

# The New Miscegenation: Las Polovinas<sup>1</sup>

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*The characteristic thing about Cuba... is that since it is an ajíaco,<sup>2</sup>  
its people are not a finished stew, but rather [in] a constant [process of] cooking.*

Don Fernando Ortiz

Cuba is a *mestizo* nation par excellence. Its people are *mestizo*, consequently, so is its culture. To speak of purity in my country is practically a sacrilege, so impossible is it. Yet, as one might expect, everyone sees miscegenation in his or her own way, as everything from a source of pride to a condition to be denied. One can still hear that someone directly descends from Spaniards, which is a claim to whiteness, forgetting, through ignorance, that if any one European people know about miscegenation, it is precisely the Iberians. Moreover, the claimant is forgetting that it is precisely the Spanish who are responsible for this blessed admixture known as *Cuban*.

It is well known that the predominant *mestizo* on the island is the mulatto: a hybrid of a white man or woman and a black man or woman = Spain + Africa. Yet, after a number of generations, it is an ill-fitting definition for contemporary mulattoes. There are many who are the products of mulatto plus mulatto mixing: their proportions and constitutive ingredients vary unimaginably. A case in point is that hardly anyone knows what a *mulato(a)*

*cuarterón(a)* [quadroon<sup>3</sup> mulatto] or a *mulato(a) blanconazo(a)* [white mulatto] is anymore; the term mulatto has come to apply to *mestizos* who besides being black and white also have Asian or any other kind of blood, so long as their black side is still visibly recognizable. In Cuba, color is still measured by *how much black anyone has in him or her*; a metric imposed by the anti-black discrimination that still, often discreetly plagues our society. Racism was legally abolished by the Constitution of 1940, and irrefutably so by the government, when the Revolution triumphed in 1959. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, miscegenation is not only an issue of race, although it is race that makes the rest more obvious. Miscegenation is a question of cultural identity.

It is precisely the sociopolitical change brought about by the Revolution that instigated what I will dare call our most recent miscegenation, with the arrival of a new ingredient: the Slavs. I am going to use the culinary simile employed by Fernando Ortiz when he compared the formation of the Cuban people to the succulent *ajíaco criollo* [tropical mixed

stew]; and then add the professional opinion of renowned head chef Gilberto Smith, who considers that each and every ingredient in the *aji-aco* makes its own contribution but should also remain recognizable, making the dish a rich garden of balance and diversity. Thus, the *aji-aco* ends up being a substantial, thick broth that submerges its many components but does not cause them to cease being individually distinguishable. That way, all of this culinary marvel's ingredients can be known.

There have been Slavs on the island since long before; their presence has been sporadic and detailed. But, in speaking of Slavs in Cuba, one cannot fail to mention Mariana de Gonich or The Russian from the hotel in Baracoa. Yet, the most popularly known presence of such people is still from Poland. They came in the 1940s, fleeing fascism and settling in Havana, opening businesses on Muralla Street. While few of them were actually Polish Slavs, most of these Jews came under similar conditions, as well as many Lebanese and Turks, who were in any event called *polacos*, too. This is why I want to write about the advent of a similar yet new arrival and presence of such people who started arriving in the 1960s, as a result of the massive granting of scholarships to Cubans in what was then the socialist block.

This new immigration went on for more than three decades and was quite common, even if at the beginning it was somewhat shy in character. Young Cubans returned to the island with a college degree under one arm, and a beautiful *ojimar* [blue-eyed] girl on the other. In turn, cradled in her free arm was her descendency: *las polovinas* [the half breeds]. It is noteworthy that of those who came home with this degree and a girl on their arms the majority were blacks and mulattoes. Not denying their honest feelings and love for their wives, many of these men who enjoyed the fact they

