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"Especiallly the Mulato Ones Like to Dance" Cuban Films and Discourses of Ethnic Difference

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"Especially the Mulato Ones Like to Dance"
Cuban Films and Discourses of Ethnic Difference

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Senior Thesis
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Abstract

This paper examines the meaning of ethnicity in contemporary Cuba. By conceptualizing inequality as structured in both the public and private realms of society, I argue that the private realm should be given equal weight in social research on ethnic inequality. The paper differentiates between structural inequality in the public realm, which has been largely addressed by the previous literature on Cuban society, and the meaning of ethnic difference at the cultural level, which shapes the nature of social interactions in the private realm. Drawing on both the sociology of culture and cinema studies, I analyze Cuban films for representations and discourses of ethnic difference. As expressive cultural forms, films are not merely reflective of an "objective" meaning of ethnicity in society, but rather are part of a more complex process of interpretation, expression, and creation of meaning. Initial findings reveal the persistence of ethnic distinctions in the private realm of Cuban society, despite a strong political rhetoric and official state policy of ethnic equality. That ethnic distinctions can persist despite little evidence of structural inequality indicates a discontinuity between structural-level change and cultural change, and suggests the possibility of deepening ethnic inequality as Cuba transitions to a new economic/political arrangement.

INTRODUCTION

In preparation for a brief visit to Cuba in January of 2001, I was treated to a debate between a North American expert on Cuba and a Cuban professor from the University of Havana. Among other issues, they discussed ethnicity – the Cuban professor asserting that ethnic inequality had been eradicated by the revolution, and the North American expert challenging us to carefully observe the reality of social life in Cuba. As a student of sociology, my interest was piqued. During my short stay in Havana, I wandered the city streets day and night, conversing with university students, tour guides, health care workers, religious leaders, and the people I encountered loitering in streets, parks and plazas.

I hesitate even to report my casual observations in the context of this paper, as my sociological training causes me to discredit such unsystematic observations. Suffice it to say that my experience caused me to doubt the absence of ethnic distinctions in Cuba, and necessitated further study on my part. Whether sympathetic to the revolution or not, one must look critically at the story of ethnic inequality in Cuba and question whether equality has been achieved in all areas of society. The available scholarship concerning ethnic inequality in Cuba focuses almost exclusively on the public realm of social life, including education, housing, political representation, and (more rarely) economic activity, which show evidence of considerable gains in ethnic equality[1]. While it is possible ethnic equality has been achieved in these commonly measured areas, they do not constitute the whole of social life. What of areas beyond state legislation? Here I am distinguishing the realm that can be directly legislated or mandated to change by the state (public) from the realm that cannot

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[1] For example, the most recent statistical data available that differentiates by ethnicity is the Cuban Census of 1981, examined later in this paper. With the exception of a few studies, the existing scholarship on ethnic inequality in Cuba has focused on the public realm, or has taken state-mandated changes in the public realm as evidence of similar change in the whole of Cuban society (see especially Ring 1961; Moreno 1971).

(private). Within the private realm, social categories, stereotypes, individual attitudes, private practices and customs "left over" from before the revolution potentially form larger patterns, which would be significant in the ordering of society. Taken together, these patterns would constitute the cultural meaning of ethnicity in Cuba[2].

It is this cultural meaning of ethnicity that I seek to address, explore, and to articulate further, on the basis that it comprises a significant part of the reality of social life in Cuba. Have ethnic distinctions persisted and remained relevant in the private spaces of Cuban social life? For example, do ethnic distinctions become relevant when it comes to intermarriage and the family, but not in the context of work or political activities? What kinds of ethnic stereotypes exist? What does this tell us about the nature of interaction between the state and culture and the future of ethnic relations in Cuba?

In order to identify and analyze the cultural meaning of ethnicity in Cuba, I have examined ethnic representations and discourses in Cuban films. To this end, I have utilized the theories and concepts of both the sociology of culture and cinema studies. Examining popular culture – including films – provides a glimpse at "the system of meanings available to ordinary people" (Griswold 1994:89). If culture is created collectively, and if we want to know something about a particular society, then we should examine "the expressive forms through which they [the society] represent themselves to themselves" (Griswold 1994:51). By analyzing films we hear the "voices and discourses" that are operating in the private realm of society, and learn something about the way in which society constructs ethnicity (Shohat and Stam 1994:214). These discourses are significant in shaping Cuban society

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[2] By using the term "cultural meaning", I wish to clarify that I am not referring to the assertion that members of minority or disadvantaged groups share a common culture that, by virtue of some kind of deficiency, contributes to their marginal status in society. Quite on the contrary, I am referring to society's ideas about the significance of ethnic difference at the cultural level.

today, and they provide clues to the future of ethnic equality in Cuba as structural, economic and political changes take place.

First, this paper presents a brief history of ethnic relations in Cuba, describing both the general tone of race rhetoric since independence and the revolutionary approach to alleviating racial/ethnic inequality. Second, I will root our discussion of Cuba in the relevant sociological literature on ethnic inequality and further articulate the distinction between the public and private realms of society, locating the concept of the cultural meaning of ethnicity within this framework. An analysis of the available data on the public realm of society follows, providing a partial (and inadequate) view of the effects of revolutionary measures on racial/ethnic inequality. Finally, an analysis of Cuban films will provide clues to the kinds of ethnic categories and meanings that are available in contemporary Cuban society and that will affect the nature of ethnic relations in the future.

