

***“I Am Clear in Who I Am”:
Cultural Identity, Racialization, and Being Cuban in the Bronx***

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Every Saturday, as I arrived at St. Stephen’s United Methodist Church in the Marble Hill neighborhood of the Bronx to assist with Spanish and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, I became used to a routine. I would enter through bright red doors that needed a stern yank to open and walk into a large room, sectioned off with a floor-to-ceiling divider from the church’s worship area, that served as a greeting area. There would be a table where several women and sometimes their children would be chatting. I would greet them, sign in, and sit on a long bench nearby, where others who had come for the classes were waiting. Sitting there I could hear the sound of drums coming from the church’s worship area, the sound of voices coming from the people who were conversing in the general area, and the sound of a jazz saxophone and piano playing coming from the balcony upstairs. Eventually, the sound of the piano would stop, and Tina¹, the ESL and Spanish language instructor, would descend the stairs, arms outstretched and smiling, greeting us in both languages. From there we would try to find a room that was unoccupied and relatively quiet, which was not always easy. There were voice lessons, baby showers, and birthday parties held downstairs, and sometimes the conference room on the first floor was being used for homework help. Occasionally we even held our ESL classes in a broom closet, because that was the only place available. The church was a lively place on Saturdays.

Regardless of where we were, Tina always made the lessons fun and memorable. She was an enthusiastic teacher, cheering the students on when they conquered a challenging phrase, and using humor to keep our attention. She readily taught two hours of language classes in exchange for a thirty-minute piano lesson. Playing the piano, I learned, was something that she had loved as a child in Cuba but had given up playing when she moved to the United States. I was drawn to her energy and enthusiasm, and the interesting stories she would tell about herself during the language lessons. As time went on I learned more about her life. I learned that she was born in Cuba in 1950, something that surprised me because she seemed to be much younger than that. I learned that she had taught as a bilingual teacher in the Bronx for over 30 years, and when she agreed to let me record her oral history, I learned just how important her Cuban heritage was to her.

As she told me about her childhood in Cuba, her immigration to the United States in 1970, and her time of teaching in the Bronx, I quickly realized that the theme of the interview was one of her asserting her Cuban national identity while downplaying the importance of racial identity. Though by doing this she left a few gaps in her life story, she used the interview as an opportunity to represent herself in the way she wished to be identified. During the interview, she emphasized how important Cuba and being Cuban is to her life. Tina is dark-skinned, but insists that America’s preoccupation with race “is so crazy”² because in Cuba skin color “didn’t make any difference.” The contention that America’s preoccupation with race “is crazy” demonstrated

¹ Name changed to protect anonymity.

² Tina [pseud.]. 2012a. Interviewed by Lauren Sepanski. Transcript. April 14. Bronx African American History Project, Fordham University, Bronx, New York.

to me that she had indeed felt the pressure of American racial categorization yet had not been swayed under its weight to change how she self-identified. By comparing American racism with her experience of Cuba, it showed that she still views the world through a Cuban lens and has not accepted the racialization she found upon coming to the United States.

This paper will explore Tina's resistance to American racial interpellation as presented in her oral history. How has her Cuban upbringing affected her self-identification? Has her experience in New York challenged her value of national/cultural identity over racial identity, and if so, how has she responded? Finally, is her attempt to ignore race a successful way of combating racism? Drawing from Tina's oral history interview, my field notes from time spent at St. Stephen's, scholarly sources on race in Cuba and the United States, as well as from Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History*, I contend that Tina's childhood experience in Cuba and the historical context of her move to the United States allowed her to maintain her national/cultural form of self-identification and avoid forming a racial consciousness, and that she has been able to maintain this way of self-identification by living and working in multicultural environments throughout her life, which diverted racism. While this approach to race has been successful for Tina individually in that she has been able to maintain the self-identification and world-view that she desires, it is not a solution to combating racism systematically, as it seems to merely sidestep the issue.

