

Ambiguities of Race: Afro-Cuban Men Tell their Life Stories¹

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Prologue

Missing from the worldwide commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution are the voices of men and women living on the island. The research project *Memories of the Cuban Revolution* set out to redress that absence. Drawing on 100+ in-depth life history interviews collected across the island from 2004 through 2008, the study analyzes how Cubans of different generations, social positions, racial, gender, and religious identities, and political views, narrated their experiences of living the revolution. The project delves into ordinary Cubans' views about the achievements and failures of the revolutionary process. Encouraging women and men to speak about what mattered most to them, rather than to their government, or its nemesis in Miami, prompted a torrent of memories, some expected many unexpected. People recounted the ecstasies and the agonies of the 1960s; how the withering away and later resurgence of social stratification affected their lives; and, their views about the ways gender roles and racial stereotypes changed and stayed the same. Older Cubans often expressed pride in their personal accomplishments, while young people generally despaired that the jobs they sought had disappeared.

Pressures in Cuba to talk the talk cultivates silence in the public sphere. But these interviews are laced with hidden histories of religiosity, migration,

¹ Working draft, portion of a chapter from ms. *Cubans' Lives: Voices from the Revolution*. Please do not quote without author's permission.

For information about the research project go to: www.soton.ac.uk/ml/profiles/dore.html;
www.voces Cuban as.soton.ac.uk; www.cubanor alhistory.soton.ac.uk

opposition, racism, domestic violence, surveillance as well as many unsung pleasures. They dramatize the ways people embraced, succumbed to, and resisted conforming to the official model of the good Cuban. Keeping in mind that oral history combines past and present 'in a single breath,' the interviews reveal how recent economic difficulties influenced Cubans' recollections of the past.

The life histories were collected by a team of eight Cuban and two British academics, under my direction. It was the first large oral history project authorized by the Cuban government, since a similar study led by Oscar Lewis was closed down in 1970. While members of the research team shared a common goal, to understand the diversity of experiences of living the revolution, we also pursued our own particular interests.

My book-in-progress, *Cubans' Lives: Voices from the Revolution*, tells some of these stories. I am writing it for a broad audience. I explore the meanings of the life histories by analyzing what people say and don't say. This fragment is from a larger section that includes a number Afro-Cuban men's narratives. I am struggling with many knots in the manuscript, which I want to talk about at the workshop.

Juan Guillard, San Mateo Township, Havana Province, Spring 2005

Juan Guillard is dozing on the porch of his run-down house in the center of this one horse town. It is Saturday afternoon, the sky is blazing blue, the street is melting under the scorching sun, and Elton John's hit album *Sleeping with the Past* is blaring from the HiFi in the kitchen. As Elsa and Victoria open the gate of his front yard, all manner of goats, chickens, ducks and piglets squawk. The clamor wakes Juan. He waves and calls out over the din that Rosa told him they were coming. Juan is thirty-seven, tall, fit, and very good looking. He has longish curly hair, bright flashing eyes, a radiant smile, and describes his skin color as 'very black.' Dressed in stylish blue jeans, a carefully ironed, short-sleeved red shirt, and flip-flops, Juan exudes charm and bristles with energy.

Elsa and Victoria, both white, middle aged academics lack Juan's luster. They are sweaty and tired after a grueling two hour bus ride from Central Havana. Although only fifteen miles east of the capital, and a bit inland from the string of popular beaches known as Playas del Este, San Mateo feels remote. It has an aura of a place that time passed by.

Whistling along with Elton John, Juan revives his guests with ice water and a fan. As Victoria starts the tiny recorder, she asks if he would mind turning down the music. 'Of course, of course I will. I'll turn it off completely.' Juan is visibly pleased, and jittery, that Rosa, San Mateo's party veteran, singled him out as someone to interview. Knowing Rosa's inclination to line up people she regards as trustworthy, *de confianza*, Victoria asked her to include afro-cubans, twenty-somethings, individuals known for religiosity of one sort or another, neighbors she considered dicey or out-of-step with her vision of a good Cuban, and 'orientales': recent migrants from the Eastern provinces. Most are Afro-Cubans who are living illegally on the outskirts of town in cargo containers and tin huts. Although Rosa readily complied; later she tells me she regretted having given us the names of several people who are unstable.

