

Race and Revolution in Cuba

African-American Perspectives

Manning Marable

The historic Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem was packed to overflowing on Sunday night, October 22, 1995. A flood of dignitaries managed to make their way into church: Congressman Charles Rangel, Congressman José Serrano, and Congresswoman Nydia Velásquez; Minister Conrad Muhammad, leader of Harlem's branch of the Nation of Islam; Afrocentric scholars John Henrik Clarke and Leonard Jeffries; and radical feminist scholar/activist Angela Y. Davis. Reverend Calvin O. Butts welcomed his audience of 1,300 people and described Abyssinian's guest of honor as "one of the great leaders in the world."¹ Reverend Butts added that it had long been the tradition of his church "to welcome those who are visionary and revolutionary and who seek the freedom of all of the people around the world." Harlem black nationalist activist Elombe Brath informed his audience that the daughter of the keynote speaker was among the demonstrators denouncing his presence in New York City. Her behavior was "hardly" that one might expect of "family." But after all, Brath said, smiling, "Castro has family right here ... among us!" The audience roared with approval.²

Fidel Castro had come home to Harlem. Everyone in the audience knew about, and many remembered from personal experience, Castro's controversial visit to the United Nations thirty-five years earlier. Now part of Harlem's folklore, Castro was celebrated for staying at the Hotel Theresa, at the corner of 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. Other

world dignitaries who had traveled uptown to caucus with Fidel included Nikita Khrushchev, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Jawaharlal Nehru. Castro reminded his audience that his 1960 delegation had first been expelled from a fancy midtown hotel. "We were happy to have the heart of Harlem as our neighbors," Castro declared. "We could see the city's discrimination, it was so very obvious. As President Lincoln said, 'You can fool all the people some of the time—you can not fool all of the people all of the time'." Castro honored his African-American audience by adding: "You were never deceived. We were never deceived." There was thunderous applause.³

Now Castro had returned to the United States—and once more had been snubbed. He observed that he was not welcomed at a reception President Clinton had just hosted for other world leaders at the New York Public Library in midtown Manhattan. New York's conservative Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had also excluded Castro from attending a host of dinners and public receptions. "The Mayor says I was a demon, and a demon couldn't be invited to dinner," Castro explained. "So I said I'll go hungry the first day in New York." But Castro added, "As a revolutionary, I knew I would be welcome in this neighborhood." Castro was even appropriately attired for the occasion. Downtown at the United Nations, he had worn a conservative dark suit. For the Abyssinian audience, he put on his olive-green fatigues. The president of Cuba laughed: "How could I go to

Harlem in my business suit?" The United States had maintained an illegal embargo against his country for thirty-five years, but the Cuban people would defend their revolution. Castro's voice rose defiantly: "We will never change because we are right."⁴

The enthusiastic acclaim Fidel Castro received that evening was absolutely genuine. No white political leader, not even President Clinton, would ever come as close to receiving this kind of approval from literally every sector of the African-American community. To Nation of Islam minister Conrad Muhammad, Castro was respected for "maintaining the dignity of his nation and his dignity as a world leader." Castro's visit was "one of the few occa-

sions when we don't see a man bowing down and kissing the feet of America."⁵ Across the ideological spectrum of black American politics, Fidel was not viewed as just another Third World politician. Only Nelson Mandela of South Africa surpassed the moral authority and political credibility that Castro could claim within black America. For generations, African-American leaders have felt a deep affection for the people of Cuba and for their historic struggles for their self-determination. To explain how and why this is so is the subject of this essay, and this issue of *Souls*.

II

Cuba and black America are, by most criteria, very different societies. Yet they also share certain common historical experiences and social characteristics. These social and historical similarities form the context for an

ongoing political dialogue between the people of both nations. The exchange has frequently been sympathetic and in concert with acts of political solidarity. But it has also been filled with misunderstandings and ambiguities. Adding to the confusion is that Cubans and African Americans often use the identical language to describe a racial issue or concept, but they generally mean very different things.

