

# BOOK REVIEWS

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FERNANDEZ, NADINE T. *Revolutionizing Romance: Interracial Couples in Contemporary Cuba*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010. Pp. 232. ISBN: 978-0-8135-4723-7 (Paperback).

Love, romance and affect have for some time now inspired considerable anthropological interest as a way to examine the interplay between individual experiences and large-scale social changes such as modernisation and (neoliberal) globalisation (e.g. Wardlow & Hirsch 2006; Padilla et al. 2007). Nadine Fernandez's book *Revolutionizing Romance* (2010) contributes to this field of study via examining the significance of race in young Cubans' romantic relationships in the context of the revolution's official egalitarianism that was meant to erase all forms of social difference.

Fernandez's ethnography is situated in the turbulent context of Havana in the 1990s, when the fall of the Soviet Union launched the island into severe economic problems. By granting detailed attention to romantic relations among young locals, Fernandez brings a fresh and important perspective to the study of post-Soviet Cuba, which has recently been highly dominated by research on the relations between locals and tourists. Analysing local views on gender, sexuality, love and race is important in itself, but it also sheds light on the relations between Cubans and foreigners as a way to gain a holistic understanding of the relationships in their full context.

Fernandez focuses on young interracial couples as way to gain insight on the working of *mestizaje* at a grassroots level, and the connection of such individual experiences to broader racial ideologies and practices. Fernandez argues that race continues to matter despite Cuba's long history of racial mixing and more than fifty years of revolutionary rule. In her pursuit to understand the persistent significance of race in the country, she explores three specific fields of society: space, language and family. The book starts with a careful examination of the history of Cuban race relations both in the nineteenth century (Chapter 1) as well as in the revolutionary period (Chapter 2) and proceeds then to examine the racialisation of locality and neighbourhoods (Chapter 3). After this, Fernandez turns her attention to the everyday understandings of race in media representations, literature and language (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 examines the racialised consequences of the new tourist economy in the post-Soviet period and Chapter 6 explores racialised meanings of young people's romances at home in the context of extended families.

Fernandez shows that the revolution has had contradictory effects in terms of race. On the one hand it created space for the formation of interracial couples and undermined institutionalised racism, yet at the same time it ignored race as a problem in the so-called private sphere, thereby allowing for the continuation of many earlier racialised hierarchies. Fernandez also points out that the post-Soviet period has seen a re-racing of space that has resulted in the emergence of new meanings for class, colour and romance.

Paying careful attention to the complexities of Cuba's racial classification system, Fernandez approaches race as a contextually contingent hierarchy of categorical meanings, with white at the pinnacle of local racialised understandings. To a degree, racial meanings can be negotiated; different cultural factors and practices such as place of residence or cultural interests may alternatively whiten or blacken a person. This highlights the

continuously shifting and historically transforming character of racialised distinctions. Simultaneously, however, Fernandez maintains that race comprises a central difference in Cuban social relations. She argues that love relations are characterised by a racial endogamy, although the frequency of interracial romances varies according to class.

While Fernandez pays significant attention to gender in her views on race, romance and sexuality, in the context of family relations I felt that gender could have received more careful analysis. Sometimes the conflicts that Fernandez examines as racialised connect, in my view, equally with more general gendered tensions in Cuban kinship. For instance, conflicts between a person's kin and his/her partner (i.e. consanguines and affines) are highly frequent amongst all kinds of couples, in particular amongst a man's mother and his partner. The frequent problems that young people seemed to encounter with their families are not just racialised; they are also importantly gendered.

This leads me to the more extensive question of the relationship between young couples and their families. Fernandez highlights family as the site for continued racism and rejection of ideas of *mestizaje*. Worry about the future offspring of these potentially reproductive unions emerges as a central concern for the kin of young lovers, and family members often try to influence them to change their minds. In this way, young interracial couples end up regarded as 'radical actors' (p. 154) that defy the older generation's racism. It is a view that comes close to the ways in which romantic love has been conceptualised as central to the emergence of individualism in many parts of the world. I am critical of highlighting family bonds as primarily something 'oppressive'; in Cuba family relations are central to individuals' life projects and love relations take place in the complex interplay of larger networks of family bonds. Yet it would have been interesting to hear how the interaction between young Cubans' romances and their more extensive family networks relates to the comparative anthropological discussions on romantic love; for instance, do interracial romances end up also highlighting individual agency in other contexts?

However, despite these remarks, as a whole Fernandez offers us an insightful and fascinating account of Cuban romance and race relations, of interest to contemporary anthropological discussions on love, gender and sexuality, as well as to anyone studying race relations in the Caribbean or Latin America.

HEIDI HÄRKÖNEN  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
heidi.harkonen@helsinki.fi

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