The dream of an order: Race and gender and the project of another Caribbean history

Marta Jimena Cabrera
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Abstract
The historical novel Yngermina or the Daughter of Calamar (1844) is Colombia’s first novel and one that illustrates the difficulties in conceptualising and representing women, natives and blacks in the nineteenth-century nation-making process. In Latin America, this period of national formation is linked to the idealism of the liberal elites, where the masses are romanticised and symbolically integrated into a homogenous ‘imagined community’.

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The historical novel Yngermina or the Daughter of Calamar (1844) is Colombia’s first novel and one that illustrates the difficulties in conceptualising and representing women, natives and blacks in the nineteenth-century nation-making process. In Latin America, this period of national formation is linked to the idealism of the liberal elites, where the masses are romanticised and symbolically integrated into a homogenous ‘imagined community’. Yngermina, a novel written and set in the Caribbean world navigates between two waters: while it seeks to give the indigenous peoples a voice it also relies on narrative strategies to conceal or even avoid the difference that women, blacks and natives embody; at the same time, it also criticises the abuse of power (typical of liberal idealism) and, contradictorily, celebrates the arrival of conquistadors bringing civilisation to the ‘savages’. In fact, Yngermina can be seen as an effort made by local letrado (writer/statesman) Juan José Nieto to delineate an ideal body politic modelled according to his view of civilisation and modernity. In this particular project, race and gender are tools by which the history of a marginalised region is rewritten as the locus of a civilisation that features strong utopian elements.

**JUAN JOSÉ NIETO AND THE PROJECT OF AN-OTHER HISTORY**

Anyway, my friend, the deputies of this province that have gone to the Congress have disillusioned us. Through them we know that in legislature where there is an excessive majority over the deputies of this region, it is impossible to obtain anything in its favour, because there is a spirit of opposition that degenerates into insult; there runs aground every useful project proposed for the [Caribbean] coast if it is assumed that it affects the interest of the centre, even indirectly, while for [the centre], everything is obtained. (Nieto 1993:23)

Juan José Nieto was born in 1804 under the shadow of a long conflict between the unlettered city of the coast, Cartagena, and the lettered city of the highland, Bogotá. He was born into a humble tri-ethnic family but ascended the social ladder through his two marriages to upper-class women (Fals Borda 37B). Nieto, a self-taught man, became a popular leader and a military person, as well as a member of the local intelligentsia, despite the initial rejection of Cartagena’s elite (Lemaître 14). He wrote Colombia’s first regional geography, Geografía histórica, estadística y local de la provincial de Cartagena (1839), a ‘Mercantile
Dictionary’, many political texts and three novels: Yngermina (1844), Los moriscos (1845) and Rosina o la prisión del Castillo de Chagres (1850). The first two were published during the author’s exile in Jamaica and the last one published in a regional newspaper, La Democracia (founded by Nieto in Cartagena). During his successful political career, Nieto occupied several positions: governor of the province of Cartagena (1851–1853) and president of the province of Bolívar (1859). In 1860 he declared its secession from the national territory and in 1861 Nieto declared himself president of the Republic of Nueva Granada and occupied the position until 1862 (Fals Borda, 146B). After that, Nieto returned to Cartagena and faced an insurrection, which ended in his fall from power (1864). He retired from public life and in 1866 died in the region whose history he sought to rewrite.

As a novelist, Nieto has received very little critical attention. Published in Jamaica and focusing upon a regional theme, potential readership of Yngermina would have been small and its critical reception discouraging — qualified as ‘unattractive’ in an 1894 critical essay (Laverde 79), and labelled in the 1950s as an ‘embryo’ of a novel with no imaginative spirit (Curcio Altamar 72). Nieto’s goal however was the literary representation (based on a study of archival colonial documents) of a significant episode in Caribbean regional history, that being the foundation of his fatherland, Cartagena.

