

*Six*

## The Caribbean



*Puerto Ricans, West Indians, Cubans*

### Civilization and Pride

*Jésus was our guide.* The six-hundred-mile trip carried us over roads that often predate the Cuban Revolution. We and our student group stopped at all the big and small cities along the way—Camaquey, Trinidad, Santa Clara—but one immensely impressive aspect of Cuban life never called for any commentary from Jesús. Communities seemed to compete fiercely for recognition. Floral arrangements often signaled the entry to a new town or village. Sometimes citizens draped the arrangements around artful combinations of rocks; in other instances, they used flowers and king palm plantings to spell out the names of their home. People often used machetes to cut the grass near the roads for hundreds of miles; and, compared to the trash-dotted mountains and valleys of Puerto Rico, Jamaica, or Trinidad, Cuba is almost free of litter. It offers an exquisite, spotless landscape in the middle of grinding poverty where farmers plow with oxen and use tractors to pull passengers stacked in an accompanying cart.

I finally asked Jesús about the landscape. How did Cubans achieve such beauty in the face of seemingly insurmountable economic and

political problems? Jesús, a man with a very ready wit, seemed baffled by my question at first. He took the landscape for granted, whereas I came from Connecticut, a land of flashing neon signs, malls, and litter. Jesús finally said that Cuba enjoyed a distinct advantage over other Caribbean nations. Since they had no access to soda cans and plastic-wrapped junk food, Cubans had little to discard even if they wanted to litter. It was a good point, but I argued that communities who maintained themselves with so much attention to beauty must have great pride.

Jesús smiled. "Pride! That is all we have left."

With only the subtlest allusion to the punishing U.S. embargo, Jesús expressed his immense pride in being Cuban. We saw it everywhere because, despite poverty, pride in culture and nationality marks one Caribbean nation after another. Puerto Ricans joke that if you get one of them started on *la isla* (the island) they will never shut up. Jamaicans literally light up when they talk about the island, and in Trinidad, Barbados, or Grenada people also light up when speaking about their greatest possession: their country, their home.

Nationality is the axis of social identity for the vast majority of Caribbean people. In Hartford alone, the West Indian community boasts at last count more than ten social clubs. The clubs subdivide by island so that a person from tiny St. Lucia can boast with as much passion as a Cuban or a Puerto Rican.

Consider the problems Caribbean people face in the United States. American Anglo Protestant culture emphasizes the color of their generally darker skins, while they focus on culture, nationality, extraordinary beaches, magnificent landscapes, and everyday civility. It truly angers many Caribbean immigrants that we expect them to assign as much meaning to skin color as we do. When they refuse, many Americans, among them African Americans, accuse them of lying. It often sounds like this: Black faces rarely appear among the Cuban leadership, and Puerto Rican politicians continually boast light or lighter skins. Thus, the Caribbean is just as bad as the United States; you people just refuse to admit it.

Rex Nettleford, the vice chancellor of the University of the West Indies, points out that, because the Caribbean is the crossroads of the

Americas, all Caribbean nations experience an endless process of creolisation. Trinidad contains a population with a substantial contribution from India; Jamaica has welcomed thousands of Chinese and Indian immigrants; and, with the Spanish supposedly in command, 60 percent of Havana's population (circa 1600) claimed Portuguese roots. The Caribbean has always experienced such an endless fusion of heritages that Nettleford describes Caribbean people as "part-African, part European, part-Asian, and totally Caribbean."

Since the word *Caribbean* comes from the Carib Indians, we should also include indigenous contributions in the mix. Caribbean people, like Mexicans, learn that they are the product of many heritages; to a Caribbean person, pure, homogenous groups seem as absurd as snow in the streets of Kingston. That does not mean that Caribbean people totally disregard skin color; nations that were colonized by England, Spain, and the United States obviously—and forcefully—learned that skin color played a significant role in who got what and when. The difference is that Caribbean people got control of their cultures and, in the process, made skin color a generally peripheral consideration in everyday life in the popular cultures of Caribbean people.

Americans want Jamaicans or Puerto Ricans to think (and act) in black and white. Qualifications never exist; you see skin color or you do not. When Caribbean people try to explain that their world is much more complicated, we too often write them off as hypocrites and miss one of the most remarkable features of life in many Caribbean nations: When it comes to race and ethnicity, they are among the most civilized people on earth.

With quiet pride and a sure sense of self, Rex Nettleford explains that "the Caribbean has produced fewer monumental material edifices but it has created innate structures of civilized social interaction in 'crossroads' communities of differing races, cultures and world views." Walk through the streets of Trinidad's Port of Spain and you see fusions of virtually every possible variety. Everybody is intermingled, and, in general, their children seem quite comfortable with one another's dazzling array of physical characteristics. According to Nettleford, because class or religion counts for much more than biology, "it is the pluralist dimension of Caribbean reality and the correspond-

ing perceptions of life and living that remain among the greatest of the region's attributes."<sup>1</sup>

During our three student trips to Cuba, we made every academic effort to understand the African roots of Cuban culture. But I think our African American students learned far more on the streets than in the classrooms. Walking in Havana or Bayamo, they told us that it was the first time in their lives that they had ever felt comfortable. Skin color was so unimportant that Cubans ignored it, and, after a while, so did some of our students.

That sense of comfort is what Caribbean leaders mean when they talk about civilization in the region. The inhabitants of the crossroads of the Americas achieved a magnificent—if never total—victory over the colonial heritage. Their victory could be a tool for our social change. Unfortunately, we not only ignore the Caribbean model but actually demand that they behave like us. In late October 2004, the Census Bureau announced that it planned to eliminate the “some other race” category from the nation's list of options. Because more than fifteen million Latinos (many of them from the Caribbean) regularly checked this box, the Census Bureau had a problem. It had to give these people a race even though they did not want one. As Preston Jay Waite, associate director of the Census Bureau, explained, “*We are making up the race for fifteen million people. We would prefer not to do it. It doesn't seem wise to me that we would put at risk the racial statistics of the nation in order to answer an interesting sociological question*”<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added).

What kind of nation makes up the race of fifteen million people, none of whom want the race you “need” to give them? As Kathia Mendez, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, told the *New York Times* when they questioned her about the Census Bureau's intentions, “I am not black and I am not white. We don't define ourselves that way.”<sup>3</sup> If the Census Bureau is successful, American culture will force you into one of our two categories, by denying you the box you actually want. We will ignore your self-determined identity and teach you to be as uncomfortable with one another as we are. You will behave like an American and neglect the benefits of five hundred years of cultural creation in the crossroads of the Americas.

The request or demand to relinquish Caribbean civilization runs through the experiences of millions of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and West Indian Americans. They respond in a variety of ways, all saying as much about our civilization as they do about theirs.

### Puerto Ricans: Los Boricuas

*Puerto Rico* is unique. As the oldest colony on earth and, simultaneously, an “unincorporated” territory of the United States, Puerto Rico poses a problem. How do we count Puerto Ricans? Do we discuss only the three million who live on the U.S. mainland? Or, do we also include the four million who live on the island? The latter are U.S. citizens but cannot vote—in Puerto Rico—in a presidential election. Those same U.S. citizens can vote in a presidential election if they live in New York or Maine. They are subject to the draft but have no voting representation in Congress and cannot vote for any of the federal officials who control their destiny.

