In a well-known lecture given several years ago, British cultural theorist Stuart Hall referred to race as “a floating signifier,” constantly subject to “redefinition and appropriation” (Jhally & Hall 1996). To the extent that scholars of race take this idea seriously, reflection upon all the work that has been done to construct and to mark races in the world since the era of colonial expansion raises a number of fundamental questions (Holt 1995) about the object of our study.

Just what, we may ask, is the business of race-making all about? What does it mean to “mark” someone racially? What do the patterns according to which race is marked say about different understandings of the social order? How has racial classification been implicated in struggles over access to power, wealth, rights, and respectability (Covington 1995; Ferrer 1999; Scott 2004; Zeuske 2002; Omi 2001; Harris & Sim 2002; Waters 1999)?

These broad theoretical questions inform the discussion found in this article. Here, I examine the politics of racialization in late-nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century Cuba, through an analysis of the record-keeping practices of the Cuban Catholic Church. The study is largely based upon an analysis of a half-century of baptismal and marital records housed in Catholic parish archives and thus pertains to the intimate, racialized, and gendered domains of Cuban social life.

My examination of the documents begins in the period just after the achievement of full emancipation, as Cuba transitioned from a colony built solidly upon slavery to a nation that championed race-blindness as its ideal
(Scott 1985; Ferrer 1999; de la Fuente 2001). The transition from colony to republic brought about a series of conflicts over the terms of sovereignty, as nationalists struggled against both the authority of a Church that had sided with Spain during the wars of independence and against increasing North American incursions into the political, economic, and cultural life of the island (Logan 2008; Röig de Leuchsenring 1958; Ibarra 1992; Pérez 1999). The first decades of independence also brought about a major shift in the social construct of race. With the collapse of older, starker racial hierarchies built upon the difference between slave and free, others – buttressed by social science, public policy, and religion – were erected (Zeuske 2002; Bronfman 2004).

Men of color had participated extensively in the independence wars, making up at least half of the revolutionary army and 40 percent of its senior commissioned officers (Pérez 1986; Fermoselle-López 1972). This fact helped to open up enough space for Blacks and Mulattos to attain a level of recognition and political representation in the new nation – including universal manhood suffrage – that was closed to their counterparts elsewhere (Ferrer 1999; de la Fuente 2001). Furthermore, Cuban nationalist ideology, articulated by Jose Martí and Antonio Maceo, had championed racial inclusiveness and color-blindness as an ideal. Thus from the inauguration of the republic in 1902, overt expressions of racism and state-sponsored discrimination lacked both ideological legitimacy and the force of law.

Cuba’s “racial democracy” had its limits however. The ideology of race-blind nationalism that declared all Cubans to be equal regardless of color, also proscribed silences around race and condemned political mobilization along racial lines (Logan 1999; Helg 1995). Despite important advances, non-Whites found themselves shut out of private educational institutions and higher-status professions. Though segregation was illegal, Blacks and Mulattos were effectively banned from elite social clubs, hotels, and other public accommodations (Cole 1986; Arredondo 1939; de la Fuente 2001).

Immigration policy though the 1930s severely restricted the legal entrance of Haitians and Jamaicans, in favor of newcomers from Spain (Helg 1990). Cubans of color as well as Whites commonly expressed a desire for a whiter population (i.e., Castillo Bueno & Castillo 1996). The directive to adelantar la raza, or “take the race forward,” by marrying up the color hierarchy and giving birth to lighter-skinned children, is still heard on the island today. Furthermore, while unwed unions between white men and women of color were common and tolerated in the period under study, social prejudice against formal marriages between Whites and non-Whites was strong.

2. Final abolition was not achieved in Cuba until 1886, and independence from Spain was accomplished only in 1898, after thirty years of anticolonial war. See Scott 1985 and Ferrer 1999.
Thus, as historian Alejandro de la Fuente writes, it is “neither unqualified racial integration nor linear exclusion [that] characterizes the history of Cuba as an independent nation.” It is “ambiguous,” he feels, that “best defines the evolution of race relations in [the] 20th century” (de la Fuente 2001:11). To a certain extent, this dynamic is reflected in the race-making practices of the Cuban Catholic Church as well. While certain policies adopted by religious authorities gestured towards inclusivism and egalitarianism, others served to reinforce hierarchies based upon race and rank.

Situating the Study

As the cites mentioned earlier clearly indicate, a vibrant body of scholarship on Cuban racial politics has appeared in recent years. Scholars such as Rebecca Scott (2005), Aline Helg (1995), Tomás Fernández Robaina (1990), Alejandro de la Fuente (2001), Ada Ferrer (1999), and Alejandra Bronfman (2004) have offered a wealth of information on the ways that race was implicated in electoral politics, labor struggles, and debates about science, immigration, and modernity. Issues of gender, family, and sexuality have not assumed an important place in this work, however, despite the clear centrality of gender to notions of race in Latin America. The first major contribution of my research, then, is to look at race relations in postemancipation Cuba in the context of a race-sex system.

Although constructs of race and sex are deeply intertwined in many societies, this is especially true in Iberian America. Take for example Cuba’s cultural and religious iconography. The classic work of Cuban literature, Cecilia Valdés (1882), takes as its subject the tragic nineteenth-century romance between a haughty mulata and her wealthy white half-brother Leonardo Gamboa. The Catholic patroness of Cuba, la Virgen de la Caridad, is herself figured as a mulata, as is Ochun, the virgin’s alter ego in the Afro-Cuban religious practice of santería. Furthermore, ideas about the sexual proclivities of different groups have long been pivotal to notions of race on the island and are widely found in novels, poetry, popular sayings, theater, song, and the visual arts (Morejón 1982; Kutzinski 1993; Moore 1997).

While the construct of race in the United States has been historically rooted in a rigid, dichotomous system of categorization, Latin Americans have long utilized a more “fluid” and “negotiable” process of racial ascription. In Cuba, individuals who fall between the “poles” of blanco and negro are viewed as members of “intermediary” racial groups. The dozens of color terms employed in everyday speech make reference to an array of hair textures, skin tones, and facial features, thus constantly calling attention to the nation’s hybrid racial heritage.

But color terms do more than reference differences in phenotype. In nineteenth-century Cuba, especially, white and black were seen as polar opposites on a continuum of kinds of human beings – whose quotients of social worth,
honor, shame, or respectability were imprinted to a highly significant degree in their very pedigree. The children that resulted from mixed-race unions were further viewed as “intermediary” or “in between” types of people. The kinds of racial markers that I discuss in this article therefore, never stood as “neutral” markers of physical characteristics, but were deeply laden with moral valuations and notions of hierarchy. Contests over the attribution of racial labels in Church records – as priests or parishioners sought to avoid certain terms or to employ others – therefore had profound symbolic, political, and cultural resonance.

**Race and Sex in Cuban Catholic Parish Archives**

The data upon which my research is based, Catholic baptismal and marital records, have not been systematically utilized by scholars of twentieth-century Cuba. One of the major challenges faced by historians interested in how race was lived “on the ground” in postemancipation Cuba is that racial labels largely disappeared from civil and military records after 1890 (Zeuske 2002; Ferrer 1999; Scott 2004). Twentieth-century civil registries employed color terms very infrequently. And in accordance with the ideal of race-blind nationalism, notaries, lawyers, and judges studiously avoided the use of explicit racial labels as well (Zeuske 2002; Scott 2004).

Not so for the Catholic clergy. Labels pertaining to race and to birth status were utilized consistently in sacramental documents through the year 1940, when the practice was banned by the constitution. It is likely, therefore, that Catholic parish archives contain the largest, most comprehensive system of racial classification available to scholars of the postemancipation era. The second major contribution of this work therefore lies in my use of Catholic parish archives to study the processes of racialization unfolding in Cuba during the first decades of independence.

