

**RACISM: FROM CANE FIELDS TO COMMUNISM**

As I drove through the cane fields and mountains of South Central Cuba on my way back to Havana, I imagined that these same tall, razor sharp stalks were once being harvested by African slaves. Today, just one hundred and fifteen years since slavery ended, many believe that Cuba has eradicated discrimination based on concepts of race. Jean Stubbs and Pedro Perez Sarduy critically refer to the “conventional wisdom that sees Cuba as a racial democracy on the basis of its celebrated *mestizaje* (race mixing)” (2000: 8). Although slavery ended in Cuba in 1886, racial discrimination remained a part of Cuban life until the Revolution in 1959 and has undoubtedly persisted since—though structural institutions have been dismantled, cultural notions about race live on.

I spent three weeks in Cuba in the summer of 1999 studying Afro-Cuban culture, and I spent a month there during the summer of 2000 conducting ethnographic research on race relations. I lived in downtown Havana neighborhoods spending time with Cuban families and young adults. With great pride, many of my informants made comparisons with the United States. Cuba, they repeatedly reminded me, has no homelessness, no starvation, virtually universal literacy, excellent health care, and no racial discrimination. But, when we discussed specific examples of what I perceived to be racial discrimination, the same informants often agreed that it still exists in the hearts and minds of individuals. Many of these informants felt that while racial discrimination is presently limited to individual cases, today’s changing economic climate threatens to reverse advances in standard of living and to revive racial inequality to a degree not seen on the island since the Revolution. Pedro Perez Sarduy concurs, warning that “compared with most countries

of the world, the state of race relations in Cuba is by no means alarming, but postponing attention might allow them to worsen considerably” (1995: 4).

*Mestizaje*, or the mixing of the races, has been at the heart of Cuban race relations and racial discourse for more than a hundred years, and is believed to be evidence that Cubans as a people are, figuratively speaking, colorblind. It suggests that separate Afro-Cuban or Hispano-Cuban cultures be denied in favor of a generally mixed Cuban national identity. Meanwhile, valuing whiteness over blackness is a deep-seeded practice—even today. In this paper I will consider these contrasting factors in light of my observations. These include differential access to resources for blacks and whites under the new dollar economy, situational/relational identity, the reciprocal commodification of black/mulatto female sexuality and white male power, as well as the associated positive view of “whitening.” In light of these, I conclude that *mestizaje* must be viewed as a manifestation of race-consciousness rather than proof that it does not exist.

The hegemonic ideology of *mestizaje* continues to be reflected in the lack of understanding of Afro-Cuban religion and culture, among whites. This in turn perpetuates stereotypes and prejudice. I do not wish to suggest that Afro-Cubans are “hapless victims”—subject to the influence of hegemonic ideology or processes beyond their control. The fact is they have consciously maintained cultural traditions such as music and religion for centuries—and these things have sustained them. By forming tight knit communities, they have been able to cope with their ascribed “inferior” status, and to maintain a sense of identity, pride, and knowledge of their history, and moreover, have served as forms of resistance against hegemonic forces. Afro-Cuban cultural institutions and communities may be the key to raising awareness of Afro-Cuban culture. This may

counteract the trend towards denying blackness that has become so much a part of the Cuban understanding of race.

### **THE ECONOMICS OF INEQUALITY**

Socialism has leveled the playing field for Cubans to a great extent. But, for the first time in its history Cuba is attempting to develop without the aid of the Soviet Union or the United States or Spain. The country is trying to maintain control of its destiny but is being pressured to become part of the global economy or risk losing the high standard of living it enjoyed relative to other Latin-American countries in the 1970s and '80s. Money is hard to come by. The government as well as families and individuals are resorting to desperate measures to obtain capital or basic necessities. Much of Cuba's economy now relies on remittances from mostly white expatriates in Miami. Stubbs and Perez Sarduy point out that "the total value of remittances was calculated to exceed Cuban government earnings from either of its major income-generating sectors [tourism and sugar]—as well as from all other exports" (2000: 34). They add, "senders and recipients are far more likely to be Euro-Cuban" (2000: 34).

Some of my informants say the stage is now set for a return to widespread economic disparity and perhaps tension along racial lines. Advances in education, health care and equality are, they suggest, all threatened. They point out that as the Cuban government has eased socialist measures, allowing ownership of small businesses, Cubans who receive money from relatives are able to start businesses. Meanwhile, as the formal economy struggles in response to global economic processes, those without capital hit what I call "the dollar ceiling" and are forced to hustle a living in the informal economy—either through prostitution, selling counterfeit cigars, or other petty crime.

This situation tends to breakdown along racial lines with whites maintaining their historical advantage.