When Congress and President McKinley seized the island in 1898, they endlessly debated what to do with their new possession. No one wanted a Puerto Rican state, and no one wanted to grant the island independence. So Congress got creative and established something unprecedented in U.S. constitutional history, the unincorporated territory of Puerto Rico. Congress retains plenary or absolute power over the island, but it generally lets its residents (in the Caribbean) manage their own affairs, except when it comes to a resolution of the status issue. In the new millennium, Puerto Ricans still wait for a decision, but we cannot. Therefore, I will move back and forth between the mainland and the island because all seven million Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens and because analysts often forget that Congress made a greater effort to assimilate the Puerto Ricans in San Juan and Ponce than they did the Puerto Ricans in Manhattan and the Bronx.

In response to the new “host” culture, Puerto Ricans reconfigured their world at home and abroad, in the colony and away from it. Scholars like Carlos Torre, Hugo Vecchini, and William Burgos even argue that Puerto Rico is the “commuter nation”: its U.S. citizens live in the air, traveling back and forth with such frequency that the Caribbean

continually influences the mainland and vice versa. There are Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans (slang for the mainland Puerto Rican); they are the same thing, yet different.<sup>4</sup>

### *Borinquen*

Going to the airport in San Juan and in Hartford exemplifies one significant, tangible difference between Puerto Rican and Anglo Protestant culture. For us, picking up a relative at the airport is a chore; we may do our wife or son “a favor” by going along for the ride, but if we can stay home and let someone else do it, we will. After all, no one wants to miss the latest episode of *Survivor* or *Lost*. But for many Puerto Ricans a trip to the airport is an anticipated, loving family experience. Six or eight family members crowd into a car bound for the airport and wait eagerly at the gate for an arriving spouse, son, or daughter. In San Juan, the crush of relatives is an everyday phenomenon. Some wait on the glass walkway, spot the relative, throw excited kisses, and then rush to the gate to embrace the relative who is already kissing the other family members. Anglos accentuate the individual and disparage the waste of time. Puerto Ricans key on the family, and for the family they have all the time in the world.

The focus on family dates back to Columbus. Spanish colonists erased the indigenous name of the island—Borinquen—and changed it to San Juan; then, with the discovery of gold, San Juan became Puerto Rico, or “rich port.” Within fifty years, the Spanish reduced the indigenous Taino Indian population to less than a thousand people, and that slaughter generated a controversy that still simmers. In his book *El País de Cuatro Pisos* (The Four Storeyed Country) José Luis González argues that the first floor of Puerto Rican culture is African. The Spanish killed the Indians and brought thousands of African slaves and very few of their own. By default, Africans provided the vital foundation for a Puerto Rican identity, and then European and other influences added other floors to the one built by Africans.<sup>5</sup>

Puerto Rican culture is a rich mixture of indigenous, African, European, and North American influences. That culture developed with great independence because the Spanish neglected Puerto Rico

for almost two centuries. Between 1651 and 1662, not a single Spanish boat came to Puerto Rico. No one seemed to care, so islanders created a new culture with the amalgam of available ingredients.<sup>6</sup>

The islanders soon began to distinguish between San Juan and *la isla*. The mammoth, concrete fort called El Morro represented Spanish power based in San Juan. Leave San Juan and you entered *la isla*, the place where real Puerto Rican culture was found.<sup>7</sup> In 2006 Ponce still offers tourists a passport that symbolizes local pride: I am a Ponceño and a Puerto Rican. This localized loyalty developed because escaped slaves and soldiers, Taino Indians, buccaneers, and others passing through the crossroads of the Americas discovered the island's superb geographical barriers to intrusion. Travel agents sell the beaches; but many Puerto Ricans still live in the mountains, so high that Puerto Ricans jokingly say that, if you fall over the side, it takes six months for your soul to reach God.

Puerto Rican culture has at least four essential elements: family, language, and the concepts of *dignidad* and *respeto*. Some critics call these latter concepts "slave" values, but in a society ruled by the sword, people developed codes that allowed them to protect their self-respect, even if the powers in San Juan and Madrid objected. Whatever their social-psychological roots, most Puerto Ricans have an inherent dignity and are owed respect. North American managers coming to the island often have to learn how to deal with these aspects of island culture. Raising one's voice indicates a lack of respect that simultaneously tramples on the person's inherent dignity. Outsiders complain that they walk on eggshells in interactions, but the insistence on *respeto* and *dignidad* lends everyday contacts in Puerto Rico (and in New York or Philadelphia) a basic and laudable decency.

Spain so neglected Puerto Rico that, as of 1765, the island was home to only forty-four thousand inhabitants. El Morro crumbled in the sun, and the island's new "indigenous" culture thrived. So, it came as a shock when Spain decided to reinvigorate its Caribbean colonies by substantially increasing the number of slaves and slave owners. Offering everything from land incentives to positions in colonial government, Spain dramatically increased the island's population and the opportunities for conflict between newcomers and criollos,

“natives” of the island. The population in 1854 was 492,452, a more than elevenfold increase in eighty-nine years. The number of slaves jumped to 46,918 in 1854, from 5,000 in 1765. However, as a percentage of the total population, slaves dropped from 11.2 percent to 9.5 percent. Puerto Rico never experienced the increase in slaves—or African influence—that became a hallmark of Cuban culture.<sup>8</sup>

Spain sent more reales to Cuba, and that produced labor problems in Puerto Rico. Spaniards eager to milk their colonial, Caribbean opportunities created, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a system of forced labor that alienated the lower classes; simultaneously, the imperial reservation of privileges to Spaniards alienated ambitious criollos who were more attuned to nationality than skin color. These early Puerto Ricans recognized that, like all Caribbean people, they were ethnic combinations. But while skin color may have been a peripheral consideration in the mountains, it assumed more significance for the Spanish authorities based in San Juan.

In 1868 Puerto Ricans launched “El Grito de Lares” (the shout of Lares), a revolutionary effort that failed within a matter of days. The shout of Lares—a town very high in the Puerto Rican mountains—signaled the maturity of Puerto Rican, as opposed to Spanish, culture. Revolutionary leaders like Eugenio Hostos and Ramón Betances affirmed values and beliefs that embraced all Puerto Ricans; skin color was unimportant for these heroes, who are still revered by Puerto Ricans of all political persuasions.

The United States took control of the island on July 25, 1898, in the aftermath of what U.S. historians call the Spanish-American War. General Miles promised freedom and then initiated instead an almost two-year stretch of martial law. Finally, in April 1900, Congress passed the Foraker Act, which assigned virtually all political, economic, and cultural power to Washington. The president would appoint the Puerto Rican governor, who ruled over an Executive Council that combined executive and legislative powers in a single body; the council made the crucial decisions, and it always included a majority of U.S. representatives. Puerto Ricans could vote for members of the House of Delegates, whose only real power, as one of the architects of the colonial administration noted, was the ability to vote yes or no on the

island's annual budget. The colonial administration "to a large extent took the whole control over the manner in which the actual administration of affairs shall be exercised out of the hands of the people of the island itself."<sup>9</sup>

Our special interest is the attempt to Americanize the Puerto Rican people. Focusing *first* on assimilation when Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland in large numbers—during the 1950s—misses a half century of resistance to U.S. culture *long before* millions of Puerto Ricans settled in the Bronx or Tampa. In many ways, Puerto Rican culture was stronger than ever when the "immigrants" finally arrived because all political parties agreed with a statement made by the head of the statehood party, Carlos Romero Barcelo. In his book *Statehood Is for the Poor*, Romero said that, here is "something we all know to be true with our hearts and with every fiber of our beings: namely that to be Puerto Rican is something very special and that we who *are* Puerto Rican are not about to give up our identity for anybody. When it comes to the future of Puerto Rico, our language and our culture are *not* negotiable."<sup>10</sup>

The earliest U.S. administrators had total authority over Puerto Rico and its people, and the island became a U.S. colony at the onset of the movement to Americanize the immigrant. Since General Miles spelled the name of the colony "Porto Rico," for example, islanders learned to misspell the name of their own country, a convention that persisted in federal documents to 1932. Schools were assigned new names—Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson—that signified nothing to the Puerto Rican people. In the classrooms, U.S. administrators mandated the use of English. Puerto Rican teachers who did not speak English were to teach students who did not understand the English their teachers could not speak. As late as 1937, Franklin Roosevelt reinforced the focus on English, with as much success as his predecessors. In practice, teachers did as they pleased.

