

Introduction

As a teenager, Tamara, a blue-eyed, blond white Cuban woman, dated a classmate, Alberto, a dark-skinned black man. Near the cathedral in Old Havana, a middle-aged white couple looked at the young interracial couple in horror and commented quite loudly, "Look at that blond with light eyes, and she's with a black!" Recounting the story to me, Tamara said, "That really shook me. It was the first time we were out together—like presenting our relationship to society—and that comment really had an impact on me. I felt ashamed because I thought of what Alberto must have felt. I never asked him about that insulting incident. We never talked about it."

Olga, a dark-skinned mulata, and José Miguel, a white man, both in their mid-twenties, had been together several years when I interviewed them. José Miguel said, "It's very uncomfortable when many well-educated people ask disbelievingly if we are a couple. . . . Once I got so insulted, I turned to this [white] man, and pointing to a black woman in the street, I asked him, 'Is that your girlfriend? No? I knew that because you don't date blacks.'"

Centuries earlier, Juan Millían fell in love and married on the island of Fernandina, as Cuba was first called. Millían was a Spanish conquistador who arrived with Diego Velázquez (1465–1524) in 1510 and added Cuba to the growing list of Spanish possessions in the new world.¹ The woman Millían married and later brought back to Spain was an indigenous Taíno. Their marriage was one of the first interracial

couplings documented in Cuba (Richard 1992). Legally sanctioned or illicit, some form of interracial coupling, also referred to as miscegenation or *mestizaje* (race mixing), has been taking place in Cuba ever since. Through brutality and disease, the Spanish exterminated most of Cuba's indigenous population within the first fifty years of contact.² Subsequently, the racial mixing on the island included enslaved Africans, who first arrived in Cuba in 1523; Chinese indentured laborers, who started arriving around 1848;³ and indigenous populations from the Yucatan, who came to Cuba in 1855 and 1870 (Moreno Fraginals 1978). Haitians and West Indians came to Cuba throughout the republic (1902–1958), largely to work in sugarcane production on the eastern end of the island. These groups mixed with each other and with white Europeans, predominantly Spaniards (whose immigration to Cuba continued well into the twentieth century), but also French (fleeing the Haitian revolution), Irish laborers (who came in the 1830s and 1840s),⁴ and, after 1959, Russians and other citizens of the socialist bloc countries.

Interracial couples, indeed, have populated all periods of Cuban history—the colony, the republic, and the socialist state. They have been legally married, lived in loving, long-term, common-law unions, and endured forced concubinage. Interracial couplings have been violent rapes and fleeting amorous trysts. They have taken place between white men and women of color, and between white women and men of color—coming from all ranges and combinations of the class hierarchy, though some combinations of race, class, and gender have been more common and condoned than others. To walk in Havana today is to witness the centuries of racial mixing, to see an infinite array of combinations of skin color, hair texture, and facial features. The mixing has been as much cultural as it has been physical. Radios blare Cuban music infused with African and Spanish rhythms. Menus boast cuisine simmering with spices from Cuba's long, cosmopolitan history. The devout worship at altars dedicated to the Virgin of Charity (La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre), who represents both the Catholic mother of Jesus and the Yoruba deity of love, Ochún. Racial mixing through interracial couplings and cultural *mestizaje* have been perhaps the most enduring features of the Cuban cultural and racial reality since Columbus first

landed on the island 1492. Scholars (Benítez-Rojo 1992; Foner 1977; Ortiz 1993a) have long proclaimed *mestizaje*, both physical and cultural, as the essence of the nation. Today, the revolutionary government promotes socialist equality and national unity, in part, as an extension of the nation's deep tradition of *mestizaje*.

With racial mixing so embedded in Cuban history and national identity, it is easy to take interracial couples as unremarkable and commonplace. They are, indeed, rather common, particularly in cosmopolitan Havana. Given Cuba's long genealogy of *mestizaje*, the reactions Tamara, Alberto, Olga, and José Miguel receive on the street at first seem counterintuitive. Why are contemporary interracial couples sometimes the targets of racist commentary and social disapproval if the nation has such a long tradition of *mestizaje* bolstered by decades of socialist equality? This is the central conundrum that motivates this book.

