

# Cuba

## *Great Contradiction, Even Greater Promise*

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I remember, as a child, being thoroughly perplexed by grown folks' rants and tirades over something called "The Bay of Pigs." I remember the maelstrom of accusations, the bitterness, disbelief, and fear generated by the divide over this strange, porcine bay. The divide, I recall, was absolute and unrelenting. On one side stood the ruthless Fidel Castro and the Communist threat—demonic enemies against the free world. On the other side stood the courageous Fidel Castro and socialist ideals—righteous forces against U.S. imperialism. At school and in the many spheres of public life, American was good and Cuban was bad. Moreover, capitalism meant democracy and communism meant tyranny. But within the private sphere of my home, Cuba was the David that had struck down the giant puppet Batista. Cuba spit in the face of red-white-and-blue racism and capitalism, sending both puppet and his strings back north.

In the eyes of many black people, particularly those who identified with the Communist Party, the Cuban Revolution was a triumph for the oppressed masses. Fidel seemed the embodiment of the socialist visionary.

Talking bad about Fidel in some black homes was equivalent to burning the flag in some white ones. But that was then, and this is now. Now, I have actually gone to Cuba (see Editor's Essay). And as with all experiences in which memory, imagination, and expectation confront the palpable reality of "actually *being there*," Cuba has tried and tested my notions of its meaning and its future.

Many long hours of reflection on my visit to Cuba have made a mess of the clear bifurcations of my youth (and a few lasting ones I have tried to hold on to). Relying on the framework of capitalism versus communism, crying out for the purity and preeminence of either has proven regressive at best and genocidal at worst. But what will be the "new model" for Cuba, and how will it take form? Cuba knows it must begin the process of political change. But which vestiges of the revolution should remain and which should go? How will Cuba preserve its socialist principles that guarantee health care, shelter, and education for all its citizens while embracing free speech and multiple political interests? How will it open the

market without reintroducing the racial and economic stratifications it fought so long and hard to eradicate? There is no better place for reinventing democracy and citizenship than Cuba. It is a country at the crossroads, with the second coming just over the horizon. But will it come forth in an apocalyptic storm, a grueling defeat, or a progressive transition?

In Cuba, culture and politics appear both together and apart—the proverbial love-hate dynamic. Cuba is volatile, yet strangely stable. It is a country filled with hope and despair, possibility and peril, creation and containment. These tensions surface most dramatically in the country's visual politics, its silent signs and symbols. During my visit, I found that Cuba's greatest challenges and its greatest possibilities lay in the areas of race, gender, and symbol.

### **Race: The Law and the Everyday**

Structure and law are not separate from sensibility and value, but ontologically they may operate at cross-purposes. Although we cannot exist without them, we are incessantly waging wars between them. Law may govern our behavior in one direction, but our feelings may lead us in another. Discrimination is against the law in Cuba, but racial prejudice survives. Perhaps surprisingly, some of the strongest denials of racism in Cuba come from Afro-Cubans working in government, education, and the arts.

Before the revolution, the majority of Afro-Cubans lived lives of geographical confinement, educational and economic deprivation, and legal discrimination. Those Afro-Cubans who fought for and won their freedom from European colonialism at the turn of the last century found themselves the victims of a Cuban regime built on racism,

elitism, and U.S. imperialism. The revolution of 1959 represents the victory of those Afro-Cubans who lived in the hills of Oriente and fought with the guerrillas to cast off the injustices of a racist and corrupt government. They represent both pledge and evidence that Afro-Cubans have become an integral part of the fabric of Cuban culture.

During my recent visit with the Columbia University delegation, many Cubans vehemently denied the existence of racism in their country. As black people from the States, were we trying to force them into our own racial paradigm, even when they refused to fit into it? Were we, as some Afro-Cubans suggested, ignoring their unique history? Some Afro-Cubans insisted that if there is racism in Cuba, it is left over from the "old days," a remnant from the era of Batista. It is not simply that racism is illegal, they explained; it is also against the principles of the revolution.

