The Celebration of Interracial Intimacy Racial Mixture as the Cure for Racism – A Critical View

Tanya K. Hernandez
Fordham University School of Law, therhandez@law.fordham.edu

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Tanya Katerí Hernández
Fordham Law School Archibald R. Murray Professor of Law & author of *Racial Innocence: Unmasking Latino Anti-Black Bias and the Struggle for Equality* (Beacon Press, 2022). Email: THernandez@law.fordham.edu

Solangel Maldonado’s *The Architecture of Desire: How the Law Shapes Interracial Intimacy and Perpetuates Inequality*, offers an empirically rich intervention into the presumption that one’s choice of intimate partner is solely the product of individual preference. By methodically assessing all the laws that have shaped how our “choices and preferences” are formed, Maldonado demonstrates that our racially restrictive ideas of who makes a desirable partner are not simply a matter of individual choice. The value of Maldonado’s exhaustive assessment of the role of law in influencing intimate partner choice, is that it dispels the notion that our racially segregated societies are natural.

Peeling back the veil to show the legal machinery that structured and continues to influence intimate partner choice, will hopefully disrupt the societal complacency of accepting racial segregation as a natural consequence of benign personal choice. By doing so, the book is key in the social justice effort to address the great extent to which segregation facilitates racial hierarchy and denial of opportunity even in the present-day absence of Jim Crow laws mandating racial segregation. As a result, the book makes a valuable contribution not only to the U.S. conversation about racism, but also to the transnational consideration of race and racism. This is because the puzzlement over how racism can exist in the contemporary absence of Jim Crow segregation, is a global phenomenon that needs insightful analyses like that of Maldonado.
There is one complication that is beyond the scope of *The Architecture of Desire’s*, already significant contributions, but is worth noting for how this additional layer also further normalizes racial hierarchy as being beyond the reach of legal intervention. This relates to the way in which the global misperception of endogamous intimacy patterns as a matter of mere personal preference, is often coupled with the notion that any cross-racial intimacy is a direct indicator that race relations have improved.

For instance, the mainstream press has universally celebrated the growth of interracial intimacy and the creation of a multiracial-identified population therefrom as a new phenomenon that portends “the end of race as we know it.” Ethnic studies scholar Caroline Streeter notes that the ubiquity of media images featuring mixed-race people as visions of racial harmony is a device that “emphasizes the pleasurable aspects of ethnic diversity without engaging the challenge of cultural differences and the existence of racial hierarchies and racial inequality. Multicultural images that use multiracial people envision a future free of such power struggles.” Indeed, advertisers have seized upon the interest in what sociologist Kimberly McClain DaCosta describes as “racially ambiguous” and presumably mixed-race-appearing persons for marketing numerous products.

The public fascination with interracial intimacy has promoted the belief that racial mixture will, in and of itself, destroy racism. For instance, leaders of the lobby for the recognition of a “multiracial” census category frequently posit that multiracials are a “unifying force,” on the theory that multiracial individuals “as a group may be the embodiment of America’s best chance to clean up race relations.” Indeed, the equating of
interracial racial mixture with racial harmony is often quite explicit. Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson agrees: “If your object is the eventual integration of the races, a mixed-race or middle group is something you’d want to see developing. . . . The middle group grows larger and larger, and the races eventually blend.” Similarly, demographer William Frey, the author of “Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America,” asserts that multiracial identity will blur racial divisions and soothe cultural tensions. The multiracial discourse narrative thus posits that “mixing away” racism will absolve the nation from having to address entrenched racial disparities in socioeconomic opportunity.

However, one only need look to jurisdictions with much longer standing mythologies regarding the presumed power of interracial intimacy and racial mixture; to better appreciate the hindrance it poses to the pursuit of racial equality. Latin America in particular provides an illuminating comparative example. Persons of African descent are approximately 1/3 of the region but make up more than 40 percent of the poor and have been consistently marginalized and denigrated as undesirable elements of the society since the abolition of slavery across the Americas. Yet, the view that “racism does not exist” is pervasive in Latin America despite the advent of social justice movements and social science researchers demonstrating the contrary. When the BBC surveyed Latin Americans regarding the existence of racism, a significant number of respondents emphatically denied the existence of racism. Many, for instance, made statements such as “Ibero-Americans are not racist,” and “Ibero-America is not a racist region, for the simple fact that the majority of the population is either indigenous, creole, or mixed.”

Thus the denial of racism is rooted in what many scholars have critiqued as the
“myth of racial democracy” – the notion that the racial mixture (mestizaje/mestiçagem) in a population is emblematic of racial harmony and insulated from racial discord and inequality. Academic scholarship has in the last thirty years critiqued Latin American “mestizaje” theories of racial mixture as emblematic of racial harmony. Yet, Latin Americans still very much adhere to the notion that racial mixture and the absence of Jim Crow racial segregation are such a marked contrast to the United States racial history that the region views itself as what I term “racially innocent.” Indeed, extensive survey data demonstrates that biased Latin American racial ideologies have not completely evolved despite the existing scholarly critiques of mestizaje as a trope of racial innocence.

As a result, in Latin America today the Afro-descendant racial justice movement struggle against racism is in large measure centered on questioning “the myth of racial democracy” and countering the opposition to race-specific equality policies that are based upon the presumed distinctiveness of the Latin American racial democracy mestizaje ethos. In short, the celebration of interracial intimacy racial mixture as the cure for racism has done little to eradicate racism, and has instead obstructed the ability to address it.

This is why The Architecture of Desire, is such a significant contribution. The book begins the arduous process of deconstructing U.S. mythologies about the presumed civil rights consequences of interracial intimacy. This is a much-needed intervention during a time in which so much backlash against racial equity efforts exist. With the insights provided by The Architecture of Desire, the pursuit of substantive racial justice will not be equated with ineffectual celebrations of interracial intimacy. The Architecture of Desire, shows us that there is a better path forward.