As civil registries were not established in Cuba until 1885, prior to that, births, deaths, and marriages were recorded solely in Church archives. Historian Karen Morrison writes, “At a minimum, for a Catholic society such as colonial Cuba, baptism represented everyone’s formal inclusion in the community. One did not have a legal identity without it, and the vast majority of the population was baptized” (Morrison 2007:59). Centuries of

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3. Rebecca Scott (2004:154-55) writes of working with lists of rebel soldiers: “Painstaking scrutiny was necessary because racial labels almost never appear on lists of this kind. The strength of the trans-racial, or race-blind ideal of nationalism was such that Cuban separatists generally declined to record racial attributions when drawing up recruitment lists, and the victorious Cuban nationalists also refrained from including them when they compiled nominal records of rebel veterans. In effect, the written record was intentionally designed to ratify José Martí and Antonio Maceo’s principle of race-blindness. It thus erased evidence of racial distinctions.”
tradition meant that even decades after independence, Catholic baptismal records continued to be far more representative of the general population than civil registries. Cubans – even though not a particularly religious people – were more likely to take a newborn before the parish priest than before a notary. Thus, well into the twentieth century, Catholic sacramental documents were a primary means by which individuals established their identity and origins, publicly, officially, and in perpetuity.

During the era of Spanish rule, status distinctions pertaining to color and to birth status (or legitimacy) were fundamental to determining one’s place in the social hierarchy. The key dichotomy, between slave and free, was heavily racialized, and to be classified as mulato or as negro was to be associated with the taint of slavery. A child’s birth status – as legítimo, ilegítimo, or natural – was linked to different legal entitlements and degrees of honor or stigma as well. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, legitimacy was a key signifier with which notions of race were co-articulated. Cubans of color were often born to unwed parents, and both illegitimacy and African descent were markers of dishonor.

The Church played an important role in the maintenance and transformation of status hierarchies pertaining to color and to birth. As a gatekeeping institution, the Church held unparalleled authority to certify the ancestry and origins of members of the population and to weigh in on the politics of morality and respectability. The historical archive of the archdiocese of Havana contains hundreds of cases dating from the 1890s to 1940, testifying to the importance of Catholic sacramental documents to public and to private affairs on the island.\(^4\) In these documents, women, men, children and grandchildren, their lawyers and employers, school administrators, judges, and other priests solicited evidence of a formal marriage, baptism, or paternity; or requested that small changes, usually concerning birth status or surnames, be made to records that had often been established decades before. I supplement the data from the parish registers with evidence from these cases in order to help establish the moral, legal, and social context in which the documents were maintained.

\(\text{Into the Archives}\)

I began my work in the archives motivated by a strong interest in examining the relationships between race, gender, and sex. The lack of attention to gender in Cuban social histories – either in their own right, or in connection to the issue of race – was to me particularly glaring. To date there are no large-

\(^4\) The diocese of Havana was elevated to an archdiocese in 1925, thus the terms employed in this article (diocese/archdiocese, bishop/archbishop) will vary based on the period in question.
scale studies of marriage, gender, or the family in Cuba between the end of Spanish sovereignty and the socialist revolution (1898-1959).5

Thus the original aim of the research was to provide demographic information on race and family in the Cuban republic. I also sought to use marriage and reproduction as lenses through which to elucidate the structure and dynamics of the social construct of race. Over the course of two years, I collected data from some 14,500 marital registers and 35,000 baptismal records seated in three historic parishes in the city of Havana.6

I carried out two kinds of analysis of the documents. The first entailed a quantitative study of trends in formal marriage and reproduction according to race, place of birth, socioeconomic status, and legitimacy. The basic questions that I asked of the data were who married whom, and under what conditions? The second-level analysis, which is the focus of this article, entailed a study of the ways that the documents themselves were constructed. Specifically, I examined the uses of different social ascriptors by priests and scribes to indicate race and legitimacy in parish records.

I became interested in thinking about the logic of social ascription in the documents following several months of research in the archives. After reading through a half-century of marital and baptismal records in a number of Cuban parishes, it seemed to me that the documents themselves begged to be analyzed. How had they been constructed? Why did priests and scribes choose certain terms to describe color and birth status over others? What kinds of data were included, and which seemed to be systematically omitted, and why? What clues might the ways that race and legitimacy were marked in the documents give us about the connections between race, gender, and sexuality in Cuban society? In the next sections of the article, I offer a discussion of the trends that I found, as well as my observations and working hypotheses about what they meant.

5. The existing studies focus either on the colonial period or on the Castro era. See Guanche 1987, 1999; de la Fuente 1990; Sierra Madero 2002; Barcia 2003; Morrison 2007; Vera Estrada 1997; Reca Moreira et al. 1990, Benitez Pérez 1999, 2003; Pérez Rojas 1979; and Catasús Cevera 1994. Lynn Stoner’s From the House to the Streets (1991) is an examination of the predominantly white, upper- and middle-class feminist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. While this detailed study provides a crucial starting point for discussions of women and politics in republican Cuba, it includes little discussion of day-to-day gender relations on the island and is largely silent on the issue of race.

6. The church of el Espíritu Santo in la Habana Vieja is Havana’s oldest surviving church, having been built in 1638 by free Blacks and Mulatos. Nuestra Señora de la Caridad in Centro Habana, formerly known as Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, was founded in 1739. Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in the Vedado neighborhood was founded in 1892, just before last war of independence (1895-1898).
PARISH RECORDS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE IN THE COLONY

The records I reviewed invoked a rich and shifting variety of terms to describe the race and birth status of the persons found therein, reflecting a preoccupation with color and rank that characterized Cuban society in general. Racial difference was signaled in nineteenth-century Church registries in a variety of ways. At the most basic level was the physical separation of the documents. Records of Whites were seated in libros de españoles or blancos, and those of non-Whites were found in libros de pardos y morenos.

The former set of books contained the registers of Cuban-born Whites, Spanish immigrants, and persons from other parts of Europe, Latin America, and Asia – in short, anyone not marked by African ancestry. Biracial baptisms (common) and interracial marriages (very uncommon) were seated in the registers of people of color. Nineteenth-century registers of blancos provided place of birth, birth status, and other details, but color terms were not used. In the registers for Blacks and Mulattos, however, it was a different story. Consider for example the 1890 marriage of José Simeón and Inés Francisca, celebrated at the Cathedral of Havana:

On the twenty-ninth day of May 1890, in the tabernacle of the Blessed Cathedral of this city … marriage was contracted by the pardo José FelipE Simeón, native of Santiago de las Vegas, single, thirty years old, and resident of this city and this parish, of Obispo street no. 45, son of the parda Silveria César, also native of Santiago de las Vegas, and resident of the same city; and the parda Inés María Francisca, native of this city, thirty years of age, single, dedicated to the work that pertains to her sex, and resident, for the last twenty-six days, of Obispo street no. 45, daughter of the morena Isabel Reyna, also native of this capital and resident of the parish of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe … Don Antonio Cavieses, native of Santander, resident of Obispo Street no. 45, and Don Manuel Lavo, native of Santander, resident of Obispo Street no. 15, were witnesses.

The register is careful to indicate that the bride has been living with the groom for less than a month – implying that while she may no longer be

7. The exact sorting of records varied from parish to parish. De la Fuente, for example, found that in the parish of the Cathedral of Havana, the marriages of slaves and other free persons of color in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were found in the registros de españoles. The placement of the Chinese in the registros de blancos – while the census listed them as people of color – reflects the ambiguity that existed concerning the racial status of the Chinese in Cuban society. See also discussion in Martinez-Alier (1989:76-77).
8. Obispado de la Habana, Legajo 140, Expediente 99, October 5, 1908. Sobre enmienda en la partida de matrimonio de Agapito José Felipe Simeón Cesar con Inés María Francisca Reina.
a virgin, the marriage has taken place in a timely enough manner that her honor is not called into question (Socolow 2000). Note also that while the race of the bride, groom, and both mothers is listed, explicit color terms are not used for the Spanish-born witnesses. The race of the Spaniards was nevertheless indicated through the use of the title “Don” before their names, a courtesy not extended to the others who appear in the record. The governor of Havana ruled only in 1893 that Don and Doña could be applied to Blacks and Mulattos in official documents. Previously, the use of these titles was restricted to high-status Whites (Hevia 1996).