The most obvious characteristic the two societies have in common is their histories of racialization. Cuba and the United States are

both "racial formations," societies constructed over hundreds of years with different kinds of racial hierarchies that were first developed in slave

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economics. What separates the two societies, however, is how the dynamics of racial domination and black resistance evolved over time. This is admittedly something of an oversimplification, but a proper starting point is found by examining the different meanings and definitions of "race." In the North American context, race as a social force generally had a two-dimensional or dual character. As it historically evolved, race was simultaneously imposed from without and constructed from within. That is, race in the United States represented a political economy of exploitation and subordinate sets of social relations largely coded by phenotype or skin color. To be "black" was to be overdetermined by sets of social and economic structures of domination, which were rationalized and justified by an elaborate ideology of white privilege. Yet for African Americans, "race" was also a site of resistance. The designation of racial inferi-

ority, imposed from without, gave the oppressed a very different and potentially creative perspective about the nature of power and how the society actually worked. In this sense, the category of race generated a series

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of modes of struggle, from expressions of cultural resistance to outright rebellion. From within the confines of the racialized social body, black Americans found a freedom to challenge the social

order in ways that most whites could barely conceive.

Cuba, by way of contrast, evolved a definition of race that was in certain respects one-dimensional. Blacks, whites, and everybody in between conceived of race as a social hierarchy that confined a segment of the society to the bottom rung. Blackness was therefore something to be avoided, overcome, transcended. Even to people of African descent, blackness represented a kind of stigmatization. Thus, the best way to approach the issue of racial differences was by not talking about race at all. Moreover, in countries like Cuba and Puerto Rico, a popular cross-race nationalism had developed by the late nineteenth century. Blackness by itself did not prohibit individuals of talent and ability, such as Antonio Maceo, from assuming leading positions in the struggle for national independence. In short, race mattered, but Cuban nationalism usually trumped race. Conversely, American nationalism was so intertwined with white supremacy that it is impossible to imagine an African-American Maceo assuming the role of George Washington or Ulysses S. Grant. In

the United States, to be "all-American" is presumed to be "white."

The Cuba model of race relations was influenced by its distinct historical and social development. Compared to other slave societies in the Americas and the Caribbean, Cuba's economic development occurred relatively late. It was only in the nineteenth century that Cuba took the place of Saint Domingue as the center of sugar production in the Western hemisphere. The expansion of the sugar industry depended upon labor, and this was the primary factor behind the massive importation of Africans into the country. Between 1811 and 1870, about 550,000 slaves were shipped into Cuba, or roughly the number that were transported to all of Spanish America in the previous century. The physical conditions for Cuban slaves were, by all accounts, horrific, and mortality rates on the sugar plantations were extremely high. But the legal and cultural structure for organizing race relations in Cuba, compared to that in the United States, was in many respects more liberal. In 1872, Cuba's racial composition included 287,000 African slaves, 107,000 mulattoes and free blacks, and 306,000 whites. Through the system of *coartacion*, many Africans were permitted to purchase their freedom.⁶ Mulattoes and free blacks still experienced extreme discrimination and economic liabilities. But they did not encounter the same virulent ideology of white supremacy and racial prejudice that was all too common in the United States.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, antislavery activists in both the United States and Cuba recognized the similarities between their respective slave societies and drew mutual support from each other. For example, at the outbreak of Cuba's Ten Years War (1868-1878), African-American leaders quickly rallied behind the movement for independence against Spain. They recognized that the most prominent general of the revolu-

tionary forces, Antonio Maceo, was black, and they also understood that this struggle would inevitably lead to the abolition of Cuban slavery. The great African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass declared that "the first gleam of the sword of freedom and independence in Cuba secured my sympathy with the revolutionary cause," and he urged young black Americans "to join their fortunes with those of their suffering brethren in Cuba."⁷ In 1872, the Cuban Anti-Slavery Society was founded in New York City under the leadership of black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet. The chief theoretician and political leader of the Cuban independence movement, José Martí, was personally close with black activists such as Garnet, and he frequently attacked the policies and practices of U.S. racism against African Americans and American Indians.⁸

A second factor that helped to foster links between Cuba and black America was the connection of both to the black Caribbean. Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries inspired a series of slave conspiracies and insurrections in the United States, including those of Gabriel Prosser in Virginia in 1800 and Denmark Vesey in South Carolina in 1822. There was among black Americans a recognition of racial solidarity through the struggles of the Haitian masses, as well as those of other black populations in the Caribbean region. Such linkages would become even more important a century later, as hundreds of thousands of Afro-Caribbean poor and working people migrated to both the United States and Cuba, in the desperate search for employment. Over 80,000 Jamaicans migrated to Cuba between 1919 and 1931. Another 140,000 black migrants, mostly from the Caribbean, entered the United States between 1899 and 1937. Historian Winston James estimates that by 1930, nearly one-fourth of Harlem's popula-

tion was of Caribbean origin.⁹ This black Caribbean diaspora was a vast international network where political ideas and protest organizations moved broadly across geographical boundaries.