Literature Review: Racism in Cuba and the United States

The topic of racism in Cuba is a complicated subject. The Cuban government has declared racism eradicated by the revolution; while some scholars agree, others say racism is still present as strongly as before. Both claims are hard to back up, however, given that the Cuban government does not use racial categories in collecting data in areas including employment, housing, health care, criminal justice, and political participation, and many Cubans think that the very discussion of race brings about racism and therefore do not like to talk about it. In fact, any expressed racial group consciousness is determined racist and illegal (Lusane 1999). Still, scholar de la Fuente says, "when someone hears about a robbery in Cuba, the customary comment is: 'It was probably a negro'" (1995, 162). Even Jonetta B. Cole, who in "Race Toward Equality" claims that "racism in its institutionalized forms has been eliminated in Cuba," admits that it still exists in attitudes and "periodic individual behavior" (1980, 2). The overall consensus, then, is that the revolution did not eradicate racism. Even though it is officially banned, racism is still present on (at least) an individual level.

The racialization of black Cubans in the United States is just as complicated. In "Normalizing Cuban Refugees: Representations of Whiteness and Anti-communism in the USA during the Cold War," scholar Cheris Brewer Current describes in detail the peculiar attitude the United States government had towards Cuban immigrants during the Cold War, which was when Tina and her mother immigrated to the United States. At that time, taking in Cuban refugees was seen as a crucial component of foreign policy (2008). Every Cuban who left Cuba was seen as a vote for the United States and capitalism and against communism. In order to avoid an anti-Cuban backlash, which would soil its image as the "utopian refuge for all seeking freedom" (Current 2008, 52), the U.S. government and the press made a concerted effort to generalize all Cuban immigrants as being white, well-educated, anti-communist, and the upper class elite of Cuba. While this was true for the very first group that left Cuba immediately after the revolution, it was definitely not accurate in describing the immigrants who continued to come to America

throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Though the propaganda was not always successful, the U.S. government's warm acceptance of Cubans during the Cold War ultimately provided Cuban immigrants with unusual access to citizenship, education, and economic and political power in the United States for first generation immigrants.

This does not mean, however, that all Cubans in the United States have become part of the white population. Things are complicated by time and location. For example, currently in Miami, which has a large Cuban population, light-skinned Cubans have for the most part merged seamlessly into mainstream white Miami, while dark-skinned Cubans face racial discrimination from whites (including from light-skinned Cubans) they feel they did not experience in Cuba. "Best of Friends, Worlds Apart," written by Mirta Ojito for *The New York Times* in June 2000, explores the lives and friendship between two men—one dark-skinned, one light-skinned—who immigrated to Miami from Cuba in 1994. In Cuba, their different skin colors had not mattered to them. They had grown up in the same neighborhood, attended school together and played on the same sports teams. "Color was not what defined them. Nationality, they had been taught, meant far more than race. They felt, above all, Cuban." But in Miami, the large Cuban population has absorbed American racism and practically every aspect of the two men's lives is determined by the color of their skin. Mr. Ruiz, who is dark-skinned, feels now that, though still Cuban, being black is what defines him. He identifies as Afro-Cuban now, prefers African American clothing, food, and music, dates black women, and has experienced racial discrimination in white neighborhoods and establishments enough to where he now avoids them as much as possible. Mr. Valdes, who is light-skinned, lives in an all-white neighborhood, has white Cuban friends and rarely thinks about race. When he does, "it is in terms learned from other white Cubans: American blacks, he now believes are to be avoided because they are delinquent and dangerous and resentful of whites. The only blacks he trusts, he says, are those he knows from Cuba."

