from black men. They say that the women from the interior of the country, even the married ones, go mad for them and seek them out.

> They expect a lot from one. . . . When they are with you, go with you . . . they go with you under a certain impression of what they are going to find, of what they expect. For this reason, one tries to give them the most that one can, and maybe it is true that one gives them a lot.
>
> Here in the interior one has had relations with *rolas* [women from Bogotá], with white women, and they have felt good, they have told me that [expresses satisfaction with a grimace] and they want to repeat it.
>
> I know many friends, and more or less 97 percent of the men from Quibdó are passionate like me. There are others that are not, but almost always when they are with a woman, black or white, they show their abilities. One is very anxious to please, I am very conscious to please when I make love.

The Chocoanos' way of dancing follows certain rules that express masculine domination over a woman and the type of relationship that they want to establish with her. When a man likes a woman, he immediately tries to establish bodily contact with her through dance and uses his skills to conquer her:

> In the universities, on Fridays, the *rolas* or the women are looking out for us [black men], to see if we are going to go there [the disco] because of the fame that we have as dancers. In terms of conquests, dancing is a very important factor. I speak from experience: here at the university, one goes dancing on weekends, and the women students like us to touch them, to feel them, and our swing and waist movements are important factors.

Erotic advances are manifested in physical contacts that become increasingly closer to the sexual act without necessarily resorting to the mediation of language in the expression of this progress. The sequence of this increasingly physical nearness is described in the following way by one of the male interviewees:

> You know that there are women that if they see a man dance well, one who dances beautifully, some women want to dance with him, and from there is the fall, you warm up her ear. . . . Some women like to do this movement, and depending on how you move her, one moves toward her and she gives an idea, more or less, of what could happen later.

On certain occasions, the will to "possess" a woman is not just a manifestation of sexual attraction but also a desire to express superiority over her, the more so when for racial or social class reasons she is "prohibited." One of the male interviewees, justifying why men brag among themselves of their sexual conquests, said: "Maybe the woman is the *picadita*[7] of the neighborhood and has not wanted to sleep with anybody, and when one arrives and manages to do it with her, one has to tell."

For many of the interviewees, upward mobility involved marriage with someone of superior status. One of them put it as follows:

> I am a person who wants too much, more than what is evident. Here in Bogotá, one experiments with many different types of women from Bogotá. But there is something that is really important when one does not have much money and is often weighed down, without knowing what to do and without money. Here in Bogotá, one tries to find a woman who has money, who has a good position and from there one begins to climb the social ladder . . . and some achieve their objective and there you are [laughter]. More than anything, one thinks of the family.

Although skin color is not mentioned here, the reference to women "from here, from Bogotá," implicitly means white or mestizo-white. This declaration provoked a strong reaction from other interviewees, who argued that the only reason to form a couple was the possibility of being happy:

> I don't share Javier's opinion . . . one can go out with many women who are professionals, who work well, but if one goes out with a woman because she has money, one is not going to feel good, so what is one doing there? One should look for happiness in oneself. I believe that in love one should not have interests beyond simply being in love.

However, although ideally love relationships are formed on the basis of personal qualities of the members of the couple, the men and women interviewed recognized that economic and social status are crucial in the seduction game. One of the participants expressed it in the following way: "One is very influenced by material things. If the man has something, then one likes him. If the man has a motorbike, even if he is ugly, or if he studies in a good school or if he goes to university, then one likes him."

"THE ONE WHO MAKES LOVE THE MOST IS THE MOST MACHO"

The interviews in Quibdó demonstrate how closely interwoven masculine and racial identity are and that the experience of being a man and being black is simultaneous and not sequential. Taking into account that identity is a relational concept, we can infer that the identity of male Chocoanos refers implicitly or explicitly to the identity of nonblack men. Within this comparison, the place assigned to the body has been one of the elements used by the two groups to distinguish themselves. Both black men and others perceive that black men hold the comparative advantage in terms of skills in dancing and music and sexual performance. For this reason, few black men give up or distance themselves from the values that associate them with being *quebradores*,[8] recognizing that it is through these values that the equilibrium of their subjective position is reestablished in relation to men from the other regions.

Generally, relations among black males are potentially conflictive and competitive except of those constructed around the family and certain personal affinities. The following quotations are illustrative of this competitive character:

> In Quibdó, competition is a daily thing. The one who makes love the most is the most macho, the leader; people look for him, he can order people around, and

> wherever he goes he shows off. . . . "This is my woman, and for this reason she should be respected."
>
> Black men like competition among ourselves. When there is a lot of competition among us and someone has a girlfriend and another man likes her, and the other man makes her feel better, the other man takes her away from him, and the rest of the men make fun of him. There is a lot of competition, and nobody wants to lose.