Victoria fiddles with the recorder, while Elsa surveys the surroundings, searching for the source of the odor penetrating the small room. A city slicker ignorant of country ways, she had not noticed the sow suckling two piglets just outside the door. Taking in the lumber and bags of cement stacked up around them, Elsa asks Juan if he owns the house. The question makes him uneasy. Dropping his voice, Juan explains that his best friend's family left half of their house to him when they fled in 1994, in the exodus of rafters. Catching Elsa's interest in his stash of construction materials, Juan explains proudly that he just added the kitchen and indoor bathroom, and when he can get his hands on (*resolver*) more wood he will replace the roof. When Elsa asks where he got the lumber he clams up. Without doubt, like everybody else, Juan acquired it via illegal channels, but he isn't about to say this on the recording. Elsa enquires

because she wants to do some repairs herself. But for all Juan knows, she was sent by the Party to snoop on him.

After an awkward silence, Elsa tries to recapture the conviviality of their arrival by describing again who they are, and what the interview is all about. She explains they work at a research institute connected to the Ministry of Science, and that Victoria lives in Miramar. Elsa adds, bizarrely, "it's the neighborhood of the higher ups", to which Juan replies, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "yes, of the aristocracy." After the three share a brittle laugh, Juan goes quiet. Elsa rattles on nervously to fill the silence. She emphasizes the importance of anonymity, and in the next breath asks Juan for his phone number. This triggers more tension. He doesn't have a phone, but Elsa persists, asking for his work number. Juan is evasive, mumbling something about being between jobs. For her next faux pas, she asks, by way of explaining oral history, if he's read Miguel Barnet's book, *El Cimarron*. He has not, but answers timidly that he thinks he might have heard of it.

The next day I listen to the interview. It is apparent that when Victoria and Elsa arrived Juan was full of enthusiasm, proud to be picked for this important task. But Elsa's questions built up, layer upon layer, a wall between his life and the official world of Cuban academic researchers. It is a tribute to Juan's exuberance and his passion to tell his life story "to the whole world", as he put it grandly, and to Elsa and Victoria's commitment to making the project work, that by the end the three had established a rapport.

In hours and hours of conversations around his kitchen table, Juan pours out his joys and heart aches, fears and humiliations, aspirations and frustrations. In stories crackling with comedy, he portrays himself as the Don Juan of western Cuba, the man with *ashé* (charisma, spiritual powers). At first he makes only veiled allusions to racism, but after Victoria asks whether he has experienced discrimination the veil falls away. Juan is one of the few narrators who defies the taboos surrounding race. He recounts the trials, as well as the delights, of growing up black and male in a largely white town.

After a rocky start, Victoria tries to patch things up. "Maybe it would be best for you to grab the reins. Go on, feel free to tell us whatever you want about your life." Juan's laughter is followed by a long pause. The silence is different, friendlier, than before, as he reflects carefully about what to say, and what not to say. In his opening lines Juan establishes his revolutionary credentials.

My best times were the first fourteen years of my life when I had my mom. I can't complain because then I had everything. Another thing that I enjoyed a lot was military service. Although many boys try to dodge the draft, not me. In the service they teach you... I was selected to participate in Bastión 1986, a battalion that carried out military exercises. I received a medal for distinguished service.

Even though he can't find the medal, Juan is genuinely proud of it. It is his only decoration for loyalty: for services rendered. The way Juan describes it, his life was more out- than in- step with the powers that be.