New York City, however, is not Miami. Cubans immigrating to New York do not have the expectation of joining a dominant ethnic group upon their arrival. New York, in particular the Bronx, where Tina and I are located, is a city of immigrants, and as such, is a city marked with racial and ethnic tension. The major waves of immigration to the Bronx consisted of Irish, German, Jewish, Italian, and later African American and Puerto Rican immigrants. Relationships between these dominant groups were not always friendly. Tensions ran high between the Germans, Jews, and Italians during World War II. Gangs formed and fought between the established Italian and Irish populations and the newly arrived Puerto Rican population. As white flight and planned shrinkage struck the Bronx, the Puerto Rican and African American communities struggled with each other for political power while their neighborhoods crumbled around them (Jonnes 2002). Upon arrival, immigrants like Tina, who do not fit into one of the predominant ethnic groups, face the struggle of negotiating how they previously self-identified with how they are categorized by the people around them.

Into this entanglement of race, ethnicity, and politics of identity fall Tina and myself. For, alone in the St. Stephen's broom closet, where we found the only quiet and unused place in the church, racial politics are still present. Tina is black and I am white. In *Recording Oral History*, Valerie Yow says that power and race are inseparable, and the racial dynamics of an interview can infringe on what the narrator will say during the interview. A black narrator, therefore, is more likely to speak more truthfully to a black interviewer than a white interviewer (1994). How this plays out, and whether this has an impact on what Tina shares in her interview, will be explored in the next section.

Self-identity, Diversity, and the Bronx

As Tina and I were settling in for our second interview (our first interview had been cut short), Tina informed me that she had looked over the consent form more closely and had seen that it was about racial inequality. I told her no, not exactly: I wanted to know about how her travels, which had inevitably brought her to places with distinct racial and ethnic tensions, had affected how she saw herself.³ “Oh,” she told me, “that’s easy. I never experienced any of that. People have always been very nice to me. I am clear in who I am. If anybody doesn’t like it they don’t have to like me.” She said it in a way that was very matter-of-fact, yet there was a tone in her voice that sounded as if that was all she had to say on the subject of race, and all she *wanted* to say. This worried me, as the previous interview session had been about her childhood in Cuba, and for this session, I was planning to question her about her experience in New York, particularly regarding racial tension and identity. I was caught off-guard, unsure if I should proceed with my agenda, but told her I was looking forward to hearing all about it as I turned the recorder on and began the second part of the interview. After all, it was her story to tell, and I wanted to hear it.

What followed was a portrait of New York, and indeed, every place that she had been, as a place that was welcoming and accepting. However, there were a few times that it appeared Tina was avoiding certain topics. Her outright denial of experiencing any racism was still fresh in my head, and I was sure it still was in hers as well. This made me uncomfortable with probing for more information whenever she hinted that things were not quite as she was presenting them. I felt that if I did so, I would be overtly showing that I did not trust or believe her, which might then have a negative effect on our relationship and the rest of the interview, not to mention the rest of our time teaching ESL at St. Stephen’s! For example, in this part of the interview she is telling me about her experience in Brooklyn, where she first moved when she immigrated to the United States:

[Laughs] It was very nice. My, and I say, “Thank God.” My first five or six years, when I was getting to know the country, when I needed it! Because now if I meet a nasty person I know how to deal with that nasty person! [laughs] You know. But, um, but at the beginning, at the beginning when we were learning the city, and then, you know, after my, my, my cousin got married and my uncle moved to Puerto Rico, so you know. And, so, we had a lot of support from everybody. Everybody was very nice⁴.

I remember this moment explicitly during the interview because I remember hearing what she said, wondering about it, and then deciding not to act on it. Instead of asking what she meant by “nasty,” or if she could give me an example of when someone was “nasty,” I shied away from probing and continued to ask about her life chronologically, saying: “That’s good. Um, so you moved to Park Slope.” Unfortunately that is not the only moment in the interview where a call

³ The exact phrasing on the informed consent form is: “You are invited to take part in an interview that will supplement a paper written by the interview conductor about the effects of migration on racial self-identification.”

⁴ Tina [pseud.]. 2012b. Interviewed by Lauren Sepanski. Transcript. April 21. Bronx African American History Project, Fordham University, Bronx, New York.

for clarification from me could have made the interview a more accurate description of her life. Knowing this, I decided to ask her some follow-up questions at a later date.

