Chapter 6

Blackness, the Racial-Spatial Order at Work, and Beauty Contest Politics: Señorases, Mujeres, Blanqueamiento, and the Negra Permitida

In this chapter, my intent is to locate blackness within the cultural topography of Ecuadorian society, or what I call its racial-spatial order (see Chapter 2). 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, 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 the white-mestizo Ecuadorian society. The presence of Afro-Ecuadorians has greatly changed in the urban society, when compared to the “invisibility” of blackness of the mid-1970s. Blacks are physically present in urban settings, and their numbers can no longer be ignored. Despite the refusal of many whites and white-mestizos to consider them invisible, they have become an integral part of the landscape of the two major urban areas of the country: Quito and Guayaquil. These cities are the centers of political and
Migration of blacks to urban centers continues to be seen as a threat even when they are moving up the socioeconomic ladder and do not act according to racist stereotypes. Racism quickly puts an end to their hopes and aspirations.

In this chapter, my objective is twofold. First, I show what I have called the racial-spatial order at work by revisiting some ethnographic moments that unambiguously reveal its existence. The racial-spatial dimension of Ecuadorian sociopolitical reality posited in that way allows for a careful disentangling of the various societal forces and processes that crystalize in the preparation and holding of two beauty contests in which black women were victorious, at the end of the period I called monocultural mestizaje (Rahier 2012, 1–14): Miss Ecuador 1995–1996 and Miss Esmeraldas 1997–1998.

**Some Ethnographic Encounters: The Racial-Spatial Order at Work**

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 there to build second residences, small hotels, or restaurants near the beach. In Atacames, one can observe an antagonism between local inhabitants born in the village and these permanent or seasonal migrants known as serranos (from the highland). 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 people 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 concrete existence of the Ecuadorian racial order and the spatial dimensions within which it is constituted. On numerous occasions in Quito, white, white-mestizo, and mestizo people, 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,”