Cuban Color in Tourism and La Lucha
An Ethnography of Racial Meanings

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I like to think of ethnography as “a portrait of a people” that captures broad cultural patterns from the finest details of daily life. The problem that ethnographers encounter is that the subject usually must sit still for the portrait! Especially since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Cuba has been in a state of rapid change that casts the ethnographer’s findings into the realm of history before they have been fully analyzed. The rise of tourism as the engine of Cuba’s socialist economy has profound implications for the Cuban revolution, for Cuban culture more broadly, and for other sites of international tourism. Special Period Cuba teaches enduring lessons about belonging in the contexts of race, nation, and tourism.

To highlight longstanding cultural patterns (as well as newer ones), this book requires a broad historical context that dates from before Cuba’s independence at the dawn of the twentieth century. Cuban Color centrally asks what “belonging” means in a nationalist context, and how that meaning translates in the context of mass international tourism. In other words, I use tourism as a lens to bring Cuban culture into clearer focus. I find that the issues of race, gender, and international class highlighted by contemporary tourism in Cuba are not creations of the post-Soviet present but are foundational to Cuban identity regardless of time or place.

Implications of the Study
These issues also have implications in a variety of wide-ranging contexts. First, the focus on tourism has relevance to any number of developing countries that rely on tourism as the center of their economy. Certainly, each country has its own specific historical context (which deserve more
attention than this book can provide), but the issues of status and belonging for tourists and their hosts are replicated in many sites. Whereas Cuba's socialist ideology features in the desire to maintain separate spheres for Cubans and tourists, in East African sites of cultural tourism, for example, the desire to maintain the illusion of indigeneity motivates a similar segregation of tourists from their increasingly modern host population (see Bruner 2005). The racialization implicit in the Cuban case pushes us to think about whether the separate worlds in which tourists and hosts dwell should be considered inherently unequal.

This book also highlights the constructed nature of race and draws directly from Cuban understandings of color and status to argue for a racialized conception of tourists and Cubans that does not depend solely on skin color. While anthropologists have long posited race to be a cultural construct, we do not always clarify what this means in practice. Rather, we tend to continue to theorize as though blackness and whiteness are the sole determinants of "race." My repeated use of the more active terms "racialize" and "racialization," as well as the descriptive "racial," seeks to remind readers of the constructed nature of race. Skin color is only one aspect of Cuban racial understandings, which include performative (or behavioral) features that extend into tourism. This approach has particular relevance in places where ethnic distinctions predominate over racial ones like in tourism to Eastern Europe, Africa, or Asia.

Lastly, this research has relevance for understanding what nationalism means at the level of day-to-day practice. While states may posit a particular national ideology—in Cuba's case, the state ideology is socialism—everyday life may not always mesh with that vision. It is necessary, therefore, to illustrate how people interact with ideology on the ground: do they buy into it, ignore it, talk back to it, or manipulate it? The Cuban case—filled with luchadores, buscadores, bisneros, and jineiros—demonstrates that they do all of these things and more.

A common thread that runs through literature on tourism, race, and nationalism is the need to distinguish between Us and Them, the Self and the Other. All speak to theories of belonging, to which I hope Cuban Color contributes while highlighting the need for future research on this pivotal concept.

Organization
Chapter 1 introduces the book's central arguments about the racialization that I perceive to be central to tourism as practiced in Cuba today, while considering tourism's capitalistic implications in the context of the socialist revolution. The chapter concludes with an explanation of my research methodology. Chapter 2 considers the question of Cuban identity, tracing Cuban conceptions of race and blackness historically from the prerevolutionary era through the contemporary Special Period (a timeline is included at the end of the book). It historically grounds the subsequent chapters in order to demonstrate parallels as well as divergences in the racialized tourist encounters I describe in the present. Chapter 3 is ethnographic analysis of everyday life in the world of Cubans. It extends the racialized concept of cultura described in the previous chapter to the contemporary Special Period lucha (or struggle) to survive. It also considers the increased individualism and decline in state authority in Cuba's late-socialist context, showing how revolutionary ethics and propaganda are often at odds with what people must do to get by.

Chapter 4 incorporates foreign tourists into the Cuban landscape. Considering global power in terms of race, place, and gender, as well as what that power means for Cuba's revolutionary project, the chapter extends arguments made in the third chapter about the growing racial implications of privilege, power, and belonging that resonate in sites of Cuban–tourist interaction. Chapter 5 concludes the book by revisiting the generational significance of the revolution with an eye toward the contemporary importance of capitalist tools in Cuba's socialist system. The epilogue updates some of the ethnographic data in light of follow-up visits in July 2007 and July 2008 during the transition from Fidel Castro's long period of leadership to the rise of his brother, Raul. Changes in street terminology reveal a hardened lucha context amid the continued racialization of Cubans and tourists.

Audience
Cuban Color is written with two primary audiences in mind: (1) undergraduate students in introductory or advanced courses on Cuba, the Caribbean, tourism, race, or cultural anthropology, and (2) fellow scholars who seek a novel approach either to Cuba or to the ethnographic endeavor. In addition to glossaries in English and Spanish, there is a Student Resource Guide to support classroom use that contains chapter-specific exercises, and additional (film and online) resources located at the end of the book.

In addition to these primary audiences, I hope this book enlightens everyday Americans about Cuban realities so they may engage knowledgeably in broader policy discussions. And, most importantly, I hope the many Cubans who contributed to this book recognize their experiences and culture to be truthfully represented.
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