The marriage between José and Inés took place in the postabolition period. Under the regime of slavery, however, the law had stipulated that all slaves must be baptized (Perera Díaz & Meriño Fuentes 2006:64). Baptismal records served “as proof of the legal and economic bond between the enslaved and their owners” (Morrison 2007:60). Thus the registros of pardos and morenos further indicated whether the persons therein were slave or free. Consider the language found in the 1870 record of María Luisa Gutiérrez:

On Sunday, 20 November of 1870, I, Father Don José Martínez y Folgueras, solemnly baptized and applied holy oils to a párbula morena, who, as has been authorized by the Courts of the Nation, is free, and who was born on the thirtieth day of August, daughter of an unknown father, and of Lorenza Criolla, slave of Don Tomás Gutiérrez.9

See also the 1879 baptism of Domingo Crespo, which took place in the parish of Aguacate, Havana:

On June 11, 1879, I, D. Justo Alentado, parish priest, solemnly baptized a free-born párvulo, son of an unknown father, and the pardá Agustina

9. Arzobispado de la Habana, Legajo 185, Expediente 31, February 11, 1941. Expediente de bautismo de María Luisa Gutiérrez. María Luisa’s baptismal record references the Moret Law of 1870, aka the “free womb” law. This law declared that though slavery was not abolished (it remained in place until 1886), all children born from September 1868 forward to women held in bondage were themselves free (Scott 1985). The use of surnames in documents pertaining to María Luisa’s case is also quite interesting. In 1941, at the age of 71, the parishioner wrote to the Archbishop of Havana requesting that her surname be modified in her baptismal record. She stated that Criolla was not her mother’s legal surname, but simply a term used to distinguish slaves born on the island (criollas, or Creoles) from those born in Africa (bozales). Upon receiving her freedom, María’s mother had adopted the surname of her master, Gutiérrez, and María Luisa had taken that surname as well. Thus she asked to be referred to not as Criolla, but as Gutiérrez in her baptismal record, and in “any future certifications pertaining to my birth” – presumably regarding a pension or inheritance. The Archbishop accepted María Luisa’s reasoning, on the grounds that it was costumbre reconocida (a known custom) for slaves to take the surnames of their masters.
Fathers listed as “unknown” in baptismal records were often in fact well known to the mothers, and to others in the parish (Perera Diaz & Meriño Fuentes 2006). But there were many reasons that a father might be listed as “unknown.” First, of course, was genuine uncertainty on the part of the mother, or inconvenient circumstances of conception (such as adultery or incest). In many cases, Church officials simply refused to acknowledge the relationship between men and children born out of wedlock (Perera Diaz & Meriño Fuentes 2006). Though the Crown decreed in 1837 that men who admitted paternity of their natural children should be listed in the baptismal record (Morrison 2007), the colonial Church was slow to implement this policy. In some parishes, unwed fathers continued to be listed as incógnito or desconocido through the 1890s.

Once the names of natural fathers began to appear in baptismal records, however, Church policy was actually substantially ahead of the law. According to Castilian custom, legitimate children bore two surnames—the first being that of the father and the second, that of the mother. Prior to 1940, the use of a double surname was only legally sanctioned for those whose parents were married, or those whose fathers had officially recognized them before a notary. In early-twentieth-century Church records, however, natural children whose fathers admitted paternity were always inscribed with the surnames of both their parents. In the register of the parish of Regla, for example, is found the May 1904 baptism of José Ajón y Balloveras (no race provided). He is listed as the natural son of José Ajón, native of Canton, China, and Clara Balloveras y Rojas, White, age nineteen, and native of Regla. As his parents were unmarried, legally, the child was not entitled to carry his father’s name. This shift in Church policy, permitting natural children to carry the apellido of the father, was a decisive step towards deconstructing the hierarchies associated with birth status in the new republic.


11. Take the case of Lúz Parada y Barrio, baptized in 1898 in the parish of Santo Ángel Custodio in Habana Vieja. Though Lúz was inscribed as the daughter of a woman from Orense, Spain, and a padre desconocido, her father, also a Spaniard, legally recognized her when she turned sixteen. Obispado de la Habana, Legajo 150, Expediente 1, July 3, 1914, Parroquia del Santo Ángel Custodio. Sobre reconocimiento de hijo natural á favor de Luz Dolores Josefa Parada.

12. Rebecca Scott describes the use of double surnames as “the classic Iberian signal of legitimate descent” (Scott 2004:161).
But let us again consider the colonial-era baptisms of Domingo Crespo and María Gutiérrez, cited earlier. One very curious finding of my research, which I have not found reference to elsewhere in the literature, was that babies of color were sometimes referred to as *párvulos* (spelled with a “v” or a “b”), rather than as *niños*. In addition to numerous cases found in the archive of the archdiocese of Havana, this label was used in records from the parish of Sagrado Corazón del Vedado, for every baptism of a non-white baby through the year 1902. I also found references to *párvulos morenos* or *párvulos pardos* in a number of the late-nineteenth-century baptismal records from the Casa de la Maternidad which took in abandoned and orphaned children.

*párvulo* translates as infant or toddler, but also as small or “runty.” The term was applied to infants of color both slave and free, legitimate and natural, baptized at any age. In this case the word had clear racial connotations, as it always accompanied the color terms *pardo* or *moreno*. This discovery is similar to Michael Zeuske’s (2002) finding that in turn-of-the-century Cienfuegos, Cuba, notaries and judges used the phrase “*sin otro apellido*,” or “*s.o.a.*” (no other surname) to indicate the illegitimacy and African descent of the persons who came before them. The key difference is that “*s.o.a.*” was a “hidden marker” of status, used instead of an explicit racial label, while here, *párvulo* was used to emphasize an inferior condition.

Thus in late-colonial-era sacramental documentation, there were many ways that blackness and illegitimacy were marked. Records were placed in separate registers. Color terms were used consistently, but only for non-Whites. Fathers who may have been in long-term consensual unions (or even present at the baptism) were listed as “unknown.” A baby of color might be described as a *párvulo* rather than as a *niño*. And in records established prior to abolition, the condition of slave or free was carefully denoted by the priests. As Martinez-Alier (1989:72) writes of nineteenth-century Cuba, color and birth status “were conceived not as attributes conclusive in themselves but as mere outward ‘signs’ of a deeper condition.”

**Race, Legitimacy, and the Casa de la Maternidad**

In the city of Havana, second August 1895: I . . . acting chaplain of the Royal House of Maternity of the Blessed Mary and Saint John, solemnly baptized a baby girl, classified by Don José R. Montalvo, doctor at this Establishment, as belonging to the white race, who was left (*expuesta*) at the front door, and represented as having been born two months ago, on the twelfth day of June, at three in the afternoon, and I named her ANTONIA DE PADUA, and to her corresponds the surname Valdes.13

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13. Casa de la Beneficencia y Maternidad, Libro de Bautismos 1885-1910, Record no. 675, Antonia de Padua Valdes.
Baptismal records from Cuba’s home for foundlings – the Casa de Beneficencia y Maternidad – offer a fascinating glimpse into the ways that ancestry and rank were marked for those whose origins were unknown. Founded in 1687 by Father Diego Evelio de Compostela, the Casa de Beneficencia y Maternidad was administered jointly by Church and Crown (Alfonso y García 1920). Babies might be sent to the institution by judges, police, or grandparents who could not care for them. The great majority of those taken into the Casa, however, were placed anonymously in a turnstile doorway (expuesto por el torno) at the front of the building, with a note pinned to their garments (see Figure 1).

