

Shades of race in contemporary Cuba

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As an African American man living in Cuba I am surprised and overwhelmed by the kaleidoscope of names Cuban people use to describe race in their country. I wonder what would happen if and when American cultural influence fully invades Cuba again.

I wrote this line in my field notes during a long stay on the island in 2002 and 2003 when I conducted anthropological research about popular music and the Cuban society.

*Quien no tiene de
congo, tiene de
carabali*
Havana, 2003.
Photograph by ©
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*Literally the phrase
means, who doesn't
have congo [African]
blood has carabali
[African] blood; all
Cubans share African
genetic and cultural
heritage according to
this view.*



Both Cuba and the United States (U.S.) are melting pots, where various racial and national sources feed the continual process of

nation building and cultural production. In both countries, the binary of European/African or black/white are key factors because of the decimation of indigenous populations and the importance of African slave labor for European masters. The struggle between these groups has brought about much pain, exchange, and creation. While the contributions of other immigrant groups were of great importance, they never displaced the black/white paradigm of race in the U.S. or Cuba.

In Cuba's politics as well as its race issues, I see a kinder, gentler take on the ways of an imperfect world that are similar to our U.S. system, yet different. In these times of increased U.S. conservatism and international intervention, all with racial implications —some people even predict a U.S. invasion of Cuba — it is important to consider how people think and talk about race in Cuba and what it

reveals about that nation. This also invites one to reflect on race in the U.S..

Here in the U.S., African Americans understand color distinctions like blue black, red bone, high yellow, and honey brown. However, our main distinction is between black and white. In Cuba, these distinctions

aspects of the Cuban culture. Ortiz explained the concept of transculturation in which two or more cultures come into contact and elements from each culture are lost. However, new elements are created and, therefore, a cultural product is born from the different ingredient parts.

*¿Cuál?/Which?,
Havana, 2003.
Photograph by © Umi
Vaughan*



—blanco y negro— are joined by others such as mulato, jabao, trigueño, and moro, as well as a plethora of distinctions within and in between these descriptions. The Cuban distinctions are much more colorful and expressive than the quadroons and octoroons that exist in the history of North American racial talk. The distinctions reveal a mathematical conception of color and ethnicity that rely on appearance, temperament, and intention (of the speaker) as well as express a clear hierarchy in which white is right and black...ya tú sabes/you know the rest.

Nancy Morejón¹ asserts that “the Afro Cuban essence” exists and notes that the term “afrocubano” was coined by Fernando Ortiz² as part of a continuum balanced by “hispanocubano,” referring to the predominance of African or Spanish elements in various

Cuban society and its race codes are interesting because they show great plurality and flexibility while underscoring the permeability of categories and, at the same time, reflect origins in the institution of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. People who would be considered black in the U.S. and subject to a monolithic racism, may fall into many shades of categorization in Cuba, which has indisputably made great efforts toward equality on many levels. At the same time, adelantar la raza, or efforts to improve the race, do not refer to creating more cultural awareness or unified economic action on the part of people of color, but rather finding lighter-skinned partners to make lighter-skinned babies.

Similar to other places in the world, there are many attractive dark chocolate to

blue-black Africans in Cuba. Negro fino (refined), negro bonito (good looking), and negro serio (serious) are a few positive designations that acknowledge their clear African heritage and respectfully honor the contributions black Cubans such as Antonio Maceo, Juan Gualberto Gomez, and Evaristo Estenoz have made to Cuban history. On the other hand, designations such as negrofosforescente (coal black), negro bombón (big lipped black), negro fula (brother up to no good), negro verde (angry), mono (monkey), or negro palmao (broke black man) are used to express negativity in terms of undesirable, “ugly” African features, stereotypical black (mis)behavior, and social and economic underdevelopment.