ETHNIC RELATIONS IN CUBA

Cuba's population is commonly categorized using four ethnic distinctions[3]. The label "white" refers to those who descend from Spanish colonists/conquistadors of the island and have the lightest skin tone; the category "black" describes the descendants of African slaves brought to Cuba. The label *mulato(a)* or *mestizo(a)*, meaning of mixed ancestry, distinguishes a rather ambiguous, intermediate group. The fourth category, "Asiatics", refers to the descendants of Chinese immigrants who are often not acknowledged because they make up such a small proportion of the population. These categories represent crude

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[3] Throughout this paper, I will be using the term "ethnicity" rather than "race", as I am not attempting to measure any "real" or biological differences that the term race implies. Ethnicity is a more accurate term and a more useful concept for my study, precisely because it refers to the cultural construction of these distinctions/meanings. However, I will use "race" when describing a period in Cuba's history when the term referred to a belief in biological differences, or when referring to another scholar's work.

groupings in a full spectrum of skin colors and other morphological traits, and there is often difficulty in assigning an individual to one category (Casal 1979). A myriad of terms is used colloquially to make subtle ethnic distinctions, suggesting more fluid boundaries between categories. For example, *moreno(a)* is used to describe an "olive-complexioned person (usually lighter than a *mulato*)" and *jabao(a)* refers to "a light-skinned mulatto with negroid features", while *gallego(a)* (as opposed to *blanco(a)* – white) describes a "Spaniard" (McGarrity 1992:201).

The experience of conquest and colonization by Spain and the subsequent importation of African slaves laid the groundwork for ethnic inequality in Cuba, and established the social meaningfulness of racial/ethnic distinctions. With the indigenous population of the island virtually destroyed, a racial/ethnic hierarchy was created in which white Europeans held the top position and black African slaves occupied the bottom rung. An intermediate group of mulattos was gradually established through miscegenation; this "buffer" group between whites and blacks made it impossible to define Cuban society in dichotomous terms, though this often occurs due to the previously mentioned difficulty in categorizing individuals. Added to this hierarchy were "discrete but strong elements of Indian, Chinese and Jewish cultures" brought to Cuba not as slaves but in a subordinate laboring capacity (Morejón 1982:231).

Slavery was abolished in 1886 with independence from Spain. Since that point, Cuban society has engaged in the post-colonial process of defining a national identity and creating unity among diverse groups. It has tried to accomplish this simultaneously by way of and in spite of the issue of race. From independence through the revolution of 1959, Cuban society has been characterized by an ideology of ethnic equality, if not always the reality of such equality. More specifically, the post-independence story of ethnic relations in

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Cuba can be described as the perpetual existence of an ideological and/or legal basis for equality, used paradoxically to prevent any further movement on the issue of ethnic inequality while providing some basis for disadvantaged groups to challenge the continuing social order. Ethnicity has generally been viewed as a divisive issue that is best addressed by indirect, gradual, or non-confrontational measures (de la Fuente 1998).

The following elements characterized ethnic relations in the early republic. First, blacks comprised a substantial part of the independence army, and key figures in the independence movement from both extremes of the ethnic hierarchy had placed "racial unity and integration" as central to the creation of the new Cuban republic (Casal 1979:17). Second, the extremely influential writing of José Martí – Cuban intellectual, poet, and leader of the independence movement – articulated the precedence of national identity over ethnic identification, emphasizing the process of whites liberating their black slaves and thus making amends for the injustices of slavery (Logan 1999:198). The Cuban "myth of racial equality", referring to the dismissal of a distinct black or Afro-Cuban experience, stemmed from Martí's writing and defined mere ethnic identification as racist and harmful to national unity (de la Fuente 1998; Login 1999). By preventing issues of race or ethnicity from being addressed openly, the existing social order remained essentially unchanged. This social order, established in the colonial period, was characterized by a ruling white elite and a black and mulatto population lacking full access to social, economic, and political institutions (de la Fuente 1998; Login 1999). Login describes this early republican period of Cuban society as characterized by segregation and inequality in occupations, income, education, and "housing, private clubs, restaurants, hotels, and public spaces", as well as widespread negative stereotyping of blacks and mulattos (1999:201). There are accounts of government attempts to "whiten" the population through racist immigration practices – encouraging

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white immigration and discouraging or curtailing nonwhite immigration (de la Fuente 1998; Login 1999). In addition, U.S. political, economic and social influence on the island (beginning in earnest with the Spanish-American War) is said to have facilitated racial/ethnic discrimination despite the legal basis for equality in the 1901 Constitution (Casal 1979:13).

Thus, ethnic inequality persisted despite the presence of ideologies of equality, because these very ideologies were used to maintain the status quo. And yet, the existence of an ideology of equality gave those on the lower end of the ethnic hierarchy a politically and socially legitimate basis for asserting their equal rights (de la Fuente 1998). This created an impasse of sorts that, along with a general political crisis and growing resistance to U.S. influence in the 1930s, brought about a transformation of the notion of Cuban national identity. At this point, Cuba was redefined as a fundamentally "mixed" nation (de la Fuente 1998). In essence, the notion of *cubanidad* or Cubanness went from raceless (meaning that white, Spanish heritage was the only valued or recognized component) to *mestizo* (meaning everything Cuban was part African and part Spanish, located specifically in the Americas). The African contribution was now embraced rather than despised or ignored, but ironically this meant few concrete changes, as *mestizaje* still denied the singular position of blacks by defining all Cubans as mixed (de la Fuente 1998).

Although the revolution did entail undeniably dramatic structural changes, it has been argued that significant ideological changes in regard to ethnic inequality did not occur (Casal 1979; de la Fuente 1998). The leadership of the Cuban revolution was mostly white, and blacks suffered scapegoating as alleged supporters of Bastista's corrupt regime (de la Fuente 2001). However, the revolutionary government made ethnicity a central issue, claiming that racism would be eliminated by way of eliminating classism (Ibid.:18).