The assault on native culture was driven by American economic interests. Coffee was king when the United States took over. In a decade sugar and tobacco reigned supreme, and the island's economy was inextricably linked to that of the United States. In 1897, 15 percent of Puerto Rican exports went to the United States; that figure

rose to 86 percent by 1915. Twenty-one percent of Puerto Rican imports came from the United States in 1897; by 1915 the figure was an incredible 91 percent and rising. However important, the numbers do little to capture the nature of colonial economic development. For example, the island could grow sugar but not process it. Processing jobs stayed in the United States, leaving Puerto Rico's agricultural labor force without work for significant periods. Everything depended on the United States: islanders soon joked that, when the North American economy caught a cold, the island got pneumonia.

But not everyone found the new arrangement amusing. Led by a Harvard-educated lawyer named Pedro Albizu Campos, the Puerto Rican nationalists tried everything from creating their own army to assassinating the American head of San Juan's police in 1937. Documents at the Roosevelt Presidential Library show that FDR was rightfully worried about the success of this independence movement. However, Albizu never fully tapped into the culture created in the countryside. He tried to generate a sense of pride by focusing on Spain, the "mother country," the cultural taproot of Puerto Rican greatness. This message never generated mass enthusiasm because, like the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans often regarded their Spanish heritage with disfavor. Memories of oppression overwhelmed the pride that Albizu tried to draw from Puerto Rico's first "mother country."

As another response to U.S. colonial control, Antonio S. Pedreira's *Insularismo* (1934) reeks with pessimism about the miserable state of Puerto Rico's economy and also its culture. Puerto Ricans, Pedreira claims, actually share a learned sense of inferiority. A small island, lacking in natural resources, produces small minds. "It is our honest belief that a Puerto Rican soul does exist though it be disintegrated, disperse, latent, still in thousands of tiny pieces like a painfully difficult jigsaw puzzle which has never been successfully assembled." According to Pedreira, Puerto Ricans had surrendered under the oppressive weight of colonial history and geography.

Pedreira wrote this elegy as the armed nationalists literally were challenging U.S. control from one end of the island to the other. Albizu pointed to Spain, Pedreira raised his arms in desperation, and Luis Muñoz Marín produced a stirring affirmation of the island's cul-

ture just before large numbers of Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States. Through the Popular Democratic Party (established in 1938), Luis Muñoz Marín sought to ignore the status issue. He wanted to focus on economic development but to attract the masses to his new political party. He chose popular culture, deftly using symbols that produced both great pride and many votes. The party's newspaper, *El Batey*, was named after the sacred, ceremonial ball fields of the Taino Indians that had been destroyed by the Spanish. Muñoz's slogan was what the people wanted: "Bread, Land, and Liberty." And its inspirational roots were not in Spain but in the Puerto Rican countryside. Muñoz's supporters wore straw hats, the pava that championed *el jibaro*, the peasant who stoically worked in sugar and tobacco to provide love and food for the vital center of Puerto Rican culture, the family.

Evidence of the enormous pride in popular culture that Muñoz resurrected is still seen throughout the island, not to mention in Chicago, New York, Hartford, and Los Angeles. Along the thruway that leads from San Juan to Ponce rises a huge statue, a national shrine to *el jibaro*. Wearing the pava, he stands with his wife and children as a living testimony to heroism in the face of poverty and colonialism. Opponents called *el jibaro* a hick, but, among other things, Muñoz's use of cultural pride enabled him to dominate Puerto Rican politics from 1940 to 1964.

Muñoz also made a deal with the devil called economic development via tax breaks. Billing the *jibaro* as the "Showcase of the Caribbean," Muñoz and his colleagues championed the peasant as they allowed agriculture to languish. Drive the southern end of the island and you still see vast tracts of unused land. Drive the northern route and you see the polluted results of development that used a fishing net approach to industrialization. Offering federal, state, and local tax exemptions, Muñoz pulled in whoever wanted to make a fast buck on the island. He hoped to produce self-sustaining economic development but found, by 1959, that businesses left when their exemptions disappeared or, even worse, businesses blackmailed the Puerto Rican government by demanding continued or new exemptions to stay. Official unemployment was 12.9 percent in 1950; and,

after thirteen years of the industrialization “miracle,” official unemployment was 12.8 percent.<sup>11</sup>

On the mainland, the jibaro was a hero no one wanted, but he was nevertheless coming to the United States. Industrialization had made San Juan one of the most densely inhabited cities on earth, and people in search of work received help from the colonial and the native government if they left for the mainland. Muñoz and Washington helped hide the economic failure of Operation Bootstrap by sending roughly 25 percent of the Puerto Rican people to cities like New York and Chicago. Unable to say no to U.S. citizens, the United States received the possible benefits of cheap labor when its thoroughly decaying cities offered few jobs for the Puerto Ricans who came with little education and few marketable skills. Adding insult to injury, the Puerto Ricans arrived in the middle of a civil rights struggle that made skin color more important than ever.

Author and scholar Juan Flores argues that Puerto Ricans responded to the United States in a series of three stages. First was “the state of abandon.” Moving from the tropical Caribbean, Puerto Ricans found themselves in frozen Chicago or New York. Oscar Lopez, the Puerto Rican revolutionary, notes that his uncle took him to a ballgame in the late fifties to see the famous Puerto Rican player Victor Pellot. When fifteen-year-old Oscar searched the program, Pellot’s name was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was a Vic Power. To Lopez, the name change represented a betrayal. Why would any Puerto Rican turn his back on island pride? The answer was prejudice. Pellot’s dark skin produced problems, so he changed his name, and kids like Oscar Lopez felt abandoned in the Windy City and in the Big Apple.

After abandonment comes enchantment, “an almost dream-like trance at the striking contrast between the cultural barrenness of New York and the *imagined luxuriance* of the island culture.”<sup>12</sup> Again, in Chicago, you can find innumerable stores named Borinquen, battles to rename U.S. schools for Puerto Rican heroes, and cars with Puerto Rican flags tied to the windshield wipers. The flags go back and forth as a fictional Andrés fixes his hat in *They Have to Be Puerto Ricans*.