It is clear that Africa has permeated the Cuban culture, in everything from the exquisite skin shades, rhythms of speech, and nourishment from dance and music, cuisine, and worship. At the same time, however, elements that are too purely African or that reveal the legacy of slavery (i.e., blacks’ weaker economic position or shorter history of formal education) are rejected. It seems that positive evaluations of black are anomalies that disrupt the normal perception of black as bad, antisocial, and inferior. Dynamic, talented blacks are sometimes referred to as *blancos echados a perder*, i.e. white folks gone to waste. Blacks, especially Black women, are said to be best suited for labor rather than love. Negrito is a common derogative diminutive used to describe them. However, at the same time negro or negra is also used as a term of endearment regardless of the loved one’s skin color.

There are also race descriptions that fall in between and augment the main ones. For example, very dark-skinned people with fine facial features (slim noses, pursed lips, etc.) and good hair are called moros –named after

the Moors who are Cubans of Spanish heritage. Sometimes in order to flatter someone, a person may utilize the subtle language of race by referring to the individual as moro when it would be more accurate to describe them as negro. In other examples, one evening a gentleman approached me trying to sell several pairs of eyeglasses in very poor condition. In order to butter me up for his hard sell, he immediately began calling me moro. On another occasion I was summoned by someone but did not realize they were talking to me because they kept calling me, “hey you, mulato!”

Mulato or mulata is a vague term that refers to a mixture between black and white. This term give the individual the best of both worlds, passion and soul, pelo bueno (good hair) and fine features. Fair-skinned mulatos are called mulato claro (light), mulato blanconazo (big white mulato), or adelantao (advanced/evolved) while the darker-skinned mulatos are called mulato oscuro or mulato con trova (with soul, a little more of Africa). In the black/white continuum, the mulato or mulata are not simply median, but are said to be “la combinación perfecta” (the perfect mixture), with a mystique of sensuality and beauty that is evoked to represent Cuba itself.

Cuba is known by many for its cigars and its women (por sus habanos y sus mulatas). There are ladies in La Habana that drink Mulata brand rum as they speak of this or that hunk (tremendo mulato). The main character in one of Cuba’s most significant works of literature from the nineteenth century, Cirilo Villaverde’s Cecilia Valdés, is a beautiful mulata. Mulatas and mulatos are said to be good for sex.

Jabao is another color distinction. A kind of median, like the mulato, however stripped of the idyllic qualities of sensuality

and beauty. Jabaos usually have fair skin with kinky hair and clear African facial features such as wide noses, thick lips, etc.. Some Jabaos have reddish or even blond hair and are said to be *la candela*, extremely mischie-

standards because they are slightly dark, tawny, marked by the influence of their Spanish ancestors and have shared the island of Cuba with descendants of Africa and China. This phenotype is preferred by many

*Mora/Moorish girl,
Havana, 2003.
Photograph by © Umi
Vaughan*



vous and roguish. It is said that jabaos have no race (*los jabao no tienen raza*) and that they do not mix well (genetically) with other races. Jabaos are bad (*los jabaos son malos*) is another often heard phrase.

In the barrios of Havana you will inevitably find someone who responds immediately to the nickname *chino* or *china*. The Chinese entered Cuba in 1847 as indentured servants, to augment slave labor, established long lasting communities and left their genetic legacy. During the slavery era, Chinese men reproduced with free black women and *mulatas* because steps were taken to keep the Chinese laborers separate from the slaves. Currently, anybody with slightly slanted eyes is likely to be called *chino* and identified with the early mixture of Chinese men and free black women or the mixture that took place when the Chinese migrated to Cuba throughout the 1920s and 1930s as business people, ambassadors, and students.

One final note, white folks in Cuba would not be considered white by U.S. racial

when it comes to attractiveness and social acceptability, although it does imply the clumsiness and lack of grace/rhythm attributed to whites in the U.S. And, yes, the O.J. Simpson complex does exist, in which success and true influence is marked by a person's access to white partners. Whites are labeled best for love and marriage. Still, the Afro-Cuban essence rules over Cuba. Most people there would agree that, in the words of Cuba's national poet Nicolas Guillén, Cubans are all mixed up ("*todos mezclados*").

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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