Matthew Pettway, PhD
University of South Alabama

When Gabriel García Márquez won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982 for One Hundred Years of Solitude, he became the fourth Latin American writer to be so honored. The Nobel Committee awarded him the coveted prize, “for his novels and short stories, in which the fantastic and the realistic are combined in a richly composed world of imagination, reflecting a continent's life and conflicts.”

Though the award-winning novel has inspired an enormous body of literary scholarship that viewed the mythical Macondo through myriad prisms, there has been very little focus on the presence and significance of race in the novel. The deafening silence on the racial issue has remained a constant since the novel’s premiere in 1967, and persists to this day in spite of the fact that Latin America boasts a population of 150 million persons of African descent. But the reticence to acknowledge race, as a social category in Latin America and, the general silence around African ancestry in the region is typical of Luso-Hispanic approaches to thinking about and defining race. This is due in part to the fact that Latin Americans have defined racism as a state-sponsored activity, that is, as legislation that explicitly promotes racial segregation. In this way, the violence of Jim Crow in the U.S. South and the militarized body politic of South African apartheid exemplified what racism looks like.

Conversations surrounding One Hundred Years of Solitude are no exception to the rule. My lecture, “Reading Through the Invisibility of Race in One Hundred Years of Solitude” is informed by a particular set of concerns that I hope to address this morning. If One Hundred Years of Solitude is a novel about deciphering the destiny of the family of José Arcadio Buendia and Úrsula Iguarán then how might we decipher the representation of race in the novel? What lens should we use to do such

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work? And, if we apply a racial lens to the text, what might we see that has otherwise escaped our notice?

Let me begin my defining race. Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1980) defined “race [as] a division of [human]kind possessing traits that are transmissible by descent and sufficient to characterize it as a distinct human type” (Sipress 176). But recent findings have disrupted scientific certainty surrounding the idea of race. Since the 1970s, modern science has proven Webster’s Dictionary wrong.² Today, we know that human beings are 99.9% identical genetically, as Drs. Francis Collins and Craig Venter jointly announced at the White House on June 26, 2000, when the rough draft of the human genome project was released (John Harvard’s Journal, 63).³

Scientific definitions notwithstanding, sociologist Howard Winant defines racial formation theory thus:

From a racial formation perspective (Omi and Winant 1986), race is understood as a fluid, unstable, and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political conflict. Race both shapes the individual psyche and “colors” relationships among individuals on the one hand, and furnishes an irreducible component of collective identities and social structures on the other (59).

One Hundred Years of Solitude is a mystery wrapped in a riddle, mocking, even taunting the reader to decipher, if she dares, the fate of a people that has already been predestined by forces greater than them. For centuries race has been a way of thinking about the moral character, cultural sophistication and destiny of a people that creates immutable categories based on superficial phenotypical differences. Racism, on the other hand, is a system with the purpose of transforming fictional racial destinies into tangible realities supported by empirical evidence.

MESTIZAJE AS A METAPHOR FOR SOCIAL HARMONY

I am saying that race has been made invisible in Latin American criticism about One Hundred Years of Solitude not because it is absent in the novel but because it is present in a way that is so familiar that it eludes recognition.

² See Peter Wade’s “Race in Latin America” in Companion to Latin American Anthropology.
³ “The Human Genome Project”. Nature.com
In *Colonialism and Race in Luso-Hispanic Literature*, Jerome Branche argues that *mestizaje* is not merely a phenotypical descriptor for persons of African, indigenous and European ancestry but rather *mestizaje* is a metaphor for social harmony. *Mestizaje* is a way of picturing race not in terms of difference but rather as a “homogeneous racially amalgamated collectivity,” in other words as a harmonious multihued family. This multicolored family is, of course, devoid of social conflict. Latin Americans are rhetorically equipped to describe racial intermingling as a metaphor for social harmony in light of their chosen point of comparison: The United States. Latin Americans juxtapose racial intermixing with the institutionalized racial violence of the United States’ Jim Crow south and the apartheid regime in South Africa (Branche 5). The very visible violence of these systems of racial control stands in stark contrast with Latin American countries where conflict is explained in terms of class inequities.

To understand *mestizaje* in Latin American terms, I turn to José Vasconcelos, perhaps the most famous proponent of this racial intermingling in modern Latin America. José Vasconcelos was Mexican education minister from 1921-1924 and he published *La raza cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*) in 1925 as a defense of *mestizaje* against nineteenth-century social Darwinist theories that characterized miscegenation as something that brought about the racial degradation. Vasconcelos’ theory of the cosmic race put forth two ideas that are important for my lecture today: first that racial intermixing did not lead to cultural and intellectual ruin but rather that it would aid Latin America to achieve what other great mestizo cultures such as Egypt, Greece and Rome had accomplished (3-4, 11). Secondly, to ensure the cultural progression of the cosmic race, Vasconcelos argued for what Branche calls an “aesthetic eugenics” so that Greco-Roman principles of beauty, emotion and refined taste would predominate in the development of the new cosmic race. In this way, Vasconcelos mused that more advanced human beings would absorb less sophisticated, even backward cultural groups. In fact, Vasconcelos reasoned that the black race would disappear within a few decades of the mestizaje process and that indigenous persons would promptly become modern and civilized experiencing a “quantum leap” (Branche 22-23).