In fact, a discussion of Juan José Nieto’s Yngermina is inseparable from the cultural history of the Colombian Caribbean coast and of the city of Cartagena from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Founded in 1533, Cartagena was the main colonial port of South America through which black slaves were trafficked. The city became a stronghold of African culture and mestizaje, producing a complex system of social stratification based on race and lineage. The Inquisition was introduced in 1610, since Cartagena had become an important colonial port but one in which scant social control was seen to result in the proliferation of ‘crimes’ such as adultery and sorcery. The Church Fathers judged the colonial city to be the ‘most vicious and sinful in the Spanish Dominions, with the faith on the point of destruction’ (Lea qd in Taussig 42). Blacks in particular were notorious for anti-Christian outbursts, resulting in the identification of slave folklore and religion with sorcery. In the late seventeenth century, runaway slave camps (paleques) began to appear, later including Indians and mestizos, who formed unsupervised tri-ethnic communities. In contrast to other important cities, Cartagena had become an overwhelmingly black and mulatto society from the early seventeenth century (Múnera 1995 96).

These distinctive social and ethno-cultural regional characteristics were to create disputes between the elite of the Coast and that of the Highland, a process that began in the early colonial period. The process of marginalisation of the Colombian Caribbean from the Highland, which was to become the signifier for the nation, is based on intertwining discourses of scientific determinism and on the presence of African slaves, who arrived there in the first half of the sixteenth
In the temperate regions — ‘Men in society, the peaceful planter of the Andes’. In the production of the institution of slavery, and its discursive substance remained active until the post-independence period (Maya 184–88). By the eighteenth century, an image of liminality and disorder arose and was reinforced by postpositivist scientific discourse, of which the best examples are the writings of the prestigious Creole scientists Francisco José de Caldas and Pedro Fermín de Vargas. Caldas, for instance, wrote in his Del influjo del clima en los seres organizados (1808) that climate was a fundamental influence on the development of human beings, greatest development being seen in the inhabitants of the temperate regions — ‘Men in society, the peaceful planter of the Andes’. In contrast,

Moreover, blacks and mestizos posed serious threats to Creole bourgeois order; in 1811, a group of armed artisans imposed absolute independence from Spain on a horrified Creole junta. As historian Gabriel Jiménez Molinares stated: ‘the coercion of the armed mob over the organs of government reduced authority to a shadow: mutiny was the way in which all matters were solved’ (287). This picture of social anarchy was reinforced by the influential nineteenth-century historian José Manuel Restrepo: ‘since the common people were called from the beginning to take part so as to overthrow the royalist party, they became insolent; and the coloured people, who were numerous in the city, acquired a preponderance which came to be disastrous for public order’ (1942–1950 I 167). Such were the expressions of the feelings of the ruling class in general, menaced by a ‘low-other’ that hoped mainly for equality, as is evident in the 1812 Constitution of Cartagena (Múnera 1995 239). This first experiment in republican life lasted until 1815, when the Spaniards occupied Cartagena until 1821. It was the last important city of New Granada to be liberated, with its Creole, black and mulatto leaders dead, imprisoned or in exile. Consequently, the port entered a period of decadence and was unable to actively negotiate with Bogotá in the creation of the nation (Múnera 1998; 1996; Helg).
Alonso confesses his love despite the suspicion that Spanish pride could act upon him to persuade Alonso to desist from aspiring to a young Indian woman, that although a descendant of the country’s rulers, because of her condition of conquered and colonized, would find her unworthy of being the wife of a Castilian and brother of the Governor. (37)

Although noble, Yngermina is a feminine colonial subject, ‘conquered and colonized’, who occupies the subordinated side of the binary hierarchies that the Spanish cultural elements supersede the native ones, thus concealing all black elements. It is a reconstructive project in which Nieto’s attitudes toward issues of race and gender play a significant part.

Seemingly natural hierarchies mark this romance from the start: after Alonso falls in love with Yngermina, he is relieved to discover that ‘the young Calamareña descended from the sovereigns of the land — Pride of almost every Spaniard, who wants to be the son of someone respectable’ (21 emphasis added). The noble origin of Yngermina overcomes the first obstacle to the realisation of the relationship. Here, Nieto accurately alludes to the sixteenth-century idea that marrying into the Indian nobility was honourable, an idea that was out-moded by the nineteenth century. Other, less-menacing hindrances included illiteracy and paganism. Illiteracy is overcome by Alonso’s desire to personally ‘educate’ Yngermina, and paganism through baptism. Yngermina undertakes both projects without hesitation; she is (female ‘nature’ in need of (male) ‘culture’. The otherness of women appears fully entwined with the otherness of the native culture. As Helen Carr insists, ‘women’s unknowable otherness can also be projected onto the non-European’ (49). When Alonso begins her education, Yngermina ends up falling for the Spaniard and forgetting her irksome Indian fiancé, Catarpa.