One example of the intricate connections between the black Caribbean, black America, and Cuba was represented in the black nationalist international movement of Marcus Garvey. Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was founded in Jamaica in 1914 but soon developed a mass base of supporters throughout the United States. The UNIA also moved to establish contacts with the Afro-Cuban community. By the time Garvey visited Cuba in March 1921, there were already twenty-five UNIA branches across the island. When sectors of the Cuban press criticized Garvey's appeals to black solidarity and pan-Americanism as antithetical to Cuba's supposed tradition of nonracialism, his response said a good deal about the racial outlook of at least some Afro-Cubans. Garvey declared that it was

a mistake to suppose that I want to take [all] Negroes to Africa. ... Each Negro can be a citizen of the nation in which he was born or that he has chosen but I see the building of a great state in Africa which, featuring in the concert of the great nations, will make the Negro as respectable as others. . . . Cuban Negroes will be favored by the building of this African state because when this state exists they will be considered and respected as descendants of this powerful country which has enough strength to protect them.¹⁰

Although the UNIA at the height of its influence in Cuba claimed fifty-two branch organizations, the historical evidence indicates that the bulk of Garvey's local converts to black nationalism were workers from the non-Hispanic Caribbean, frequently of Ja-

maican background. Winston James observes that "Afro-Cubans would sometimes attend the meetings of the Garveyites, but seldom joined the organization." Most Cuban representatives at the UNIA's international conventions "had surnames like Collins, Cunningham and Taite."¹¹ Despite the somewhat limited appeal of Garvey, the U.S.-backed Cuban dictator, General Gerardo Machado, took nothing to chance. Garvey's newspaper, the *Negro World*, and the UNIA chapters were viciously suppressed. In 1930, Garvey himself was barred from ever visiting the island again. Machado sternly declared that racism did not exist in Cuba and that "the propaganda of Garvey is prejudicial to society in Cuba."¹²

A third element in the African-American-Cuban relationship was the parallel struggle that the oppressed people in both societies had waged for political democracy and, to a lesser extent, for self-determination. In the United States, blacks were deliberately barred from legal citizenship for more than two centuries, and for nearly one hundred more years they were effectively blocked from exercising their full constitutional rights. The black freedom movement that emerged in this context emphasized the redefinition and expansion of the concept of democracy and questioned the deeply flawed institutions of U.S. representative government, which rationalized and even celebrated white supremacy. In short, the practical experiences of being black in racist white America have taught African Americans that the United States had no monopoly on the true meaning of political freedom and that other societies should have the right to decide for themselves what their political institutions should look like. In Cuba, after centuries of Spanish domination, the United States claimed its own hegemony over the island and its people. Cuba was defined as part of "America's backyard," and its political insti-

tutions and economic system were expected to conform to U.S. interests. Thus, the insurgent democratic movements that emerged in twentieth-century Cuba also developed ideologies that were intensely critical of the U.S. model of political democracy.

Intellectuals, artists, trade unionists, and many others in Cuba and black America actively corresponded with each other and closely followed major political events in each country. One excellent example is provided by the great Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, who maintained extensive contacts with African-American artists and writers such as Langston Hughes.¹³ Just as important, the struggles of the African-American people served to inspire Cuban progressives. For instance, in 1931, when nine young black men were framed for the rape of two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama, and were threatened with execution, Cubans participated in the international campaign to save their lives. Mirta Aguirre's 1935 poem presents a powerful antiracist critique of U.S. society:

Scottsboro en Alabama
Scottsboro en Yanquilandia.
Es un hierro puesto al fuego
y elevado en las entrañas de una raza.
Nueve negros casi niños, sin trabajo
Dos mujeres, prostitutas.
Ley de Lynch, capitalismo, burguesía,
las tres K del turbia historia
Y a los pies del monstruo enorme de mil
garras,
nueve negros casi niños.
Scottsboro en Alabama,
en la tierra imperialista: Yanquilandia
es un manto de martirio y es un manto
de vergüenza
que cobija las dos razas.¹⁴

A new phase in Cuban-black American relations began on January 1, 1959, with the flight of dictator Fulgencio Batista to the Do-

minican Republic and the triumph of the Cuban revolution. The massive economic and social reforms initiated by the new government had the greatest positive impact upon Afro-Cubans, disproportionately represented at the bottom of society. The revolution's explicitly antiracist agenda was clearly stated by Fidel Castro in a televised speech on March 22, 1959. Outlawing racial discrimination in public accommodations, the workplace, and schools, Castro declared that "nobody can consider himself as being of a pure, much less superior, race."¹⁵ Black American opinion at the initial stages of the Cuban Revolution was generally favorable. In early 1959, the *Amsterdam News* published a series of articles documenting the prospects for the revolution and its implications for black people, both inside Cuba and the United States. One remarkable essay by John Young III, "The Negro in Castro's Cuba," located the significance of events in Cuba within the civil rights struggles then occurring throughout the South:

It is a mark of his destiny that in the present world struggle between Russia and the United States for friendship of colored peoples, the mantle of leadership has fallen upon the shoulders of the American Negro. This leadership has made him increasingly sensitive to injustice wherever it may occur in the world. It logically follows, therefore, that Cuba, with a great Negro population, should draw the active interest that has been manifested in Harlem during the present crisis. Then, too, the Batista injustices of lynching and police state are so remindful of the identical practices now prevalent against the Negro in the South.¹⁶

As hundreds of thousands of mostly white upper- and middle-class Cubans fled into exile in the United States, many black Americans began to interpret this exodus in dis-

tinctly racial terms. In 1959, journalist Ralph Matthews, writing for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, observed: "Every white man who cuffs, deprives and abuses even the lowest colored person, simply because he is white and the other colored, should have seared upon his consciousness the fact that it is possible for the tables to be turned. Castro has proved it in our time."¹⁷

In July 1960, a group of African-American writers and activists—including John Henrik Clarke, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Julian Mayfield, and Harold Cruse—were invited to Cuba, as Cruse later wrote, to "see for ourselves what it was all about." In his *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Cruse captured the contradictory feelings of some African Americans about the turbulent situation in revolutionary Cuba. "I was admittedly pro-Castro, but there were too many Communists around acting imperious and important," Cruse complained. "Yet we were treated with such overwhelming deference, consideration and privilege, it was difficult to be critical." The delegation made the long journey from Havana to the Sierra Maestra mountains, to attend the July 26 national celebration of the revolution. Cruse recalls:

We were caught up in a revolutionary outpouring of thousands upon thousands of people making their way up the mountain roads to the shrine of the Revolution, under the hottest sun-drenching any of us Americans had ever experienced. Jones and I stood shoulder-to-shoulder in a Cuban rebel army truck, packed to its side-ribbings with liberated Castroites whose euphoria we could feel profoundly, but not experience. . . . Our reward was the prize of revolutionary protocol that favored those victims of capitalism away from home.¹⁸

Despite being swept up in the spirit of revolution, Cruse was still troubled by the question

"What did it all mean and how did it relate to the Negro in America?"¹⁹

LeRoi Jones, representing a younger, more militant black generation, came away with very different impressions than Cruse. In his classic 1960 essay "Cuba Libre," Jones recounted his experiences traveling through revolutionary Cuba. At the July 26 rally, surrounded by thousands of people, the North American delegation was introduced to Castro on the speaker's platform. Jones grasped Fidel's hand and, through an interpreter, explained that he was a poet from New York City. Castro was amused and asked Jones what the U.S. government "thought about my trip. I shrugged my shoulders," Jones states, "and asked him what did he intend to do with this revolution." Jones continues:

We both laughed at the question because it was almost like a reflex action on my part; something that came out so quick that I was almost unaware of it. He twisted the cigar in his mouth and grinned, smoothing the strangely grown beard on his cheeks. 'That is a poet's question,' he said, 'and the only poet's answer I can give you is that I will do what I think is right, what I think the people want. That's the best I can hope for, don't you think?'²⁰

Two months after the delegation's visit to Cuba, Castro came to New York City to speak at the opening of the fifteenth session of the General Assembly. Although thousands of supporters greeted Castro upon his arrival, the U.S. government set severe travel restrictions on the entire Cuban delegation, forbidding it from leaving Manhattan. After refusing to give a \$20,000 security fee demanded by the management of the midtown Selburne Hotel, the Cuban delegation immediately relocated to Harlem's Hotel Theresa. Thousands of black and Latino Harlemites surrounded the hotel, cheering and carrying

pro-Cuba signs. Late on the evening of September 19, Malcolm X dropped by the Hotel Theresa to extend his personal greetings. The two leaders conversed for about an hour. Castro assured Malcolm that the new Cuban government was firmly committed to uprooting racism. "On racial discrimination," Castro stated, "we work for every oppressed person." Castro emphasized the growing political solidarity of the newly emerging countries of Africa and Latin America, praising African Americans for their leadership and struggles for political rights. "Negroes in the U.S. have more political consciousness, more vision than anyone else," he declared.²¹ Malcolm was deeply moved by Castro's sincerity. One reporter present at the meeting recalled that "Malcolm also expressed that it was good to see [Fidel] continue his struggle for all black people." In a subsequent conversation with Cuban journalist Reinaldo Penalver, Malcolm observed, "I am very interested in Cuba and also because the only white person that I have really liked was Fidel."²²