### **THE DOLLAR CIELING**

Guillermo is a young Cuban musician, twenty-six years old, of mixed racial background. He was trained as a math and computer science teacher, but teaching pays only 4000 pesos (200 USD) monthly and demands a large investment of time that could otherwise be used for securing extra income. As the Cuban economy shifted to the use of U.S. dollars in the 1990's, it became more and more difficult to buy food, clothing and other staples. Government ration stores frequently had empty shelves, while dollar stores were well stocked, but with goods sold at prices similar to the U.S. With the average Cuban making around 2400 USD a year, shopping at these stores without added income was, for Guillermo, out of the question.

Guillermo decided to find other work. His principled nature would not allow him to hustle tourists or participate in criminal activity. He took a job at a TV station that paid about the same as teaching but had a more flexible schedule. He then did what many Cubans now do—tried to turn his hobby into a profitable venture. At night he plays music at cafes popular with tourists—the tips from this work are inconsistent, but often nearly double his income.

### **INTERPERSONAL DISCRIMINATION AND SITUATIONAL IDENTITY**

Guillermo and I shared many conversations regarding perceptions of race and racial relations in Cuba. He occasionally became frustrated because I was unable to understand the situational nature of racial identity in Cuba. In the U.S. we tend to follow the “‘one drop of black blood’ rule’ (Perez Sarduy and Stubbs 2000: 21). In Cuba this is

not the case. Peter Wade writes that “the same individual dressed shabbily and smartly will be identified with different colour terms that locate the person on a scale between black and white” (1997: 38). This concept became clearer to me following a situation I observed at a party Guillermo and I attended. At the party we met two young men. One of them, Freddie, was white and his friend Yuri was black. Over the course of the evening Freddie used several slang racial labels to describe another party across the street and Salsa music, which is perceived by some Cubans as “black music”. He did so even in front of Yuri—his Afro-Cuban friend. I found this difficult to understand and later asked Guillermo about it. He explained that to Freddie, although Yuri was phenotypically African, he was essentially exempt from blackness because he is highly educated, speaks three languages, has a high profile job working with computers and, not least of all—as a sign of upward mobility, because he wishes to find work abroad. Blackness or whiteness can be assigned characteristics based on cultural, economic and other factors, including the relative position of the person making the judgement—not just phenotypic features.

The fact that such value judgements about people are still framed in terms of color highlights the continued persistence of cultural notions about race. Wade explains the co-existence of situational identity and race consciousness, as is found in the case of Freddie and Yuri, by stating that flexibility of identity “fitted into a powerful ethos of whitening which held that black was inferior to white” (1997: 69). *Mestizaje*, we must then again conclude, is symptomatic of a framework of race consciousness—it is this ethos of whitening, as Wade suggests, that *provides* higher status for mulattos relative to blacks. As I will demonstrate, this similarly explains the reciprocal commodification of the power of black female sexuality and male whiteness.

**SEX IS POWER: STRATEGIES OF UPWARD MOBILITY**

Wade writes of people attempting to “whiten themselves by association with non-blacks and by ‘marrying up’ the racial hierarchy if they could, thus whitening their children even more” (1997: 69). The cultural value attributed to whitening is clearly a legacy of colonialism and slavery—when being white meant having power and being black meant lacking it and when masters had unfettered sexual access to their slaves. As a result, “sexuality” writes bell hooks, “has always provided gendered metaphors for colonisation” (in Wade 1997: 103). Wade cites Young in adding that

“ ‘colonialism...was not only a machine of war and administration, it was also a desiring machine’—and the object of desire was the power of black sexuality. Hence, Sex is at the very heart of racism” (in Wade 1997: 103).

Indeed, the Afro-Cuban woman has been traditionally romanticized in Cuban art, music and literature dominated by white men. And while this dynamic does not today always play out in such a dominant/submissive pattern—Afro-Cubans are indeed strategic participants. It is not uncommon to find a trade of black sexuality to a white male in exchange for the whitening of a black female’s offspring.

Guillermo’s family background exemplifies this type of exchange. Guillermo’s mother is an Afro-Cuban woman whose grandmother was a slave brought from Africa. Guillermo’s father is a white man. The two fell in love but were never able to marry because it was considered socially unacceptable. Guillermo’s father later married and started a family with a white woman. Guillermo’s mother has been on her own—having another child by another white man whom she also did not marry. Guillermo acknowledges that issues of race kept his parents apart. But, he does not feel as though, in Cuba, there is anything particularly strange or shameful about this. In fact, he recognizes that his lighter complexion makes life easier for him in comparison with some of his

darker skinned friends. This scenario is yet another example of the contrast between reality of race consciousness and the ideology of *Mestizaje* or racial democracy.

