Karen Y. Morrison

Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750–2000.

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This sophisticated study analyzes race, family, and nation across two and a half centuries of Cuba's history. Positing race-making as "a process occurring just as much in intimate private spaces as in public political discourse" (p. xiv), Karen Morrison explores the reproductive processes that have helped construct changing racial and national meanings, from the mid-eighteenth century until the dawn of the twenty-first. Since private acts and interpretations are not completely separable from public pronouncements and policies, *Cuba's Racial Crucible* also provides a detailed synthesis of these, woven into an original, primary-source-based study of the private processes that are its central concern. This rich combination enhances the book's authority and adds to its value for both teaching and researching race, family, and gender in Cuba.

To analyze intimate race-making spaces in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Morrison draws on 6,300 baptism and paternity-recognition records, held at the Espíritu Santo parish archive in Havana. While the practical limitations inherent to this painstaking work limit the discussion to one parish, reference to other demographic studies provides helpful contextualization. The book demonstrates how these underutilized records—many of which are now available through the Ecclesiastical & Secular Sources for Slave Societies collaborative project, at Vanderbilt University—can provide fascinating insights into racial processes across generations of Afro-Cubans. For the twentieth century, other rich sources used include the Afro-Cuban press and intellectual and artistic production, and a collection of 23 interviews conducted in Cuba by Morrison.

The result is an illuminating study. Scholars of Cuba no longer need to assert that enslaved and free people of color could and did form families, but Morrison's thoughtful questions reveal how much of the diversity and agency of Cuba's interracial reproductive life remains unexplored. While recognizing the family-destroying aspects of the intensive slave-importing plantation era of the nineteenth century, the book reminds us that such destruction was never absolute. It emphasizes, instead, high rates of Afro-Cuban legitimacy and paternal recognition before, as well as after, the onslaught of the liberalized slave trade from 1789. Even at the height of slave trading, Morrison stresses, many voices continued to position Afro-Cubans as contributors to social reproduction, as well as simply laborers for sugar. Only during the period of legal free slave trading (1790–1820), she argues, were slaveholders certain that it was cheaper to import Africans than to encourage enslaved reproduction. Meanwhile, the

influx of new enslaved Africans undermined the status of (but did not erase) Cuba's longstanding families of color—many of whom were already of mixed racial heritage and had attained a significant historical distance from slavery. Subsequent chapters confirm how family functioned as a bridge toward emancipation from the late 1860s, or explore how, after emancipation, many Afro-Cuban families saw interracial relationships as damaging and undesirable, despite the obsession with “whitening” that is projected in much of the literature of the period. By the late 1920s, the *mestizaje* that had occurred privately over generations was publicly embraced in renewed definitions of national identity. While the “family practices of ordinary people” (p. 246) often conformed to shifting intellectual notions about race and nation, at other moments they resisted or redefined them.

These hidden contradictions to the “rules” of racialized reproduction constitute some of the book's most interesting moments. Family members quietly conspired with Church officials to record as “white” the mixed-race children of white men and women of color. White people adopted *pardo* official status in order to circumvent restrictions on interracial marriage and marry a person of mixed race. White fathers recognized legally their mixed-race children, despite not marrying the mothers. Many of these examples apparently constitute only infrequent exceptions to the general pattern; without broader demographic studies, we will not know how common they were across Cuba. Nonetheless, viewed together, such individual resistive acts help us complicate many stereotypical notions that have been passed on to us from centuries of public pronouncements about race and family in Cuba. The simplistic tendency to view interracial sex as driven by a desire for “whitening,” or the assumption that it was somehow female-driven, when, in fact, men were also deliberate agents of biological and social reproduction, are just two of the myths that Morrison challenges using these subtle counterexamples. Meanwhile, social interpretations of interracial reproduction were always more complicated than the biological act itself: thus, one person's celebration of nation-building *mestizaje* could easily be another person's “beneficial” whitening. The use of fascinating oral histories helps trace the messy, conflicting attitudinal shifts that occurred within particular families across the generations. Spanning such a broad chronological period, the book inevitably focuses in greater depth on some issues, moments, or groups than others. Nonetheless, it provides an original, *longue-durée* examination of how ordinary Cubans remade race, family, and nation. *Cuba's Racial Crucible* sets an inspiring example for future studies.

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