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4 It must be noted that Ancient Egypt was an African civilization peopled by what Herodotus described as persons of “Black skin and woolly hair” (qtd. in Diop 1, 51, 53). In the early dynastic periods, Black Africans in Ancient Egypt produced highly sophisticated forms of architecture, science, mathematics and religious systems prior to Grecian and Roman invasions from the north. See Cheikh Anta Diop’s classic, *Origins of African Civilizations: Myth or Reality*. 
The treatment of race in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can be represented in three motifs: race as a deterministic marker of human identity, that is as a sign of the inescapable destiny of a people, race as cultural and biological mixture, commonly celebrated in Latin America as *mestizaje* and, finally, overseas exotica as a cultural euphemism for Afro-Latin American culture. Today, I seek to expound upon these motifs by doing a close reading of three passages from García Márquez’s novel.

**THE BUENDÍA AS A BUENA FAMILIA IN ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE**

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* broke with the theory of cosmic race by returning the reader to a pre-Vasconcelos moment when racial intermingling was an unambiguous statement of a blood impurity. When Amaranta resists the sexual advances of her nephew Aureliano José she warns him that “any children will be born with a tail of a pig” (149). *Mestizaje* is destiny in this novel but is not the destiny that Vasconcelos imagined and hoped for.

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* leaves no doubt about the cultural heritage and racial lineage of the Buendía family. The marriage between Ursula Iguarán and José Arcadio Buendía is a classic representation of how prominent Latin American families constituted themselves racially. The matriarch, Ursula Iguarán’s great grandfather was Aragonese and José Arcadio Buendía is described as a *Creole tobacco farmer*. Though in the United States the term, *creole* refers to racial mixture, in Spanish America it bespeaks a native-born person generally of European ancestry (López Mejía 30). Aragon’s claims to fame in the history of Spanish empire are without dispute: because Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon’s marriage in 1469, produced a political union that spearheaded European settlement of the western hemisphere for more than a century. The Buendía family is what Latin Americans have often referred to as a *buena familia* (good family), that is a prosperous Creole family thought to be unblemished by *mestizo*, Afro-Latin American or indigenous lineage. They are the “New World” equivalent of the old Christians (*viejos cristianos*) on the Iberian Peninsula. García Márquez’s choice of Aragon as the ancestral home of Ursula Iguarán’s great-grandfather is, as I have shown, of great symbolic consequence.

With this in mind, I analyze *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a story about a white Latin American family’s fall from grace into a multitude of vices, the degradation and destruction of the race, being chief among their transgressions. Ursula—the matriarchal figure that García Márquez constructs as the sole voice of reason—is certainly not silent on
Ursula described the vices of the Buendía men as: “the talk of war”, “fighting cocks”, “bad women” and “wild undertakings” (García Márquez 188). I will give first consideration to the “bad women” or *mala mujer* stereotype. *La mala mujer* stereotype is illustrative of a tendency for euphemism and misnomers in the Hispanophone Caribbean and Latin America. By evoking the bad woman stereotype, Ursula is able to allude to many forms of marginality and sexual impropriety through a distinctly racist cultural lens without ever uttering the word, *negra*. García Márquez omniscient narrator sums up Ursula’s attitude regarding the vices of José Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo thus:

> It was as if the defects of the family and none of the virtues had been in concentrated both [José Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo]. Then she [Ursula] decided that no one again would be called Aureliano or José Arcadio (García Márquez 188-189).

On another occasion, Ursula chided her great-grandson, Aureliano Segundo for his illicit relationship with a mulatto woman by the name of Petra Cotes. She shouted, “That woman has been your ruination” and “She’s got you so bewitched that one of these days I’m going to see you twisting around with colic and with a toad in your belly” (García Márquez 190). Ursula’s use of animalistic imagery not only characterizes the supposed contamination of her family’s lineage but also insinuates that Latin American women of African descent possess a third sense, and ability to access African ritual powers the Catholic societies have misnamed has witchcraft. Again, Ursula’s concern is with the buena familia’s lineage and social reputation and she racializes Petra Cotes without using racially explicit discourse.

**THE MULATTO WOMAN STEREOTYPE & MULATTO SONS as Illegitimate Fruit**

Her name was Petra Cotes. She had arrived in Macondo in the middle of the war with a chance husband who lived off the raffles, when the man died she kept up the business. She was a clean young mulatto woman with yellow almond-shaped eyes that gave her faith the ferocity of a panther, but she had a generous heart and a magnificent vocation for love.

> It was as if the defects of the family and none of the virtues had been in concentrated both [José Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo]. Then she [Ursula] decided that no one again would be called Aureliano or José Arcadio.
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His mares would bare triplets, his hens laid twice a day, and his hog fattened with such speed that no one could explain such disorderly fecundity except to the use of black magic. [...] The more he opened champagne to soak his friends, the more wildly his animals gave birth and the more he was convinced that his lucky star was not a matter of his conduct but an influence of Petra Cotes, his concubine, whose love had the virtue of exasperating nature (Garcia Márquez 188-189).