“Andrés also bought . . . a multi-color cap with the colors of the Puerto Rican flag—red, blue and white . . . Andrés walks to the mirror; he puts his cap on, takes a close look from his forehead up, thinks about Puerto Rico and he feels good. Andrés washes his cap, rinses his cap, smells his cap, and feels good.”<sup>13</sup>

Like perfume from an island flower, you smilingly admire what you left, you long for your “isla heritage,” and you try to resurrect it in the United States. Instead of assimilation, Juan Flores stresses that the main content of this second moment “*is the recovered African and indigenous foundation of Puerto Rican culture.*”<sup>14</sup> While the Chicanos discover “La Raza Cósmica” in Los Angeles, the Puerto Ricans happily embrace their combined ethnicities in New York and Chicago. Again we witness the transculturation envisioned by Fernando Ortiz. With great passion, the Puerto Rican “reenters” American life (this is the third moment of the process) by emphasizing the difference between them and us. As a U.S. citizen he is also one of them, but as a Puerto Rican he suffuses his everyday conversation with remarks about *los Norteamericanos*. After a century of U.S. influence, this distinction remains a constant of life in the Caribbean and the United States. The difference is that, on the mainland, the encounter with prejudice produces an even stronger affirmation of being Puerto Rican because “they” are everywhere and they often treat me like dirt because of my accent, my skin color, and my inability to fit into the world of *los frios* (the cold ones).

Rooted in the Taino and Afro Caribbean world, the Puerto Rican reenters U.S. culture and then reenters Puerto Rico culture. In Hartford, a relatively small city, a jet leaves seven mornings a week for the island; seven nights a week another plane returns. This aerial byway offers Nuyoricans a chance to refresh and reinvigorate their ties to the homeland; the required response to landing in San Juan is a loud burst of applause from Puerto Rican fliers. They are delighted to be home. But the trip is not always easy. Nuyoricans are no longer the real thing. Someone might criticize their accent or ridicule their less than perfect Spanish. An upbringing in the Bronx is not the same as growing up in the mountains near Jayuua.

But in the bosom of the family, all Puerto Ricans again come together as one. It is not unknown for more than one hundred relatives to attend family celebrations. And with digital photography and the Internet, an aunt or an uncle can hit “return” and broadcast the news. Puerto Rico is a culture that creates a deep, lasting sense of family, on the island and in the coldest streets of Chicago.

But it is difficult to forget the status issue. Puerto Rico is a thriving *Latin American* culture, a de facto nation that is also a colony and a commonwealth. Congress claims plenary or absolute power, so Puerto Ricans of all political persuasions must see themselves against the background of American rule. The status issue continually breathes new life into the Puerto Rican identity because it is another manifestation of “them” and “us.” On the island, all political parties agree that Puerto Rico is a colony. Embarrassment over that fact produces many different suggestions for change; but when they come before Congress one thing is always clear. The North Americans are up there, behind the desks; we, the Puerto Ricans, are down here, at the witness table. And whatever other differences we have, we again reiterate the point you always force us to make. Our language and our culture are not negotiable.

Interestingly, Puerto Ricans, who made up 80 percent of New York’s Latino population in 1960, now account for only 50 percent, and that number is dropping. Large-scale immigration by Dominicans, Chicanos, Colombians, Peruvians, and other Latin American groups in recent years has produced a new cultural mix. Puerto Ricans are learning that they are also Latinos, a new identity that generates both cooperation and competition. As a Puerto Rican, I positively identify with the larger Latino family; yet I also worry that my most important cultural identity risks being subsumed by all these Latinos. In response, there have been calls to form new cultural advocacy groups that focus *only* on Puerto Ricans. It often comes down to claims about who was here (on the East Coast) first and whether the new groups sometimes overshadow the more established ones. Yet again, it is a question of them and us; and, yet again, the Puerto Rican raises his red, white, and blue flag and waves it with passion.

## West Indians

### Dance Hall, 1993

*The painting's* name is *Dance Hall*; the artist is Joshua Higgins, a Jamaican and a West Indian. I first saw *Dance Hall* at the home of Rex Nettleford, the founder of the National Dance Theater Company of Jamaica as well as the vice chancellor of the University of the West Indies. Rex hangs copy number one of *Dance Hall* in the most prominent spot in his dining room. It is a racy painting by most standards; churches and schools would never display the lavish love of life so colorfully depicted by Higgins.

The largest figure in the picture, a Jamaican man, stands near the center of the image. He sports a beret; a loud green, checkered shirt; and white gloves. His eyes make it clear that he is having a hell of a good time. Just below the man is the derriere of a woman dressed in pink; her head is below one fellow's belt buckle while, to her left, another woman with a dazzling smile holds on to her most sensitive parts. Other couples embrace in various suggestive postures while, at the very center of the portrait, a dark-skinned man with straight hair and distinctly Far Eastern features peeks through the crowd. He represents the Chinese influence in Jamaican culture; he is the exclamation point who emphasizes "out of many, one people."

I immediately fell in love with Higgins's painting. It represents the tremendous energy and love of life that run through so many sides of Jamaican society. Problems arose when, as director of my school's Center of Caribbean and Latin American Studies, I brought a copy of *Dance Hall* to the campus. My West Indian students liked the picture. It reminded them of home. But, when I showed it to an African American friend, he became visibly upset. *Dance Hall* represented a stereotypical portrayal of black people; it echoed the negative thinking of whites and so offended my friend that I removed the painting from school and brought it home. When I later mentioned the incident to Rex, he indifferently made this comment: "It is a dance hall. What is their problem?"

Their problem is people who, because of the one-drop rule, look

like black Americans but are in reality an ocean and a culture apart. Many Jamaicans, Trinidadians, and Bayans are darker than most African Americans, yet they wear their ethnicity with as much self-assurance as the flamboyant star of *Dance Hall*. A problem arises when West Indians visit American churches, universities, or dance halls and are expected to worry about the stereotypes of white people. The West Indian, and certainly the Jamaican, generally responds with something like this: “You must be kidding. If white people pay the cover charge, they can dance with us or they can watch us. But I am not going to worry about white people or about African Americans who worry about white people.” As a friend from Trinidad put it, “African Americans need to get over it [slavery] and get on with life. Take it easy, but take it.”

My friend’s flippant and less than empathetic response is a sign of the friction that can arise when West Indians come to the United States. Whites want to treat them as the “good” black people, while blacks want them to admit that color is all-important. West Indians react to all this with a variety of insights about the consequences of cultural reconfiguration and cultural assimilation.

#### *Afro-Creole*

After living in the United States for twelve years, a Jamaican teacher made this remark: “They are just now trying to overcome many of the discriminations and what the whites have been doing to them over the period. You see, we West Indians came here with the idea that nobody was better than we are. It was not a matter of color in the Caribbean, it was a matter of haves and have-nots. You came here; it was definitely a matter of black and white. We really haven’t ever been discriminated against in Jamaica.”<sup>15</sup>

Nobody is better than we are. This statement is a perfect encapsulation of the West Indian sense of self. But how, given the harsh prejudices of British colonialism, did the Jamaicans manage to cultivate a positive sense of themselves and their island culture? The Puerto Ricans talk about *insularismo* and the inherent limitations of being a

small island without natural resources. The West Indian responds: *We* are the best natural resource in the world.

In the discussion that follows I focus, for the sake of space, on Jamaica. From the outset, Jamaica was home to extraordinary cultural diversity. In 1673 the island contained roughly eight thousand whites and ninety-five hundred blacks. The whites included planters but also soldiers, officials, farmers, convicts, buccaneers, and prostitutes. Scots, Irish, and Welsh seconded the English presence; the historian Richard D. E. Burton also describes communities of Portuguese-speaking Sephardic Jews who had arrived from Brazil via Surinam and groups of Romanian-speaking gypsies brought by the British to labor alongside Africans on farms and in the sugar cane fields.