Continuing on safe ground, Juan explains that his parents moved from Central Havana to San Mateo just after he was born, when the Ministry of Education sent his mother to teach in a rural school. "My mother was raised in the middle aristocracy. Her people had social standing. They were very proper." By 'middle aristocracy' Juan means that his mother's family was from the black professional class. He makes sure to emphasize early on that he comes from a line of upstanding citizens. His family was not like the riff raff, the lumpen blacks of the barrio in Central Havana, who he describes later.

In successive recollections Juan dwells on the decency or indecency, attractiveness or unattractiveness of Cubans according to racial hue. His attitude towards blacks, and to his own blackness, is ambivalent. Sometimes he demonstrates black pride, often black shame. The only consistencies are his fixation about skin color; his honesty about how bad it feels to be called *negrito* [blacky, black boy] when meant pejoratively, not endearingly; and, his anger at

racial stereotypes. But Juan invokes stereotypes too. Although he reveals how racial slurs have hurt him over the years, he seems still to be burdened with baggage of white, or more precisely, lighter-skinned superiority. In his head he knows these feelings are wrong; but in his gut he feels that lighter 'chicas' [girls] are prettier than blacker ones. In telling his life story Juan becomes confused by the mismatch between his head and heart; it makes him visibly uneasy. He struggles to account for his attraction to lighter-skinned females; but finds this very difficult to explain to the two white, official looking women sitting across his kitchen table, and to himself. Juan gets tangled up in the insidious vocabulary of race. He contradicts himself, gets embarrassed, stumbles over words. To cover his unease, Juan turns to comedy, self-parody, sometimes to farce. He speaks very fast, especially when defying taboos: racial and political. It almost seems as if he didn't want Elsa and Victoria to follow what he was saying.

Listening to the recording, the team discusses whether Juan was for real. Was he sincere, or making fun of Elsa and Victoria, sending them up, or as we say in the UK, taking the mickey? Yadira, a young Afro-Cuban researcher who occasionally joins the group says that Juan is "characano": an odd ball, has a screw loose. Yadira hangs out with the island's young Afro- artists, whose art is about racial identity. She is outraged by Juan's fixation with women's skin color. She doesn't think his narrative is meant as a parody of racism. She thinks Juan is racist, sexist, and altogether "atrazado" [backward]. Juan is definitely macho, and he is not cosmopolitan, like her artist friends; although he longs to be. But I think it's unfair to call him racist. He's plagued by conflicting feelings about race. Maybe I was taken in by Juan's ashé.

Life history narratives are famously difficult to interpret. They combine memories that are both unreliable and reliable, in the sense that people tend to remember and to forget what suits them. They are about the present as much as the past; in Jan Vansina's phrase, oral history is past and present in a single breath. Life histories are also performances. Narrators portray themselves as

they want to be seen by the audience sitting in front of them, and the imagined public that might one day listen to the recording. Part of the challenge of analyzing life histories is that sometimes narrators themselves are unsure of the meanings of what they say. I have learned, from years of working in Cuba, that you have to listen hard to the texture of words, the tone of voice, and pay close attention to people's facial and body expressions. I try to bring out into the open the ambiguities in life history narratives, rather than suppress them. This depends on cultivating a sensitivity to the narrators' social and political place in the world, and their understandings of it.

Unlike Yadira, a highly educated, widely traveled Habanera, skilled in the arts of analysis and representation, Juan is a school drop out who never travelled far from San Mateo. Although issues of race are ever present in his narrative, I doubt he has ever talked about, or thought about, what race means. Juan grew up in a country where for the last 50 years, virtually all authority figures and celebrities have been white—except musicians, salsa dancers, and ball players. Juan perceives of himself, is perceived, as 'a minority' in the small town, whether or not that is true. If white superiority is not something openly talked about in San Mateo, it is often taken for granted. I don't think Juan is an odd ball, or has a screw loose; rather, he is a product, dare I say it, a victim, of his place and time. Yes, his life history is riddled with contradictory feelings about race. But understanding race and overcoming racism are not something you come to alone.