Two weeks after the final session of our interview, I gave Tina the interview transcription and recording, and told her that I had a few follow-up questions I needed to ask just to clear up some things for my paper. There, in the ease of a casual, unrecorded conversation, she told me that the reason she always looked for multicultural neighborhoods to live in was because she had been turned down from some buildings because she was black. I asked her if she identified with the term Afro-Cuban,⁵ and she said, “No, the term Afro-Cuban is totally wrong. It is for music, not people.” She said that she is “black—black Cuban.” She then told me again that she thinks the focus on race in America “is crazy,” and almost repeated verbatim what she had told me in the interview about racial identity: “People look at you and they know. You shouldn’t have to keep going on and on explaining yourself.” This seemed to suggest that she does not see race as something from which to draw identity, rather only as a physical trait.

So, why was Tina prompted to tell me that she never had problems with racism before we started our interview, and then tell me later that she has indeed encountered racism, and takes steps to avoid it? I have ruled out her feeling uneasy about our racial difference during the interview process, because that would have affected our conversation outside of the interview, which it did not do. Valerie Yow quotes Judith Modell when she writes about the oral history narrator: “As informant, the individual self-consciously unravels a plot and presents a character [she] has been constructing and coloring all along” (1994, 118). I believe Tina saw the interview as an opportunity to assert her own identity. The taped interview provided her the opportunity to present herself, on record, as she desires to be seen, as more than a racialized being.

Though scholars agree that racism was and is still present in pre- and post-revolutionary Cuba, Tina says she felt none of that. In fact, her account of Cuba is exactly the same that the Cuban government asserts: that in Cuba, all races coexisted peacefully and skin color did not matter. My point is not to discount Tina’s experience of racial harmony as unbelievable or to claim that she must be lying and therefore her oral history is useless, but to instead focus on Tina’s (perceived) experience in Cuba, and how it affected how she still views others and herself. When I asked her about the neighborhood she grew up in, she told me this:

T: And black and white, ya know, Chinese-Americans, ya know, Chinese-Cubans, ya know, very mixed.

L: Did everyone... was it a nice place to live? Did everyone get along?

T: Oh, absolutely! Absolutely. That’s one of the things that I miss so much, when I came to live in the United States, because we were like, our neighbors were like our relatives...

L: No matter race, ethnicity...

T: No, because we lived in the same, let’s say for example, everybody took care of the little kids. Whoever, ya know, this is so-and-so’s son, you know all those little kids, if you see them doing something wrong, something happening, you know, you took care of those kids. Regardless. Because they were the kids on your block.... So they were like your kids, and with the older people it was the same thing. I mean, there was no question,

⁵ In “From black Cuban to Afro-Cuban,” scholar Clarence Lusane points out that “A broad acceptance of the term ‘Afro-Cuban’... would indicate a mature race consciousness that has not existed in almost a century among black Cubans” (1999, 75). I wanted to see if she similarly had a racial consciousness.

if you saw an older person immediately you stand right by them and walk with them, even if they could walk by themselves, but you walk with them. Ya know, just to make sure they were okay.

L: So...

T: So your neighborhoods were very, very strong. That's what, they were very, very strong.

The diversity of her neighborhood was reflected in who her classmates and friends were at school. She recalled a particularly touching story of herself and her two best friends in junior high school:

We were like the three sisters, always together. One was Chinese-Cuban. Her mother was black, her father was Chinese. So she had dark skin and all the other Chinese features and hair. And she could not have any style with her hair because her hair was just down and here [holds hands up to represent bangs] and that's it....And there was another girl who looked also very different. A red-headed. But *totally* red. So we were the three friends! You know how different we looked. ...And now, every time I look back, we didn't think we were different, I mean, the others may think—but we, we got along great! We didn't think anything...And we were like this [clasps hands together] and then, the teachers, you know, you know how in junior high you have different teachers every 45 minutes or 50 minutes, the teachers would go, "Betty, [Tina]!" [holds hands up and moves them apart]...they would separate us! Because if we were together—forget it!—we were talking, talking and interrupting. And that, and we were the three [inaudible]... and years later I found out she left, she was Jewish, of Jewish parents. She was born in Cuba of Jewish parents. And my friend Betty, which I knew, because I had gone to her house and I met her father who was Chinese, and me! So you know, we were...you know, like the three musketeers! You know, looking very *different*, and yet feeling, you know, very good with each other.