The so-called black population included three groups of more or less Spanish-speaking Maroons. They united with the remnants of the indigenous Sarawak Indians and resisted British authority as much as they had resisted the Spanish who brought them to Jamaica. The other “blacks,” who, by 1739, outnumbered the whites by a ratio of ten to one, were characterized by a variety of African influences and languages. On the plantations, the ratio often reached one in twenty, offering so much room for cultural creativity that Creole became the spoken language of the slaves, as well as many of their masters. Britain maintained such loose control over everyday life that Burton found villages to be “comparatively free to develop according to their own logic; and that logic, during the first half of the eighteenth century, appears to have been preponderantly African.”<sup>16</sup>

Jamaicans proudly championed transculturation hundreds of years before Fernando Ortiz devised the concept. However, Jamaica also experienced a push to reduce the Creole component of its popular culture. In 1834 Jamaica’s “Free Coloured” easily outnumbered whites by a factor of two to one; ironically, “the most physically creolized section of the Jamaican population” owned slaves, often dressed and talked like the English, and over time displaced white boys from the schools. At the Woolmer’s Free School in 1815, 3 “coloured” pupils studied with 111 whites; by 1832, 360 “coloureds” studied with only 90 whites.<sup>17</sup>

Jamaicans always enjoyed substantial cultural independence. But Jamaica—and all the West Indian islands—were ultimately money-making English colonies. The Crown used force whenever necessary to maintain control, and Jamaica’s economy was tied so closely to Great Britain’s that Jamaican prime minister Michael Manley later noted that Jamaica tried to move forward while chained to an imperial anchor: the island produced what others consumed and consumed what others produced. But England, even as it bled the economy dry, continued to add to the Jamaican mix. As late as the 1940s Jamaica absorbed the Chinese and the Indians, who, like the gypsies, found themselves exploited by the English and embraced by the Jamaicans. Nearly one in five Indians married a local, and curried goat flesh is a staple of the Jamaican diet.<sup>18</sup>

England exploited the world; it never wanted the world to live in the British Isles. Only seven thousand “coloureds” lived in Great Britain in 1939.<sup>19</sup> After World War II, the English very reluctantly admitted hundreds of thousands of West Indian immigrants. In an effort to resuscitate the empire, Churchill and his colleagues said that anyone in the Commonwealth enjoyed British citizenship. While even the British had a hard time keeping out their own citizens, the Conservative government did its best to keep the “coloureds” where they belonged, in the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia. In the West Indies governors were instructed to tamper with shipping lists and schedules so that West Indian workers would find themselves at the end of the immigration line; they were also ordered to cordon off ports in order to prevent passport-holding stowaways from boarding ships and to delay the issuing of passports to migrants.<sup>20</sup>

Nothing worked. Coloured Commonwealth citizens continued to flow into the United Kingdom. So, using a variety of legal prettexts, Britain adopted what was effectively a zero immigration policy in the same year—1965—that the United States opened its doors to the world. West Indians began coming to the United States in large numbers because England had locked them out, because the island’s economy was tethered to the mother country’s, and because U.S. policy rarely did anything to help create self-sustaining Caribbean economies. When President Reagan imposed country quotas on

Caribbean sugar in 1982, he put, by one estimate, four hundred thousand people out of work. Washington's Caribbean Basin Initiative did create roughly 136,000 jobs, but that still left the Caribbean with a net loss of more than a quarter of a million jobs.<sup>21</sup>

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has also had a devastating effect on the Caribbean in general and on Jamaica and the Dominican Republic in particular. Mexico produces clothing at costs 25 percent below those in the Caribbean. Meanwhile, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic are to this day subject, as with sugar, to quotas that limit their exports to the United States. Post-NAFTA Mexico has no quota restrictions.<sup>22</sup>

Until the Caribbean becomes self-sustaining, West Indians will continue to migrate to the United States in large numbers. The West Indian community in Brooklyn numbers more than 750,000 people by some estimates; the one in Hartford contains more than 60,000. An exact count is impossible because, as with Mexicans, the West Indian population includes many undocumented Americans. They come to find opportunities, and they stay because that is the best way to help their families. The World Bank reports that no one in Latin America and the Caribbean sends more money home, per capita, than Jamaicans.<sup>23</sup>

### *Resistance and Assimilation*

West Indians often struggle to make sense of life in the United States. At home, social class is often the key identifier. In meetings, for example, West Indian people address one another by "Mister" or "Miss"; even individuals with long-standing business and personal relationships generally avoid first names. Older professors complain that students come to their offices without academic robes; and I saw a close West Indian friend explode when a tradesman had the audacity to come to her front door. This otherwise charming and down-to-earth woman bridled at an offense whose significance would elude most Americans.

West Indians who disembark at JFK Airport may look for markers of social class, but, as one immigrant explains, this is what they find:

“You heard about crime but you didn’t hear that you come here and you would be bombarded with this racial thing . . . I still see it as people against people. I find that American blacks, they talk about it, they see it in every incident that happens, it has to be race why this happen.”

Many West Indians worry about their children catching the racial bug. “Well, no, I’ve never really told them because of black this and black that. Eventually you will start to become racial. At least I feel that. You see, I feel that it doesn’t matter the color of your skin. And you know, the minute you will start to look at it, oh, he’s white, they’re black . . . you know, eventually it becomes you and humbles your thinking.”<sup>24</sup>

Any sociologist, cleric, or political leader advocating assimilation into Anglo Protestant culture needs to consider this person’s assessment. It comes from a West Indian woman who does not care about color. But we want her to. She is virtually color-blind, but we teach her to think in black and white. Worse yet, she understands that thinking of herself as black will “humble” her. She and her children will think less of themselves because of what they have learned in the process of assimilation into American life.

In response, West Indians sometimes use their accents to emphasize their “foreign” status. They vigorously protest any manifestation of skin color prejudice against themselves or other West Indians but, especially in the first generation, distance themselves from a culture that sees black and thinks white. In Hartford, for example, many African Americans and West Indians live on the “wrong side” of town. But there is a clear geographical boundary between the two communities; the proof is in signs indicating Caribbean or West Indian restaurants and the accents of people on the street.

Harvard sociologist Mary Waters quotes a West Indian from New York, who could also be living in Hartford or Miami. “I can’t help them [African Americans] because they’re so wrapped up in racism, and they act it out so often, they interpret it as such so often that sometimes they are not approachable. If they’re going to teach anything and it’s not black, black, all black, they are not satisfied you know . . . Sometimes I feel sorry for them, but you find that you just can’t

change their attitude because they tell you that you don't understand. You weren't here to feel what we felt."

African Americans get the point. When Waters asked about tensions and problems with West Indians, she got this response: "Oh yes. Oh my god. Are you kidding? This is ridiculous. I mean it's really ridiculous because a lot if it is pure ignorance . . . they don't like us. And myself included. We don't try to get out and do things for ourselves. We just sit back and complain about the white man."<sup>25</sup>

The white/black dichotomy turns one group of people against another. Meanwhile, whites sit on the sidelines, proclaiming that they harbor no prejudices against anyone but telling Waters and her associates that "they felt very uncomfortable with blacks, made negative judgments about black people as a whole, and evaluated their employees by the color of their skin all of the time."

This is not ancient history. Waters published her book in 2000. Whites retain their prejudices against blacks and, in a pernicious use of the dichotomy, ask West Indians to reaffirm and reinvigorate their prejudices against African Americans. The dead end reappears because West Indians become as much of a model minority for whites as Asians (see chap. 4). As Waters notes, given prejudice against blacks and an egalitarian value system, whites are "eager to find 'good blacks' whom they can trust and relate to as 'individuals' without the weight of guilt and 'chips on the shoulder' and past historical wrongs being thrown in their face."