"IN OUR REGION, THE WOMAN HAS A LOT OF INFLUENCE"

While the strategies of masculine prestige are constructed among men, the relations between men and women also influence the negotiation of masculine identity (Gutmann, 1998). Men from the Chocó are in agreement in saying that women from the Chocó are more relaxed and expressive in terms of sex than women from other regions. They actively participate in the game of seduction and do not hesitate to show that they are interested in a man if they consider him attractive or to express dissatisfaction with his sexual performance (Viveros and Cañon, 1997). This does not mean that power relations between men and women do not exist in this context but rather that they are manifested differently than in other societies. Sexuality is transformed into a site of resistance and is recognized as such:

> In our region, women have a lot of influence. There are women who demand a lot from one. One is making love with a woman one night, and one is fine, and the next day the woman tells her neighbor or her friend that that one wasn't good enough and that he only made love twice [laughter] and that influences a lot, and that is why we have to be potent lovers, tigers. This influences a lot; this is very common.

The men from the Chocó know that they have to fulfill certain obligations to their official women partners, among them sexual obligations, if they want to continue having relations with other women—that is, that the condition of their success with other women is partly related to their capacity for sexually satisfying their official partners:

> One could be making love with one's wife or with another woman, and if there is a moment of displeasure, either of the women will say, "You are not worth anything, you are not a man in bed," and this leads to us having to be tigers in bed, and we have to show that, because they demand it from one. And also, as a black man, one does not like to be with only one woman but with various women, one has to take into account that friends talk among themselves whether one is good in bed or not, and they ask each other, "Was he good or not?" And if one wasn't, then they discard one. This influences a lot.

THE IDEAL LOVER IS WHITE AND BLACK

The women from the Chocó that we interviewed do not deny the ideas about the supposed sexual prowess of black men, but they provide other tonalities. It is important to underline that these women said that they had had erotic-affectionate experiences with men from other regions that allowed them to compare them with men from the Chocó. They said, for example, "Black men aren't interested in details. They don't say beautiful things to women before sex, they are not interested in that." Men and women interviewees were in agreement that black men do not combine words with actions during the sexual act. One of them said,

> The men from the interior are more elegant in their seduction than men from the Chocó; they are more into detail, they compliment more. We are more direct and less interested in details, although we are affectionate as well. . . . But in the sense of falling in love, they are more into detail.

From another point of view, these young women may be more exposed to modern discourses about feminine sexuality and may aspire to amorous relations that are more pleasurable and less oriented to the standards of male behavior. When they speak of the ideal lover, they elaborate an image based on the courtship qualities of white men and the sexual potency of black men: "A white boyfriend is more tender, he gives little kisses, he spoils more . . . he is more affectionate. Black men are more reserved, and they are ashamed to express themselves, but in terms of sexual relations it seems to me that black men are more passionate, in addition to all of that."

The women interviewees did not protest the prevalent image of black women as "hot," although they distinguished between being "hot," that is, sexually ardent, and being "easy," pointing out a tendency to confuse the two.[9] The need that the women felt to make this distinction demonstrates that women are less authorized than men to assert these supposed sexual powers. In the case of these women, these images can easily become accusations of immorality and can damage their honor.

FROM SEXUAL COMPETENCES TO THE RACIAL ORDER

It has been said that sexuality, because it is seen to be private, is not easy to talk about, but this generalization is not valid in this case. We have shown in our fieldwork in Quibdó and in Bogotá with people originally from the Chocó

that it is not difficult for them to talk directly and spontaneously about sex. The only subject in our conversations about sex that provoked strong emotion among the men was male homosexuality. For many of them, it was incomprehensible, given that black men are perceived as "naturally" virile.

Whereas Bastide found in Brazil that when he said "race," "sex" was the response, our experience led us in the other direction. The moment that we turned off the tape recorder and stopped speaking about the sensuality and sexuality of black people, the issue of racism came strongly to the fore. The feeling that I had during these conversations was that the subject was too painful to be discussed with serenity (see Mosquera, 1998). The comments were emphatic and polarized. While some asserted that they had been discriminated against, others said that this was a thing of the past and one should not keep on insisting on talking about it. Some tried to show that they recognized the existence of the phenomenon but that it did not affect them and that they could overcome it. "When one arrives in Bogotá, one realizes that they look at one strangely, and that is when one's work begins. They told me that black people should sit at the back, and for this reason I always sit at the front of the bus." Others tried to minimize the existence of racism by pointing out that discriminatory attitudes are common to all societies, including those that are the object of racism: "I went out with a black girl from Buenaventura, and she told me that her mother did not like me because I was from the Chocó. And we were both the same color." Finally, one of the most active participants in the group interview captured the feelings of many of the interviewees by expressing the desire to be integrated into his social surroundings, not identified by his color, and criticizing the legislation that recognized blacks as an ethnic group:[10] "Why would they have to assign someone land because they are black, living here in Bogotá? What we want is to have the same rights that all the other Colombians have. We want to be recognized not as black people but as Colombians."