Alejandro de la Fuente (1995) succinctly outlines the government's stance on ethnic

inequality with this statement:

> Cuban authorities approached the racial problem from a strongly *structural*
> perspective, coherent with their Marxist views of history and society. It was assumed that
> with the elimination of what they viewed as the causes of racial inequality (private property,
> class exploitation), racism and racial discrimination would automatically disappear. (133)

It was acknowledged that prejudice would take time to disappear, but in 1962, just

three years after Cuba's revolution, Fidel Castro proclaimed that the country was already free

of racial inequality. This statement once again rendered ethnicity an irrelevant issue in Cuba,

silencing any intellectual discourse that had begun to develop. Unity was perhaps even more

crucial to the revolutionary government than it was to the early republic. Anti-

discrimination or affirmative action legislation was not passed, but instead the government

focused on equality in education, employment, access to public spaces, and redistributive

programs for the poor (de la Fuente 2001:266). Generally, any changes were gradual and

non-confrontational, and sought to avoid social conflict or divisions – consistent with the

traditional way of dealing with ethnic issues in Cuba (Ibid.:268). Private (often segregated)

schools were abolished in 1961, and most occupations were nationalized in 1963 (de la

Fuente 2001). Educational facilities were expanded, and extensive adult education and

literacy campaigns were conducted (Casal 1979). Public spaces, including parks and social

clubs, were desegregated, and a regional health care system was established. In the more

recent years of the 1980s and 1990s, during which Cuba has suffered an economic crisis,

there is evidence that ethnicity has become a more explosive issue. Access to dollars via

family abroad or the tourist industry has been identified as a new means of ethnic

stratification, as most Cuban exiles are white, and hiring practices in the tourist sector

reportedly favor lighter-skinned individuals (de la Fuente and Glasco 1997; de la Fuente 2001).

With this understanding of the foundation of ethnic relations in Cuba and the revolutionary approach to alleviating racial/ethnic inequality, we can place Cuba in the context of the relevant sociological literature on ethnic inequality, and elaborate the concept of the cultural meaning of ethnicity.

CONCEPTUALIZING ETHNIC INEQUALITY

The "Other" Inequality

Many historians and political scientists have studied ethnic inequality in post-revolutionary Cuba. Much of this work is highly political, identifiable by either pro- or anti-socialist sentiments. Thus, nearly all follow one of two interpretations: to declare that the revolutionary process has essentially eradicated ethnic inequality, or to argue that the revolution exacerbated existing and created new inequality. Neither interpretation fully captures the story of ethnic relations in Cuba. Besides its highly political nature, the problem in previous work lies in the fact that it focuses almost exclusively on one area of social life: the realm of activities directly affected by state action. Worse, this has been taken to represent change in the whole of Cuban society in the absence of information on the "other" realm of society (Moreno 1971; Ring 1961). I argue that without systematic study of the whole of Cuban society, we cannot uncritically assume that change in one area results in the same kind of change in another area.

Many scholars have noted the continuing existence, or possibility, of a different kind of ethnic inequality. This "other" has remained relatively unarticulated and amorphous, sometimes referred to as individual, residual, private or cultural racism (Ring 1961; Matas

1971; Casal 1971; Fox 1981; McGarrity and Cárdenas 1995;). Some have simply made the distinction between discrimination, which can be affected by state policy, and prejudice, which is perhaps more resistant to change (Amaro and Mesa-Lago 1971; Moreno 1971; Landau 1991; de la Fuente 1995; de la Fuente and Glasco 1997; de la Fuente 2001). Several scholars assert that any ethnic inequality in Cuba is a residual of pre-revolutionary times and will simply disappear given enough time, but this again assumes a causal, unidirectional relationship between structural change and cultural change (Ring 1961; Paulston 1971; Moreno 1971).

There has been widespread speculation and anecdotal evidence used to address this "other" realm of society (which I will refer to as the private realm), perhaps due in part to difficulty in obtaining permission to conduct research on the island. In a detailed treatment of the 1981 census data, Alejandro de la Fuente identifies the need for research in this area, stating that "the persistence of other indicators of inequality and of a racist mentality should not be underestimated" (1995:161). However, only a few studies have attempted to deal with this issue more systematically. In a study of interracial marriages, Nadine Fernandez argues that "the total picture of race in Cuba has been left half-painted by neglecting the crucial realm of lived, subjective, quotidian experience" of Cubans (1996:101). Her interviews with interracial couples reveal the continuing existence of ethnic categorization and stereotypes, as well as the linking of race and class in popular perceptions of ethnic groups. Alejandro de la Fuente and Laurence Glasco conducted a non-representative, not randomly sampled and not officially supported survey in the Havana area on attitudes about race (1997). They found that 79 percent of blacks and 71 percent of whites surveyed agreed that discrimination does not exist in Cuba, but racial prejudices are still prevalent (Ibid.:62). In addition, they found that younger Cubans surveyed were more critical of the

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revolutionary government, and actually did not associate it with a more egalitarian Cuban society (Ibid.:63-67). This research is suggestive of the continuing relevance of ethnic distinctions, and points to the kind of work that is needed in the study of ethnicity in Cuba.

Sociological Perspectives

In their work on the status of women, Bradley and Khor challenge "the myth that inequality is structured only in the public domain", presenting a model of the status of women that articulates a public/private distinction similar to the one I am proposing in regard to ethnicity (1993:354). They conceptualize status as consisting of three dimensions – political, economic and social – each having a public and private domain (349). Each indicator of a dimension is categorized as belonging to either the public or private domain of that particular dimension. Further, Bradley and Khor predict a correlation between dimensions that would vary by society and by domain (public or private). For example, they posit that a possible correlation between the political and economic dimensions in a socialist society "may apply more directly to more of the public domain indicators of status than to the private domain, because state policies in socialist countries do not ostensibly address women's situations in the private domains" (366). This model is useful in its conceptualization of dimensions of inequality and the public/private distinction, in addition to allowing for the possibility of contradiction within a given society.

In order to address ethnicity, I will be conceptualizing the public/private distinction somewhat differently than Bradley and Khor. However, their work serves as an important reference point for the valuation of the private realm as significant for social research. I will address the private realm across all dimensions of social life, distinguishing public from private without creating an impassable boundary between the two. Surely there is some

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degree of interplay and overlap between the two realms; however, I am distinguishing the realm that can be directly legislated or mandated to change by the state (public) from the realm that cannot (private). It is important to note that this paper does not elaborate how the public/private distinction operates in Cuba, but rather investigates the realm that has been largely ignored by previous research.

