

CSWS

Research Matters

Blackness Unmoored: Challenging White Supremacy in Cuba

BY TANIA TRIANA, assistant professor, Spanish, Department of Romance Languages



For some time now I have been researching how blackness is represented in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature from the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean, with a particular focus on blackness in the Cuban cultural imagination. In Cuban history, as in the rest of the Americas, anti-Black racism has performed ideological work to sustain socioeconomic disparities marked by racial inequality. Thus, purported Black racial or cultural inferiority is used to justify Black

marginalization in order to sustain White socioeconomic supremacy. But can we really speak of “White supremacy” in the mestizo (racially mixed) nations of Latin America and the Caribbean? If not, what exactly has anti-Black racism functioned to sustain in Cuba? Does White supremacy necessarily presuppose White racial purity, or can mestizaje (the Latin American ideology of race mixture) be harnessed to a project of White supremacy? My book project, *Blackness Unmoored: Challenging White Supremacy in Cuba*, seeks to answer these questions. It argues that a dominant Hispanicist discourse about race mixture (mestizaje or mulataje) functions to sustain White property and political power by linking race mixture to the preservation of whiteness. This discourse of race mixture is moored in Iberian-derived understandings of Hispanic whiteness that do not presuppose white purity but instead imagine the process of racial or cultural whitening as progressive modernization. Thus, whitening can signify any combination of the following: sexual reproduction for “racial” improvement, acculturation (especially through language and religious conversion), education, socioeconomic modernization, normative sexuality, patriotism, refinement, and especially, economic ascension. My book explores how this Hispanic ideal of whitening became a dominant discourse in Cuban nationalist literature during moments of social crisis in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and how

Continued on other side



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY
1201 University of Oregon
Eugene OR 97403-1201

Nonprofit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Eugene OR
Permit No. 63

Research Matters

Research Matters is published by the Center for the Study of Women in Society. For more information, call (541) 346-5015, or visit our website, csws.uoregon.edu.

An equal-opportunity, affirmative-action institution committed to cultural diversity and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This publication will be made available in accessible formats upon request.
©2009 University of Oregon DES0509-110i-G53170

Continued from other side

Cuban minority writers challenged White supremacy by conceiving of blackness and mestizaje in ways that did not sustain this ideology of whitening. I analyze documents on political economy, journalistic chronicles, short stories, poetry, novels, and contemporary hip hop lyrics to explore how these texts have reproduced or questioned the paradigm of Hispanic whiteness. Part One of the book, "Moorings," discusses how Hispanic whiteness was first consolidated in the early modern period with the establishment of the Spanish nation-state and the European colonial enterprise in the Americas. I examine documents by Cuban creole elites like Francisco Arango y Parreño, José Antonio Saco, and Pedro José Morillas to determine how they sustained a narrative of whiteness during the post-Haitian Revolution era of social upheavals surrounding colonialism, slavery, independence, and freedom in the nineteenth-century American hemisphere. Part Two of the book, "Unmooring," is set in the postemancipation era in the Americas, during the late nineteenth-century Cuban Wars of the Independence and early twentieth-

century consolidation of the Cuban Republic, against the backdrop of United States imperial expansion in the Americas. I approach the writings of Cuban minorities as textual sites in which blackness and mestizaje are understood outside of a trajectory towards whiteness. Cuban writings by José Martí, Nicolás Guillén, Luis Felipe Rodríguez, and Irma Pedroso explicitly reject whitening and reconceptualize blackness and race mixture in often ambivalent and contradictory ways. In some cases, the texts studied explicitly reject whitening; other texts underscore racialized and gendered socioeconomic hierarchies obscured by discourses of "racial democracy." Others imagine the Cuban nation itself as Black (not

"I argue that Hispanic whiteness, even today, can be understood as a narrative of how socioeconomic and discursive power is consolidated and maintained during moments of social transformation."

mestizo-mulatto) or in solidarity with other Black nations like Haiti. These critical minority perspectives remove blackness from a denigrated, fixed, phenotypical, or genealogical understanding and instead emphasize the socially constructed and political nature of all identities. White supremacy, whether it is founded

in an Anglo segregationist theory of purity or a Hispanic process of hybridized whitening, is a political project that needs to be continually reasserted to sustain its hegemony, above all in moments of crisis when existing social hierarchies are being openly questioned and even reconsolidated. *Blackness Unmoored* is an invitation to rethink blackness and mestizaje and, by extension, make visible the meaning of (ambiguous, impure, elusive) whiteness in Latin American studies of race. I argue that Hispanic whiteness, even today, can be understood as a narrative of how socioeconomic and discursive power is consolidated and maintained during moments of social transformation. Since a dominant Hispanicist discourse of blackness tied to mestizaje

reinforces a White supremacist racial hierarchy that continues to sustain socioeconomic

inequalities throughout Latin America today—even when national discourses do not explicitly invoke whiteness—it is important to investigate alternative imaginings of blackness that attempt to move beyond a Hispanic logic of whitening in order to carve out other possibilities.