### **RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES: SUPPORT AND SELF-HELP**

Guillermo gets along well with both of his parents but he lives with his mother and has a particular affinity for her. He is proud of her African roots and he sees them as his spiritual foundation. Guillermo may be unusual in that he recognizes the hegemonic nature of the ideology that dictates that there are no whites or blacks in Cuba...only Cubans—even despite the prevalence of race consciousness as I have outlined above. He may, in fact, be considered part of a counter-hegemonic wave. He, like many of his generation, sees post cold war, post Soviet Cuba as changing in many ways. He hangs on to his roots and is proud of them. He practices *Regla de Palo Monte* (a syncretized Afro-Cuban religion of Congolese origin mixed with elements of Catholicism), and is connected to a community of fellow practitioners. Actually more than a religious community, it is a centuries old refuge for a culture and people that have continually suffered prejudice—a safe place where strong traditions of herbal medicine, the language of Congo, and musical and spiritual traditions are practiced and maintained. Historically, these institutions have existed as a form of direct resistance to dominant forces. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century *cabildos* (Afro-Cuban religious/community organizations) gathered money to purchase the freedom of slaves, they organized for the rights of Afro-Cubans, and they were instrumental in Cuba's fight for independence.

Many people believe that racial discrimination has disappeared—that the races, or more precisely, the separate cultures of Cuba have blended to form a single Cuban national identity, ultimately replacing its component parts. This has never been true and

still is not. I will not suggest that there has been no mixing in Cuba—racially or culturally. But in reality, there is a vibrant and separate Afro-Cuban community. A culture which continues to attract young people like Guillermo who feel the need for an alternative to a society in which they feel marginalized, perhaps even more than their parents who witnessed firsthand the great changes and golden era of the Revolution.

### **RACISM...WHAT RACISM?**

It is often difficult to discuss racial discrimination with Cubans. Most of them will tell you that it does not exist. On my first trip to Cuba, I met a family of white farmers in Pinar del Rio who proudly displayed photographs of their son who had been killed in the war in Angola. A professor of a class I took at the University of Havana said that Cubans fought in African wars because of a shared African heritage and belief in socialism. Both the family and the professor were implying that Cuban involvement in Africa had greatly improved the state of race relations and that such recognition of Cuba's African heritage precludes the present-day existence of racism.

On my second trip, I met an Afro-Cuban man, a professor of sociology, while visiting the small city of Trinidad. He had lived through the Revolution and, like the farm family, said that the government had done a great deal for Afro-Cubans. He stated definitively that racism no longer existed in Cuba. He told me that his training was based almost entirely on Marxist ideology and politics (not in the academic sense)—very different from what we learn in sociology classes in the U.S. It seems that in Cuban schools, children are taught about racial discrimination in a historical context, not as a modern problem but rather as a part of the slavery and capitalism of the pre-Revolutionary era. It was presented to me in precisely this fashion when I took a class on

Afro-Cuban culture and history at the University of Havana on my first trip to the island. Many Cubans are aware of the widespread U.S. problems of incarceration and poverty among African Americans. They say there are no such problems in Cuba.

Cuba's independence movement required the support of whites and blacks alike to achieve independence from Spain. This independence movement wrought Marti's glorification of Mestizaje, the creation of the ideology of "Cuban national identity," and denial of the multi-ethnic nature of Cuban society. The Communist government has similarly adopted these notions to advance the ideals of the Revolution. It has denied the existence of racial prejudice on anything other than a personal level since the Revolution—most Cubans, as I have said, echo this.

#### **FOR THE FUTURE**

Afro-Cuban religion is presently growing stronger and more popular with the easing of government restrictions on all religions—following 1998's Papal visit. But increases in the popularity of these religions may also be a response to the hegemonic denial of racism and Afro-Cuban culture in Cuba which, along with the rapidly changing economic situation, are likewise increasing disparity and racial divisions on the island. Perez Sarduy and Stubbs point to

“signs of a racial rollback disturbing enough to have produced an incipient clamor by black Cubans for national debate about increasingly exclusionary rather than inclusionary notions of *cubanidad* along race lines, privileging Hispano- over Afro-Cuban, white over black” (2000: 18).

If left unaddressed, this trend may lead to increased disparity and a more tenuous situation for Afro-Cubans in the twenty-first century.

*Mestizaje* provides a significant challenge to open discussion of race relations in Cuba. Meanwhile, behaviors and strategies based on cultural notions about race persist. But, through ethnographic research and historiographic reconstruction, it may be possible to bring about greater acknowledgement and a more accurate portrayal of the Afro-Cuban perspective.

**REFERENCES CITED**

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