West Indians are a prejudiced white person's dream come true. They work hard, do not obsess about race, and treat people like individuals if people treat them like individuals. The West Indian becomes the exception that whites cite as proof that they were right about "black people" all along.

This perverse logic highlights the negative power of the white/black dichotomy. After all, if dark-skinned Jamaicans or Trinidadians can neglect skin color and use ethnicity as an axis of identity, they prove that nothing insurmountable stands in our way. Moreover, are we really civilized if West Indians need to defend themselves against whites and blacks? What does it say about us that they arrive wanting to be Jamaican and we refuse to allow them to do so?

In summarizing her findings, Waters found three general responses to the United States. Recent immigrants happily accepted their foreigner status; they self-identified as Jamaican or Trinidadian and did not distance themselves from blacks. “Rather, their identities were strongly linked to their experiences on the island, and they did not worry much about how they were seen by other Americans, white or black.”<sup>26</sup> This response represented 27 percent of Waters’s sample.

A second group (31 percent) “adopted a very strong ethnic identity, which involved a considerable amount of distancing themselves from American blacks.” These folks frequent the many West Indian social clubs in New York and Hartford. They hang with their own, and, at times, they adopt a stance that makes West Indians superior to blacks and whites. Like the South Asian Indians described in chapter 5, West Indians agree to work days and nights to get ahead economically; but, when it comes to culture, they embrace their own because it is love and because it is a strong shield against the hatreds they find in the United States.

The most common response (42 percent) of the sample was to assimilate, to become black. Ironically, social class affected the likelihood of this response; if you grew up in the inner city, if your parents lacked an education, if you were poor, if the schools were rotten, then you were much more likely to focus on skin color. These young men and women did not see their West Indian identities “as important to their self-images.” On the contrary, the schools represented “white culture and white requirements,” which meant that, as blacks, these formerly West Indian immigrants had to “act black.”<sup>27</sup> In a worst-case scenario, they would adopt the attitudes of victimization and anti-intellectualism described by John McWhorter in *Losing the Race*. Then, fully assimilated, the West Indians who learned to be black could teach Caribbean newcomers how to “make it” in the United States.

West Indian culture poses truly important challenges to the American fixation on race. Tragically, we have so far neglected the Caribbean lesson and, instead, tried to teach people who have substantially transcended their colonial heritage to embrace ours. It is a world in which the last laugh still belongs to the slave traders who taught us to think in white and nonwhite categories.

## Cubans: Tampa, Miami, and Whiteness

*Here are two stories*, separated by eighty years of American life. Evilio Grillo moved to Tampa from Cuba in the early 1920s. He got off the boat and into a line. “As Cubans entered Ybor City [the cigar making section of Tampa],” he writes in his memoir, *Black Cuban, Black American*, “they were sorted out. Black Cubans went to a neighborhood immediately east of Nebraska Avenue, inhabited by black Americans and a scattering of poor whites. White Cubans had a much wider range of choices, although most of them chose to remain in Ybor City.”

Darker-skinned people still experienced discrimination in Cuba but nothing like the Jim Crow ugliness of Florida. Even in the twenties, affluent black Cubans managed to thrive among the island’s elite structures in Havana or Santiago; commercial and government facilities were opened to everyone, and blacks used the same hospitals and clinics as whites. In fact, after Grillo’s brother contracted tuberculosis, his mother finally sent him home to Cuba, “where medical care for blacks was vastly superior to that available in Tampa.”<sup>28</sup>

Grillo explains that the level of discrimination in America was so great that no one shared any interest in his accent, language, or culture. “Being black was the *only* thing that really mattered in Tampa,” he writes. As he grew up, he recognized that only one viable option existed: “Join the black American society, with its rich roots deep in this country, or have no American roots at all.”

This dark-skinned Cuban lost his ethnic heritage and became black. He was treated as such when he joined the service. On the way to fight World War II, he discovered that “white troops had fresh water for showering; Black troops had to shower with sea water. White troops had the ample stern of the ship to lounge during the day. Black troops were consigned to the narrow bow, so loaded with gear that it was difficult to find comfortable resting places.”

Meanwhile, white Cubans are almost entirely absent from Grillo’s memoir. He never saw them because they assimilated by embracing Jim Crow, a force so powerful that it even erased “Cubanidad,” or pride in culture above all else.

Joel Ruiz and Achmed Valdés both fled Fidel Castro's dictatorship in the 1990s. Almost like brothers in Cuba, they came to Miami on different rafts, and, like Evilio Grillo seventy years earlier, they were sorted into lines. Ruiz is dark skinned, while Valdés is much lighter. These two men who had been so comfortable with one another in Cuba learned to treat each other like strangers in Miami.

Valdés quickly assimilated. "He lives in an all-white neighborhood, hangs out with white Cuban friends and goes to black neighborhoods only when his job, as a deliveryman for Restonic mattresses, forces him to." Proudly wearing America's "invisible knapsack of privilege," Valdés rarely thinks about race. When he does, it is based on the lessons learned, not in Cuba, but in Miami. "American blacks, he now believes, are to be avoided because they are delinquent and dangerous and resentful of whites. The only blacks he trusts are those he knows from Cuba."<sup>29</sup>

Joel Ruiz left Cuba because of the lack of freedoms and opportunities. Except for the newspapers published by the Communist Party, fresh information is hard to find; the bookstore at La Casa de las Americas, once famous for serious intellectual discussions, contains more books about Che than anything else. Real access to the outside world is only available to Cubans who work in the tourist industry; they get to watch CNN and spend U.S. tourism dollars on consumer goods that create invidious distinctions in a theoretically classless society.

Ruiz loves *la patria* (the motherland), but politics pushed him on a raft, despite pleas from his mother. On her hands and knees, she begged him not to go. Arriving in Miami, he discovered that he had made a Faustian bargain with the descendants of Jim Crow. He got freedom of movement and freedom to order a steak whenever he wishes. But race is now such an important variable in his life "that he cannot forget about it." The dichotomy dominates his newly segregated life: his lifelong friendship with Valdés ended when they jumped off their respective rafts and moved into Miami's segregated neighborhoods. Today they can reminisce about their old life in a politically closed society but never discuss the consequences of their divergent paths of assimilation. Valdés says his old friend needs to leave his black neighborhood, forget about his needy relatives, and

begin life on his own, to which Ruiz laments, “Achmed does not know what it means to be black.”<sup>30</sup>

Separated by eighty years of social space, these two stories suggest a one-way street. When Cubans assimilate into American culture, they make race and skin color more important than being Cuban. In reality, the dynamic is much more complicated; in fact, like so many things in Cuba, this one begins with José Martí.