In the early 1960s, Fidel Castro announced that with the end of capitalism, racism had been all but eliminated. What remained, he said, were vestiges of racism, and as class differences disappeared, so would racism. In line with this pronouncement the government outlawed all race-based associations, and it became taboo to analyze race. Class was eliminated, and racial exclusion declined, thanks especially to the state's commitment to universal education and health care, to desegregation in employment and housing but above all to

equality. But racism is a noxious weed. It is hard, if not impossible, to get rid of it. Just when you think you've succeeded in rooting it out, it reappears. Because the roots of racism are enormously resilient, the fight against it must be ongoing and out in the open. Neither was permitted in Cuba.

Alexis Esquivel, an Afro-Cuban artist said awhile ago, comparing Cuba and the US,

There is an important difference between our two countries. In the United States, you can't joke about race, not at all, but you can talk about it seriously. Here in Cuba, you can joke about race all you want. But you can't talk about it seriously.²

Juan's story demonstrates the truth of Esquivel's statement. Juan continually jokes about race. But since he has never heard anyone talk seriously about race or racism on radio, TV, or out in the open, he doesn't have the concepts or the vocabulary to discuss it. When Victoria asks him if he has ever experienced discrimination, he is surprised. At that moment he begins to confide in his guests.

Back Story

Juan was three when his parents separated; his father moved back to Havana. Juan remembers his childhood as violent. He was always in trouble in school, and at home he made life miserable for his mother. Juan describes how angry he felt when he was bullied in school, when classmates called him names, when they made fun of him. When Juan first tells these stories he says nothing about racism. What he does say is that he was never one to tolerate abuse. He fought back. He not only stood up for himself, he defended other kids who were bullied. However, after sharing jokes, and some rather intimate confessions, Victoria asks him whether he has ever experienced discrimination. Juan stops for a moment, and then almost shouts back, "Yes, yes, yes, of course I have. In

² Eugene Robinson, "Cuba Begins to Answer Its Race Question," *The Washington Post*, Sunday, November 12, 2000, p. A01.

school my classmates would call out, 'oye, negrito.'" Juan retells the same stories about his classmates, this time describing the racial side of the abuse.

Juan was fourteen when his mother died suddenly: "it was the greatest tragedy of my life". Lonely and miserable, he moved in with the family of his best friend Julito. They're the ones who went to Miami and left Juan the house in 1994. They are white. Juan says he can't complain; "they treated me like a son." But they didn't have much money, and he felt like a burden, so he moved back home. He dropped out of school, and fended for himself. Juan doesn't hide his emotions. He doesn't pretend that living alone at the age of fifteen was all right. It wasn't; sometimes he considered taking his life.

After I finished the tenth grade I had to drop out of school. I couldn't afford to continue studying ...I had to support myself by doing odd jobs, earning a few pennies here and there, earning my own way. I had to get on with life...Some people said to me, 'why are you dropping out, boy. Don't do it. Schooling gives you a future, and so on and so forth.' Yes, it's easy for a person who doesn't have problems to talk like that. But for someone with problems, it's much more difficult. I had to face life head on. I just had to get on with life, so I began working [illegally]. People would drop by, 'Do you want to earn 40, 50, 80 pesos repairing walls? Can you paint my house? Hey, would you help me carry these bricks?' That's how I survived until I was drafted.

After his discharge from the army, Juan held a series of manual jobs in the state sector. In the early nineties he worked side-by-side with Julito unloading trucks for a hotel in Playas del Este. It was a coveted position because it paid US\$ 10 per month, on top of the miniscule official wage. A short time later, Julito was made permanent, but Juan was fired. While he didn't say so, racism might have had something to do with it. Just when work in tourism became very attractive, because of access to dollars, blacks were pushed out of the sector. It is widely said that whites tend to get hotel and restaurant work because they have "the right presence." When I ask Cuban friends what the right presence means, some say that government officials think white tourists prefer white staff. It probably didn't occur to Juan that the loss of his good job fit a wider pattern of black exclusion.