In April 1961, when anti-Communist Cuban exiles, supported by the CIA, attacked Cuba in an attempt to overthrow the Castro government, a number of prominent African Americans spoke out against the invasion. One group of black scholars and political activists—including W.E.B. Du Bois, LeRoi Jones, John Henrik Clarke, Shirley Graham, Harold Cruse, and Robert F. Williams—issued an appeal, entitled "Cuba: A Declaration of Conscience by Afro-Americans," which was published in the *Afro-American* on April 22, 1961. Black Americans "have the right and duty to raise our voices in protest against the forces of oppression that now seek to crush a free people linked to us by bonds of blood and a common heritage," the statement declared. "Thanks to a social revolution . . . Afro-Cubans are first-class citizens and are taking their rightful place in the life of the country where all racial barriers crumbled in

a matter of weeks following the victory of Fidel Castro." The anti-Castro forces were denounced largely in racial terms, drawn more from the U.S. context than from Cuba itself. "Now our brothers are threatened again—this time by a gang of ousted white Cuban politicians who find segregated Miami more congenial than integrated Havana." The statement concluded with an assertion that the black freedom movement in the United States was directly linked to the struggles of revolutionary Cuba: "Afro-Americans, don't be fooled—the enemies of the Cubans are our enemies, the Jim Crow bosses of this land where we are still denied our rights. The Cubans are our friends, the enemies of our enemies."²³

Other black intellectuals interpreted events in Cuba as the historical culmination of revolutionary movements throughout the Caribbean. C.L.R. James, in his 1962 essay entitled "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," observed, "What took place in French San Domingo in 1792–1804 reappeared in Cuba in 1958." James was also optimistic that the triumph of Castro had created the objective conditions for shattering U.S. capitalist hegemony in the Americas and the Caribbean. In his 1961 letter to American friends, James predicted: "The Cuban Revolution has brought the actual concrete social revolution to the American hemisphere for the first time. . . . [It] has unloosed the process of capitalist disintegration in the Western hemisphere."²⁴

In retrospect, it was literally impossible for the new revolutionary government to erase hundreds of years of racial inequalities and injustices in the span of several months or years. The new antidiscrimination laws, land reform, and the mass literacy campaign all had the greatest impact upon black Cubans. It is not surprising, therefore, that Afro-Cubans provided the revolution with its greatest constituency of supporters. But the ideology of

black inferiority and white privilege could not be shattered simply by government edicts. It would require a deeper, cultural transformation, the radical restructuring of the hegemonic ideas about race, color, and class that defined social reality for most Cubans. Black Americans, coming from their own very different racial formation, generally did not appreciate the enormous difficulties the Cubans faced in the construction of a more racially just social order.

The first prominent African-American activist who became bitterly disillusioned about Cuba was Robert F. Williams. Williams had gained national attention in 1959 for promoting the idea of armed self-defense for the black community in Monroe, North Carolina. Following a shoot-out with a unit of the state's national guard, Williams ultimately went into exile in Cuba. Upon his arrival, Williams promptly declared that the revolution had successfully eliminated racism. Yet Williams's nationalistic, racially separatist views inevitably came into conflict with his Cuban hosts. Williams began to criticize the Cuban government for refusing to permit blacks to develop their own political associations based on race. For their part, the Cubans believed that black American nationalism had little or no relevance to their situation and that race-based politics was inherently divisive and reactionary. Within several years, when Williams departed for Communist China, he bitterly announced that "power in Cuba was in the hands of a white petite bourgeoisie."²⁵

Even more problematic was Eldridge Cleaver, former convicted rapist and Black Panther Party minister of information, who arrived in Havana in late 1968. Cleaver immediately alienated his hosts by attempting to initiate a chapter of the Black Panther Party inside Cuba. He managed to recruit some African-American exiles who had hijacked their way into the country, as well as other dissidents.

