

# Mixed Metaphors

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These aren't the best of times for racial purity. These are times, like it or not, for the inevitable and, with a little luck, even fertile mixing of the races. Miscegenation is definitely the resort we must adopt to transcend the strangeness that 'others' represent for us, to finally defeat a true arrogance that is founded upon a false sense of purity. Mind you, I have no intention of going on about this by enumerating the benefits of a racially mixed heritage. I am racially mixed, a mestizo from the whitest and the blackest of the Antilles: (a mestizo who sometimes passes for 'white,' which is the way one's 'impurities' are forgiven in Cuba). That is why I, myself, find this celebration of miscegenation ridiculous and self-serving. I refuse to consider the inevitable as either good or worthy. To better explain myself, allow me to share a family anecdote.

It so happens that a century and a half ago, a young Cuban landowner, Tomás Betancourt y Zayas, did nothing of great importance: he had sexual intercourse with one of his slaves. Some time later, however, and not necessarily as a consequence of the aforementioned act, he did something truly exceptional: he joined three other young landowners in the heroic attempt of freeing

Cuba from Spain, preceding the Father of our Country and his war for independence by almost two decades. It was the year 1851 and, as was to be expected, the four heroic, budding liberators were captured and executed.

Be that as it may, at the same time he was waiting his turn to become one of the first four men ever to be shot by firing squad in Cuban history (another well-nourished national tradition), Don Tomás was visited by the aforementioned slave. She wasn't bringing him... say... a cup of hot chocolate, but rather a newborn baby girl that she asked him to recognize as his own. Don Tomás Betancourt y Zayas, fully aware of his great patriotic responsibility at such a transcendent moment, and knowing that such a gesture would be decisive in creating the shape of the future nation for which he was fighting, did not recognize the baby girl. After all, as one of his own slaves, she would in any event bear his surname. Very well, it was possible that Don Tomás was not the baby's father, but that girl was my great great grandmother Lolila. This means that even if I do not have the blood of a firing squad victim coursing through my veins, I do indeed have the life essence of that slave who Don Tomás possessed in some dark cor-



ner of his farm. This is not exactly a happy example of miscegenation. For the liberal landowner, a failed liberator, himself, it was impossible to overcome his established feeling of strangeness towards the woman whose flesh hadn't seemed so alien, but rather near and appetizing.

A friend of mine, the ineffable Chago, suggested that I use for this piece about miscegenation the metaphor of rice and beans, the basic ingredients of some of our most venerated dishes. Gastronomic metaphors can be dangerous when applied to humans, so I will use it carefully. Black beans and rice can be cooked separately or be combined to make a dish of dark rice infused with black beans known as 'Moors and Christians.' Since this is one of my favorite dishes I hardly ever order it in the myriad Cuban restaurants found the world over. I already know that they will pale miserably when compared to my recollection of the 'Moorish' rice that my grandmother, with

the masterful ease of quite a few grandmothers, made every Sunday.

By pure luck I have recovered this flavor again in unlikely places in New York and Miami but, somewhere behind the flavor, I always find hands that are wise and respectful of the alchemy that it takes to produce it. So now that the idea of miscegenation has become fashionable (although its counterpart, a rancorous and useless defense of purity, is also in style), so be it. In any event, I shall always prefer a miscegenation that is respectful and wise, one that does not entail disdain for any of its parts nor as its final product—the miscegenation brought about by the elaborate efforts of musicians such as Gema Corredera and Pavel Urquiza, or by those who, if they're lucky, can emulate the 'Moors and Christians' my grandmother gave us.