The note contained details on the place and time of birth and the purported racial origins of the infant. Most offered a first name to the priest who would carry out the baptism. One function of the note was to allow for the possibility that babies might be reunited with family members who would later claim them, or placed with others whom the parents had designated as guardians. The famous mulatto poet known as Plácido, for example, was baptized at the Casa de la Maternidad in 1809, under the name Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés. Plácido had been abandoned at the Casa by his Spanish-born mother, the dancer Concepción Vázquez. Several months later, he was retrieved by his father, the free Mulatto Diego Ferrer Matoso, who raised and educated him (Buscaglia-Salgado 2003:220-21).

Like Cecilia, the mulatta protagonist of Cirilo Villaverde’s famous novel, and the poet Plácido, babies left anonymously at the Casa were given the single surname of Valdés (without an accent over the “e”), after the Cuban Bishop Fray Geronimo Valdés. Though priestly in origin, this surname, ironically, branded its recipients with an open marker of dishonor. Both canon and civil law recognized various degrees of illegitimacy (discussed later on), and in the eyes of colonial-era elites, those whose ancestry was entirely unknown were profoundly inferior. The Cuban National Archives contains the records of numerous parents from elite families objecting to marriages between their children and others bearing the surname Valdés. As one nineteenth-century official remarked, children abandoned at the Casa de la Maternidad were generally presumed to be “the result of a punishable and wicked union, or of obscure quality and contaminated origin.” They were thus “treated with the

14. The institution carried various names throughout the colonial period – La Casa Cuna, La Casa de Expósitos, La Casa Real de la Maternidad, and finally La Casa de Beneficencia y Maternidad. In 1852, the Casa was moved to San Lázaro and Belascoín streets in Centro Habana, the location currently occupied by the Hermanos Almeijeiras hospital.

15. In 1844, Plácido was assassinated by firing squad for his alleged participation in the slave revolt known as La Conspiración de la Escalera (Helg 1995:39-40).
greatest disdain and considered as bastards, spurious, incestuous, and adul-
terous” (quoted in Martinez-Alier 1989:84).

Despite the much higher rate of illegitimacy among Blacks and Mulattos, relatively few non-white babies were taken into the Casa. There are two explanations for this phenomenon. First, colonial-era Catholic charitable institutions were not particularly welcoming to Cubans of color. When the home for the indigent and orphaned (La Casa Real de Beneficencia) was founded in 1792, for example, the decision was made that the institution would serve only Whites. The reasoning was as follows:

As the class of free people of color is so numerous, to adequately shelter these individuals, to feed them, to educate them, and to put them to work, entirely separately from the whites, would be to incur excessive costs; and to mix the members of both races together in a single locale, and in the same professions, would make the Institution odious, and among the Whites it would be regarded as a permanent affront to have been educated in such a place, or to have resided in it for a time. (quoted in Alfonso y García 1920:15)

Perhaps just as important, however, was the social function of the Casa de la Maternidad. The anonymity offered by the institution aimed to protect the honor of families from the higher rungs of society. For women in the lowest social classes, relinquishing unwed children to the Casa would have had little social utility. This was especially true for women of color. In an age in which those with ancestral ties to Africa were considered to be “stained” or “tainted,” and “no hay tamarindo dulce ni mulata señorita” (there is no sweet tamarind nor virgin Mulatta) was a common proverb, mulatas and negras simply had less honor, or status, to lose in the first place (Martinez-Alier 1989:xv). Thus, most of the relatively few pardo babies taken into the Casa were – like Cecilia Valdes – likely the offspring of white men or women from the upper rungs of society.

Given the shadowy origins of infants left at the Casa, the issue of racial classification was a tricky one. Unlike the parishes, the Casa de la Maternidad placed all baptisms in single registers – presumably because there were very few babies whose whiteness was considered to be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. In 1895, all 32 of the babies baptized were listed as al parecer pardo (pardo in appearance), al parecer de color (colored in appearance), or clasificado como blanco por el Doctor (classified as white by the doctor). By 1898 the judgment of the medical establishment was no longer employed, but priests continued to label babies as only “white in appearance” through

16. The Casa de Beneficencia and the Casa de Maternidad were joined in 1852.
1904. In one baptism from that year, the priest noted that the baby had been left “with a note that claimed he was the son of white parents.” And according to the text of the 1904 baptism of Felipe Jesús Alfredo Valdes, the priest did not know what race he belonged to (*no sé especificar la raza*). Soon after, racial labels began to disappear from these records, as the clergy at La Maternidad seemed to give up on the “science” of racial classification all together. The *apellido*, Valdes, however, remained the primary indelible marker of status.

![Image](image-url)

Figure 1. Nuns receive a baby left in the *torno* (from Alfonso y García 1920, unnumbered page, located between pp. 44 & 45).

17. See also discussion of the racial classification of foundlings in nineteenth-century Cuba in Martínez-Alier (1989:72).
The transition from the era of Spanish domination to independence brought about important changes in the uses of race in ecclesiastical archives. In each of the parishes I visited, segregation in the recording of the sacraments ceased by 1904. In August of that year, Havana-born Bishop Pedro González de Estrada issued a circular to the churches under his authority, explaining that the dawning of a new era required the Church join Whites and non-Whites in single registers. He wrote:

Previous circumstances required the Church in this diocese to maintain double books due to the racial difference; but today, these circumstances have come to an end. . . . From this date forth, double books of Whites and others of color are abolished.

It is curious that the “circumstances” requiring the Church to maintain separate registers had not been declared to have come to an end earlier – either in 1880, when slavery was abolished, in 1881 when restrictions on interracial marriage were lifted, or in 1898 with the defeat of the Spanish empire. From 1899-1903, as the Church, now formally separated from Spain, underwent a phase of reorganization, the Boletín was not published. Therefore the decision to unite the books across the diocese could have come at any time between 1899 and 1904. It may, for example, have come in 1902, with the inauguration of the republic.

It should be noted that the Church did not declare in 1904 that racial terms should no longer be used in sacramental records. In fact, it was only once Whites and non-Whites were placed in the same registers that the term blanco began to appear in the documents. Previously “unmarked,” the use of racial labels for Whites became important only when clearer divides were eliminated.

The terminology used to describe Cubans of color in the republic shifted as well. In 1893, the Directorio Central de las Sociedades de la Raza de Color, a collective of black and mulatto civic organizations, succeeded in suppress-
ing the use of pardo and moreno in official documents (Zeuske 2002). At the Directorio’s request, the Spanish Governor decreed furthermore that the honorific titles of Don and Doña were no longer reserved only for Whites. Along with the ideology of race-blind nationalism, these decrees contributed to the removal of color labels from military records and other civil documents from the late nineteenth century forward.

Race-blind practices were not adopted by the Catholic Church however. As already mentioned, the implicit marker of whiteness – “Don” – was replaced by the open marker blanco in parish records. Furthermore, as colonial-era terms to mark Cubans of color were eliminated, they were replaced with others. Pardo and moreno gave way to mestizo, negro, or the blanket term de color. While the shift from one set of labels to another was sometimes fairly abrupt, there was no consistency across the diocese. In Sagrado Corazón del Vedado, for example, moreno continued to be used in marital registers, along with the term negro through the 1920s.

Sometimes more than one analogous racial term might be found in a single register. Take for example the December 1904 inscription of María Hortensia Valdes, in the parish of Regla. The note in the margin of her baptism lists María as parda, while the text of the register describes her as a niña de color. Her mother is Rosa Valdes y Valdes, described as mestiza. As indicated by her surnames, Rosa had been raised in the Casa de la Maternidad.22 Pardo and moreno lapsed entirely from usage in each of the parish registers I reviewed by the mid-1920s. In the books of the Casa de Beneficencia y Maternidad, for example, the final instance of moreno was found in September 1922.23

The use of the term mestizo in the documents merits discussion. By the early twentieth century, mulato was the more commonly used term to refer to mixed-race persons in the wider society, yet it was entirely absent from the thousands of baptismal and marital records that were reviewed.

