

STRANGE FRUITS, FORBIDDEN FRUITS, AND ABJECT FRUITS. METAPHORS OF RACIALIZATION AND SEXUALITY IN THE AMERICAS

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Strange fruits

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh,
and the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
for the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
for the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
here is a strange and bitter crop.



The poem “Strange Fruit” written by Abel Meeropol in 1937, inspired by this photograph, and made famous as a song by Billie Holiday, became an emblem of the fight against racism in the United States, and a memorial for the countless victims of lynching in the American south. Through the disturbing metaphor of the “strange fruit” the poet and singer were able to speak openly about this extreme form of racist violence.

One thing is particularly striking about the text: despite the explicitness of its description of the hangings, there is only one racial reference, in the third line. However, this passing allusion to a “black body” (or “bodies” in the renderings of Holliday and Nina Simone) is more than enough to give the whole poem/song its profound meaning...

How can the mere mention of the “black” colour of the skin evoke in most readers and listeners a whole universe of historical, cultural, racial and even sexual references?

Following Achille Mbembe (1) we can argue that “blackness” becomes here a signifier for the centuries-old construction of the Black as a racialized Other. In this tragic instance, the Black body was saturated with menacing meanings: the threat posed by the lustful roving Black male to White female virtue, the peril posed by Blacks in general, particularly young male Blacks, to the segregated social order of the South, the specters of criminality and animality frightfully condensed in the color of the skin.

This is why this hanging body must remain nameless in its “blackness”, individuality has no place here. The metaphor of the fruit also exhibits the dehumanization to which the “black bodies” were subjected by those who attacked them so brutally.

The “black body” is a fraught historical construction born out of centuries of racism, enslavement,

segregation, the condensation of countless sexual, social, and physical fears, an object of suspicion, hatred, and extreme violence. It is, indeed, the “strange fruit” of a long, sad history.

FORBIDDEN FRUITS

[Las tres razas]

This peaceful painting, generally called “The Three Races”, but titled “Equality before the Law” by the Peruvian artist, Francisco Laso, who produced it in the 1850s, seems to represent a completely opposite arrangement of racialized bodies. The White “amito”, the little lord, plays cards with a young Indian girl and a nubile Black woman, generally assumed to be his servants. We are in a saloon, the three subjects are decently dressed, their attitude is of modesty and conviviality.

According to his author the scene represented the desirable integration of the three races that constituted the “Peruvian nation”. In a programmatic text entitled “The palette and its colours” (2) Laso defended the racial plurality of his country: “One may paint well with a single colour, but it is better to paint with four, and there is nothing bad in using thirty colours in the same palette. According to Art, no colour is superior to the others. Black, yellow, red and black are equally useful: if they are combined adequately they will create an harmonious picture.”

He then mocks the “model of democratic liberty of the United States” because in that country “the humanitarians hunt the coloured races with their hunting dogs.” In contrast, in Peru, democracy has always existed “de-facto” because the conqueror Pizarro, “a pig herder”, defeated the powerful Incas and had intercourse with the Indian women, as did other conquerors. He adds proudly: “Afterwards, Democracy further

advanced when the Spaniards also mated with their slaves of African race.”

Peru still lives under this “de-facto” racial democracy, which only needs to be consolidated through further enlightenment: “If instead of arguing so much about the epidermis, we provided instruction to Indians and Zambos (mulattos), *just through education, Indians and Zambos would become White.*”

In contrast with his optimistic discourse, Laso’s painting seems strangely reticent. For starters, the equality between the races assembled in the bourgeois salon exists only in the game of cards they are playing: the mere possibility of their being together being defined by the magnanimous invitation of the White “amito”. Furthermore, as Mario Montalbeti points out (3), the players are not really enjoying their game: the shy white boy hides his face behind a stark black cap; the virgin-like Indian girl seems stoic and hieratic (a very common way of depicting Indian women as long-suffering passive symbols of the oppression of their race); the older and sexually mature black young woman does display a degree sensuality (and the image of the Black seductress is another cliché of racism), but the “amito” pays her no attention.