More central to my argument is the distinction between structural inequality and the cultural meaning of ethnicity. The former is associated with the public realm, and refers to a discrepancy in the allocation of society's resources among ethnic groups. The latter refers to whether or not ethnicity is a meaningful category in society, without necessarily indicating the translation of this meaning into structural inequality. By differentiating what can be legislated in society and what is "inside people's heads", this perspective considers people as active agents who are involved in the creation, playing out, and negotiation of meaning in their social worlds (de la Fuente 1998; 2001). For example, the government can mandate that schools admit and educate students of all ethnic backgrounds, but it cannot directly mandate that people accept interethnic marriage (which, if such marriages were previously considered unacceptable, would mean a change in the conception/construction of ethnicity).

For the purposes of this paper, examples of the cultural meaning of ethnicity would be:

1) Socially defined, intersecting categories such as *mulato* and *female* and the meanings attached to them. For example, the construction of *mulata* women as sexual objects, or a stereotype that blacks have a greater propensity toward criminal behavior than other ethnic groups.

2) Individual attitudes that may or may not be linked to actions or practices, such as a belief that people should marry within their own ethnic group, that light skin is

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more attractive than dark skin, or that African culture is inferior to European culture.

The sociological literature on race and ethnicity largely accepts the socially constructed nature of racial/ethnic categories and meanings, and views these categories and meanings as emerging from various realms of society. Omi and Winant have delineated the concept of race as neither real (as in biological or objective) nor illusion (as in having no meaning or consequence as an organizing principle in society), instead arguing that "the meaning and salience of race are forever being reconstituted in the present" (1993:3-7). Further, these racial/ethnic meanings and identities manifest differently in different spheres of social life (Bobo 1997:54). This view of ethnicity emphasizes its continuing relevance and its malleable nature. As Smith and Feagin put it,

> Race and ethnicity are sometimes erroneously conceived as primordial essences likely to be erased by the inexorable march of 'modern times' and various material driving forces (for example, capitalism, market relations, the media, and the bureaucratic state). Racial and ethnic identities have often been deployed as a trope for local and premodern vestiges of the past. (1995:3)

Instead, Smith and Feagin argue that "the meaning of racial and ethnic difference" is contested, created, and redefined in an "everyday" sense by different social actors – individuals, groups, and institutions – in various arenas in society (1995:12). This view requires us to examine the particular meaning of ethnicity in the public and private realms of society, in both its structural and cultural manifestations. Thus, the cultural meaning of ethnicity is an important topic for study, as it shapes the nature of ethnic relations in the private realm and interacts with structural conditions in the public realm to create the full picture of ethnicity in society. Before delving into this cultural meaning of ethnicity in Cuba, I will briefly outline the available data on structural inequality, illustrating its deficiencies in painting the full picture of ethnicity in Cuba.

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ETHNICITY IN THE PUBLIC REALM – THE CENSUS DATA OF 1981

Most data on Cuba do not differentiate by ethnic group, and often several economic

indicators (such as unemployment) are unavailable. With reasonable effort, one can find

information regarding educational attainment, political representation, housing, health care

and sanitation in the broader society, which are revealing of the public realm but either do

not address ethnicity or cannot be used alone as sufficient measures of ethnic equality. The

best source of data on ethnic groups is the Cuban Census of 1981, the most recent census

taken in Cuba. The tables found in Appendix A outline the data provided by that source,

and are summarized below. In the census, the variable "skin color" (*color de la piel*) is defined

in the following manner:

> For the purposes of the census, the population was stratified by skin color in four
> categories: white, black, Asiatic, mulatto or mestizo. The categories refer to the concept that
> the population commonly understands and do not reflect actual races or color. The
> enumerator had instructions to note [skin color] without asking the question of the people
> present during the interview, and to ask about [the skin color of] those absent, if they [the
> enumerator] did have reason for doubt (My translation, page XXXVIII).

This definition brings up the problems associated with identifying an individual as a

member of a particular ethnic group, and the essential subjectivity of ethnic categorization.

The census data have been deemed unreliable because of the "subjectivity of both census

enumerators and enumeratees in 'whitening' census responses" (McGarrity 1992:197).

Interestingly, both the census definition and McGarrity's charge of "whitening" allude to a

cultural meaning of ethnicity (that is "commonly" understood by Cubans; that somehow

whitening is desirable to both enumerators and enumeratees) not evident in the actual census

data. With this caveat, we will proceed to examine the data in order to get a broad view of

ethnicity in the public realm of Cuban society.

Cuba's ethnic groups are distributed somewhat unequally between urban and rural areas (Table 1). Blacks constitute the most urbanized group at 78.2 percent, while mestizos are the least urbanized at 65.6 percent. The white and Asian populations are similarly distributed at 68.5 and 70 percent urban, respectively. This distinction is meaningless unless there are rural/urban disparities in education, health care, and other services, or perhaps differing values and attitudes. Unfortunately, the census of 1981 does not provide such information (except that shown in Table 4). There are contradictory opinions regarding the existence of rural/urban inequalities, but none provide adequate evidence to make the case either way.

The census data show that although younger members of all ethnic groups show higher levels of educational attainment, there are slightly greater ethnic disparities among the younger age group than among the older Cubans at all levels of education except *0 – Primary* and *Some Higher Education* (Table 2). Younger blacks show the greatest percentage increase in secondary school completion over their older counterparts at 23.1 percent, followed by mestizos, whites and Asians (19.6, 17.0 and 10.2 percent, respectively). However, this ranking does not hold true at the university level, where younger whites and Asians show the greatest percentage increase (4.8 and 4.7 percent) over their older counterparts, followed by blacks (4.1 percent) and mestizos (3.2 percent). This suggests that blacks and mestizos have benefited from or have taken advantage of increased access to secondary school, but have not made such advances in higher education. Overall, the data do not show dramatic differences between ethnic groups in educational attainment.