Whether they encounter objections to their relationships at home or in public, many interracial couples quickly understand that their relationships are somehow transgressive. Their presence rubs against the grain of society in some fundamental way—even in a society supposedly based on racial mixture, even after centuries of racial mixing, even in a modern socialist state. Although mixing is central to national identity, racial discrimination continues, and race is a key feature in Cuban culture, history, and daily interactions. This book explores the continuing significance of race through the everyday lives of young interracial couples. It provides an on-the-ground investigation of both the shifting practices and contested ideologies of *mestizaje*. I argue that the meanings of interracial couples, like the meanings of race, have not remained the same over the centuries or over the course of the Cuban revolution. The meanings of interracial couples have a history.

In colonial Cuba, the state encouraged certain types of interracial couplings as the engines of *mestizaje* that would propel the nation to modernity/whiteness. For many nineteenth-century intellectuals and leaders, physically whitening the population was essential to the future progress of the nation. From the colonial period we see interracial unions not just as an inevitable result of the scarcity of white women, but also as the linchpin of nation-building strategies—if

properly managed. From the colonial to the republican period, white elites remained doubtful of the virtues of physical racial mixing and fearful of particular patterns of interracial couplings. *Mestizaje*, like race, held an ambivalent place in Cuba's national identity. Nonetheless, the centrality of ideas of physical and cultural *mestizaje* sets the stage for understanding interracial unions and race relations in contemporary Cuba.

The revolution's position on race has been complex and contradictory. When Fidel Castro's revolutionary government came to power in 1959, it dismantled many structures of institutionalized racism and racial segregation and implemented transformative social programs that led to a significant increase in racial integration in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. However, while the revolution's social and economic programs benefited the country's poorest and largely nonwhite citizens, the government did not specifically target the centuries-old racial inequalities on the island. In fact, despite the structural changes, rigid adherence to Marxist ideology and a dire need for national unity in the face of U.S. hostility caused the revolutionary government to put racial issues on the back burner. The rectification campaign in 1986 recognized that blacks, women, and youth were not equally represented in Cuban leadership and called for affirmative action efforts to increase their participation.⁷ However, many white Cubans objected to these measures, and sometimes the efforts backfired (or were deliberately undermined) as the individuals placed in these leadership positions were sometimes not the best qualified for the job—thus affirming and naturalizing blacks' position in the racial hierarchy. In general, the revolution embraced a color-blind approach to race relations, employing class as the idiom of inequalities. In the early years of the revolution, white anxiety over racial integration focused on real and imagined interracial unions. Interracial couples carried a political significance that would be absent from later generations.

Tamara's, Alberto's, Olga's, and José Miguel's experiences attest to the fact that, even now, interracial couples can create social unease. These young couples, products of revolutionary Cuba, met in their racially integrated schools, were attracted to each other, and started dating. Nothing could have been more "natural" or ordinary in their

eyes. The structural changes and egalitarian ideologies of the socialist revolution shaped the courtships of their generation in now taken-for-granted ways. The fact that these couples formed across class, racial, and gender divides in patterns and combinations rarely seen in other historical periods is significant and speaks volumes to the level of racial integration on the island.

Yet the stance that the revolution had "solved" the race problem, the subsequent official silence on race, and a continuing nationalist ideology of *mestizaje* left some interracial couples without a framework in which to discuss the negative comments they encountered at home and on the street. Their contradictory experiences could not be more striking. The revolution's color-blind approach and silence created egalitarian spaces for interracial couples to flourish, but it also created spaces for racism to continue.

The silence on race has provoked a loud and varied response from academics. For some scholars, such as the Cuban Black Nationalist Carlos Moore (1988), the silence is an illustration of the blatant racism of the Castro government—a conscious unwillingness to address the situation and needs of Afro-Cubans. Some (Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 1993) argue that the continued marginalization of Afro-Cubans in social and cultural relations in Cuba cannot be fully understood, principally because of the revolutionary policy of silence and the unavailability of data by race. Even in the early 1980s Cuban social scientists may have started studying racial issues, but the results of these investigations were not publicly available. The Cuban census did collect data by skin color in 1981 and 2002, but much of it was not circulated or widely released in a form that could be used by researchers. The silence, however, is not new. The historians Alejandro de la Fuente (2001) and Ada Ferrer (1999) have documented the long cultural roots of this silence and illustrated how at certain historical conjunctures black Cubans have been able to employ the silence as a tool in their struggle against racism (de la Fuente 2001). The ideological, social, and political contexts surrounding the silence are essential in understanding its impact on race relations at any given time in Cuban history. Most recently, as I discuss in the epilogue, this public silence on racism has started to crack in the current post-Soviet era.