Garcia Marquez’s description of Petra as “a clean young mulatto woman” grants her an air of attractiveness that is close enough to European standards of beauty that it does offend Hispanic sensibilities. On the other hand, Petra has “yellow almond-shaped eyes that gave her the ferocity of a panther”. Petra’s relatively light-brown skin—commonly referred to as canela—or cinnamon color, makes her more desirable to white Hispanic men but does not enable her to escape the animalistic characteristics ascribed to the Afro-Latina female sexuality. Though mulatto women were afforded a higher place within Latin American pigmentocracies than black women—a political order that affords socioeconomic privilege based on the relative lightness of the skin—the racial epithet mulatto has its origins in deterministic ideas about animal breeding. The word mulatto is derived from the word mule and is reminiscent of white American debates concerning whether or not black persons could be deemed members of the same species as whites (Black Women Novelists, Christian qtd. in Mejía-López 36).

Adelaida Mejía-López considers Petra Cotes the most memorable mulatto character in the novel. Petra is the lifelong concubine to Aureliano Segundo who married Fernanda, a European-descended woman closely resembling a white matriarch from the US south. Fernanda’s only functions within the racial order are to maintain a thinly veiled sense of respectability for her husband Aureliano Segundo and, of course, to produce white children (Black Women Novelists, Christian qtd. in Mejía-López 35). On the other hand, Petra is a character that García Márquez condemns to the trope hypersexuality (López Mejía 35-36). Petra has what can only be explained as a magical influence on the fertility of her lover’s livestock. When his livestock multiply in ways that are inexplicable within the rubric of the biological sciences, Aureliano Segundo credits the sexual powers of his mistress. But when he fell into financial ruin he also thinks Petra’s waning sexual exuberance is to blame. In this way, the fact that she is a mulatto woman does not allow Petra Cotes to escape the dictum that black female where assigned value in slave societies according to their perceived ability to increase their owners stock (Carby qtd. in Mejía-López 36). Petra Cotes’s inability to escape blackness is eerily similar to that of Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s
seventeen mulatto sons. García Márquez introduces the colonel’s mulatto sons thus:

Then Colonel Aureliano Buendía took down the bar and saw at the door seventeen men of the most varied appearance, of all types and colors, but all of the solitary air that would have been enough to identify them anywhere on earth. They were his sons. Without any previous agreement, without knowing each other, they had arrived from the most distinct corners of the coast, captivated by the talk of the jubilee. They all bore with pride that name Aureliano and the last name of their mothers. The three days that they stayed in the house to the satisfaction of Ursula and the scandal of Fernanda, were like a state of war. Amaranta searched among old papers for the ledger where Ursula had written down the names and birth and baptism dates of all of them, and beside the space for each one she added his present address (García Márquez 215-216).

The seventeen sons of Colonel Aureliano Buendía returned—figuratively speaking—to their father’s house in search of legitimacy, in search of their birthright, something their father’s womanizing had denied them. Colonel Aureliano is akin to a Spanish conquistador because he indiscriminately spreads his seed among the “native women” and feels neither responsibility nor compunction for having done so. The fact that he is not only absent but also completely ignorant that his mulatto and mestizo sons even exist, is yet another hallmark of Spanish conquistador masculinity in the colonial period. The near magical appearance of his sons in Macondo functions as a return of sorts to a fictive place of origins, which is also their father’s birthplace. But Macondo belongs to them in myth alone because the mulatto sons only bear his first name and they carry seventeen different surnames from seventeen different nameless women of color.

García Márquez alludes to the Afro-Caribbeanness of the Colonel’s seventeen sons by noting that, “they had arrived from the most distinct corners of the coast” (García Márquez 215). Colombian coastal cities like Cartagena (known in colonial times as Cartagena de las Indias) have boasted an African cultural presence since the colonial era due to the devastating effects of the transatlantic slave trade. From 1701-1810, slave merchants transported nearly 500,000 African persons to the Spanish Caribbean; most of them were sent to Cuba (“Slavery in the Americas”, Holloway, ed. Franklin Knight, 149).

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5 Between 1518-1810, England, Portugal and France were responsible for the arrival of 90% of the African captives transported to the Americas and sold as property (“Slavery in the Americas”, Holloway, ed. Franklin Knight, 149).
As a mark of their illegitimacy, the narrator is silent about the precise ancestry of the mothers of the Colonel’s mulatto sons. We can infer, however, that these seventeen anonymous women are the descendants of Africans transported to Colombia during the aforesaid historical period. Anonymity doesn’t protect their identity nor does it restore to them any sense of honor but rather, anonymity reaffirms their position within Latin American racial hierarchies. They are invisible by virtue of their relative insignificance.

The novel discusses race as erotic pleasure, quaint Indian domestic servants and foreign exotica. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* discusses race in a way that renders racial conflict virtually invisible.

In conclusion, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a novel that reproduces the Latin American racial order in all its aspects: the timid and submissive Indigenous characters, the defilement of white European lineage due to racial intermingling women of the lower castes and...

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