The census of 1981 differentiates between different types of economically inactive citizens. For my purposes, I have included only those looking for work for the first time, those who live on economic assistance from the government or other sources, those who do

only housework, those incapacitated for work or in institutions, or in "other" undetermined categories (Table 3). By doing this I hope to access only the population that is looking for work but unable to find it, or would be working if there were not something keeping them from doing so. I include housework as economically inactive to remain consistent with the census classification of such work; however, it is evident from the tables that those doing only housework make up a significant part of the economically inactive population. The Asian population shows the highest percentage of inactivity (38.9 percent), followed by whites and mestizos (both at 36.3 percent) and then blacks (30.0 percent). There are significantly greater differences between white, black, Asian, and mestizo women than among men, suggesting that there is a certain degree of ethnic inequality for women in the area of remunerated work (Table 4). Urban men and women are more economically active than their rural counterparts; the group with the smallest percentage economically active is white rural women, while the most economically active group is white urban men.

In Table 5, we see that the number of children born alive to younger women is almost identical in urban and rural areas. Generally, older women are more differentiated by ethnic group, but rural ethnic groups of all ages are more differentiated than their urban counterparts. Overall there is a trend toward fewer children and less of an urban/rural or ethnic distinction.

As a whole, these data do not show dramatic inequalities between or systematic ranking of ethnic groups. Instead, we see a higher percentage of all ethnic groups completing secondary school and pre-university programs, roughly similar economic data, and a trend toward fewer children per woman. More importantly, the data provided by the 1981 census inadequately describe ethnic inequality in contemporary Cuba, both by virtue of the number of years that have passed since the census was taken, and the strictly public

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realm focus of the indicators. In order to gain the full picture of ethnicity in contemporary

Cuba, we must investigate its meaning in the private realm as well. The following section

discusses the theories of the sociology of culture and cinema studies, which inform my

exploration of the cultural meaning of ethnicity in Cuban films.

DISCOURSES OF ETHNICITY IN CUBAN FILMS

Methodology

In order to explore the cultural meaning of ethnicity, I have examined ethnic

representations and discourses in Cuban films. Following the work of Ella Shohat and

Robert Stam (1994) on the cinematic applications of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory, I

understand films as a kind of social "utterance". Films are not simply reflections of some

objective social "reality", but constructions of social life formed by the collective society.

Therefore, a film is thought of more usefully as a reflection *on* society than a reflection *of*

society (Griswold 1994; Stam 1997). A circular relationship exists in which the material

conditions of society, institutions, and human minds affect culture and culture in turn affects

society. If we were to stop the cycle at any one point in time, we would perhaps see the

relationship as unidirectional, but this static view disguises the existence of change over time.

Because culture is collective work, perhaps a web would be a more appropriate

conceptualization of this process than a circle (Griswold 1994).

We cannot assume that ethnicity has some absolute, uncontested or objective

meaning in society; hence it would be unprofitable to seek these absolute representations in

films. Griswold states that "ethnicity itself is a cultural object, with different creators and

different recipients, all constructing different meanings" (1994:107). Films too are cultural

objects carrying complex meanings, and the cinema is a forum where ideology is negotiated

by society. Thus, films are involved in both the *creation* and *playing out* of ideas about ethnicity, and are part of a broader social system of signification and meaning (Guerrero 1993:7). Films connect to both the public and private realms of the social world, but as a medium of cultural expression, they participate in and reflect the process of translating and utilizing public discourses and meanings (and creating new ones) in the private realm.

My aim is to identify patterns in the way "languages and discourses" about ethnicity are structured and presented in films. Shohat and Stam have shown the study of images or stereotypes in films to be fraught with problems, and have offered the methodological alternative of analyzing the "interplay of voices" in films (1994:214). They argue that

> A more nuanced discussion of race and ethnicity in the cinema would emphasize less a one-to-one mimetic adequacy to sociological or historical truth than the interplay of voices, discourses, perspectives, including those operative within the image itself... The notion of voice is open to plurality; a voice is never merely a voice; it also relays a discourse, since even an individual voice is itself a discursive sum, a polyphony of voices. (214-215).

This approach allows for the existence of contradiction in a single film and recognizes the specific conventions of the cinema (as opposed to literature or another form of cultural expression). In this way, the discourses found in films are not held up as representing "real" social life in Cuba, but the discourses themselves are "real" discourses, whose presence in films tells us something about "the system of meanings available to ordinary people" (Griswold 1994:89). Moreover, they can be compared to the discourses present in other realms of Cuban society and reveal the exchange of ideas between these realms, as well as showing change in discourses over time.

Voices and discourses are expressed in films by way of narration and scene order, use of foreground/background and framing, lighting, sound (on- and off-screen) and music, perspective (through whose eyes is the action experienced?), use of close-ups, and characterization (how developed are the characters; are they active agents or passive

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recipients; with whom are we encouraged to be sympathetic?) (Shohat and Stam 1994:208; Stam and Spence 1999:242). The films were coded based on how the preceding elements were utilized to express the cultural meaning of ethnicity, focusing on the overlapping concepts of inter-ethnic relationships, ethnic roles/categories, and the social power or legitimacy of ethnic groups.

