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Book Review Essay: *Race and Reproduction in Cuba*¹

Reviewed by Zyanya Gutiérrez²

“Though much of this book underscores the almost insurmountable weight of structures of racial and gender oppression, it does so with the hope of illuminating potential pathways to a more just and equitable society.” – Bonnie A. Lucero

An illustrative journey through the history of reproduction in Cuba, *Race and Reproduction in Cuba* employs an intersectional feminist perspective with a particular focus on its racial dimensions. In this book, Bonnie A. Lucero thoroughly examines the history of women’s reproduction in Cuba, shedding light on racial dynamics across four centuries. The discussion addresses the colonial period, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the long nineteenth century, and concludes with an analysis of post-revolutionary Cuba in the 1960s.

The book can be situated within the intellectual movement of feminist history, which emerged in mainstream academia during the mid-twentieth century as a component of second-wave feminism. Since then, this focus area has grown and evolved as a distinct school of thought within history and the social sciences. Feminist history stems from the acknowledgment of the lack of historical narratives that foreground women as historical subjects and actors (Matthews, 1986), thus leading to new research that focuses specifically on women in historical analysis. *Race and Reproduction in Cuba* aims to center women’s, especially black women’s, role in Cuba’s economic, demographic, social, legal, medical, and overall historical development, focusing mainly on their reproductive lives.

Lucero does an excellent job of exploring the nuances of the historic evolution of reproductive issues due to the comprehensive research methods employed. She utilizes a variety of historical sources to explain the reproductive experiences of women in Cuba. Lucero classifies sources into three core areas: law, social welfare, public health and medicine. Her sources are comprised of legislation, published texts, commentaries on legal frameworks applied to Cuba, police investigations, legal proceedings, baptismal records, breastfeeding logs, and financial records from charitable institutions. The sources also include ecclesiastical matters, letters, notarial registers, historic medical publications, medical curriculums, medical dissertations, demographic and health data, among other types of archived documents in Cuba, the U.S., and Spain.

An example of this exploration of nuance can be seen in her identification of the intent behind the Cuban state’s attitude toward racial criminalization and prosecution of reproductive crimes. For instance, the State openly acknowledged its aim to limit Black population growth, yet Black women were more heavily prosecuted for abortion and infanticide crimes. This phenomenon exhibits wide differences in the law’s *de jure* qualities and its applications, seeming counter-intuitive at first. However, Lucero perfectly manages to make sense of the apparent political contradictions—the Cuban state’s racist focus on White population growth and non-White

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population management—while taking the reader through the evolution of these conditions.

Despite the use of diverse research methods, it could be argued that the concept of race used to propel this research is slightly simplified. This issue arises from the inherent complexity of race as a subject, as it relies on multiple cultural components, posing challenges to standardizing a scientific approach for its analysis. The difficulty of the subject is present in Lucero’s work and is so significant that it has sparked debates about the very meaning of the term within the field of social sciences. Wade (2010) emphasizes how prior to the nineteenth century, which is the period of study of *Race and Reproduction in Cuba*, the word race was synonymous with lineage: “such a group of people shared a certain ancestry which might give them more or less common qualities” (Wade, 2010, p. 5). Based on these archaic ideas of race, scientific racism sought to legitimize racial hierarchies in which people of European descent were at the top and people of African descent at the bottom. However, this school of thought was subsequently dismantled by biologists, geneticists, and physical anthropologists, who concluded that, biologically speaking, races do not exist, highlighting the difficulty of categorizing a gene or set of genes to define a race (Wade, 2010). This leads some thinkers, such as Wade, to conclude that race encompasses some broad elements of human existence such as bodily appearance, human physical variation concerning perceived human differences, and cultural behavior, which results in naturalized explanations of culture (Wade, 2008). The issue of understanding race presents a challenge for Lucero’s book, as she seeks to analyze racial dynamics that differ from culture to culture, which is made difficult by the complexity of the particular conception of race in Latin America.

To fully understand the Latin American conception of race, a theme at the forefront of *Race and Reproduction in Cuba*, it is vital to acknowledge that historical processes significantly shape a culture’s perspective and attitude toward race, as racial conceptions are molded by specific worldviews that vary across different cultures. Although this is harder to perceive due to the current state of globalization, conceptualizations of race are widely different in the United States and Latin America, primarily due to the heritage of the different colonialist attitudes and strategies of the British and Spanish empires. As Navitski (n.d.) suggests, while slave codes in British colonies explicitly sought to create a social barrier between Whites and non-Whites, those barriers were not as strong in colonial Latin America, making interracial marriage and sex between European, Indigenous, Asian, and African-descended people more common. The rise of interracial couples led to the creation of the very detailed and complicated caste system in Spanish colonies, which classified and stratified almost every possible racial mix. This racial configuration differentiates the understanding of race in the U.S. versus Latin America. The mixing of races, or *mestizaje*, in the general conceptualization of the Spanish empire was seen as a mostly beneficial process “in which black and indigenous people would be integrated into a mestizo nation that was moving toward whiteness” (Wade, 2008). Consequently, racial circumspection in Latin America, presumably guided by ideas of *mestizaje*, has been very distinct from that in the United States (Telles & Bailey, 2013).

These differences in the U.S. and Latin American conceptions of race contribute to an added dimension of complexity in the context of Lucero’s racial analysis, which is a fundamental challenge the book faces: it not only seeks to explain the reproductive lives of women in a long time period, but it also deals with the deep, multi-faceted issues of race in a Latin American country. The book oversimplifies this complex history; for example, reproductive experiences are categorized based on the experiences of White and non-White women, with a heavy emphasis on the experiences of Black women, thereby neglecting the experiences of other non-White ethnic groups such as Indigenous, Asian, and mixed-race women. Although Cuba’s case with Indigenous
population is quite particular, as well as any other previous Spanish colony, both native Indigenous people and Asian immigrants also contribute to the country’s racial dynamics. Despite Cuba being a country mainly composed of the White, free Black people, and enslaved Black people, the overview that this book provides could be amplified by including the reproductive experiences of women of other racialized identities in Cuba.

Overall, Race and Reproduction in Cuba is a fantastic exercise in reframing history to focus on women’s experiences as a subject of study, thus making the historical understanding of this particular time period more complete. It successfully answers the main question the author proposes: how the twin demographic goals of White population growth and non-White population management shaped the Cuban Revolution. However, while the work exhibits merit in its analysis of free Black women and enslaved women, it falls short because it inadequately addresses the experiences of other non-White women across this racially diverse nation, such as Indigenous or Asian migrant women. Lucero presents a generally complete overview of the reproductive experiences of Black women, and thus it contributes to the call for increased intersectionality, rejecting both history’s focus on men and feminist history’s shortcomings of only centering White women.

References