Juan repeatedly laments that because he is a school drop out he is stuck doing menial work. "I could have amounted to more. If my mother hadn't died, by this time I would have been an important person." Juan doesn't blame the government for his aborted education, or if he does he doesn't say so. But it surprises me, and Victoria and Elsa too, both party stalwarts, that the Cuban state, which puts such store on education, lacked a system -- a safety net-- that would have allowed Juan to stay in school.

Race, Identity, Religion

Since the collapse of the economy in 1990, Juan has worked in one job after another in the formal or state sector. He does this not to earn his livelihood, but to stay on the right side of the law. His major income comes from his illegal sideline: selling all manner of birds and animals. For most of Juan's clientele the goats, pigs, rabbits, chickens, and pigeons they buy serve a double purpose. They are sacrificed in Yoruba, or Santería, ceremonies, and subsequently served up for Sunday lunch.

Juan insists that unlike his customers, he is not very religious. "I am not like those fanatics. No. No. No. I might go to this or that ceremony, here and there, but only when my body and soul call on me." He adds in a stage whisper, "if I tell you about my santos, they would lose their powers to protect me." Yet he continues, without missing a beat, "our ancestors from way way back were believers. Yes, my father's family, the ones from Matanzas, were very very. Just about everyone there practices it. My father too, all of it. But I shouldn't tell you about it. We do it to, how should I put it, to protect ourselves; it's protection." After saying that most of his relatives are santeros, initiates in the Yoruba religion, Juan leans over his kitchen table, clicks his fingers, and chuckles, "so you see, I am the son of Yemayá and the Virgin of Regla."

Juan's religion is syncretic. Like many Cubans, particularly but not exclusively Afro-Cubans, he participates both in Yoruba and Catholic ceremonies.

He shows off pictures of himself, shoulder to shoulder with the priest, carrying a statue of the Virgin del Cobre. He is more circumspect, however, when it comes to Yoruba rituals. Besides saying that he shouldn't talk about them with outsiders, he might be thinking that he shouldn't reveal too much about it to white academics from the Science Ministry no less. After all, the authorities tried to stamp out Santería, in part, because they considered it primitive, if not subversive. Then, too, there was the illegality of his sideline.

Afro-Cuban religious practices have been stifled for a very long time. Over the centuries, Spanish masters feared their slaves' drumming and chanting rituals were somehow linked to rebellion. In the late nineteenth century, Cuba's great apostle, José Martí, and his comrades in arms and letters, black and white, strove to liberate black Cubans from the shackles of slavery, as well as from what they took to be primitive superstitions. In the latest wave of religious suppression, the socialist state all but banned sacred practices of all sorts on the grounds they were anti-revolutionary, anti-scientific, and anti-modern. In the case of Afro-Cuban rituals, the government sought to convert the sacred into the profane by turning faith into folklore. Rituals that black Cubans associate with their African ancestry, and practice away from the public gaze, were reinvented as exotic, colorful song and dance routines. They now form part of the classic repertoire at Club Tropicana.

It is unlikely that Juan regards Yoruba practices as a manifestation of racial identity or pride. He considers them part of his cultural heritage; the way he keeps the faith with his ancestors. But living in Cuba off and on for several years, I have come to think that, for Afro-Cubans, Yoruba beliefs and rituals are a salient marker of racial identification whether conscious, unconscious or flatly denied. In a society that prohibits any serious discussion about race, ritual space provides an occasion to keep alive a common cultural heritage. In recent decades, the connections between race and religiosity have become more

tangled as white Cubans, as well as foreigners of all nationalities, have taken up Santería.

Race and Sex

After Juan describes the racial exclusion he experienced as a child, he talks about the racism he suffers today.

Even now, my girlfriend's mother carries on and on about it. She complains to Basquez, her husband, 'When Ana goes out she goes to that black's house. She goes to stay with that black.' Basquez tells her, 'look, quit nagging Ana because of his skin color. Why can't you stop discriminating?' But her mother responds, 'because he's a black boy. Look at you, you who are always complaining about blacks. Now your daughter has taken up with one. They're going on eight years together and she's not letting him go.'