Despite Yngermina’s nobility and her newly acquired education, the couple expect the rejection of their relationship by the patriarch of the colony, Pedro. Alonso confesses his love despite the suspicion that Spanish pride could act upon him to persuade Alonso to desist from aspiring to a young Indian woman, that although a descendant of the country’s rulers, because of her condition of conquered and colonized, would find her unworthy of being the wife of a Castilian and brother of the Governor. (37)

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articulate the discourses of this text: male/female, culture/nature, active/passive, conqueror/colonised and European/native. Pedro disagrees with the idea of marriage; he sees it as potentially harmful to the social hierarchy. Even the priests criticise Alonso’s ‘intimate relationship with a pagan woman’ (26). Pedro states that it would be strange to:

see a Castilian united to an Indian woman with the lessening of his dignity: that the colonists with such unions believing themselves equal to their masters, would degenerate in the respect in which one should always accustom them: that these almost savage nations, destined by nature to submission and obedience to their conquerors, would slowly forget their humble condition, if by means of their domestic relations they would acquire confidence and friendship with their masters. (38)

This is a tangential comment on the population of the Caribbean coast by mestizos born of this archetypical couple. Nevertheless, Alonso cleverly directs the argument towards the control of the native population, revealing the biopolitical dimensions of the love plot. Michel Foucault has defined biopolitics as ‘a technology of power centred on life’ (10), that is, a ‘politics concerned with subjects as members of a population, in which issues of individual sexual and reproductive conduct interconnect with issues of national policy and power’ (Gordon 5). Hence, for Alonso, his marriage to Yngermina is a means by which obedience of the native population will be assured:

This wedding is of great usefulness to our own projects of conquest. Through it, the Indians will be persuaded of our good intentions, since we do not hesitate in forming unions with their daughters, as proof that even though they are colonised we do not try to humiliate or oppress them; and since my chosen one is a princess of her tribe, this very reason will make them respect the dominion to which they have been submitted … [these unions are] a very effective and subtle way to further attract and bind these natives to obedience. (38)

Alonso cites as examples of this ideal, the marriage of conquistador Francisco Pizarro to the Inca Atahualpa’s widow in order ‘to remain without difficulty absolute owner of that empire’ (39) and that of Pocahontas (fn. 39). Interestingly, Pocahontas is the case chosen by Peter Hulme (1985) to discuss sexuality and mobility in early colonial discourse. Hulme introduces in his text the term ‘polypotropic man’, taken from the epithet applied to Odysseus in the first line of the Odyssey. He claims that the term ‘polypotropic’ has ‘at least three interconnected meanings: … “much travelled”, … “cunningly intelligent” or even “slippery and deceitful” … and “much given to troping, to the use of tropes”’ (20). Hence, the character of Alonso seems to fulfill the function of a ‘polypotropic man’, just as John Smith did in the story of Pocahontas. As a conquistador and colonist, Alonso is ‘much travelled’ and although not deceitful, he defends his love of an Indian woman with the use of tropes, ‘common places’ or ‘recurrent motifs’ where it appears clear that Alonso, like Odysseus and Smith, ‘covet[ed] the land whose inhabitants they confront’ (22). Those tropes are: intercultural
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with their subjects; such quality was more inherent to conquistadors, who
conquerors, consists in having the joy of doing good to the human species by rescuing
the conquered from ignorance and idolatry in order to cultivate their understanding
and bring them to the heart of the true religion; and not, like tyrants to hold enormous
masses of men in the humiliating condition of slaves, against the laws of creation
and humanity. (39–40).

‘Polytropic man’ embodies individualism and humanism in order to re-write a
successful narrative— and ‘successful narratives can only be written backwards’
(Hulme 23). Therefore, the use of ‘polytropic man’ serves the function of
constructing an allegory of male European cultural and technological
sophistication in opposition to the passiveness of a feminine America in a way
that is typical of early colonial discourse whose best examples can be perhaps
found in visual discourses (for example van der Straat’s América, c. 1575–80)
but which echoed well into the nineteenth century. Nieto fully acknowledges
this discourse in order to articulate his narrative of the conquest of the Caribbean
as one of a land in need of European power— ‘land’ and ‘women’ are interwoven
in this text, and the construction is held in place via the trope of harmonious
interacial love.