Relating the interviewees' interpretations of the stereotype constructed around their sexual and sensual talents and their comments on racism, we find common elements. Both are directly linked to their way of positioning themselves in the racial order, understood as "a structure of racial models, and as choices made by individuals related to racial and ethnic identities" (Wade, 1997: 56). Interpretations that accept the content of the stereotypes and assert the difference of black people, converting them into a source of superiority, tend to be in defense of cultural expressions that have been identified as black. Interpretations that reject the stereotypes because they do not want to stress any difference or consider that these abilities do not give them any social dividends tend toward the assumption of norms and values established by the dominant elites.

The first set of interpretations, in reaffirming the value of a black culture that is devalued or accepted only as something exotic or exciting, rejects the ambiguity that surrounds the idea of "black" in Colombia and results in presenting it as an almost personal issue (Wade, 1997). This assertion of a positive identity for black people is achieved through the transformation of difference into superiority, a source of dignity (a prerequisite for all collective identities, as E. Varikas points out [Agier, 1992]). However, these inversions only reelaborate the substance of a group whose boundaries have been established by a system of racial domination (Agier, 1992). The invention of "black" in its own terms is difficult in the context of preexisting racial relations. Some of the risks of this kind of identity are, on one hand, the reification of the difference and, on the other hand, the essentialization of "black" as a natural category.

The second set of interpretations limits the importance of these abilities to the areas of recreation and diversion and emphasizes that the only way of obtaining social recognition is through intellectual training. These positions also express the explicit desire of some black people to become assimilated into the surrounding environment, divesting themselves of all the elements of their identity that can be associated with the backward and the primitive and in this way escaping the discrimination to which they have been subjected. In practice, this means adopting a shameful black identity[11] and pursuing integration and cultural and racial homogenization—through the process of becoming mestizos—as a strategy of upward mobility. In the Colombian context the racism that is adopted assumes the form of integration and domination rather than that of exclusion and segregation. The ideal of becoming white or "whitening" conceals a biased racial integration marked by a racism that presupposes an evolution toward an improved humanity in which "black" characteristics will gradually disappear.[12]

Various questions arise in relation to these two positions, which appear to translate into the two processes Wade has described—resistance and adaptation. Is it possible for black Colombians to manipulate this stereotype without falling into the trap of essentializing their identity? Is it feasible for them to defend a cultural space and their own symbolic capital without having to do so in opposition, that is, in the terrain determined and delimited by nonblacks? Is it possible to conceive of the social participation of black people as a collective without its perspective being that of the ghetto? Lastly, is it possible to imagine an ethnocultural integration that is not in practice the primacy of Western culture?

The answers to these questions are obviously not simple. To try to resolve them means taking into account the tensions that persist between these two perspectives. To specify what some of the tensions are I will refer to a debate

that has taken place in Brazil, a country that has been considered an emblem of interracial mixing and so-called racial democracy. Some anthropologists (among them Darcy Ribeiro, a specialist in the indigenous question and a sympathizer of the struggle of nonblacks in Brazil) have begun to speak of an ethnonational unity, a cultural and linguistic homogeneity based on the forced de-Indianization of the indigenous people, the de-Africanization of black people, and interracial mixing. According to Ribeiro, Brazilians are becoming more integrated into the nation-state as a result of the general process of industrialization that is affecting everyone and the cultural homogenization of the mass media of communication (Ribeiro, 1995). He assumes that the mixing of races will ensure the elimination of racism, because if racism depends on differentiation it is sufficient to homogenize by the mixing of races to eradicate it. However, although Ribeiro is conscious of the ambiguities of assimilation, particularly its harmful effects on black identity, solidarity, and combativeness, his formula for the nation-state has been heavily criticized because it does not in practice give the same value to indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures as it does to Western ones.

From the opposite perspective, leaders of the black Brazilian movement such as Abdias do Nascimento have pointed out the dangers of racial mixing in the context of Brazil. For Nascimento the risk is that this process will lead to ethnic suicide, a profound acculturation that tends toward the desegregation of the population of African origin and becomes an ideological instrument inducing blacks to consider interracial mixing preferable to endogamous relations. The pluriethnic and multicultural ideal would be equality of the races, ethnicities, and cultures based on their differences. The nation-state that is derived from this ideal should provide recognition for the different ethnic and cultural groupings, freedom for them to choose their value systems, and equality of these systems without resorting to violence and oppression (Nascimento, 1980; 1992; D'adesky, 1998). This position could, however, lead to ghettoization as a result of attempts to delimit a separate space for black people (organization of their own territories, proposals of autonomous educational experiences) that could limit the importance of dialogue with global society (Agier, 1992).