After compiling a universe of roughly ninety-three Cuban films from books, magazines, and internet databases, I identified a convenience sample of thirteen that were accessible to me, covering different time periods since the revolution (Appendix B). I viewed each film twice, taking notes on plot, event sequence and implicit or explicit discourses of ethnic meaning, and subsequently coded the information according to the coding scheme shown in Appendix C. My notes provided me with a broad view of trends in the films, such as explicit discourses of ethnic difference, while the coding sheets allowed me to identify more subtle trends not immediately evident by simply viewing the films, such as the disproportionate backgrounding of a particular ethnic group. All elements received equal weight in my analysis. Recognizing the subjectivity involved in identifying characters as members of particular ethnic groups, I followed verbal cues in the films when available, and enlisted the help of a Cuban friend in resolving rare ambiguities. In addition, I continually reviewed my coding of previously viewed films to ensure consistency; after viewing all thirteen films, I saw ethnicity as a continuum within which I could place any one individual with reasonable accuracy. This understanding of ethnicity as a continuum particular to a society is especially important in light of the fact that an individual who is considered "white" in Cuba would likely not be categorized as such in the U.S. I would argue that my role as researcher had no greater influence on my findings than in quantitative studies, in terms of the inherent subjectivity of defining concepts and analyzing data. In

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both qualitative and quantitative scenarios, the researcher is involved in creating meaning, as the decision-maker and analyzer behind the data. However, I wish to emphasize the exploratory nature of this work and to state explicitly that I do not seek to make definitive statements or predictions about the meaning of ethnicity in contemporary Cuba.

The Findings

After viewing all thirteen films, several themes emerged that could be collectively called the cultural meaning of ethnicity. Speaking broadly, the discourses of ethnic difference expressed in the films reveal persisting ethnic distinctions in the private realm of Cuban society, conveyed through cinematic conventions in sometimes contradictory ways.

To begin, Asians were conspicuously absent from all but two of the films, and were depicted only as backgrounded, extremely peripheral characters. The multi-ethnic composition of Cuban society was acknowledged in all of the films, but black and mulatto characters most frequently occupied peripheral rather than a central roles, which has implications for the development of these characters and the likelihood of seeing the action through their perspective. Interethnic relationships in both the public and private realms were constructed in all of the films, and they were more frequently egalitarian relations than not. However, these interethnic relationships overwhelmingly involved at least one peripheral character – usually the black or mulatto character in white-black or white-mulatto relationships. The relationship between Teresa (white) and her coworker Marta (black) in the film *Retrato de Teresa* (1979) provides a typical example. Teresa, as the title suggests, is a very central character in the film, whereas Marta occupies a peripheral role. In the course of the story, we see the two women interact in the public-realm setting of work, arguing over the direction of work-related activities. In addition, we could call their relationship

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egalitarian, since neither one holds any obvious position of authority over the other. Their relationship typifies a public realm, egalitarian interethnic relationship between a white central character and a black peripheral character in which no real depth is reached in terms of the significance of the relationship in either woman's life – a theme more or less repeated, with some variation, in many of the films.

Indeed, "interethnic relationship" in these films primarily means white-black or white-mulatto relationships, as relationships between blacks and mulattos were constructed in only two films – *La Vida es Silbar* (1998) and *Fresa y Chocolate* (1993) – and existed between peripheral characters. Generally, this means that very few interethnic relationships (four, to be exact) were created between central characters in any of the films. Moreover, three of these centrally located relationships occurred in very recent films – *Guantanamera!* (1995) and *La Vida es Silbar* – and only one represented a private-realm, romantic interethnic relationship.

The cinematic conventions of narrative, scene order and sound were used to elicit sympathy primarily for the white characters in any one film. The film *Mujer Transparente* (1991), a compilation of short films about five white women, illustrates this point. The film encourages sympathy for each woman by allowing the viewer to hear her thoughts, view her troubles through her own eyes, or witness the playing out of a secret wish or desire. We experience Isabel – the central character of the first short film – moving between her two worlds of work and family, and our understanding of her working life leads us to feel sympathy with her when it becomes clear that her family has little appreciation of her professional responsibilities. The only four exceptions, where the viewer was encouraged to identify with and feel sympathy for black or mulatto characters, were again in more recent films – *Guantanamera!*, *La Vida es Silbar* and *Operación Fangio* (2000).

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Similarly, the action of the films was viewed predominantly through the white characters' point of view, and the multifaceted or "developed" characters were more often white than black or mulatto. For example, in the film *Hasta Cierto Punto* (1984), the character of Laudelina (white) is well developed and multidimensional, and her perspective is utilized more than once in the film. As a female dockworker, her struggles with machismo are central to the story, but we also see her fall in love with a married man and deal with the implications of that relationship. In contrast, the same film highlights interviews with other dockworkers, who are seen only through the secondary camera lens of a filmmaker who is himself a character in *Hasta Cierto Punto*. Of these interviewees, seven are black, one is mulatto, only three are white, and all are undeveloped or "flat" characters.

While the black and mulatto characters in each film were foregrounded and backgrounded in equal numbers, the white characters in each film were more frequently foregrounded than backgrounded. Although characters of all ethnicities were framed peripherally in the films (as partial body objects), blacks and mulattos were framed disproportionately so, in terms of their overall low representation in the films. In other words, what black and mulatto characters existed were frequently framed peripherally rather than centrally. A scene from *Retrato de Teresa* illustrates this point, as well as exemplifying the way that cinematic conventions can be used to express nuance in a film. The scene takes place on a beach, where several white men – including one of the main characters, Ramón – are arguing with a white bartender about the quantity of beer he has given them. As they argue, a black man comes in and out of the frame, sometimes existing only as an arm thrust into the picture. He is actually identified by the dialogue as the white bartender's manager, suggesting his legitimacy in the public realm of work, and yet he is framed so peripherally that it is difficult to see him as anything but marginal.

In contrast, several black and mulatto characters were constructed as active agents, rather than recipients of the action, despite their status as peripheral, backgrounded, single-faceted characters. In the film *Guantanamera!* (1999), the mulatto driver Tony is peripheral to the main narrative, but ironically he shows a great deal of agency in his easy negotiation of the black market in Cuba. While he comfortably utilizes these informal markets, the central white characters of the film struggle to obtain even a simple meal while they travel by car across the island.