After a hunting trip, he kept the weapons to be used for his insurrectionary plans. Undoubtedly, the Cubans were disturbed by Cleaver's schemes, and were instrumental in transporting him into a new home in exile in Algeria. Years later, after Cleaver renounced his revolutionary past and embraced born-again Christianity and conservative Republicanism, he harshly repudiated his links with Cuba. "The white racist Castro dictatorship is more insidious and dangerous for black people than is the white regime of South Africa, because no black person has illusions about the intentions of the Afrikaners, but many black people consider Fidel Castro to be a right-on white brother," Cleaver complained. "Nothing could be further from the truth."²⁶

Despite these and other problems raised by African-American revolutionaries inside Cuba, the vast majority of black activists in the United States continued to have generally favorable opinions of the Castro government. This feeling was reinforced by Cuba's decisive support for African liberation movements in the 1970s and 1980s. When the Portuguese pulled out of Angola in 1975 and civil war erupted, the Cubans threw their support behind the Marxist-oriented Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). The Cuban government sent 30,000 combat troops into the conflict, enabling the MPLA to defeat the South African-backed forces led by Jonas Savimbi. Three years later, the Cubans sent 20,000 troops to Ethiopia to assist a beleaguered Marxist regime in its border conflict with Somalia. Cuban medical personnel, teachers, and technicians were sent throughout the black world, from the social democratic government of Michael Manley in Jamaica to the New Jewel Movement regime of Maurice Bishop in tiny Grenada. Cuba's material solidarity with anticolonialist movements and radical states throughout the black diaspora became a major factor in the steady deterioration of U.S.-

Cuban bilateral relations. In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration imposed tougher sanctions against Cuba, including tightening the economic embargo and establishing Radio Martí, a U.S. government-funded media propaganda program aimed at Cuba. These international developments elevated Cuba's stature even among moderate U.S. black leaders, who held little regard for communism but appreciated the enormous sacrifices made by Cuba to assist struggling black nations. That Cuba's internationalism was largely funded by Soviet economic assistance equaling \$3 billion by the mid-1980s was largely irrelevant to most black Americans. What was abundantly clear was that Cuba's interventions in southern Africa were decisive in the efforts to topple the white-minority, apartheid regime in South Africa.²⁷

The collapse of Soviet communism abruptly ended the bipolar superpower conflict and eliminated the context for Cuban internationalism across the black and Third Worlds. More than 80 percent of Cuba's foreign trade in 1988 was with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The demise of this trade plunged Cuba into an economic free fall, termed the "Special Period." Shortages of manufacturing and agricultural equipment, in addition to a lack of foreign exchange, produced a decline in Cuba's gross domestic product of 50 percent in only four years. Out of necessity, U.S. dollars were decriminalized and freely permitted to circulate in the general population. Corporate investment from Europe, Canada, and Mexico was eagerly solicited. By 1997, there were over 300,000 Cubans who had registered as private entrepreneurs with the government. New resort hotels were rapidly constructed to cater to a thriving tourist business.²⁸

All of these changes have had profound racial consequences inside Cuba. Prostitution is once again flourishing in major cities, and it is now virtually impossible to enter or leave

a major hotel or night club without encountering prostitutes. To an uncomfortable degree, the Cuban state is now promoting sex tourism, marketing the bodies of black and mulatto women especially for European guests. The restrictive policies of the United States have also accelerated new problems of racialization. For example, about 100,000 Cuban-American exiles, who are overwhelmingly white, now travel to Cuba annually. They send over \$1 billion to their relatives in Cuba each year.²⁹ In effect, the Cubans who are largely white and who are related to people whose sole political objective is the destruction of the Cuban state, are receiving massive amounts of money. This group's newfound affluence means that Cubans who have remained loyal to the revolution, especially Communist Party members, government officials, and the Afro-Cuban population generally, are increasingly economically disadvantaged. In a similar way, the U.S. policies toward the Catholic Church in Cuba are deliberately designed to reinforce new racial divisions. Under the rubric of humanitarian aid, the U.S. government and private groups are funneling resources into the Catholic Church, fully recognizing that this has always been a Spanish, mostly white, upper-class institution. As of 1998, of Cuba's 250 priests, roughly one-half were foreigners and only two were black. During Pope John Paul II's 1998 visit to Cuba, an anti-Castro exile group seized the opportunity to distribute baseball-card-sized images of the Virgin of Charity, la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. Although always historically depicted as colored, these images, financed by grants from the U.S. government, show the Virgin of Charity as a white woman.³⁰