were able to get beyond the barrier of racial prejudice, discovered they were coveted for exactly the same reason that their parents and even they had been and were discriminated against in Cuba. Having a white wife was another sort of diploma they had earned, another source of pride. I recall a pre-college buddy of mine, a handsome and intelligent mulatto, who started a scandal in the neighborhood because he dared to fall in love with, and was also loved back by a white, blue-eyed schoolmate. The girl's grandmother descended from "NON-MIXED Spaniards," and had a fit when she found them out. In fact, she did not let up until she was successful in destroying their relationship. He went to Russia to study and came back with a beautiful blonde. Funnier yet is that the girl ended up marrying the son of a Chinese man, which for the rejected mulatto, made him feel like he was disdained on account of his physical appearance.

Getting back on topic, this is how all these Russian women got to Cuba [Russian is the term used for all Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Moldavian, and all Eastern European women, even Bulgarian, Polish, Czech, and even German women]. The same way we call all Asians *chinos* [Chinese] and all Spaniards *gallegos* [Galicians]. There was one peculiarity about this wave of immigration; it was almost entirely female and, unlike other immigrant groups that came prior to the Revolution, it did not become quite so visible, first because these new immigrants were not able to settle en masse in one particular place. Housing is such an endemic problem in Cuba that they came less to establish families of their own and more to insert themselves into their husband's families.

The other factor that contributes to their invisibility is that their arrival was watered down by the massive arrival of technicians, advisors, and their wives, all from the very

same countries. This bunch did garner a lot of attention, so much so, that the following examples will suffice for proving my point. The recently built Alamar neighborhood (of Havana) and the residential zone adjacent to the Lenin Hospital in Holguín are both Cuban urban centers that have become increasingly known for their large Russian populations. Yet, what is truly interesting is not that it's been 20 years since that technical and advisory corps left, or that the homes they formerly occupied are still known as "the little Russian homes," or that their remaining support installations also continue referring to their presence, e.g., the Russian amphitheatre, the Russian market, etc. Alamar and Holguín, "the Russian neighborhoods," share the fact that they house a high concentration of populous communities comprised of Cuban-Russian families. In addition, after the Soviet Union's disintegration, and despite the fact there were diplomatic missions in Cuba for almost all of the U.S.S.R.'s former republics, it was the Russian embassy that took in the majority of Cuba's ex-Soviet residents. Thus, calling all these women Russians has become more accurate with time.

These are the circumstances and kinds of families in which *las polovinas* have been born and raised; the new *mestizos*, who despite their desire and very generalized efforts to not be seen as *different*, could not avoid being called the "little Russian boy or girl" in school, or the 'Russian' at their workplace. The distinctive physical features of their origin have something to do with this (they are different from those stemming from Iberians or other Europeans), like the ever-present light eyes, which are so scarce at this latitude. If not for these, then it's their surname, or the Russian mother who came to pick them up at school that was enough to give them away. In some cases, it was even something about their behavior, since they were children brought up by

Slavic mothers, in bilingual homes where they ate and still eat *in Russian* [Russian food], and had normal Russian customs and values ingrained into them. In fact, as far as this last criterion is concerned, many of their second generation—the *polovinas*' children—are still growing up in just such households. The very same "housing factor" is still forcing them to live in a multi-generational housing situation. This is how grandchildren are growing up with their Russian grandmothers, and history repeats itself; this time supported by the most conscious and organized actions, e.g., Russian language classes that are offered to children by the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, the *polovinas*, and their children, are not seen as foreign on the island. Their mixture is a rule and not an exception for Cubans and, despite the fact that all *polovinas* are *mestizo*, this criterion does not seem to be important. Even if they have evident black ancestry, and someone insists on ["properly"] classifying them (which has become less and less important to the younger generations), they just see them as one more kind of mulatto within the extensive variety this category can represent. Or, sometimes they are called Russian *jabaos* or *jaba'as* [light-skinned, kinky haired *mulatas*],<sup>4</sup> a group into which some Cubans can fall without having any of this Russian ancestry. The rest are white Cubans or, simply, Cubans, which is more accurate. For example, Alia, the *polovina* character in the novel *Ánima fatua* [Fatuous Soul],<sup>5</sup> who in Russia can seem somewhat exotic, as the daughter of a black man who, as the character herself says, was in reality "only a fairly light-skinned mulatto, of course," is accepted as white in Cuba, just as she might have been in the time of *Cecilia Valdés*.<sup>6</sup> Thus, *polovinas* are not troubled or worried about race, which may explain why they are somewhat lost or invisible. They are seen as *mestizos* but defy classification: moreover, they ignore