There are no indications to be found in the Boletín of the diocese as to why this was the case. Like pardo, moreno, Don and Doña, however, mestizo was almost certainly an honorific appellation. Historian Rebecca Scott (2004:161) refers to mestizo as a “genteeel” label in turn-of-the-century Cuban usage. Alejandro de la Fuente suggests that the particular magic of the label mestizo was that it made no allusion to African ancestry. He writes, “It was

22. Interesting is Rosa’s use of the double surname “Valdes y Valdes.” Most babies raised in the home for foundlings carried only a single surname. As the baptismal record lists Rosa’s father and mother as “La Casa de la Maternidad” she would have only been legally entitled to the use of one apellido. See baptism of María Hortensia Valdes, Nuestra Señora de Regla, Libro 21 de Bautismos de Pardos y Morenos, Record no. 268, December 1904.
23. See Casa de la Beneficencia y Maternidad, Libro de Bautismos 1911-1932, Record no. 736.
precisely the ambiguity of the term that made it attractive. In opposition to other racial labels such as negro or mulato, deemed to be more precise in Cuban racial imagery, the denomination mestizo had the virtue of detaching a significant portion of the Cuban population from blackness” (de la Fuente 2001:32). Depending on the context then, the term mulato might be construed as offensive, as it implied an ancestral connection to Africa and to slavery. Mestizo was preferred because of its euphemistic imprecision.

I further suggest that for many of those considered to be negro in their daily lives, mestizo was often the “euphemism” used to describe them in sacramental documents as well. Sheer numbers would suggest that this was the case. In the parish of the Espíritu Santo, for example, 81 percent of babies of color baptized in every third year between 1901 and 1940 were recorded as mestizo (N = 939), whereas in the parish of la Caridad in Centro Habana, the figure soared to 91 percent (N = 2789). Population estimates from the censuses of 1907-1943, on the other hand, put “mixed race” Cubans in the city of Havana at just over 60 percent of Cubans of color – nowhere near the figures reflected in baptismal records.

I do not mean to imply that the census is an “objective” or “neutral” indicator of racial status, while the parish registry is not. Like priests and scribes, census enumerators would have applied racial labels through a social process of attribution, influenced by culture, context, and individual assessments. However, I would argue that the census contains a more “accurate” count of

24. While marital records were selected from each year, baptismal records were chosen at three-year intervals. Phase one of case selection entailed a complete count of the registers found in each of the selected years (P = 35,256 baptisms and 14,348 marriages). During phase one I collected data on the race, only, of every member of the population, as represented in Tables 1 and 2. Phase two of data collection involved gathering very detailed information from a racially stratified sample of the records, which employed an oversample of non-Whites (N = 3,680 baptisms and 906 marriages). Sample weights for each of the racial strata were calculated based upon their proportion in the full population and employed in statistical tests as was appropriate.

25. The proportion of Cubans of African descent residing in Havana listed as mestizo in each of the censuses for which data are available was as follows: 1907 (published in 1908), 58% (P = 42,753); 1919 (published in 1920), 63% (P = 48,423); 1931 (published in 1932), 63% (P = 76,280); and 1943 (published in 1945), 60% (P = 101,230). City-level data are not available for 1899, however nationally, census enumerators counted 270,805 “mixed-race” Cubans (54%) compared to 234,738 “Blacks.”

26. See Telles (2004) for an excellent discussion of the challenges inherent in using the color labels found in the modern Brazilian census to make claims about the changing racial composition of the population.
the race of the population and that the totals found in parish documents result from many individuals being “whitened.”

My reasoning is this. The census is an impersonal, largely anonymous measure of the aggregate characteristics of a population. Baptismal and marital records, on the other hand, were immediate, individual records of a person’s lineage and history. Ceremonies were performed in a context of family and neighborhood ties, in parishes where individuals and their families had often lived for generations (Perera Diaz & Meriño Fuentes 2006). Quite unlike the census, parish records would be referred to by individuals and their descendants for generations. And given the clear stigma associated with the label negro in the period under study, many Cubans of color surely sought to avoid it. Thus, I suggest, racial labels in parish documents were often applied in such a way as to hide or diminish the African ancestry of darker-skinned babies and spouses – and to thereby honor them in the process.

After the 1900s, parishes across the diocese of Havana also began to use the titles Don and Doña in reference to Blacks and Mulattos. This shift, as well as the joining of Whites and non-Whites in single registers, and getting rid of the labels pardo and negro, but replacing them with others, may be seen as part of a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion characterizing race relations in the wider society during the first republic (de la Fuente 2001). Another aspect of this dialectic is discussed further.

Counterpart to Race: Marking Legitimacy

I found over ten different labels to indicate legitimacy in the parish records. Like race, birth status was understood to indicate something fundamental about the “quality” of one’s origins. In canon law, birth status was not binary, but rather a highly internally stratified concept. At the very top of the hierarchy were hijos legítimos, or children of couples married by the Catholic Church.

27. It is possible that the discrepancies were due to the fact that Blacks and Mulattos were not baptized in equal proportions – though the long-standing practice of baptizing slave babies (for reasons religious, legal, and economic) mitigates against the likelihood that the proportions would be skewed too dramatically (Morrison 2007). We might also expect figures from the census to vary from those based on baptismal records due to the simple fact that Catholic baptisms recorded only the births of babies in any given year, while the census enumerated all living residents of an area. These caveats aside, the extremely high proportion of babies of color labeled as mestizo in parish documents, compared to much lower estimates based on the census is quite curious.

28. My research thus contradicts Aline Helg’s claim that in early-twentieth-century Catholic baptismal and marital registries “only whites’ names were preceded with the appellation Don or Doña” (Helg 1995:99).
Notes: Primary racial classification of all individuals baptized in every third year between 1901 and 1940, in the parishes of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in el Vedado, el Espíritu Santo in la Habana Vieja, and Nuestra Señora de la Caridad, in Centro Havana (P = 35,256). Babies in the second category down were not categorized by race, but were found in registers reserved for the baptisms of Whites (libros de españoles) through 1904.
They were followed by *hijos de uniones civiles* (children of civil unions) whose parents had been married by the state. While the offspring of canon and civil marriages were equal before the law, they were not equal in the eyes of the Church. In the 1890s and 1900s, the *Boletín Eccleástico* condemned civil marriage as “a form of concubinage” (Logan 2008). In early-twentieth-century baptismal records, priests often inscribed children of civil marriage as *hijos de padres unidos tan solo por lo civil* (a child of parents who are only civily united) – but never as *hijos legítimos*.

Just below babies born to civilly married parents in the ecclesiastical hierarchy were *hijos naturales*. An *hijo natural* was the child of a couple that *could have* been married at the time of birth, but was not. As stated earlier, after the mid-nineteenth century, natural children were baptized with the surnames of *both* parents, despite the fact that these children were not legally entitled to carry their father’s surnames. An *hijo natural reconocido* was a natural child that had been legally recognized by his/her father. The turn-of-the-century civil code stipulated that such children could use two surnames in legal documents and were entitled to one-half of the amount of any inheritance that legitimate children might receive (U.S. War Department 1900:118).29 There is little evidence, though, that the Church regarded them substantially differently than *hijos naturales*.

While the majority of parishioners in sacramental documents were described as *legítimo* or as *natural*, other terms were employed as well. Babies and spouses were sometimes listed as *hijos adoptivos* (adopted children), *hijos expósitos*, or *hijos de la Casa de Maternidad* (foundlings). In the last, most stigmatized category were *hijos ilegítimos*. “Illegitimate,” as opposed to “natural” children, were those whose parents could *not* have married at the time of conception, because they had faced a canonical impediment (i.e., one was married, or a member of the clergy, or the parents were related within three degrees of consanguinity). The highly pejorative label *ilegítimo* was very rarely found in parish records. For most truly “illegitimate” children, birth status was probably simply omitted from the register all together.