Yngermina is constructed textually as ‘respectful’, ‘modest’ but also, ‘noble’
and ‘elegant’ (46–47), a dignified, non-threatening female. As Ania Loomba
has asserted, ‘the figure of the “other woman” haunts colonial imagination in
ambivalent, often contradictory ways. She is an example of barbarism, but also
encodes colonial fantasies of the perfect feminine behaviour’ (157). In the passage
where she and Pedro meet, Yngermina is self-conscious of her ‘natural’ inferiority
as an Indian woman and is thus afraid of causing ‘an unpleasant impression …
since men of this character generally estrange themselves from having dealings
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modest look, with enough education to be able to make of her a worthy wife
of a Castilian ruler’ (48). Appended to Pedro’s opinion is a footnote where Nieto
offers the reader his personal appreciation on the physical features of the native
women in these terms:

the author has met in the Darien coast young Indian women of very light complexion
and beautiful features; and in the towns leeward of Cartagena, girls of this same race
with interesting figures, that if adorned and introduced in high society, would very
well play the roles of ladies; without mentioning the aborigines of the cold areas

is the Indians’ fault that providence made them be born in these regions? Do they
cease for this reason to be God’s children or worthy like us of all His benefits? Who
has given us the right to use as slaves men who are similar to us, only because of the
coincidence of having discovered their countries? The glory that … we have as
conquerors, consists in having the joy of doing good to the human species by rescuing
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and a humanistic rejection of slavery:

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where beautiful faces and colours are so common that they could be taken for European. (49)

Indian women with the appropriate physical features (‘very light complexion’) can be allowed in high society, disciplined and re-fashioned into ‘ladies’, a project of which Yngermina is the prototype. She, however, is destined to the conqueror since she belongs to the Indian nobility, is beautiful, educated, baptised and therefore distinguishable from other native women: ‘Pedro noticed the personal difference between her and her compatriots: that she was closer to the European class than to the indigenous; and that her grace and kindness greatly increased could make proud the most sprightly daughter of the cheerful Andalusia’ (48–49).

Yngermina is, to use Homi Bhabha’s words, ‘a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite’ (126 emphasis added). Yngermina embodies the subject of a disciplinary, regulatory project: she is appropriated by the masculine, colonial gaze of the conquerors in a movement which entails both the representation of her difference and its disavowal at the same time (126). It is interesting to note how Nieto had described her earlier in the novel:

‘Her skin almost white and blushing highlighted by the curls of her black hair, her slender figure, her graceful ways, her well-proportioned features and beautiful black eyes reveal happiness and other gifts of her soul; made her the queen of love and the torment of more than one young man from Calamar that sighed for her without hope’. (16 emphasis added)

Yngermina’s proximity to whiteness is an instance of what Camilla Griggers calls the ‘despotic face’ of white femininity, defined as a redundant signifier ‘emptied of specific meaning and therefore excessive in its signification’ (8.9) whose function is to rationalise race and class distinction and modernisation. Yngermina’s ‘almost white face’ is what puts her beyond the reach of Indian men (except the prince of the tribe, Catarpa) and makes her the perfect counterpart for a white conquistador, after her complete fashioning according to modern Western standards of beauty and decorum. Later in the novel, in the second volume, the secret of Yngermina’s whiteness is revealed: her real father was not an Indian chief, but a shipwrecked Spaniard. By employing the trope of Yngermina’s original whiteness, she and Alonso are suddenly turned into a white couple: the social order in which whiteness/Europeanness is preponderant will not be transgressed, but rather reinforced and reproduced. Nieto’s project of biopolitics is totally secured: the Indian population is put firmly under control and the Caribbean will be populated by a white, Christian, civilised archetypal couple thus assuring that the social body has a pristine source.