In her multiracial neighborhood and school, skin color, she says, "didn't make any difference." In her description of her friends, different racial characteristics have only physical manifestations. She does not refer to her friends as inherently different types of people because they are of different racial backgrounds. Her experience in Cuba formed the basis for her worldview in which racial identifiers like Latino and Afro-Cuban have no meaning to her.

At the same time that she was growing up in a racially diverse environment, another force was solidifying her distinctly Cuban identity. Right after she finished telling me about her best friends in junior high, we began talking about the changes that took place under the new communist government.

T: All the old books were thrown out. See, because Marxism and Leninism took over. So everything, books were thrown out, teachers would teach with a piece of paper because all curriculum was really, uh, none of, you know, they were trying so hard to erase everything. *Erase everything*. The national holidays were changed, everything was changed. This is the part that many people that did not live through they do not understand: how traumatic it is that everything that you know, like, let's say for

Americans now, if they say to you, “No more 4th of July,” not only the 4th of July, you know there are many things that are attached to that.

L: Mhmm.

T: You go here, you go there, you...there are many things attached to that particular day and that celebration.

L: Right. Your customs, family gatherings, everything you’re used to is...

T: Everything is. So that’s what happened to us. Everything was changed. Everything. It was very sad. And people in my age group suffered a lot because we were growing up to do this, and then—doom!—it’s not done anymore. For example, the Sweet, here they celebrate the Sweet 16. In Cuba it was Los Quinces. The Fifteenth. And it was a very nice party, you had rehearsals and you know, you did this and, and I was, my brother was older than me and he was involved in all of that so I was like, waiting for my time. Well, when my time came, forget it. That was out! So [laughs sadly] you know, that did not exist anymore. But these things would drop from day to day, from month to month, from year to year! Those changes, you know, and a lot of the social things were changed tremendously. And then people leaving. You know, you’ll have in a neighborhood *four* people left. This is your neighbor from across the street, the person that we loved. You know. When we left we heard, I wrote to one of my neighbors and she was telling, she told me the little girl across the street for five years old how she cried and called my mom’s name. Because she liked my mother a lot, so she kept saying, “Where is Celia? Where is Celia? *Where is Celia?*” You know, she was five years old, she could not understand that one day to the next my mother disappeared. ... So it was really, 15, 16, 17 that were very tough years because none of the things that I was prepared for took place.... Then my brother went into military service and my mom used to, you know, cry every night, I mean, you know we went through all of this different, incredible changes. It was, it was too much....And there were *tremendous* changes. The division of the family, because half the family would be pro-Castro, the other one against, and I mean, I don’t even want to go there.

L: Okay

T: I, I, and it’s too much. I don’t want to go there. It was too much.

L: Okay

T: And it marked my, my, I was going to have a wonderful, you know, coming out of age, and my 16, 17 years old were going to be wonderful. And they were not.

L: Well, okay. Let’s move on to when you come to New York, then. Let’s move on to the U.S. Let’s leave that...alone. I’m sorry for bringing up that...

T: No, it’s okay.

L:...horrible memory.

T: It’s okay. We relive it all the time when we get together [laughs].