Rates of legitimacy varied dramatically by race. In Havana marital records from 1901-1940, 93 percent of white men and 92 percent of white women were classified as legitimate, compared to only 29 percent of men and 23 percent of women of color. The “alarmingly” high rate of unwed births was a major issue of concern for middle-class social reformers of color at the turn of the twentieth century (Castellanos & Castellanos 1990; de la Fuente 2001; Logan 2005). In Cuban society, the stigma associated with illegitimacy was greatest among those higher in social rank, thus explaining the

29. Even if the deceased person had no legitimate heirs, the natural children were entitled only to half of the estate.
preponderance of “apparently” white babies left at the steps of the Casa de la Maternidad through the 1910s. Recorded birth status mattered tremendously to members of the archdiocese of Havana. From the 1900s onward, parishioners submitted hundreds of petitions requesting modifications to baptismal records, as paternity was confirmed or as couples married. In 1908, for example, the thirty-five-year-old laborer Juan Pérez and his wife Dolores Miranda, thirty age twenty-four, wrote to the Bishop:

We were married on the fifteenth of this month, in this church, [but] because of our previous illicit relations, we have two children, one Antonio, born on the eighth of June 1903, whose baptism listed him as a natural child, and the other Felicia, who was born on the twenty-sixth of May of 1905, and whose baptismal record only recorded the name of her mother, and with this declaration of marriage that we have celebrated, we request that it be noted in the record of the baptism of our children that they have been recognized and legitimized by their father.31

In 1938, another father from el Vedado sought to legitimize the twins that had resulted from his union cuasi-matrimonial (“quasi-matrimonial union”) which was finally legalized when the children were nine.32 Though paternity or marriage may have been previously acknowledged by the state, many parishioners wished the ecclesiastical record to reflect the change as well. In her 1941 petition to the Archbishop, for example, Silvia Esther Avello y Gómez requested that her baptismal record be altered, “so that the perfect relationship (filiación perfecta)” of the woman to her father, “with all its religious effects, is in exact agreement with that which is stated in the Civil Registry.”33

30. Note that wives’ names did not change upon marriage, as they retained the surnames of their parent(s).
33. Arzobispado de la Habana, Legajo 185, Expediente 47. Expediente bautismal de Silvia Esther Avello y Gómez, September 15, 1941.
There is a last aspect of sacramental record keeping that will be explored in this article: instances where information on race was missing from the documents. While seeking to understand patterns of family formation among Blacks, Mulattos, and Whites at the turn of the century, I noted that a substantial proportion of Catholic parish records omitted information on color and birth status. After perusing more than 100,000 birth and marital records in the diocese of Havana over the course of two years of research, I became convinced that that omissions of data on race and legitimacy were often deliberate.

There were many reasons that I came to this conclusion. First, the richness and the depth with which labels pertaining to race and to birth status were applied in the vast majority of the sacramental documents I reviewed strongly suggested that for the Catholic clergy, color and legitimacy were basic features by which persons were individuated from one another, nearly as fundamental as their names. In such a status-conscious society, it seemed unlikely that priests would simply “forget” to record the race or birth status of 15 to 20 percent of the population, respectively.

After 1910, once parishes began to use printed forms to record sacramental information, omissions were particularly glaring, as they resulted in blank spaces being left in the registers. Information on color, legitimacy, and paternity was omitted far more often than other, less obviously political or stigmatizing data, such as age, place of residence, place of birth, or the date and location of the ceremony. Consider the case of Inés Hernández, baptized in Regla in 1931 (Figure 2). Her mother’s name is “reserved,” and the record contains no information on race or birth status. The silences here speak loudly, as they imply that she is the formally illegitimate child of her Spanish-born father. I began to think of these omissions as a sort of “race-making work” carried out by Church officials. Thus rather than excluding racially “unmarked” persons from my thinking about race, I decided to place them squarely at the center of analysis and to inquire into the patterns and processes according to which race was omitted.

At the 1940 Constitutional Convention, progressive social reformers would prevail upon delegates to declare discrimination by race or color a crime punishable by law (Bronfman 2004:174-78). Furthermore, Article 44

34. It is important to note that all the surrounding records contained information on birth status, ancestry, and color; thus making the omission of this data in this record particularly obvious. The fact that the baptism did not take place until Inés was almost thirteen also suggests that the circumstances of her birth were complicated and controversial — perhaps the father had been married to someone else at the time.
of the new constitution explicitly prohibited the listing of birth status in civil and ecclesiastical registers. In response to these changes, the archdiocese of Havana eliminated legitimacy and race from sacramental documentation in late 1940.\textsuperscript{35} In the first four decades of independence, however, I suggest that there were three main instances in which priests and scribes would have excluded racial ascriptions from certain sacramental documents.

Instance one involves a kind of “passing” based upon physical appearance. Racial attributions in Cuba were made based upon phenotype as well as ancestry. The fluidity of racial ascription in Cuba meant that individuals could be on the “margins” of one major group and the next, and that they could fall into one of the “in-between” or “intermediate” categories – such as trigueño, jabao, and blanconazo (all somewhere between blanco and mulato) – which were most common in everyday usage. In late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Cuba, racial terms that implied African ancestry also strongly implied dishonor. As baptismal and marital records established a permanent record of identity and origins, I believe that in some cases, race was omitted for very light-skinned individuals who were considered “almost” (but not quite) White.

Why not simply declare such persons to be white? In colonial Latin America, determinations of whiteness were not made lightly (Twinam 1999). Recall for example that babies abandoned at the doorsteps of Cuba’s Casa de la Maternidad were recorded only as being “white in appearance” through the 1900s. Martínez-Alier notes that in late-colonial Cuba, white parents often “attempt[ed] to pass on their prerogatives to their mixed-race offspring … by omitting the coloured [parent’s] name in the registration” of their baptism (Martínez-Alier 1989:83). Many lighter-skinned Cubans, she also claims, themselves sought to avoid being classified as non-White in ecclesiastical and civil records.

I suggest that in twentieth-century sacramental documentation, for individuals who were “nearly white” in appearance, priests may simply have avoided affixing a racial label altogether. The rationale here is similar to the logic of “passing,” as this concept is understood in the scholarship on race in the American precivil rights era (i.e., Goffman 1963). Though unmarked

\textsuperscript{35} In September 1940, the archdiocese of Havana instructed priests to cease to qualify children as legitimate or natural. For purposes internal to the Church, however, they were permitted to state whether the parents had been married canonically or civilly. On the other hand, if information from a baptismal record were solicited for civil ends, scribes were only to provide a document certifying the date of the birth, date of the baptism, and names of the baby and parents. The 1940 decree did not state explicitly that race should be eliminated from parish records, yet color began to disappear about the same time. See \textit{Boletín de las Provincias Eclesiásticas de la República de Cuba}, Enero-Febrero 1940, Nos. 1-2, Año XXIX, pp. 86-87.
individuals may not have passed fully into the realm of whiteness, by failing to pin down their racial origins, priests allowed for the possibility that their descendants might become white and escape association with slavery and with Africa entirely.

Almost as important as phenotype in determining race was social status. Thus the second logic of omission is “unmarking” in recognition of achievement or rank. A racial ascription system that is “fluid” and “imprecise” allows context and circumstance to determine which racial labels should be affixed (de la Fuente 2001; Fernandez 1996; Twinam 1999). As Telles (2004:80) writes of Brazil, “whitening centered on a relational system with tensions that were often situationally resolved about who would be classified as white or as whiter than others.” The common adage “money whitens” referred to the fact that those who managed to acquire substantial wealth might also be eligible to move up the racial hierarchy (Hanchard 1999; Hutchinson 1957).

