Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Cuban intellectual and poet José Martí coined the felicitous expression “nuestra América mestiza” (“our mestizo America”) (Martí 312), which was eventually to become a singularly effective *idéologème* in the constitution of a positive continental identity. But although this expression has frequently been brandished as a valorizing marker of difference with respect to supposedly “racially purer” societies in North America and Europe, less attention has been paid to what exactly Martí meant by “mestizo America.” A perusal of his main writings concerned with this question reveals that the expression does not designate a continent inhabited largely by members of a “new race” resulting from the miscegenation of Europeans, Amerindians and Africans, akin to José Vasconcelos’ problematic “cosmic race” in 1925. Neither is there much similarity between his conception of mestizo society and the relatively homogenizing category of the Métis in nineteenth-century Canada. Martí generally, although not exclusively, uses the term not in the sense of racial miscegenation between individuals, but to refer to the multiracial composition of Latin American society. In his most widely read essay, “Nuestra América” (Our America), he introduces the expression “nuestra América mestiza” in the same passage in which he provides a metaphorical definition in apposition: “nations with bare legs and Parisian dress-coat” (“pueblos de pierna desnuda y casaca de París”) (Martí 312). This is a metaphor neither for the cross-breeding between European and non-European races, nor for the acculturation of Amerindians or Africans, since it is the collectivity that is personified as hybrid. Martí stresses this when he refers on the same page to the “discordant elements” of America and the “disjointed continent.” The Amerindian and the African, constituting the internal Other from the perspective of the dominant creole
sector of society, is not presented as having merged with the hegemonic groups. On the contrary, intranational (Cuban) and intracontinental diversity is constantly emphasized by Martí.

The term he prefers in most passages concerning racial diversity is, however, “hybrid” (híbrido). Although the latter term designates an organism of mixed origins, or cross-bred from different species or varieties and is thus partially synonymous with mestizo, it is a more general term, which includes, without being restricted to, interbreeding of people of different “races” such as Europeans and Amerindians. Hybridity was understood in various ways by nineteenth-century proponents of racialist theories, from the homogenizing amalgamation of races in a completely new race, to the imperfect mixing of races in which original racial characteristics remained visible and unevenly distributed among members of the society. It was hardly a neutral term, since it was associated with the pejorative connotations of racialist theories that considered the “human hybrid” as an inferior type and mingling between Caucasian and non-Caucasian races as a source of degeneration of the (Aryan) race. It was certainly not the fetishized catchword it has become today. Martí’s awareness of the negative implications of racial hybridity are obvious when he claims elsewhere, in an obviously dialogic rejoinder to the racialist beliefs at the time, that Cuba is “more favored than harmed by the mixture of its races” (“más servido que herido por la mezcla de sus razas”) (Martí 184). It is also evident in his professed admiration for the “Indian Juárez” who fought successfully to preserve Mexican independence from foreign intervention and contributed to the country’s subsequent international prestige, in spite of its being a “hybrid nation, the nation of a million Whites and seven million Indians” (“la nación híbrida, la nación de un millón de blancos y siete millones de indios”) (112). In this passage Martí is of course using the term hybrid in the sense of racially diverse, and not in that of miscegenated, but the range of meanings of the term as well as the absence of a clear distinction between these meanings in Martí’s writings make any favorable stand on hybridity in any of its meanings a strong rejection of the entire range of negative idéologèmes associated with the term. His admiring reference to Herbert Spencer as one of the two guiding lights, together with Bolívar, of Latin America (303) is highly problematic in this context, since Spencer distinguished between the positive mingling of proximate races (for example, Caucasian) and that of distant races (Caucasian and non-Caucasian), which he saw in a very pejorative light. Martí in fact oscillates between revalorizing a national/