The Cubans have generally become more candid over the years about the shortcomings and contradictions of race that still exist within their society. At the Communist Party's Fifth Congress in October 1997, party

members were "reminded to be vigilant against racism."³¹ The number of Afro-Cuban leaders on the party's twenty-eight member political bureau increased from three to six. Nor has Cuba forgotten its special relationship with black America. In May 1990, the Casa de las Americas hosted a conference on the theme "Malcolm X Speaks in the 90s," which attracted a number of African-American political activists, journalists, and scholars. On the final day of the symposium, Castro made an appearance and gave a brief, but very moving, personal statement. "We

have always been in solidarity with the struggle of black people, of minorities, and the poor in the United States," the Cuban leader declared. "I think that in these times we need that friendship more than ever, and we need your solidarity more than ever. And we fully appreciate it, because we understand that one has to be very courageous to organize a rally supporting Cuba in the United States." Castro expressed regret for not spending more time talking with Malcolm X during his 1960 visit to New York City, but he was "grateful" to the African Americans for their participation "in the seminar in remembrance of Malcolm X. Now, more than ever," Castro emphasized, "we have to remember Malcolm X, Che [Guevara], and all the heroes of the struggle and the cause of the peoples."³²

More recently, the Cuban government and people have extended their solidarity as part of an international campaign to free African-American political activist and journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is currently on death row in Pennsylvania. In 1995, as black activists in the United States mobilized to force a stay of execution, the Cubans responded in

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kind. Black American journalist Rosemary Mealy observed: "From Havana to Las Villas, from Oriente to Camaguey, the message upon the lips of the Cuban people echoed: '¡No Ensombrezcas, Philadelphia!' (translated: Don't Put a Death Shroud on Philadelphia!)." The National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, the Cuban Federation of Women, the Union of Cuban Journalists and Writers, and many other organizations became actively involved in the solidarity campaign. Cuban journalist Carlos Castro Sanchez initiated a petition and open letter denouncing the "political persecution" of Mumia Abu-Jamal "because of his ideas and his writings." When the temporary stay of execution was granted, Cuba's press and radio "jubilantly announced" the decision. Mealy also quotes a poem that captures the essential connection between the historic struggles of African Americans and the Cuban revolution:

*When powerful nations threaten us
with their demagoguery and war
machines,
when our freedom fighters face death at
the hands of the state,
We listen to Cuba when she pierces the
walls of the propaganda
with the truth—
while challenging without fear
her enemy.
We have observed Cuba reaching out to
the world
through acts of active solidarity.
It is understandable how a Cuban child
would hold my hand and tell me
emphatically—
"Mumia will be free!"³³*

III

In June 1997, the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia Uni-

versity sponsored a delegation of African-American scholars and writers on a nine-day research mission to Cuba. The fifteen-member delegation was hosted by the Center for the Study of the Americas in Havana. The goal of the delegation was to engage in a critical exchange between black Americans and representatives of Cuban cultural, academic, and governmental institutions. There were four major themes of concern that the delegation addressed: the changing role of race and the status of Afro-Cubans within society; issues of gender and the status of Cuban women; the socioeconomic impact of market-oriented policies and the growth of private investment; and debates about human rights, political pluralism, and the future role of the Cuban Communist Party. The Cubans were extraordinary frank in their discussions with us. Nothing was defined as out of bounds. We challenged our hosts at every turn, especially on the issue of race.

The papers in this volume are the product of that 1997 journey. For black America, Cuba remains part of the imagined community of the black world, a contradictory yet hopeful site of where race might be transformed, if not entirely dismantled, as a social force.

Notes

1. Joe Bragg, "President Fidel Castro Received Hero's Welcome to Harlem," *New York Beacon*, November 1, 1995. Butts had first met Castro in 1984, when he was part of a delegation of theological scholars attending a conference in Cuba.

2. Castro's daughter, Alina Fernandez Revuelta, officially defected from Cuba in 1993, during the severe economic crisis of the "Special Period." Fernandez had been a model and public relations director for a Cuban fashion company. She is now a prominent spokesperson for anti-Castro Cuban extremist groups. See Alina Fernandez Revuelta, *Castro's Daughter: An Exile's Memoir of Cuba* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

3. For news coverage of Fidel Castro's speech at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, see Cathy Connors, "Si, Si, Si ... ! Harlem Welcomed Fidel!" *New York Amsterdam News*, October 28, 1995; Hugh R. Morley,