In colonial Cuba, this process was codified into law. A 1795 order issued by the Spanish Crown allowed non-Whites to purchase whiteness – and thereby “become persons of honor” – for a fee which was determined in accordance with their degree of racial mixture (Twinam 1999:19). In twentieth-century Cuba, well-to-do light-skinned mulatos might acquire an identity as White, or, as I suggest occurred here, they might also “pass” into the nether zone between the races, entirely defying racial categorization.

The reader may wonder if many of the unmarked persons were individuals born outside of the island who did not fit easily into Cuba’s long-established racial classification system. As I discovered after running cross tabs of race against place of birth, the answer is no. Less than a third of the individuals missing racial information were foreign-born, and nearly all of these were Spanish. Inquiring into the reasons that information on race might have been excluded for individuals born in Spain takes me to a discussion of the third, and perhaps most interesting, theorized logic for the omission of race, pertaining to omissions in the marital records: the imperative of hiding a discrepancy in racial origins.

Interracial Unions, Social Prejudice, and the Catholic Church
In colonial Cuba, long-term consensual unions between white men and women of color were fairly common and generally tolerated; but legal marriage was not. Marriage was a status symbol “reserved for social equals” (Martinez-Alier 1989:xv). In 1776 the Spanish Crown issued a Royal

36. An even more significant practice than the purchasing of whiteness was the purchasing of legitimacy, around which Twinam’s 1999 study is largely based.
37. One other instance must be mentioned as well. It includes haphazard or accidental omissions of racial data, as well instances of omission that may not have been strictly “random,” but are not pertinent to my interest in the construction of racial difference.
Figure 2. Baptismal record of Inés Hernández, Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Regla, August 20, 1932. Note that race and legitimacy are missing, and the mother’s name is “reserved.”
Pragmatic requiring parental consent for the marriages of individuals under twenty-five. The aim of the decree was to prevent legal unions between those unequal in rank, on the grounds that such marriages would result in “grave offenses against God the Father, family discord, scandals and other very serious disruptions to the moral and political order” (Konetzke 1962:406).

Over the next century, hundreds of cases were filed before the Cuban courts, as family members sought to prevent their relatives from marrying others considered to be inferior. Most cases involved white parents objecting to the union of their offspring with a lover known, believed, or suspected to have ancestral ties to Africa. For a white woman to be permitted to marry a man of color, she had to be “utterly miserable” in reputation or circumstances. One woman’s marriage was allowed because, as the daughter of a priest, her illegitimate origins “offset her suitor’s inferior color.” Another woman who was permitted to marry her moreno lover had lived openly with him for a decade. Far from imposing an ideology of racial exclusiveness from without, Martinez-Alier (1989) contends, the 1776 Pragmatic only crystallized sentiments deeply rooted within Cuban society. In a society organized around slavery, the “basic line of cleavage” and inequality was race (Martinez-Alier 1989:2-25). And even among mixed-race persons, distinctions of color and phenotype were employed as a means of social differentiation. Thus, the archives contain the records of a number of Cubans of color objecting to their child’s union with a darker-skinned spouse (Martinez-Alier 1989:93).

The interracial marriage restriction was lifted in 1881, a year after the formal abolition of slavery. But social prejudice against these unions remained strong.38 My review of some 14,500 marriages celebrated between 1901 and 1940 indicates that during the first decades of independence, formal marriages between Whites and non-Whites were very rare. At first glance, 96 percent of marriages appear to be endogamous with regard to race; meaning they took place between individuals who fell into the same racial stratum (see Table 2). Furthermore, the rate of racial endogamy appears to increase over time.

While it is clear that the overwhelming majority of marriages were endogamous, I believe that the apparent rate of racial in-marriage is exaggerated. In many cases, I contend, information on race may have been omitted from marital records in order to hide “inequality” in origins. As the litera-

38. In her study of interracial relationships in contemporary Cuba, Nadine Fernandez found that legal marriages between Whites and non-Whites remain exceptional today. She wrote, “Though laws do not prohibit interracial marriages, social norms continue to make them the minority. Concubinage and consensual unions are far more frequent” (Fernandez 1996:16). Furthermore, despite governmental claims that the problem of race has been “solved” in socialist Cuba, nonmarital relationships continue to provoke “a fury” in white families.
ture cited earlier has indicated, from the point of view of members of the elite classes, formal marriage between unequals was shameful and improper. Calling attention to disparate ancestry in a marital record might thus have been considered to be a pejorative act.

If the social logic of race in Cuba led priests to hide a discrepancy in origins, then there are implications for the composition of the population described as blanco, mestizo, or negro as well. In some instances, I suggest, a mulato engaged to a blanca may have been permitted to adopt his wife’s social race in the register of their marriage. It is much less likely that a person identified as White would have been “downgraded” to mulato. Migration up the hierarchy would have taken place among people of color as well. Darker-skinned negras were likely often characterized as mestiza, in accordance with the color of their spouse, in order to present an appearance of endogamy with regard to color. Alternately, they may have been permitted to move up the hierarchy as a recognition of distinguished status or merit.

Thus I theorize that a substantial number of cross-race or cross-color unions were hidden within the data, in one of three ways: (a) the race of one spouse was omitted (b) the race of both spouses was omitted, or (c) one spouse (generally the “darker” one) was allowed to “adopt” the race of the other.

To understand why Church officials would have gone to the lengths that are suggested in the preceding in order to conceal the ancestry of different individuals, we must consider the history of the colonial Church with regard to the issues of slavery and marriage. While the Catholic Church presented little organized opposition to the institution of slavery, it did, however, take a stronger stand when it came to the issue of interracial marriage. Church officials advocated marriage as a remedy for the widespread practice of concubinage between Whites and non-Whites, which was held to be a mortal sin. Havana Bishop Jacinto Martínez’s advocacy of interracial marriage in the late 1860s was partially responsible for his being expelled from the island.

39. I was first alerted to the possibility that this dynamic may have been at play in Catholic marital records during a conversation with Cuban historian Jorge Ibarra Sr. at his home in November 1999. In this conversation, Ibarra related to me his experience working as an enumerator for the 1953 census in the city of Santiago de Cuba. In numerous cases, he said, couples socially recognized as “interracial” prevailed upon census workers to list them both as being of the same race or color.

40. Most often priests bent to the demands of the planter class that religious duties towards enslaved persons not interrupt the harvest cycle, significantly cut into the workday, or place an undue financial burden upon planters (Maza Miquel 1995; Segredo Ricardo 2000). The Church found its most outspoken critics of slavery in Juan de Espada (Bishop of Havana from 1800-1832) and Padre Felix Varela who lived from 1782 to 1853. For more on the lives and work of Espada and Varela, see García Pons (1951), Figueroa y Miranda (1975), and Varela (1997).
(Martinez-Alier 1989). And when Antonio María de Claret married some 12,000 mostly mixed-race couples during his tenure as the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba (1850-1859), he provoked the outrage of members of the planter class, who claimed that his actions threatened the equilibrium of society (Marrero 1986). Thus certain sectors of the colonial church evidenced a strong desire to consecrate unwed interracial unions, despite the conflicts that their actions provoked with civil authorities and landed elites.

After 1881, legal barriers to interracial marriages were abolished, but social prejudice against such marriages remained. I suggest that priests began to selectively omit data on race as a strategy of “compromise.” As Martinez-Alier (1989:4) writes of the Church in the nineteenth century, “The Catholic Church did not attack slavery as such, but in its zeal to promote marriage and combat such excrescences of slavery as interracial concubinage, it challenged the social order which produced it.”

Hints from the Archives
Examination of a contingency table constructed with the marital data may shed some light upon the issues discussed (see Table 2). The population consists of all marriages (P = 14,348) solemnized in every year between 1901 and 1940, in the parishes of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad in Centro Habana, Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in el Vedado, and el Espíritu Santo in la Habana Vieja.