Juan says nothing for awhile. Then continues in a subdued tone, and at a slower pace.

Yes, I've experienced it, and here in town there has been a lot of it. There still is. It's still alive around here, but what's happened is that now things are a little more free. Although the kids are under pressure at home, some go to boarding school. Young girls, friends of mine, tell me, 'so-and-so's boyfriend is a black boy from Havana, as black as you. But listen, when he falls down on the football field everyone gives him a mighty kick.' Yes, here in San Mateo, that thing has always been strong. It's always been strong. There's less now, but development came late here. In Havana you'd rarely hear, 'hey listen, he's black.' Rarely. In Havana there's lots of mixing. I've seen it myself: negritos [black boys] with dreadlocks; they give me, they make me, to me they are... Those dreadlocks, *chorongo* and all that, they that look as if they haven't brushed their hair for a year or so, and with a little white girl with a pretty little body. They are hanging on to each other and kissing. I said to myself, wow! Look at that black man, and I turned to my mates and said, 'Look at that. In Havana, in the barrio, things are changing.' But before, yes, there was lots of it here. Gentlemen, a black boy with a white, what a scandal. But later on, well, things began to change. There still remain certain idiosyncrasies in some quarters. In some corners old habits carry on. Nevertheless, everything is beginning to change and people are adapting. That's the way the world works. But yes, I have experienced... Yes, yes, I have experienced it.

Juan talks more openly about the racism of everyday life than most blacks we interviewed; nevertheless, on account of the longstanding taboo, the very

words stick in his throat. Instead of calling racism by its name, he refers to 'it', 'that thing', 'certain idiosyncrasies'. In the absence of any public discourse about race, Juan simply does not have the vocabulary.

Juan says that racism is on the decline, that younger Cubans are less obsessed with race than their parents. But in the same breath he reveals quite conventional racial views. In Cuba, dreadlocks are (or were) a symbol of black pride, of opposition to state policy on race, of defiance to the status quo. Sort of like beards and long hair were to Fidel Castro and Che Guevara when they led the assault on the Batista dictatorship. But instead of celebrating chorongó braids, Juan sneers, employing the same words as his small town neighbors. Juan tells me a few days later that Bob Marley is one of his favorite singers. I am struck by the glaring mismatch between his admiration for Marley and his attitude towards dreadlocks. I am left wondering whether, being a sort of country bumpkin, it might have been the first time that Juan saw Cubans with dreadlocks, and he had absolutely no idea what they symbolized.

Despite his scorn, Juan is evidently proud of the brothers with dirty braids. Not only did they have pretty white girlfriends, but they were kissing in public. His first comment is that not long ago it would have been a scandal for a black man to date a white woman. As for kissing in public, he's astounded. Juan told his mates from San Mateo to look. The subtext is, 'you have to see it to believe it.'

When they next get together, Juan, Elsa and Victoria act like old friends. Juan resumes his story by describing with evident pleasure, and probably some exaggeration, his complicated love life. Picking up the threads of racism and socializing, Juan tells them that often he overheard women say, "that black boy, isn't he fresh and violent." With palpable anger he exclaims, "They portray you in ways that just don't match who you are. Damn it." Victoria asks whether he prefers black or white women, and Juan launches into a very macho, but very funny, account of the women he has won and lost.