If Cubans in Miami and in Havana agree about anything, it is their reverence for José Martí, the nation’s preeminent hero. Even Fidel Castro uses Martí’s statue and museum as backdrop for his million-man speeches in La Plaza de la Revolución. A wall depicting Che is in the background; front and center is José Martí. Martí also dominates in Miami. Martí statues, portraits, and busts are everywhere, in universities and restaurants and libraries. He is the hero who, after a short stay in Brooklyn, literally rode a white horse into “Nuestra América.” For Martí, our America began below the Rio Grande. Almost thirty years before Vaconcelos and Rivera in Mexico, Martí sought to create a sense of unity throughout Latin America, but especially in Cuba, by emphasizing *mestizaje*, the endless human and cultural combinations that characterize life in the Caribbean and Latin America. Martí believed in the universalizing ideal; but, equally important, he sought to create a renewed sense of “Cubanidad” in a late-nineteenth-century nation struggling to defeat the Spanish while somehow keeping “the giant colossus of the North” at arm’s length.<sup>31</sup>

Martí, who was born in 1853, grew up in a Cuba overwhelmed by immigration, slavery, and imperialism. In 1757, the giant island was home to only 149,170 inhabitants. The Spanish had allowed their Caribbean colonies to languish, but, after a damning report on conditions in 1765, Spain decided to finally exploit Cuba as aggressively as it exploited Mexico. Offering everything from land grants to toleration of slavery, Spain was able to raise Cuba’s population to 898,732 by 1846, a sixfold increase in 89 years. Even more to the point, the first 250 years of Spanish rule had brought 60,000 slaves to Cuba, whereas, between 1763 and 1865, while the rest of the world was debating abolition, Cuba’s slave population increased to 636,465.<sup>32</sup>

While about a quarter of slaves worked on Cuban sugar plantations, another 18 percent worked on small properties in the countryside and fully 45 percent worked in homes and cities throughout Cuba. Eduardo Torres Cuevas rightly emphasizes the enormous impact of original African culture on Cuban life. Many slaves worked and lived in people's homes, an intimacy that bred the transculturation celebrated by Fernando Ortiz and other Cuban social scientists. However, Spanish imperial policy reserved the lion's share of political and economic privileges for European landowners and merchants, who lacked any ties to Cuba and its culture. Spain treated the newcomers like close members of the family. Meanwhile, "native" Cubans got angry, and Martí tried to provide, through essays like "Nuestra America," a synthesis that sustained the independence movement by creating unity rooted in *mestizaje*, patriotism, and wariness of the United States.<sup>33</sup>

In 1898, three years after Martí's death on the battlefield, the U.S. Congress confirmed Cuban nationalists' worst fears. In a debate about war in Cuba, President McKinley's opponents reminded Secretary of State John Sherman about a speech he made in 1896. Sherman then said that, "much to my surprise . . . they have gone through all the formulae of self-government as fully and completely as the people of the United States did at the beginning of the Revolution." In 1896 Sherman thought Congress must recognize the Cuban revolutionary government. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts seconded this suggestion. He said the Cubans had endured "a year of desperate and successful fighting against heavy odds." The U.S. government should recognize the independence of Cuba for two reasons: "it was reasonable and proper, and Lodge felt certain "that the American people would sustain recognition of independence without a dissenting voice and that the civilized world would applaud."<sup>34</sup>

In 1898 President McKinley refused to concede independence. Disregarding the previous comments of his secretary of state, McKinley said that "such recognition is not due to a revolted dependency until the danger of its being subjugated by the parent state has entirely passed away." In addition, if the United States recognized the legitimacy of the revolutionary government, "our conduct would be subject

to the approval and disapproval of such government. We would be required to submit to its direction and to assume to it the mere relation of a friendly ally.”<sup>35</sup>

With his refusal to concede independence, McKinley changed the Cuban War for Independence into the Spanish-American War. Martí wanted to create a united Cuba by marrying Cubanidad—the fierce and wonderful pride exhibited by Jesús in 2003—to an affirmation of mestizaje as the island’s cultural soul. The new Spanish immigrants thought otherwise and so too the Americans, who, in the name of independence, retained the right to interfere in Cuba whenever they pleased.

In *On Becoming Cuban*, Louis Perez Jr. writes that the Americans “intruded themselves” at a “critical juncture” in Cuban history. Thanks to the revolutionary government, “the institutional basis of a more equitable society actually existed.” Especially for the Spanish and other European immigrants, prejudice against darker-skinned Cubans flourished in public institutions and in private life; but “Cubans of color had distinguished themselves in all sectors of the separatist project. They had occupied positions in the provisional government and the Cuban Revolutionary Party; they were fully represented within the command structure of the Liberation Army.”<sup>36</sup>

Cuba could move toward Martí’s ideal or away from it. The Caribbean nation moved away from it because, with the Spanish defeated in war, the United States brought Jim Crow to the Caribbean. The U.S. military government that controlled the island for its first three years of independence “revived and reinforced many of the most deleterious aspects of race relations in the colonial regime.” Perez notes that whites monopolized most of the appointments to government offices. Cuban blacks got few of the positions in the Rural Guard; they were “officially” denied commissions in the Artillery Corps; and, most important, “they were systematically excluded from political participation through narrow suffrage restrictions.” Ultimately, Secretary of War Elihu Root congratulated General Wood “for the popular establishment of self-government, based on a limited suffrage, excluding so great a proportion of the elements that have brought ruin to Haiti and Santo Domingo.”<sup>37</sup>

America demanded that Cubans disregard Martí's teachings. Cubans could disagree—and they did—but the United States held the keys to power, and they exerted that power even when Cubans refused to sanction the American takeover.

Remember not the Maine but Guantanamo. Cubans leaders never wanted Yankee bases on Cuban land. By October 1902, President Roosevelt told Secretary of State John Hay that “the naval stations are to be ceded and in the near future . . . the question is not a matter open to discussion by the Cubans. It is already in their constitution and no discussion concerning it will be entertained.” When Cubans resisted—the constitutional clause was never their idea—Roosevelt suggested sending troops to take what the United States wanted. Finally, negotiators produced a face-saving deal. In exchange for the bases, the United States agreed to return title to the Isle of Pines, a twenty-by-fifty-mile appendage that, for centuries, rested under Cuban sovereignty. Not one Cuban leader appeared when Guantanamo formally changed hands on December 10, 1903. Cubans were angry about the bases and furious with a U.S. Congress that never returned title to the Isle of Pines. That occurred in 1925, a quarter of a century into Cuba's lauded independence.<sup>38</sup>

Americans and Cubans moved the nation toward Jim Crow and away from ideals espoused by the Mexicans. Light skin color was so esteemed that, by 1930, a North American dentist in Havana could blithely advertise “a practice confined to the white race.” Even as Evillo Grillo's mother was sending her son back to Cuba because blacks still received better medical treatment on the island, U.S. citizens were demanding that Havana be more like Tampa. The Washington Saloon posted this large sign: “We Cater to White People Only.” And the American Grocery advertised for a clerk to wait on customers: “Must be white.” Finally, in sharp contrast to the intimacy that existed in the nineteenth century, “a family advertised for a neat girl (white) as cook and for general house work.”<sup>39</sup>

As the tourist industry developed and relied on American customers, the same “whites only” preferences came to dominate. African American poet Langston Hughes already expected that the American steamship lines would refuse to sell colored people tickets to Cuba. He

did not anticipate that, when he finally got to Cuba, he would be denied admission to tourist spots because, as in Atlanta or Miami, dark skin color meant that you belonged in the shadows of Cuban life.<sup>40</sup>

This history is relevant for at least three reasons. One, it indicates the Jim Crow culture inherited by the revolution. In 1957 black Cubans could not enter Veradero, the most important tourist spot on the island. Second, this history suggests who came to Miami because they fled Fidel Castro and his dictatorship. Today we see freedom fighters out to defeat communism and Castro. Then, the refugees significantly included those who adamantly supported Jim Crow; the Batista dictatorship; and, as the CIA stressed, the “gangsters” who worked for the United States and Cuban interests also supporting the political and racial status quo. Finally, the history matters because race was a very hot topic on the island when we spoke to academics at the University of Havana in 2003.