Perhaps the most striking depiction of ethnic difference in the films was the portrayal of musicians, dancers and prostitutes as almost exclusively black or mulatto. Musicians are present in nine of the thirteen films, and while there were sometimes white or mulatto individuals scattered in their midst, the vast majority were black. This same statement could be made in regard to the dancers portrayed in the films. Interestingly, two of the three white dancers depicted were specifically ballet dancers, which associates them with Cuba's European heritage and sends a specific message in terms of the cultural meaning of whiteness. In addition, the few white prostitutes depicted in the films occupied central roles, while the black and mulata prostitutes (the vast majority) occupied peripheral roles. The opening scene of *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (1968) illustrates these trends in terms of the portrayal of musicians and dancers. The film opens with a kind of frantic, chaotic fiesta; black dancers and musicians crowd together, with only the occasional white or mulatto in their midst. The scene remains somewhat removed from the rest of the film; the characters remain unnamed and extremely peripheral, reappearing only once to show that the main character, Sergio (white) is in the crowd of dancers. While this scene serves as an example of how musicians and dancers are portrayed as black or mulatto in the films, its place in the narrative conveys a specific message about ethnicity. The fact that it opens a film titled

Memorias del Subdesarrollo (Memories of Underdevelopment) suggests that we are seeing what is underdeveloped about Cuba, or at least criticizes the existence of that idea in society.

In terms of discourses of ethnic difference, the films convey several voices asserting a distinct and identifiable ethnic difference, especially in regard to black and mulatto Cubans. First, several commentaries refer to the construction of black women as sexual objects. In the film *Mujer Transparente*, the white character Zoe receives a visit in her garage apartment from a white male friend, someone who belongs to a very different social circle than the unconventional Zoe. In a moment of rage, she challenges him to step out of his straight-and-narrow lifestyle and "*Screw a black woman, get out of the closet, do something!*" She refers to this almost as if it is a rite of passage for a white male such as himself, and the underlying message is unmistakable. Similarly, in *Las Profesías de Amanda* (1999) the main character (white) gives psychic readings to two white women in her home. To one woman she says, "*So you married a white, but you have a black on the side for your kicks*". When the woman reluctantly admits to it, Amanda advises her, "*If you like the black man, stay with him and leave the white. Don't be embarrassed.*" The woman shakes her head as if this is impossible. Beyond the issue of her infidelity, we must ask why the white woman would feel embarrassment over her relationship with a black man. This commentary suggests the construction of blackness as sensual, and also somehow lesser than whiteness. Finally, in *Hasta Cierto Punto*, Laudelina (white) describes the story of her romance with her son's absent father in the following way:

> *I met Claudio's father at school. I was seventeen… and in love. Anyway, I got pregnant. It was an awful scandal for my family. And Pablo was a coward. My father refused to understand, especially since Pablo was mulatto. I felt very alone. I decided to have it.*

Although the two attended school together, the interethnic nature of their relationship still posed a serious problem. This example very clearly draws a line between the legitimacy of public realm interethnic relationships and the illegitimacy of the same

relationships in the private realm. Together, these discourses point to the continuing

significance of ethnic distinctions in regard to romance, marriage and families, and suggest

the existence of a taboo against interethnic unions in contemporary Cuba.

CONCLUSIONS

As I stated earlier in the paper, the cultural meaning of ethnicity consists of social

categories, stereotypes, individual attitudes, private practices and customs that are significant

in shaping society, and can be expressed through popular cultural forms. The discourses of

ethnic difference in the films both reflect the meaning of ethnicity that exists in

contemporary Cuban society and participate in the creation of that meaning. These films

construct ethnicity in a patterned way, indicating the continuing relevance of ethnic

distinctions in the private spaces of Cuban society. Interethnic relationships seem less

common or accepted in the private realm; the discourses present in the films suggest that

ethnic distinctions are more relevant in terms of intermarriage and the family, but less so in

regard to work and other public-realm activities. In terms of the existence of ethnic

stereotyping, the same voices and discourses point to the construction of blacks and

mulattos as inclined toward sensuality – whether as musicians, dancers, or sexual objects.

This finding has particularly interesting implications for Cuba's future, because of the forum

that tourism provides for the manifestation and exploitation of these stereotypes. As a

growing industry in Cuba and the focus of foreign investments, tourism holds enormous

potential for the further construction of Afro-Cuban culture as exotic and sensual, and the

identification of blacks and mulattos as the bearers of that culture. To the extent that this

meaning of ethnic difference pervades the private realm of Cuban society, blacks and

mulattos will occupy a marginal position in society with less social legitimacy than other groups.

That ethnic distinctions can persist despite a strong political rhetoric of ethnic equality and little evidence of structural inequality indicates a discontinuity between structural-level change and cultural change, and suggests the possibility of deepening ethnic inequality as Cuba transitions to a new economic/political arrangement. Of course, the relationship between structural change and cultural change is unclear, and articulating this relationship is beyond the scope of my research. However, future research should focus on the intersections of the public and private realms, in order to better understand the interplay between structural inequality and the cultural meaning of ethnicity.

During my visit to Cuba in January of 2001, I spent a great deal of time conversing with university students, who articulately shared their perception of Cuba as a country without inequalities or ethnic differences[4]. One night in Habana Vieja, toward the end of my stay, I shared an unexpected conversation with a black woman and her three children. I had meant to sit near the cathedral and sketch a bit, but a small 7-year-old boy, Lazaro, kept scooting nearer to me on the curb. Eventually his sisters started asking questions of me, and after a few minutes I engaged their mother in conversation while her girls drew exuberantly in my sketchbook. Although she was very willing to answer my questions, she glanced around and covered her mouth with her hand when saying anything negative about Cuba. She expressed her frustration at lacking certain liberties, and placed blame squarely on the government for the struggles of the Cuban people, rather than on the U.S. blockade.

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[4] The title of this paper comes from a conversation I shared with one university student who asserted the irrelevance of ethnic distinctions, but in a later conversation stated that "Everyone in Cuba likes to dance – especially the *mulato* ones".

She and her three children walked with me that evening, scribbling their address on a scrap of paper before saying goodbye. A connection with a foreigner could help her to survive in Cuba's difficult dollarized economy, but regardless of this I appreciated her candid responses to my questions, so typical of the Cubans that I met. And yet, the contrast between this black woman's views and those expressed by the university students caused me many nights of wondering, resulting in a desire to go beyond politics and appearances and view Cuban society in all of its complexity and contradiction.