I've never had a black girlfriend. They've always been brown skinned women [trigueñas or mulatas]. The girls around here who know me say 'you're

attracted to white women.' I answer, 'that's because I haven't had luck with black women. I fell in love with Irma, a black girl from Santa Maria, and with Laura, whose skin is blacker than mine.' But still people say, 'you don't go for black women,' and the truth is no. The other day a young girl from Alamar was around here, a little black beauty, so beautiful you'd think she's white. But what my friends say is right: I'm not attracted to black girls. Gentlemen, they just don't do anything for me. One of my friends, a young kid I hang around with said, 'Forget about it. You're the chief of white girls. That's just the way it is.' It seems that I get along with them because, as people say, of my ashé. It seems like they're attracted to me. Yes, it's a funny thing, but it seems so. Now that race, dalmatian, that mixture of a little black paint on top of white, now that's the world-wide fashion... But I'm very finicky about girlfriends. I don't like girls who are very immature. Sometimes it's the young ones who drive you crazy. I've had relationships with nine older women and seven married ones. Think of that! And I have to say, gentlemen, people tell me 'your way of doing things isn't easy.' But the color I like best is indianish [indeado], with that oriental hue. That's the color I like best for breeding, as I said, for breeding.

Juan's ambivalent feelings about race come to a crescendo. He describes a 'black beauty' as 'una blanca echa a perder', which roughly translates as 'so beautiful, you'd think she's white'. This slang is routinely used by black Cuban men in exactly the way Juan does. Whenever I hear the phrase I gasp in disbelief. Seemingly entranced by his own performance, Juan proclaims that although the world-wide craze is for 'dalmatians', [yes, Alice, like the dogs], he prefers Indianish, or bronze-colored women, especially for breeding. He boasts about how many women he's had in his life - sixteen -- and is very proud to tell the white women from the barrio alto, the aristocratic neighborhood, that he's known as the 'chief of white girls.' By the end of this riff, I don't know whether to laugh or cry, so I do both.

As Juan talks about love, life and racial hue, his delivery becomes lyrical. His words speed by faster and faster, and his anecdotes appear more and more fanciful. Listening over and over again to the recording, to understand what he is saying, it strikes me that Juan's story is a Cubanized Don Giovanni. The recitation of sexual exploits, complete with details about physical features,

echoes Leporello's catalogue of Giovanni's conquests. This is Opera Bouffe. Juan is Pavarotti. Juan clearly enjoys his performance, and the two women are a very enthusiastic audience. They entreat Juan to tell them more, which encourages him to carry on with the show. Elsa asks Juan whether he discriminates against black women.

I don't think so. Because, look at it this way, I don't like black boys [negritos] with blonds. I don't fancy the blond race, too white, too white. I'm just not attracted to them. The slightly burnished brown girls [trigueñas quemaditas], or a little mulata [mulatita] that's different. They're OK, but blondes, no... I don't like blondes. I don't know why. But it's a fact; I don't like a black with a blond. It bothers me. I just don't like that mixture.

Even though he's reputed to be the chief of white women, Juan repeats several times that black men with white girlfriends make him uncomfortable. He doesn't know why; it just does. Surely, the long history of lynching and violence against black men accused of sexual crimes against white women has something to do with his unease. Along similar lines, the give and take between Juan and his guests about racialized sexuality makes me uncomfortable. Two white women asking a younger black man to explain his sexual-racial preferences strikes me as racist. Would they ask a white man similar questions? This may make Juan uncomfortable too, and maybe that is why he uses black humor to satirize—and subvert-- the interrogation. But then again, maybe my unease reflects Esquivel's double bind.

Mulling over this part of the interview, I'm left wondering whether Juan is indeed characono and atrazado. But I still don't think so. It seems to me that more than anything else Juan is plagued by contradictory emotions. Infected with longstanding notions about racial uplift through whitening, he says that indianish women are good for breeding. At the same time he is very angry that his girlfriend's white-ish mother dislikes him because he's black. Tensions and contradictions are splayed over the interview: the contradictions and tensions of race. On one level Juan is trying to make sense of feelings that are senseless.

On another level he is giving as good as he gets to interviewers who seem to be prying into his love life. I think he is satirizing Cubans' obsession with skin color—and his own. By making a parody of the spectrum of skin colors, Juan goes some way, consciously or unconsciously, to subverting racism and the taboos surrounding it.