Spouses were first grouped into racial strata. Whites were placed in stratum A. Stratum B included all people who were given a racial label but were not classified as White – namely, mestizos, los de color, negros, morenos, pardos, and amarillos. Those whose race was not listed – no matter what their origins – were placed into stratum C. Thus a Spaniard listed as blanco fell into stratum A, and one with no given race fell into stratum C. (As I was interested in the ways that racial labels were applied or omitted, imposing my own logic of race onto the population, by classifying a racially unmarked Spaniard as “White” would have defeated my purpose). Jointly, the three racial strata resulted in nine possible combinations of couples, as found in Table 2.

41. José María Martín de Herrera, Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba from 1875 to 1889, was another activist prelate. He was instrumental in bringing about the 1881 repeal of the ban on interracial marriage (Martinez-Alier 1989).
42. See footnote 24 above for discussion of sampling methodology.
43. The term amarillo was used to refer to men born in China (P = 12). There were no women labeled amarilla in the population. Furthermore, this racial term was never applied to persons of partial Chinese ancestry only. The decision to place amarillo grooms in stratum B with other people of color was based on the convention used in the censuses of 1899, 1907, 1919, 1931, and 1943.
Table 2. Race of Brides and Grooms Contracting Marriage in Havana, 1901-1940

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<tr>
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<td>11450</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>11721</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>98% white men</td>
<td>0.5% white men</td>
<td>2% white men</td>
<td>100% white men</td>
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<tr>
<td>80% total</td>
<td>12% women of color</td>
<td>0.5% total</td>
<td>10% women no race</td>
<td>82% all women</td>
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<td>[B]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men of Color</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5% men of color</td>
<td>95% men of color</td>
<td>2.5% men of color</td>
<td>1% women no race</td>
<td>100% men of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.2% white women</td>
<td>86% women of color</td>
<td>0.1% total</td>
<td></td>
<td>4% all women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1% total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[C]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men No Race</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1746</td>
<td>2038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5% men no race</td>
<td>1% men no race</td>
<td>86% men no race</td>
<td>14% all women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5% white women</td>
<td>2% women of color</td>
<td>89.5% women no race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2% total</td>
<td>0.1% total</td>
<td>12% total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11748</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>14348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82% all men</td>
<td>4.5% all men</td>
<td>13.5% all men</td>
<td>100% all men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100% white women</td>
<td>100% women of color</td>
<td>100% women no race</td>
<td>100% all women</td>
<td>100% total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All marriages taking place every year 1901-1940, in the parishes of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in el Vedado, el Espíritu Santo in la Habana Vieja, and Nuestra Señora de la Caridad in Centro Havana (P = 14,348). Decimals greater than 0.5 are rounded up.

My basic finding was that the religious marital registration system was in fact overwhelmingly characterized by endogamy with regard to race. Only 4 percent of marriages took place between individuals who were not equally racially ascribed. If we consider only unions in which one partner was specifically labeled as White and the other was labeled *mestizo*, *negro*, or *amarillo* (marital strata AB and BA), then the number of such marriages drops to two-thirds of 1 percent.44

Even given the history of race and marriage in colonial Cuba, this finding is startling. Interracial couples appear to have almost never entered into formal marriage. Though I do believe that rates of interracial marriage were quite low, centuries of open miscegenation (acknowledged in the tripartite racial structure) lead me to view the rate of less than 1 percent with skepticism. In a society characterized by substantial fluidity and negotiability in racial ascription, taboos against interracial marriage would encourage priests

44. There were 76 recorded marriages of white men to women of color, and 20 recorded marriages of men of color to white women. Out of a total of 14,348 marriages between 1901 and 1940 in the three parishes, this is 0.67%.
to conceal discrepancies in the racial origins of spouses. In many cases, I have suggested, inequality in origins was hidden through the omission of data on race. In other cases, men and women of color may have been “whitened” to match the race of their partners.

Rates of in- and out-marriage varied considerably by group. Whites were 98 percent endogamous, with only a 2 percent apparent rate of out-marriage. People of color were 90 percent endogamous and therefore appear to have married out at five times the rate of Whites. Persons with no given race married to a spouse classified as White or non-White constituted 12.5 percent, thus their apparent rate of exogamy was over six times that of Whites. Exogamous pairings among this group, however, were almost surely much higher. In many cases of mixed-race pairings, I believe, the race of both partners would have been omitted; thus using the criterion employed in the current section, they would appear to be “endogamous.” The very large size of strata CC – at 12 percent of all marriages – would seem to strongly support a view that the primary imperative of racial ascription guiding priests and their scribes was to minimize or obfuscate any possible inequality in origins.

Other support for my hypotheses might be found in comparing the sizes of strata AC and CA (white men and women married to persons with no race) to strata AB and BA (white men and women married to persons described as mestizo, negro, or de color). The former strata are much larger than the latter. Such “half markings” involving Whites (listing one spouse as White and leaving out the race of the other) may have allowed for acknowledgement of the whiteness of one partner without overtly shaming their family by calling attention to the African ancestry of the other. Furthermore, such a practice would have made it easier for any of the couple’s offspring to claim the racial status of the white parent in the future (Martinez-Alier 1989:83).

The much larger size of CA (unmarked men and white women) compared to AC (white men and unmarked women) may suggest a gendered asymmetry to the value of whiteness, according to which it would have been a particularly valuable indicator of status for women. Given that in Iberian America, a white woman’s sexual and racial purity were long viewed as integral to the prestige of her family (Martinez-Alier 1989; Caulfield 2000; Fernandez 1996) this hypothesis seems especially plausible.

Lastly, the extremely tiny sizes of the groups CB and BC, unions between non-Whites and individuals with no given race (N = 28), suggest that this kind of marking had very little social utility. Why hide the racial origins of one spouse, if the other was already labeled as a member of a stained and tainted group?
Conclusions

In the preceding section, I have aimed only to offer suggestions as to the reasons why race may have been selectively omitted from certain sacramental documents. Researchers will be able to come to stronger conclusions by searching for clues outside of the data employed in this study. Approaches that would be fruitful include conducting genealogical studies of certain families to determine whether any of the unmarked or partially marked couples would have been socially considered “interracial,” or searching textual sources for clues concerning the gendered value of whiteness in early-twentieth-century Havana.

If it is true, however, that church officials often deliberately avoided racial labels for any of the reasons already suggested, then a rich picture of the dynamics of race and marriage in Cuba’s first constitutional era emerges. By omitting information on race, priests would have, for example, allowed higher-status Cubans of color to escape the stigma of African origins, in a vital document certifying ancestry and lineage.

This is not the same as arguing that Cubans of color were provided with an “escape hatch” by which they could “pass” permanently from one side of the color-line to the other (i.e., Degler 1971). The person labeled as mestizo at birth, who became a dentist, and was therefore allowed to “transcend race” in his marital record, would likely nonetheless have been barred from membership in Havana’s elite social clubs, on the grounds that he was still considered to be inferior to others who were, in that arena of social interaction, considered to be “white.”

Thus the practice of “unmarking” race that I highlight here – in that it appears to be deliberate – is not so different from the practices of “marking” discussed by Thomas Holt (1995) and others; in fact I would submit that it is part of the same dynamic. It is also related to the subtle ways of marking race without using racial labels that have been documented by Michael Zeuske (2002) in his work using Cuban notarial archives.

But did “unmarking” race have a particular significance, beyond that understood by theorists who have emphasized that the attribution of racial labels is situational and negotiable? Were there particular settings or circumstances in which this practice might have had special social importance? Consideration of the institutional domain of marriage suggests that we might answer this question in the affirmative. For one, the omission of racial labels could have allowed a couple to formalize an interracial union without directly arousing social indignation. In sum, through its omissions of race, the Church may have permitted certain individuals to “transcend” race; without significantly transforming its meaning, or challenging the hierarchies around which it was built.
REFERENCES


ENID LYNETTE LOGAN
Department of Sociology
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis MN 55455, U.S.A.
<elogan@umn.edu>