Table 1: Urban/Rural Distribution of Ethnic Groups, 1981

	ETHNIC GROUP			
	White (66.0%)*	Black (12.0%)	Asiatic (0.1%)	Mulatto (21.9%)
URBAN	68.5%	78.2%	70.0%	65.6%
RURAL	31.5	21.8	30.0	34.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Cuba, Censo de Población y Viviendas, 1981
*Numbers in parentheses are each ethnic group's percentage of the total population

Table 2: Educational Attainment by Ethnic Group and Selected Age Group*, 1981

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	ETHNIC GROUP AND AGE GROUP							
	White		Black		Asiatic		Mulatto	
	20-34	40-49	20-34	40-49	20-34	40-49	20-34	40-49
0 – Primary Education	38.1%	69.5%	31.0%	67.2%	38.9%	60.4%	38.1%	70.7%
Some Secondary Education	16.8	10.0	18.8	12.7	15.9	11.6	18.1	10.7
Secondary Education Completed	32.5	15.5	38.3	15.2	30.0	19.8	33.5	13.9
Some Higher Education	3.9	1.1	4.0	1.1	4.3	2.1	3.5	1.0
Higher Education Completed	8.7	3.9	7.9	3.8	10.8	6.1	6.9	3.7

Source: Cuba, Censo de Población y Viviendas, 1981
Note that totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.
* I selected these age groups to represent those who had essentially completed their education before the revolution occurred, and those who were young enough to have their educational attainment affected by revolutionary programs, yet old enough to have completed the highest level of education at the time of the census. The age group 35 to 39 was not used because it was on the cusp of revolutionary changes.

Table 3: Ethnic Groups and Economic Activity, 1981

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY	ETHNIC GROUP			
	White	Black	Asiatic	Mulatto
Active	63.7%	70.0%	61.1%	63.7%
Not Active*	36.3	30.0	38.9	36.3
Looking for work for the first time	*1.2*	*1.7*	*1.3*	*1.9*
Living on Economic Assistance	*1.2*	*0.9*	*3.4*	*0.9*
Housework	*30.3*	*22.8*	*24.9*	*28.7*
Incapacitated for work	*0.9*	*1.0*	*1.2*	*0.9*
Incarcerated or in an asylum	*0.2*	*0.3*	*3.4*	*0.1*
Other	*2.5*	*3.2*	*4.7*	*3.8*

Source: Cuba, Censo de Población y Viviendas
*There are other possible inactive categories, such as retired, that I have not included in order to access only the population that would be working if there were not something keeping them from doing so.

Table 4: Economic Activity by Gender, Ethnic Group, and Rural/Urban Residence, 1981

PERCENTAGE ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE	ETHNIC GROUP			
	White	Black	Asiatic	Mulatto
URBAN				
Men	93.0%	91.7%	77.1%	91.0%
Women	43.9	42.7	37.5	38.7
RURAL				
Men	90.7	89.1	85.7	87.1
Women	19.1	33.1	21.6	19.8

Source: Cuba, Censo de Población y Viviendas, 1981

Table 5: Number of Children Born Alive by Age Group, Ethnic Group, and Rural/Urban Residence of Mother, 1981

AVERAGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN BORN ALIVE PER WOMAN	ETHNIC GROUP			
	White	Black	Asiatic	Mulatto
URBAN				
Age Group (years)				
20 – 34	1.44	1.41	1.45	1.50
40 – 54	2.98	3.66	2.95	3.71
60 +	3.37	3.75	3.28	3.99
RURAL				
Age Group (years)				
20 – 34	1.91	2.03	2.25	2.21
40 – 54	4.35	5.83	5.65	6.17
60 +	5.20	5.68	6.41	6.66

Source: Cuba, Censo de Población y Viviendas, 1981

TITLE	YEAR
La Muerte de un Burocrata (Death of a Bureaucrat)	1966
Memorias del Subdesarrollo (Memories of Underdevelopment)	1968
La Ultima Cena (The Last Supper)	1976 (set 1900s)
Retrato de Teresa (Portrait of Teresa)	1979
Hasta Cierto Punto (Up to a Certain Point)	1984
Un Hombre de Exito (A Successful Man)	1985 (set 1930-1959)
Cartas del Parque (Letters from the Park)	1988 (set early 1990s)
Mujer Transparente (Transparent Woman)	1991
Fresa y Chocolate (Strawberry and Chocolate)	1993
Guantanamera!	1995
La Vida Es Silbar (Life is to Whistle)	1998
Las Profesías de Amanda (Amanda's Prophesies)	1999
Operación Fangio (Operation Fangio)	2000 (set 1958)

a) Inter-ethnic relationships
- between central or peripheral characters
- public or private context (professional or intimate)
- egalitarian or not
- scene order encourages sympathy with black, mulatto, or white characters
- sound and/or music encourages sympathy with black, mulatto, or white characters
- foregrounding or backgrounding of characters of each ethnicity

b) Racial/ethnic roles (categories, meanings, constructions)
- point of view of characters of each ethnicity utilized or not
- characters of each ethnicity multidimensional/round or one-dimensional/flat
- characters of each ethnicity active agents or acted upon/recipients
- scene order encourages sympathy with black, mulatto, or white characters
- sound encourages sympathy with black, mulatto, or white characters
- foregrounding or backgrounding of characters of each ethnicity

c) Social power/legitimacy
- characters of each ethnicity framed as central or peripheral; partial body "objects" or full-bodied individuals
- lighting favors black, mulatto, or white characters (or none)
- point of view of characters of each ethnicity utilized or not
- characters of each ethnicity multidimensional/round or one-dimensional/flat
- characters of each ethnicity active agents or acted upon/recipients
- foregrounding or backgrounding of characters of each ethnicity

d) Miscellaneous points

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