
Reviewed by Eloise Linger

Alison Fraunhar is a cultural cartographer who has taken the job of mapping out many of the intersections of race, gender, social class and identity in the construction of Cubanness (*Cubanidad*). Further, she shows how the images and portrayals of the *mulata* have changed alongside the growth of Cuban nationalism and Cuban identity.

The research encompasses an impressive array of sources – from the visual arts of nineteenth-century advertising, to literature, drama (both formal and street performance), popular song lyrics from the 1600s celebrating the eroticised *mulata* (who was sweet as sugar), artists’ presentations of African female religious deities and Cuban *Vanguardia* art. She features several sophisticated magazine covers, and female representations in Cuban film before and after the profound changes of the 1959 revolution, including self-representation in the arts. She brings us up to the present with images of the difficult survival issues of Cuba’s “Special Period” and after, such as the rise of *jineterismo* and what she calls “The Return of the Repressed: Tourists and their Baggage”. Finally, she presents the major changes in approaches to sexualities and to self-representations in twenty-first-century Cuba and the Cuban diaspora.

The book is a visual treat that educates. Some of the most fascinating sections are the paintings reproduced in bulk for the *marquillas cigarreras* or cigarette package wrappings. The author interprets the wrappers’ representations. Each company had its own advertisement alongside a visual story, often painted in several panels that covered the sides of the cigarette box.

Their advertising tried to entice sales by using exotic presentations of Cuba. One wrapper emphasised the image of an indigenous woman, with feathers, palms and other tropical plants, to attract Spanish investment and to sell tobacco and sugar. Less exotic, but equally misleading painted ads showed idyllic plantation scenes in harmony with nature, while the presumed owners sat conspicuously consuming luxuries – instead of the horrors and brutality of slavery or images of the malnourished men and women who actually produced the sugar.

Such scenes did not convey the turmoil of the sugar economy during the nineteenth century. The paintings hinted at the growing nationalist desires of many,

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but ignored altogether the hatred of slavery. Alongside the peaceful scenes of plantation life, mixed-race women were painted as suggestive objects of desire, as seen by Euro-male artists whose talents were employed to increase the sales of Cuban tobacco, liquor and sugar.

This is not a book about political economy; yet its cultural revelations do illustrate how changing politics and economy were related to changes in imagery, growing self-awareness and increasing resentment of Spanish rule. The older colonial owners of land had been exporters, primarily of tobacco and modest amounts of sugar and liquor. However, in the nineteenth century, Cuba’s sugar production exploded, as did its importing of slaves and the immigration of surviving families from the planter class of Saint Domingue (renamed the Proud Black Republic of Haiti in 1804). Cuba replaced Haiti as the world’s top sugar producer – and its elites lived in constant fear of a slave rebellion similar to that of Saint Domingue. Perhaps the idyllic plantation scenes depicted on the cigarette boxes offered solace to those who paid the artists, and to those who purchased the product.

As native-born Cubans began to feel the yearnings of nationalism, along with the growing social critique of slavery, there remained the ambiguous social position of the imagined desirable mulata. Yet, over the nineteenth century, real Afro-Cuban women and men of various economic and social strata did attend dances and socialised with young white men, although “respectable” white women did not participate.

Historically, the first known Cuban dances had been religious rituals to honour the Yoruba deities (albeit as merged with European Catholic saints). Thus, the author asserts the performances themselves were mulata, as they were mixed, of both African and European cultures.

One of the more salient points about self-presentation of women was their active participation in the pro-independence movements even before the first War for Independence (1868–78). At dances, nationalist women refused to dance with Spain’s military men, and women cut their hair to protest political repression. There were women’s magazines, organisations and congresses. Afro-Cuban women had at least one regular magazine, Minerva, devoted to social questions facing African-descended families.

As part of a growing body of literature on race and gender in the Western hemisphere and on the construction (and reconstruction) of national identities, Mulata Nation, Visualizing Race and Gender in Cuba offers a vast span of visual images to illustrate the changes in identity and in the ways one was able to take control of her/his representation. Technically and aesthetically, the book’s great strength is its colourful reproductions that permit us to see the proof of Fraunhar’s sophisticated arguments. The book’s weakness is
inadequate proof-reading, e.g. jumbled citations and some unclarity in the numbering system for locating the illustrations. But the value of the book far overcomes the weakness.

The book is appropriate for courses in Women’s Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Latin American and/or Caribbean Culture, Cuban History, Latin American History, Gender Studies and perhaps some Art History courses.