If we accept that the card game represents the equality before the law defended by Laso it would seem that its acceptance necessitates the exclusion of any other kind of relation between the races, particularly sexual intercourse, which is why the modest seductiveness of the Black woman must be ignored by the “amito.”

Interpreters of the painting have attributed Laso’s coyness to a personal history of shame regarding the abuse of Indian servants in his family’s plantation (4). However, it may also be read as a more wide ranging, and paradoxical, injunction: if “de facto” democracy was built upon the sexual predation of White males



on Indian and Black subordinate women, perhaps “de jure” democracy (the improvement of the races under a single law) requires the end of these sexual relations. Thus miscegenation must stop for the Indians and Black to become White through education, and the rule of the law. The racialized bodies of the Indian and the Black women must become forbidden fruits, devoid of sexuality.

ABJECT FRUIT

[Cortés y Malinche]

This mural painting from 1926 by José Clemente Orozco, one of the three most famous Mexican muralists of the Post-Revolutionary period presents a more tragic, arrangement of racialized and sexualized bodies. In this scene, the couple formed by the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, and his interpreter and concubine, the Indian woman Malinche, are depicted as the “Adam and Eve” of the Mexican mestizo race, the founding parents of the nation, according to the

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interpretation of the painting by the poet Octavio Paz, the most influential thinker in 20th century Mexico.

Their coupling, however, is not a happy one. Cortés, whose body seems to be the color of metal, confirming his identity as a warrior, takes possession of the body of Malinche in an imperative and overbearing way, like his war booty. Indeed, at his feet lies the body of a slain Indian man whose sacrifice is the prelude to the taking of his woman by the triumphant conquistador. Malinche’s body is naked and clearly sexualised, but not seductive. Her dour expression (another instance of the stoicism attributed to Indian women) is a sign of resignation and of surrender, not desire. Thus the conception of the new Mestizo race, is not presented as a joyful occasion, but as the sad epilogue of defeat and subjugation.

This bleak reading of Mestizaje is confirmed by Paz’s interpretation of the historic figure of Malinche in his paramount work on Mexican national identity, *Labyrinth of Solitude*. In a chapter entitled “Children of Malinche”, the author analyses the Mexican insult *chingar* (to fuck, to screw over, to spoil) and defines the figure of “la Chingada” (a feminine insult much stronger than the “fucked one”) as a paradigmatic female figure opposed to the Virgin of Guadalupe (the most worshipped Christian figure in Mexico). La Chingada “is the violated Mother [...] Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust. Her taint is constitutional and resides



in her sex.” He then goes on to argue that Malinche is the original la Chingada: “the Conquest was a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. [...] When he repudiates La Malinche, the Mexican Eve, as she was represented by José Clemente Orozco, the Mexican breaks his ties with the past, renounces his origins, and lives in isolation and solitude.” (5)

This deeply misogynistic interpretation deprives Malinche and all other Indian women of their agency; their will and desires. Their fascination or seduction have no value in the face of the absolute male power of the Conquistadores (and, also, the discursive power of the writer who condemns them). They can only be chingadas (fucked ones, destroyed ones), betrayers, thoroughly abject and despicable.

These are not the strange fruits of the threatening male “black bodies”; nor are they the forbidden fruits of the modest well behaved Indian and Black young women invited to play the game of equality at the table of their coy White master; they are the abject fruits of racialized and sexualized subordinate women who deserve to be raped and discarded by their conquerors, despised by their children and even insulted by high minded poets.

These three bitter fruits of the racial history of the Americas show us the tragic limits of non-racialism in societies constituted by discrimination and colonialism: in the first the sexualised bodies of young Black males must be destroyed to preclude any risk of miscegenation; in the second, the sexuality of the Black and Indian females and the White males must be suppressed in order to achieve formal equality; in the third, *mestizaje* can only be conceived as a brutal victory of masculine power over subjugated and degraded feminine Indian bodies.

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