it. At most, they admit to a minimal or quite ambiguous reference relative to their parents' origin. Because of this situation, they are satisfied and comfortable with the way in which society sees them, because being *different* always presents a challenge. In Cuba, they are just simply one more Cuban. If they have any conflict at all, it has to do with their identity, which besides being personal or internal, is also unique to them because they grew up taking roundtrip flights between two distant shores. Put differently, as a friend of mine says: they are people who were educated in Cuba in "Russian schools."<sup>7</sup>

The *polovinas* rarely refer to Russia as the Motherland, and if they do, somehow mean it differently, perhaps acknowledging that pronouncing its name in Cuba is akin to talking about Spain. The majority of those who live in Cuba choose to consider themselves Cuban, with conviction. I say the majority because I have not conducted a study to support this with statistical evidence, but I can share the results of a small, unofficial survey I did with *polovina* friends and acquaintances. I got myriad different and moving responses to the question "Do you feel Russian or Cuban?" e.g.:

- *I don't feel Cuban. I AM CUBAN.*
- *Cubanness is something external, the clothes I wear WITH GREAT PRIDE to go out into the world; but deep down inside, I know I'm Russian.*
- *Neither one. I am American. (This polovina was born and raised in Cuba but emigrated to the U.S. as an adult).*
- *I am in no way a polovina. I am 100% from here and 100% from there.*
- *My answer to you is going to come from my favorite song, the one by Alberto Cortés that says: "No soy de aquí/ni soy de allá..." [I am neither from here [nor] from there...].*

- *My mother is Russian. I'm Cuban. I have nothing to do with Russia.*
- *Everyone says I'm very Russian, even my Cuban grandmother; but I'm not about over there, I couldn't live there. My place is here.*
- *I more than accept that I am a polovina. I am proud to be Cuban and also a descendent of Don Cossacks.*
- *Just wait and see me dance at the casino...*

Of course, there was intentionality on my part when I asked them about how they felt and not what they were. Logically, *polovinas* know that their *mestizo* condition is an unequivocal marker of being Cuban; but not of their Cubanness, their full, deeply felt, conscious, and desired *Cubanness*; a responsible Cubanness.<sup>8</sup> They are aware of the fact that whatever marks them as Cubans are also factors sometimes associated with certain kinds of stereotypes that are nonetheless somehow accurate, e.g., a way of moving, of feeling, of expressing themselves; their grace, wit and charm, ability to dance, rhythm, and temperament. As Fernando Ortiz would say: "Cubanness is a condition of the soul, a suite of emotions, ideas, attitudes..."

Not all *polovinas* find themselves in Cuba. Many of them remained with their mothers, who chose not to emigrate. Thus, they do not know the land of their fathers. Others found it necessary to return, and yet others chose to do so. They are equally *mestizo*, but they are not Cuban. The miscegenation within them becomes diluted in the very mixture that fueled the existence of the confederation of Soviet republics, where someone like me, who in Cuba is clearly identified as a *mulata* far from the island's revealing sun, can pass for a Georgian hybrid in Moscow. It is obvious, in any event, that these experiences should be somehow different, although I'd dare to say that at some point they will converge.

