Mestizaje: “I understand the reality, I just do not like the word:” Perspectives on an Option

Catherine Poupney-Hart

To assert people are métissé, that métissage has value, is to deconstruct in this way the category of métis that is considered as halfway between two “pure” extremes. It is only in those countries whose exploitation is barbaric (South Africa, for instance) that this intermediary category has been officially recognized. This is perhaps what was felt by the Caribbean poet who, in response to my thoughts on our métissé Caribbean cultures, said to me: “I understand the reality, I just do not like the word.” (Edouard Glissant, Le discours antillais)

The heterogeneous and conflictive nature of social components and cultural practices is by no means exclusive to Latin America. Many critics argue, however, that these traits manifest themselves in particularly complex, polyvalent and extreme ways in the subcontinent. Suffice it to mention the constant focuses of violence (highly ideologized or not), the juxtaposition of ostentatious wealth and extreme poverty in urban settings, the co-presence of radically different languages, ethnic groups, historical temporalities, forms of spirituality or world views that may be found in the same national territory, in the same region, or even in the same text (as in José María Arguedas’s El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo).

Inevitably, the extent of this heterogeneity and “conflictivity” has been attributed first to the circumstances of colonization, that is to say, to a contact among diverse populations that reached dimensions unheard of in the history of mankind; to the particularly unprecedented violence resulting from that contact, and the diversity of the sectors affected. Violence was exerted in physical as well as intellectual or spiritual relations, in such a way that the “Contact” appeared more akin to extorsion,

1 We found it necessary to modify Dash’s translation.
2 Heightened by the initial demographic catastrophethat resulted from the microbial impact.
rape, mutilation and imposition (\textit{encontronazo}), than to an encounter (\textit{encuentro}) of cultures and wills.

Paradoxically, the degree of societal heterogeneity and “conflictivity” has also been attributed to the invaders’ relative familiarity with cultural heterogeneity, since they were themselves the result of a long mixing process (among “Iberians, Celts, Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, Jews, Arabs, Berbers, Gypsies and … slaves of different origins”) (Mörner 13). For centuries throughout the Middle Ages, their world had been involved in a “strange mixture between savage warfare and pacific exchange, including miscegenation, between intolerance and tolerance in interethnic relations” (Mörner 14). This no doubt prepared the ground for what would be observed in the Americas during the Conquest. Although forms of ethnic coexistence were encouraged (like the constitution of repúblicas de indios alongside repúblicas de españoles), in general, some kind of \textit{laisser faire} was adopted, marked as it was by the fluctuations and ambiguities of linguistic and religious assimilation policy, which served colonial interests by producing conveniently imperfect subjects, “almost the same but not quite.”

To this colonial framework which set the rules for many centuries to come, should be added the adjustments made by the governments of young Latin American nations which, following the emancipation of their countries, attempted to administer cultural differences. Disregarding a few episodes of a euphemistic “conquest of the desert” (in Argentina, for instance), societal heterogeneity has not been seen as the object of systematic reduction policies—policies of marginalization (as in the United States with its non WASP elements) (Benítez-Rojo 201), or radical “ethnic cleansing” (as in nazi Germany) (Fernández Retamar 102).

As a result partly of the prejudice against the so-called hybrid condition of people born out of the Native-invader contact, but also as a result of the fact that American practices were judged according to European principles and categories, the heterogeneity of Latin American society and cultural practices, that should have been appreciated as a source of enrichment, was traditionally apprehended in a negative fashion. When judged by these foreign and artificial measurements, American “identity” was easily constructed as either deficient or excessive: in short, as a monstrosity (whose basic feature is hybridity) (Cros 42).

Carmen Perilli’s observation that “representation was marked by the alterity of the object, in relation to a subject who was defining it from