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- Record* (New Jersey), October 23, 1995; and Juan Forero, "Castro Criticizes the West," *Star-Ledger* (Newark), October 23, 1995.
4. John F. Harris, "Harlem Warmly Embraces Castro," *Washington Post*, October 23, 1995.
 5. Bragg, "President Fidel Castro Received Hero's Welcome to Harlem."
 6. Ronald Segal, *The Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), pp. 83–85.
 7. Lisa Brock, introduction to Lisa Brock and Digna Castaneda Fuertes, eds., *Between Race and Empire: African-American and Cubans Before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p. 8.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 9. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 12, 29.
 10. Thomas Fernandez Robiana, "Marcus Garvey in Cuba: Urruita, Cubans, and Black Nationalism," in Brock and Castaneda Fuertes, *Between Race and Empire*, pp. 120–121.
 11. James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, p. 196.
 12. Brock, "introduction," p. 9.
 13. See Keith Ellis, "Nicolás Guillen and Langston Hughes: Convergences and Divergences," in Brock and Castaneda Fuertes, *Between Race and Empire*, pp. 129–167. Also see Edward Mullen, ed., *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and in Haiti* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977).
 14. Mirta Aguirre, "Scottsboro," in Carmen Gomez Garcia, "Cuban Social Poetry and the Struggle Against Two Racisms," in Brock and Castaneda Fuertes, *Between Race and Empire*, p. 230. The English translation of Aguirre's "Scottsboro" is as follows: Scottsboro in Alabama, Scottsboro in Yankeeland. It is an iron put to the fire and lifted into the belly of a race. Nine blacks almost children, out of work / Two women, prostitutes. / Lynch law, capitalism, bourgeoisie, the three Ks of shady history / And at the feet of the enormous monster with a thousand claws, nine blacks almost children. Scottsboro in Alabama, in imperialist territory: Yankeeland / is a cloak of martyrdom and a cloak of shame which covers the two races.
 15. Segal, *The Black Diaspora*, p. 234.
 16. Van Gose, "The African-American Press Greets the Cuban Revolution," in Brock and Castaneda Fuertes, *Between Race and Empire*, p. 273.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
 18. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), pp. 356–357.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 357.
 20. LeRoi Jones, "Cuba Libre," republished in Rosemari Mealy, ed., *Fidel and Malcolm X: Memories of a Meeting* (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1993), p. 71.
 21. Ralph D. Matthews, "Going Upstairs—Malcolm X Greets Fidel," *New York Citizen-Call*, September 24, 1960, reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 41–44.
 22. Interviews with Jimmy Booker and Reinaldo Penalver, in *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 58.
 23. "Cuba—A Declaration of Conscience by Afro-Americans," *Afro-American*, April 22, 1961, reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 79–80.
 24. James would later be troubled by Cuba's growing dependency on the Soviet Union. He attended the Cultural Congress held in Havana in January 1968 and reported on the event several months later in London in a paper entitled "Cuba Report." After this report, James was virtually silent about his attitudes on Cuba and Latin America until his death in 1989. An excellent discussion of James's evolving views about Cuba is provided in Santiago Colas, "Silence and Dialectics: Speculations on C.L.R. James and Latin America," in Grant Farred, ed., *Rethinking C.L.R. James* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 131–163.
 25. Williams's highly critical appraisal of the Cuban revolution is presented in Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles: Center for African Studies, UCLA Press, 1988). Moore has become the most controversial black nationalist opponent of the Cuban government. He was originally born in Oriente of black West Indian parents. Moore was one of the endorsers of the 1961 "Declaration of Conscience by Afro-Americans" in behalf of Cuba.
 26. On Eldridge Cleaver's misadventures in Cuba, see Moore, *Castro, the Blacks and Africa*, and also Kathleen Route, *Eldridge Cleaver* (Boston: Twayne, 1991).
 27. See William M. Leo Grande, *Cuba's Policy in Africa, 1959–1980*, Policy Papers in International Affairs, no. 13 (Berkeley: University of California, 1980); and Jorge Domíquez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
 28. William M. Leo Grande, "From Havana to Miami: U.S. Cuba Policy as a Two-Level Game," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 40 (1) (April 1, 1998): 80–101.
 29. Maria T. Padilla, "The Pope's Visit: Political Discontent Raises Accusations of Intolerance," *Orlando Sentinel*, January 11, 1998.
 30. Alfred L. Padula, "White Exile Elite Runs Cuba Policy," *Portland Press Herald*, March 29, 1998.
 31. Lori S. Robinson, "Race and Revolution," *Emergence* 9 (6) (May 1998): 51–57.
 32. Mealy, *Fidel and Malcolm X*, pp. 59–61.
 33. Rosemari Mealy, "Cuba—In Defense of Mumia," in S. E. Anderson and Tony Medina, eds., *In Defense of Mumia* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1996), pp. 214–218.