From my point of view, both positions—that of racial and cultural integration through racial mixing and that of insistence on the visibility of ethnocultural differences—are unsatisfactory. With regard to this, it is suggestive to bring into the discussion the collation proposed by Rita Laura Segato (1992). In Brazil a group of people, not necessarily black, has raised the banner of "blacks" in an attempt to subvert ethnic blocking by racial determination and to resist submitting them to a "black" category created by Western essentialism.

To refine these reflections on ethnoracial differences, it is pertinent to consider the perspective of the deconstructive method, which opposes the reification of differences and offers the possibility of destabilizing all fixed identities. Therefore, the point is neither to dissolve all racial and cultural differences to achieve one universal identity (as Ribeiro proposes) nor, as is proposed by do Nascimento (1992), to support the differentiation of ethnic groupings at all costs. Rather, it is necessary to deconstruct the notion of race and propose ethnocultural identities based on multiple, fluid, and changing differences. However, following Fraser (1997), it is important to remember that black Colombians are subject not only to cultural injustice but also to economic injustice and therefore require solutions based on both cultural recognition and economic redistribution. In practice it has been noted that the simultaneous pursuit of both redistribution and recognition involves interference with regard to the measures associated with each strategy. One of the ways of avoiding this dilemma is to situate oneself in a wider field in which the multiple and interconnected struggles against diverse and intersecting injustices can be taken into account. Ethnicity/race is interrelated with values with regard to class, gender, generation, and sexuality, and the concrete experience of individuals is constructed simultaneously in relation to all of these variables. This is the more important when people may be subordinated on all of these axes or, on the contrary, dominant on some and subordinated on others.

The dialogue with men and women from the Chocó on the supposed Dionysian tendencies of black people was for me an opportunity to explore, both in myself and in the interviewees, the degree to which it is feasible to manipulate this stereotype within the Colombian socio-racial order. This implies negotiating a balance between an assertion of ethnicity, on one hand, and a self-critical approach to the tendency to invert the roles of domination in defense of the importance of music, dance, and eroticism in the black world, on the other, and recognizing that the Dionysian aspects of life are neither incompatible with the Apollonian ones nor exclusively associated with blackness. The question remains open on deconstruction as an option in Colombia, a country that is just beginning to witness the consolidation of a black identity and the inclusion of blackness as an element of national identity.

NOTES

1. Here "black" is understood not as an essentialized identity but as a personal, social, cultural, political, and economic process in a particular temporal and spatial context with local, regional, national, and transnational dimensions (Muteba Rahier, 1998).

2. I am grateful to William Cañon, Fredy Gómez, and Marcela Rodríguez for participating in the collection and transcription of the information that emerged from the group interviews.

3. A *mulata* is a person with parents of African and indigenous descent.

4. In the interviews, the use of the word "dance" is a kind of "dancing." The act of speaking is accompanied by hand movements, arm and waist movements, and facial expressions, interspersed with laughter. This use of gesture and movement unites them as a group, providing the opportunity to establish this nonverbal subtext as a privileged form of identity affirmation.

5. Many of the foods of the Chocó were attributed aphrodisiac virtues, among them *chontaduro* and *borojó*. We do not know whether this belief is a form of confirmation of the behavior of men or whether sexual potency is perceived as the result of the properties of this food.

6. In the María Moliner dictionary *arrecho* is defined as a popular term used in some places, and in botany it means "rigid, erect, sprightly." By extension, *arrechera* is utilized to designate sexual excitement.

7. In colloquial speech, a *picada* is someone who is pretentious and self-important.

8. Literally "bankrupters." A *quebrador* is someone who has the ability to "win" many women, who moves from one woman to another.

9. The notion of black women's being easy is rooted in ways of thinking and in social practices. Young black women who work as domestic employees continue to be seen as the sexual initiators of the adolescent sons of their employers.

10. Law 70 of August 27, 1993, recognizes blacks as an ethnic group and concedes them rights to own land; equally, it contains measures designed to improve the education, training, access to credit, and material conditions of black communities at a national level. The law attempts to ensure that education will reflect the cultural specificity of black people and establishes special electoral districts and the possibility of being able to elect two representatives of black communities to the Congress (Wade, 1997).

11. This desire to eliminate difference could be a way of covering up the idea of eliminating distinctive characteristics of a race that has been considered intrinsically inferior in order to assume the characteristics of a race that is perceived as superior.

12. David Brion Davis, cited by Wade (1987), suggests that it "is arguable if a society is more or less racist that sees in each drop of white blood a step towards purification, than a society which sees in the least trace of black blood a sign of degradation."

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