CARTAGENA IS AFRAID OF THE DARKNESS

So pristine is the social body produced in the text that violent conquest and slavery appear only fragmentarily. The topic of slavery, Indian or other, sets up
a conflict in the narrative since it disrupts the images of Spanish nobility and gentleness, or the seductive power of the Spanish culture being articulated. The text explicitly avoids the mention of the traffic or even the presence of black slaves, which is surprising for an account of the history of the main colonial port, through which around 150,000 slaves entered the viceroyalty (Gutiérrez 16). When confronted by historiographical sources available in Nieto’s time, Yngermina is found to be a text that wilfully ignores facts like Heredia’s importing of black slaves, brought to aid the looting of Indian burials along the coast (Friede 137). There is even documentation of the escape in 1533 of some of them (Palacios 337). Moreover, the historical Badillo introduced them in the region of Antioquia, and Juan de Castellanos mentions them in relation to the historical Heredia in his widely known chronicle:

with the intention of stealing some jewel
a clever black man owned by Heredia
with the favour of his master took advantage
and visited the neighbouring houses
he saw an amphora covered with fine gold
which he gave to his master in his own hands
and it weighed four hundred castellanos (III 60).

The reluctance to acknowledge the African legacy of Cartagena might be founded on the discursive production of low-class blacks and mestizos not only as lacking culture and civilisation, or as evil-doers and Satanists, but also as a dangerous group, capable of disputing the political power of the elite (as happened in 1811) and penetrating the public sphere. In short, blacks, mulattos, and zambos are grotesque, racialised ‘low others’. The blacks in particular were associated with savagery, since they came as slaves from Africa; a continent discursively constructed both for European and Creole imagination as ‘cultureless’ and ‘history-less’. Since the 1820s fear was employed as a general argument against manumission, where the ‘criminal nature’ of the black was constantly underscored by accusations of murder, infanticide, abortion and so forth (Bierck). By the time Yngermina was published (1844), slavery was not yet abolished in Nueva Granada (abolition came in 1851) and the emancipation debate was active (Jaramillo).

Nieto’s silence on the black heritage of the coast was a typical position for both coastal and highland elites as well as coastal popular sectors, the consequence of which was Colombia being increasingly depicted as a white, Andean nation; a nation that thus has continued to exclude vast sectors of its population (Helg 243; 245). Furthermore, the black heritage has no place in Nieto’s project; the Indian was useful to justify an original ancestry, which is rapidly neutralised by the supposed ethnic and cultural superiority of the coloniser. In this project, Indian subjectivities are fashioned as needy and then re-fashioned as mimic
whites, but the blackness and its attached signifiers do not fit the economy of signs of this social body. This version of the Caribbean is a utopian microcosm where a eugenic project has been installed; it is a closed world with practically no contact with the outer world, nurtured only by endogenous Caribbean migratory fluxes. Spain appears as a background, as a source, whilst the links with Africa have been severed in a clear Occidentalist stance in which relational stories are disaggregated, differences turned into hierarchies and naturalised (Coronil 57).

This project, critical of Spanish abuse of power in some sections, also provides the region with a ‘sacralised’ historical version, tending towards homogenisation and even towards the negation of otherness (Bernd 86–87; 98), thus tracing the boundaries and identity of this imagined community and producing both social and historical silences.

NOTES
1 The local intelligentsia was also seen as inferior as compared to Bogotá’s elite in the late eighteenth century — Cartagena lacking higher educational institutions and newspapers (Múnera 1995 121–22).
2 On the regional connections between Cartagena and Jamaica, see Bell Lemus (1993).
3 Yngermina had a single edition for over a century, until 1998, although the introduction was published separately before this in 1990 and 1993. The entire novel was republished again in 2001.
4 Yngermina is nevertheless remarkable in that Nieto managed to publish it through sponsorship. Based on the fact that twelve sponsors financed the project, Williams calculated its readership between one and two hundred people (93).
5 The most renowned slave camp is San Basilio. To this day, it is inhabited by descendents of a maroon community, featuring a unique Creole language and memory of their ancestors (Wade 344).
6 Hulme usefully distinguishes here between ‘topos’, recurrent motif, and ‘trope’, which implies a turn in which the discourse is exercising power (28, ft. 14).
7 The discovery of the original whiteness (usually accompanied by wealth) of the heroine is an oft-used trope present in modern-day telenovelas (soap operas).
8 De Friedmann has argued that the contemporary negation of the African origins of the Negro in Colombia amounts to a de-historisation which is, in itself, a form of invisibility.

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