Juan stands out among the men we interviewed in that he talks remarkably openly about his emotions. What other Afro-Cuban men might feel, and say jokingly to friends in private, Juan is willing to say publicly, literally on the record. He is brave, and possibly very honest. At the same time, least we forget, he is giving the performance of his life. He thoroughly enjoys entertaining, teasing, and shocking the two white, middle aged, and somewhat square academics who hang on his every word. I am also a white, middle aged, and somewhat square academic. When I meet Juan, a few days later, he takes mickey out of me too. As soon as I sit down, he says, "Okay. Now you have to tell me your life story." Juan quizzes me about the Beatles, Liverpool, and about Arsenal, my local football club in London. He derives great pleasure demonstrating that he knows far more about these aspects of 'my culture' than I do.

Scars of racism

Victoria asks Juan how discrimination affected him. His charged reply reveals the scars.

Do you really want to know how it made me feel? It always strengthens me. I am stronger than the atom. And besides, I have my sign; I am a legitimate Aquarius. I am the son of water. I can put out fire and quench thirst. If someone harms me they might die. Nobody can live without me, and sometimes I say to people. 'Nobody can live without me.' You see, I have a defect that's sort of bad. I'm not resentful, but I am vindictive. 'If I give you flowers, why are you throwing stones at me? Sooner or later you'll have to pay for it.' I'm not saying that someone will die. No, I'm not saying that I want someone to die. No, no, I don't want that. But, 'you'll pay for what you did. If I don't deserve it, why do you hurt me? Let's talk

straight. I don't like any of it.' I have the luck of ashé [spiritual powers], and I can foresee the future. I have the power of my santos. I can imagine what might happen and what can't happen, what I can foresee, and what I can't. Sometimes things happen and I, no, give it time. But how much time? It's already been two years. Give it time. But finally, look, there it is.

Juan begins in earnest, "Do you really want to know?" But in the next breath, speaking from the realm of fantasy, he is the super macho. "It [racism] always strengthens me". Turning abruptly from superman to suffering saint, Juan beseeches his aggressors to stop tormenting him. "If I give you flowers, why are you throwing stones at me?" Finally, Juan invokes spiritual powers, his ashé and his santos, to protect him. Again Juan gives a virtuoso performance. Combining powerful poetry in the tragic spirit of Othello, with corny stock phrases redolent of grade B Hollywood films, Juan relives the different ways that racism forged his sense of self.

Juan says repeatedly that he has charisma, that everyone likes him.

Here in town I'm like an idol. People say 'bam bam, this boy is one helluva' beautiful black. Wow.' I get along really well with everyone. I don't say 'but' or 'why' to anyone. Wherever I go, in every part of the island, people like me. I don't know why. I don't know what it is I have.

Juan is machista. If we were to put aside the racism and exclusion that dogged his life, we might well think that he is an egomaniac. But Juan can't put racism aside, it is part of his everyday life. One of his strategies to overcome exclusion is to ingratiate himself with his neighbors. "I don't say 'but' or 'why' to anyone," prompts Victoria to enquire if he thinks of himself as very deferential. "Yes, yes, yes. I am just like that. I like doing favors for people. I want to be in people's minds and hearts." Simply put, Juan craves popularity. In his fantasy world sometimes he counters racism by wreaking revenge. In the real world Juan endeavors to deflect racism by currying favor. Juan, the outsider, worked long and hard to become an insider, and even more: the town's idol.

Conclusion (abrupt, to be continued at the workshop)

On the long bus ride from San Mateo back to Havana, I reflect on Juan's life story, and what it says about race and racism on the island. His history is a demonstration of the ways that everyday forms of racism, casual racism, inflicted pain, but in his case also bred resilience. Juan is not asking for pity; he is demanding respect.

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The race issue in Cuba is ambiguous. Fifty years of universal education and health care, subsidized food and housing, and a profound egalitarianism, eroded many of the inequalities and stigmas that divided blacks and whites. At the same time state suppression of discussions about race, allowed racism to survive, in some places even to thrive.

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