During a dinner hosted by faculty at the university, I told our hosts about the book I was writing and my African American students’ delighted reaction to life on the island. How had the Cubans managed to do such a good job of eliminating Spanish, North American, and Cuban prejudices? Our Cuban colleagues explained that, while total elimination was an exaggeration, Cubans under Castro did learn to focus on Cubanidad rather than on the color of a person’s skin. Those born after 1959 grew up in a world that, whatever the lack of everyday freedoms, genuinely tried to erase the racial past. However, with a sly smile, one fellow added that Fidel Castro had a secret weapon. “We sent all the rabid racists to Miami; we exported our problem to you and thus had the chance to work from a relatively clean slate.”

The 2002 Pew Hispanic Center’s *National Survey of Latinos* found that roughly 20 percent of Latinos identified as whites but 55 percent of Cubans did so.<sup>41</sup> No other Latino group approaches the Cubans in their willingness to use the white label. Can we blame the Cubans if, like the Arabs in the previous chapter, they once again identified with prejudiced white people rather than their national hero, José Martí?

In Cuba, in 2003, politicians and academics also talked about Martí as they debated the possible failure of the revolution. For example, in the center of Havana the El Presidente Hotel contains a wall

full of photos of its important managerial personnel. No dark faces appear on the wall, and critics who call Castro a hypocrite and a racist underline the lack of dark faces in the nation's positions of power. Our Cuban colleagues noticed the same thing, but, instead of blaming Castro, they blamed everyone's failure to erase the institutional barriers to change. Unlike the Indians in 1948, Castro and colleagues focused on ideology; they tried to transform beliefs but never demanded that, for example, darker-skinned Cubans move to locations that easily offered access to education and social mobility. Given the segregation that existed in 1959, darker-skinned Cubans often lived in grossly underserved areas. Since the revolution never moved the people to the services, nor enough of the universities and other advantages to the people, darker-skinned Cubans experienced few prejudices but never the jump start necessary to leap over the institutional barriers that also prevented real equality and justice. Our Cuban colleagues blamed themselves and the revolution. Cuba needed to rectify its mistakes by marrying a change in beliefs to affirmative access to, among other things, the school systems that trained Cuban leaders.

Here, then, is the situation after a century full of change. Cubans raised under Castro arrive in Miami, where they learn that assimilation requires racial segregation, even in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, ninety miles offshore, in a nation with precious few public freedoms and information, their fellow Cubans openly debate the failure of their revolutionary efforts to eliminate prejudices connected to race and skin color. All the while Cubans in both nations celebrate their version of Martí. It is a stalemate for them and for us. Instead of learning from history, we choose to repeat it, using black and white film from the early twentieth century.

#### *Gracias a Gracia*

Jorge Gracia is a Cuban immigrant who offers a vision of the future that is an imaginative process of cultural reconfiguration. In *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, Gracia roots himself in the Caribbean, offering fellow Hispanics a way to avoid America's interpretation of their past.

Gracia begins with an analysis of two words: Latino and Hispanic. He devotes significant attention to the names because “names serve to carve out the world”; accompanied by concepts, names teach us how to think about things and the properties we attribute to them. Names and concepts “*are windows to the world.*”<sup>42</sup>

Gracia seeks to unite—over and against Anglo Protestant culture—people as different as Mexicans, Cubans, and Colombians. He therefore settles on Hispanic because it is a label that reidentifies the meaning and place of Caribbean and Latin American people in the Americas. “Hispanics are the group of people comprised by the inhabitants of the countries of the Iberian Peninsula *after 1492.*” Hispanic also includes people raised “in what were to become the colonies of those countries after the encounter between Iberia and America took place.” Finally, Hispanic also includes “the descendants of these people who live in other countries (e.g., the United States) but preserve some link to these people.”<sup>43</sup> By this definition, even Spanish immigrants as removed from contemporary issues as my parents are Hispanics because they came from Iberia after 1492 and they proudly maintained a link with their homeland.

With his name and concept in place, Gracia opens his window by asking this question: Where do we come from? His answer is as creative as the Chicanos in the sixties and, implicitly, as assertive as those who speak about an occupied America.

No one discovered a new world. To Gracia, “discover makes sense only insofar as it describes what Europeans thought had happened, not what actually happened.” Gracia uses the word *encounter* because it is neutral and because it makes all parties to the encounter equal participants. Those with guns and cannons did have more power, but none of the participants was inherently superior or inferior to the other. They encountered one another, and altogether Hispanics created new nations and cultures. Judgments about the value of those cultures will vary between and among, for example, Puerto Ricans or Chileans; the indisputable point is that all the creators deserve the name Hispanic.

Starting in Spain, Gracia reminds us that the English phrase “blue blood” originated from the Spanish term *sangre azul*. Spaniards wor-

ried about the purity of blood because they realized that the world already ran through their veins. They tried to do the impossible: find *sangre azul* in a world that contained no pure breeds, only endless combinations that began at the dawn of time.

When the Spaniards and other Iberians encountered the new world, they behaved like Cortez and Malinche. They intermingled with everybody, but “since conquest implies domination and domination requires identifying and labeling, naming is the first required step toward domination.” We get Christians and heathens; whites and blacks; and, in Mexico, a list that requires a higher education to decipher. A mulatto had a European father and a Negra mother. A mestizo had a European father and an Indian mother. A Zambo had a Negro father and a mulatta mother. A Chino *claro* had a mulatto father and mestizo mother. A Chino *oscuro* (dark) had a mulatto father and a Chinese mother.<sup>44</sup>

Gracia stresses that the one-drop rule never dominated in Latin America. Equally important for all Hispanics, *mestizaje* never implied homogeneity, the racial purity imagined by Anglo Protestant culture. On the contrary, the elements in any combination were not “actually separable.” Once united, *mestizaje* implies a fusion, something so new that “it can be a principle of union without implying the kind of homogenization that obliterates the contributions made by different ethnic and racial elements.”<sup>45</sup>

Gracia uses the word *race* in its cultural rather than its biological meaning. He indicates that Fernando Ortiz discarded the biological concept of race in the early 1900s; and he uses race in its *raza*—its Spanish language—sense. *Race* means a group of people who think and act in a similar fashion.

Hispanics “cannot be understood apart from *mestizaje*.” In addition, unlike the creation of a mythical Atzlán by Chicanos, Gracia seeks to root Hispanic in indisputable, historical facts. “The Spanish, the African, the Iberian, the Mexican, the Inca, the Amerindian—all these are myths if we mean by those names something pure, unmixed and separable. Indeed, they are at best abstractions and at worst nothing but fictional creations of the present based on nostal-

gic longings for the past or on political manipulation by power-seeking opportunists.”<sup>46</sup>

Imagine this: forty million Hispanic Americans joining hands around recognition of *mestizaje* and the encounter with Europe, Africa, Asia, and Iberia. By definition, this union would require, as in Cuba or Puerto Rico, a “righting” of history. Since Europeans wrote most of the books, they talk about discovery while Hispanics talk about conquest and the need for a reconfiguration of contemporary American culture.

Potentially, Hispanic is a lovely window to the world, our world. The problem is that Gracia seeks to fuse a bond around *mestizaje* while the Census Bureau, in October 2004, talks about eliminating the “other race” category that is crucial to Hispanics. Our choice is clear: the Census Bureau or a Caribbean man who understands the lessons we can learn from the Spanish- and the English-speaking Caribbean.