Talking about it is still difficult for Tina, but these are the moments that she relives when she gets together with her Cuban friends. These are the experiences, for Tina, that make Cubans unique and bind them together. This is the basis for her saying, “I do not like the word Latino...Latino doesn’t mean anything, it’s a made-up word...A Mexican kid that had to cross the border is very different a kid from Ecuador that got on a plane and came with both his parents in the same plane. It is not the same. It is not the same.” Her unique experience as a Cuban, to her, is what makes her different from everyone else, and also makes her more sensitive

to other people's ethnic/national backgrounds. This was apparent during our interview process. When talking about others, she barely referred to them racially. If she did so, it was only in response to me saying it first or to describe physical characteristics (e.g., her childhood friend had dark skin because her mother was "black"). Instead, she uses ethnic/national identifiers: "Chinese-Cuban," "Mexican," "Albanian," "Colombian," "African American," etc. How she identifies others is reflective of how she identifies herself.

When she first moved to New York, Tina was able to maintain her Cuba-born worldview instead of adapting U.S. racial categorization by initially being accepted and welcomed as a Cuban. At that time, New York did not have a large Cuban population, but was familiar with Spanish-speaking immigrants thanks to the large Puerto Rican community. It was also during the Cold War, when Americans were acutely aware of the global politics surrounding Cuba. When Tina moved to New York in 1970, she lived in Brooklyn and attended Brooklyn College. At that time, she says, "people were more aware of the political issue," and "there was a lot of sympathy" to her as a Cuban. A professor was sensitive to her struggles with English and American-style exams, and gave her a different type of test when she failed the first one. A ConEdison telephone operator was patient with her as she spoke broken English in an attempt to adjust an electricity bill that was the wrong amount. Italian and Irish store owners aided her mother though she could only speak Spanish. Though the people she encountered could have very well been acting on their own personal moral convictions, the sympathy and encouragement Tina received correlates with scholar Cheri Brewer Current's claims that Cubans were seen as "good immigrants" and uniquely welcomed by the U.S. government and population because of the political implications their immigration had during the Cold War (2008).

Two years after graduating from Brooklyn College and being hired as a bilingual teacher, Tina moved with her mother to the Bronx to shorten the commute to the school where she taught, which was in the South Bronx. There, the schools where she would spend the rest of her career as a teacher had diverse ethnic and racial student and teacher populations. Here she describes her good fortune of being in a "multicultural" work environment:

That was very lucky for me because other schools were not. My girlfriend from Panama, she went through a lot because when these people that were Puerto Ricans, they found out that you were not, that you were Spanish-speaking but not Puerto Rican, they gave you the second look. And then they would watch and observe. If you did not, sort of, join them they felt that you wanted to join the others. You had not joined the others but, and then the others would look at you with distrust because you were Spanish-speaking and you were contacting the parents and so on and so forth.

At her school, she said, "the staff was multicultural so we felt it less." In one school in which she taught, she told me that there were Cuban, African American, Puerto Rican, Jewish, and Irish teachers. There was even a Honduran teacher and a "teacher of Japanese background." She went on to tell me about her students:

You know, I remember that I had—was it in that school? no it was in another school that I did it—but you know, everything was multicultural. I will talk to this. Oh in that school I had a map. I was a math teacher, but you know I, the kids were with my home room, and you know in home room we talk about everything else. So I had the map of the

Americas and I had next to that one it said, “South of the Border,” because that year we had kids from twelve different countries.

In her classroom she was able to share her own national pride and promote it among her students.

Because I always, this is another personal thing to me, I always told them that your country is like your family. If you don’t love your family, don’t tell me you love other people. And it’s the same thing and I used to say them there’s nothing wrong with loving your country and loving the United States. I said I love my country very much and I love the United States. So, and, you know, I always used to tell them, be proud of who you are.

Tina’s experience in the Bronx has been one of diversity—sometimes circumstantial, at other times, planned. The Bronx neighborhoods in which she lived were always multicultural, because she looked specifically for that trait before moving to a new place. Talking about her current neighborhood, she told me:

L: Okay. Do you like that area?

T: I do. Because it is also multicultural. You know, my neighbors from, I have a Cuban neighbor, from Chile, from Honduras, from Haiti, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, you know.