The jury is still out on what contribution (in the broadest sense) this immigrant group has made to our culture. The tendency is to see the impact of Russia in Cuba in our country's political policies and actions of decades ago. Yet, for me the *polovinas* are a very important part of this impact because they are part of the broth of our national identity. As regards Cuba, their way of feeling and thinking stems from very specific and particular experiences and perspectives; they are everywhere, some of them in places as prominent as the vanguard of our intelligentsia.

I do not want to finish this article without sharing a passage from the aforementioned novel, *Fatuous Soul*, in which the author describes the character, Alia's, emotions. Born in Russia, she was brought to Cuba as a very young child, and then taken back to Russia at the age of ten. She remains there till adulthood, at which time she decides to return to Cuba to stay. Upon arriving in Moscow, as an adolescent, "Alia swallowed her tears along with the Moscow air, a song, the soot. For the first time she felt Russian, through and through, sure of who she was, home. Her blood finally understood the Motherland's call to her, and answered it, her blood pulsing through her veins, her heart almost beating out of her; she felt like screaming, falling to her knees, delirious, wanting to kiss the ground, HER ground."

Further on, Alia confesses the emotions she felt almost immediately, after spending the night in some Cubans' apartment in Moscow: "That night I wept in an intensely Cuban home while all the while looking out the window at an intensely Russian city. I felt broken into two irreconcilable pieces, *two halves*\* battling, an incompatible and cruel combination."

I will end with an excerpt from "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad" [Human Factors in Cubaness], by Fernando Ortiz: "That is how Cuba's *ajiacó* has been boiling and cooking, on a blazing or smoldering fire, clean or dirty, varied throughout the years according to the human substance that the cook threw into the pot, and within this metaphor are the vicissitudes of history. Like the *ajiacó*, our people have always been made up of absolutely new and raw elements that have just been thrown into the pot for cooking, a heterogeneous conglomerate of diverse races and cultures representing many different ingredients that are stirred, [and then] blended and dispersed into a social ebullience. Deep within the mixture, is an already settled mass [that was] produced by those elements that while boiling disintegrated, and are the most tenacious essence of a rich and deliciously seasoned admixture that has its own proper identity—a miscegenation of foodstuffs, of races, of cultures, a thick broth of civilization that bubbles on the burner of the Caribbean."

\* Emphasis is mine.

Notes:

1. *Polovina* signifies 'half' in Russian. The plural, 'halves,' is *poloviny*. When Castilianized, it becomes *polovinas*, a term I began to employ not knowing that it has been employed by the group, itself (*las polovinas*), for some time now.
2. *Ajiaco criollo*. A stew typical of Cuban cuisine. A meat-based stew of mostly pork, a variety of root and other vegetables are also in it: *malanga* [Taro root], *boniato* [sweet potatoes], *plátano* [plantains], *yuca* [Cassava root], *maíz* [corn], *ajo* [garlic], *aji* [peppers] y *cebolla* [onions], among others.

3. *Mulato cuarterón o blanconazo*. A hybrid descending from a mulatto male or female and a white, resulting in a person whose genetic composition is only one quarter. Their appearance is practically that of a white person (*they pass for white*).
4. *Jaba'o ruso*. In Cuba, a *jabao* or *jaba'a* is a mulatto man or woman whose skin is very light and hair is very curly. The adjective 'Russian' is added when the hair is blond and the person also has light eyes.
5. *Ánima fatua* [Fatuous Soul], a novel by Cuban writer Ana Lidia Vega Serova (Leningrad 1968), published in Habana by the Editorial Letras Cubanas, in 2007.
6. *Cecilia Valdés*. A character in the homonymous novel by Cuban writer Cirilo Villaverde in the nineteenth century, and the daughter of a *criollo* white and a *mulata*.
7. *Escuela de los rusos*. An educational center for the children of Russian technicians, advisors, and diplomatic personnel residing in Cuba that *polovinas* had a right to attend.
8. Ortiz, Fernando. "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad." In *Revista Bimestre Cubana* (1940).

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