

Analysis

The story Mirta Ojito writes in “Best of Friends, Worlds Apart” is not an easy one to nail down. What she attempts is to show how racial identity can trump national heritage once an immigrant arrives on U.S. soil. Framed by the friendship of two Cuban men, the story sheds light on the divisive and formative power of stereotypes and assumptions based largely on skin color.



Achmed Valdés, top, and Joel Ruiz, bottom. In America, they discovered race matters. (Photo: Librado Romero/ The New York Times)

Ojito joins the story six years after Achmed Valdés, who is white, and Joel Ruiz, who is black, rode rafts from Cuba to Miami. She uses small moments to demonstrate the ways race determined direction in their lives (**Text: pp. 54, 57-58, 59**). The evidence resides in the places the men live and visit, the aspirations they reveal, and in the telling quotes Ojito provides. The story also shows that the emerging racial schism is made worse by the choices the men make and not simply the product of race’s inexorable pull.

Worth noticing is the way Ojito makes a point in the story of challenging the oft-repeated legend that Cuba under Fidel Castro had reached “racial utopia.” (**Text: pp. 53, 58, 65, 75**). Ojito shows that, like the state of race relations the men found when they arrived in Miami, the racial situation in Cuba is far more complicated than the myth implies.

Critical to this story are the voices of the two men, resonant as they are with the sounds of growing disillusionment, resignation, and judgment. Though Ojito says that she was reluctant to tell Joel the things Achmed had said about him (**DVD: Ojito, 2:59**), the moment proves poignant in the story (**Text: p.69**).

There are two times in the story when Ojito’s use of the word “black” can be instructive. In a passage about Cuba (scenes captured for Ojito by a freelance journalist), she makes the important contextual point that the phrase “un negro,” or “black,” used sometimes in Latin America as a term of endearment, is often hurled as an invective (**Text: pp. 65, 67**). When reporting across cultures, journalists need to be sure they understand in which way a source is using such terms.

Ojito also uses the phrase “black Miami” twice, once to reflect on Achmed’s fear after getting lost (**Text: p.64**), the other to identify Joel’s neighborhood (**Text: p.68**). Each time, it is easy for a reader to conclude that Miami’s black neighborhoods are, as Achmed described in one section (**Text: p.65**), places where “people were smoking crack in the middle of the street.” That, Ojito acknowledges (**DVD: Ojito interview, 6:15**), is not the

whole story. Precision—noting the specific neighborhood’s name, for instance—would have minimized the risk of overgeneralizing created by a phrase such as “black Miami.”

In the Classroom

One of the central issues in Ojito’s story, which may resonate with students, is the difference in racial awareness that exists for the two men. Ojito writes that race has driven a wedge between them that is “obvious to the black man but far less so to the white one.” How true to life does that seem to students?



Joel Ruiz collects cover charges at his uncle's bar in a Miami neighborhood. (Photo: Librado Romero/ The New York Times)

It might be useful to talk through the implications of that dissonance for interviewing across difference. Does a reporter adjust her expectations differently for white sources than for others, anticipating less awareness and/or candor from the former than from the latter? Elizabeth Llorente adds a little more texture to this issue, and her thoughts on the matter would be worth discussing as well (**DVD: Llorente interview, 8:30**).

Casting the Story

Journalists deciding whom they’ll choose as sources in stories about race and ethnicity should pay attention to a number of factors beyond skin color and point of view. There are a few important lessons learned by journalists interviewed for *The Authentic Voice*.

1. If your source is going to represent a large group, as was the case with Mirta Ojito, Allie Shah, (**DVD: Shah interview, 00:29**) and Anne Hull (**DVD: Hull interview, 2:53**), make sure you understand the full range of what they can—and cannot—bring to the story. You should also find out why they want to be in the story, because those feelings can lead to insights that you might never consider otherwise. Also, learn enough about the group, as Ojito tried to do (**DVD: Ojito interview, 00:45**), to know whether your sources are truly representative.
2. Be sure you’ve considered the widest range of possible stakeholders in your source base, not just the most obvious sources (**DVD: Donovan interview, 00:01**).
3. You’ll need access to the source for follow-up interviews. Getting to deeper truths in this area may require a second or third interview, as was the case with Mirta Ojito (**Text: p. 74**).
4. Be wary of how your own race or ethnicity may be affecting your casting decisions. As you decide which sources you’ll pursue, test your reasoning out on an editor or colleague. to guard against the undue influence of your biases.

5. If you don't speak the language of a source, you'll need a plan for getting the information the story demands. Determine how you'll compensate for some of the challenges of using interpreters that are identified by Elizabeth Llorente (**DVD: Llorente interview, 9:47**) and Steve Glauber (**Text: p. 246**).

Assignments

1. Research the ways the words “black,” “negrito,” and “negrita” are used in Latin American discourse. Do a short story about what these words can mean to people and how that meaning differs or meshes across race and within Latino communities. For instance, do Cubans bring different meaning to these words than Columbians or other Latin American groups? Find at least three sources for the report.



Achmed Valdés works as a deliveryman for a mattress company. (Photo: Librado Romero/ The New York Times)

2. Find two people who are friends but not of the same race or ethnicity. Interview them separately about their experiences and views on race relations, using the same questions for both interviews. Also, ask each to predict how the other would answer the questions. Ask permission to record their answers. Compare and contrast their answers in light of what you learned from Ojito's story. What lessons can you glean from the exercise?

3. Borrowing from what you've learned from reading Ojito's Q&A in the textbook and watching her DVD interview, do a commentary about how her race and ethnicity helped and/or hindered her journalism.