L: Wow, wow!

T: Yeah, I always look for, that’s why I told you I never had a problem, because I look for multicultural neighborhoods.

L: Mhmm

T: And multicultural people. So then, you know.

The “problem” Tina refers to in the dialogue above is racial discrimination. She later revealed to me that the reason she prefers multicultural neighborhoods is because she feels more comfortable in them. She finds them more accepting. She has experienced being denied tenancy to a building because she is black. As Tina’s experiences show, though the Bronx can in no way be considered a haven from racism, it has offered her opportunities to live and work in diverse communities where racism is less of a problem for her. If she had lived somewhere else, somewhere with less ethnic/racial diversity, she may not have been so lucky.

For Tina, then, her ability to maintain her Cuban-born self-identification in U.S. society has depended on her reliance on her uniqueness as a Cuban and avoiding racial conflicts by escaping into multicultural communities where racism is diverted. For Tina individually, this method of resisting racism can be seen as successful—she has, after all, resisted what Mr. Ruiz and Mr. Valdes in “Best Friends, Worlds Apart” could not. However, it can really only be seen as a partial success on the individual level, and on the social level, it does not combat racism at all.

On the individual level, simply asserting her identity as she sees it does not guarantee that others will accept and acknowledge it. Ultimately it is up to the people around her to decide whether they will accept her self-identification or uphold their own categorization of her. Take, for instance, Tina’s example of how she asserts her identity:

L: And so, would you, do you identify as Black, do you identify with African Americans at all or do you feel pressured at all to...

T: No, as I was telling you in the beginning that I am not. I tell people, yeah I say to them, "What do you see?" and they say a black person. And then they hear me talking and say, "You have an accent." And I say, "I am from Cuba."

L: Okay

T: And for me that is enough.

While for Tina, "that is enough," she is not guaranteed that other people will accept her declaration of Cuban-ness as enough to change their preconceived categorization of her. Though to her it may seem that she is maintaining her Cuban identity, it is only internally, as it is ultimately out of her control how others identify her. Racist apartment managers did not agree with Tina that only her Cuban national identity mattered, as she was turned down because she was *black*, not Cuban.

On the social level, ignoring or avoiding race and racism will not make it go away. Tina's avoidance of apartment buildings with racist managers will not prevent other black people from confrontations with the very same managers. And by avoiding a racial identity, she passes up the opportunity to use it as a resource for positive social change. This is not to say that national/cultural identity cannot also be a source for positive social change, but that a racial identity can be positive as well. If racism is to be fought, race itself cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

Scholars are divided on whether immigrants successfully resist or absorb their new country's racial categorizations. Through the use of an oral history narrative—with attention paid as much to what was said as to what was not said—this paper demonstrates the process of one Cuban-born immigrant's self-identification and the role it has played in her life. What was found is that this immigrant, Tina, has maintained an approach toward racial and national identity that is very similar to her native Cuba's national policy. To Tina, race is best ignored; national identity—Cuban identity—is all that matters. Her experience in Cuba—the racially diverse classroom, the traumatic events she experienced after the revolution—is the foundation of how she identifies herself and has shaped how she sees others. In New York City, by being respected for being Cuban when she first arrived and living and working in multicultural environments, she has maintained her cultural/national self-identification and encouraged her students to express their own.

But, similar to in Cuba, ignoring race can be dangerously disempowering. In Cuba, when racism occurs, the victims are left defenseless, as organizing around race is deemed racist and illegal by the government. For Tina in the United States, she may make a case against her own racialization, but it is still ultimately up to others to decide whether they will accept it. So far, she has had mostly positive results in her approach, but it may nevertheless be egregious to propose that racism can be ignored out of existence.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Oneka LaBennett, who showed me the beauty and importance of oral history and ethnographic research, and never stopped supporting me. I would also like to thank the subject of this paper, Tina, whose warm friendship and moving oral history made this paper possible.

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