But I saw signs that the revolutionary vision of racial equality was now, more than ever, being tested. One day, for example, I realized I had not brought my extra bottle of contact lens solution. So I asked the hotel staff where I might purchase more. They told me I could get the solution at the hospital. When I first arrived at the hospital, no one understood what I was talking about. Eventually, the hospital directed me to another location, farther away. The neighborhood to which they directed me was far more affluent than any I had seen. The store itself was in a rather large and charming home with a beautiful, ornate black wrought-iron fence circling it. I opened the gate, walked up the few steps and entered the building. Inside was a rather intimate and exclusive boutique, no mere chain-store House of Vision. Mirrors and tinted glass filled the room, with elegant vanity tables and stylish eyeglasses carefully and artistically arranged on the walls and on the accent tables. As I walked into the room, I

felt that familiar *weight*, the *weight* of entering a room filled with white people who don't expect you to be there—and who, moreover, aren't particularly pleased that you've arrived. Black people know this weight too well. It is not a figment of our imagination; it is unmistakable and real. It

is not the weight of rejection but the weight of needing to be cautious. The white people, so clean and pressed, turned and looked at me as if I had two horns and a tail. I hadn't felt the weight since I left the States. I purchased my contact lens solution from a polite, reserved redhead. Then I left.

Back at the hotel, the workers were also marked by color: The dark-skinned Cubans did the cleaning while the light-skinned Cubans interacted with the public. While white Cuban women in hotel uniforms greeted guests inside, Afro-Cuban women in Spandex and high heels hustled johns outside. The circumstances of the eye boutique and the hotel do not negate the progressive racial strides of Cuba, but they do raise questions about the idea of Cuba as a racial utopia. More important, they raise questions about the "costs" or consequences of the transition to an eventual open market.

### **Women: The Distribution of Labor**

During the visit, representatives from the Cuban Federation of Women and the Women's Studies Program at the University of Havana explained another vision of the

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revolution: gender equity. Women, they said, are regarded as comrades, equal partners in the work and sustenance of the state. The government ensures reproductive rights; education and career are the norm. But whereas women function in both the domestic and public spheres, they

pointed out, men remain identified with the public sphere. Caring for home and children is still "women's work." As one of the representatives from the Federation of Women stated:

The Special Period is hardest on the woman, because she must do everything: she works a job and then she must come home and cook, clean, and care for her husband and children. Because the Special Period has brought on a shortage of foodstuffs and supplies, it is primarily the woman who must go out and find these things for her family and carry them home.

If they do all the work, I wondered, do they also rule? Or, if they ruled, would they be doing all the work?

The recent surge in prostitution raises further issues regarding gender relations. The Special Period depends on tourism—and tourism's goal is profit. Profit is good for Cubans; it is what the Cubans want. The fall of the Soviet Union and the U.S. embargo have left the country with little choice but to open the market, though only at certain levels and for certain Cubans. Right now, tourism is the golden egg. It is the most expedient, efficient, and lucrative means to rescue the economy.

The irony is that tourism depends upon the advertisement and sale of a culture. That which is indigenous, enigmatic, and often sacred also becomes commodified for foreign purchase. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Beyond attaining needed economic resources for the country, it may ideally cultivate cultural knowledge, appreciation, and exchange. However, when a country is in dire need, the culture that is up for sale is also open to exploitation, and women's bodies are often the targets.

Tourism across the globe invites prostitution. In countries where color caste is a reality, the shade of one's skin often determines desire and disgust. Most of the prostitutes that I saw in Cuba were Afro-Cuban women. As a result of their sexualized dark skin, these women have become objects of both exotic fetish and profane lust. The black woman's body has been devalued, in sharp contrast to the ideals of the revolution. Are these women no longer comrades or sisters in the struggle? Have their bodies become a sign that the times have changed? Have their bodies now become signs of loss, political compromise, moral decay, and European dollars?

Some would argue that these women are not indiscriminate victims at all. In this argument, the women are in control of their bodies, using the licentious desires of foreigners to make a profitable life for themselves and their families. Prostitution, in this argument, is truly a *sex trade*, with losses and gains on both sides. No doubt this argument contains some truth. But illegal prostitution and European tourism in Cuba have also brought incredible abuse, death, sickness, and desperation to many of these women. How, I wonder, will the government handle the tourist trade when one of its major attractions is the trade of sex? How will Afro-Cuban women resist further disenfranchisement as their bodies become objects of jaded desire and symbols of racialized disgust?

### **Symbol: Memory, Revolution, Che Guevara, and a New Generation**

Race and gender inequities are formidable foes for the Cuban people and for the promise of the revolution. Whatever it may mean to be Cuban, the revolution serves as the reference point for inspiration and direction. Therefore, the revolution must be sealed in the collective memory of the Cuban people. Cubans must fight against forgetting, lest their struggle, past and present, lose its purpose. The Soviet Union may fall, Cubans may risk death and flee in boatloads, racism and sexism may threaten harmony, and some may walk in fear and silence, but the spirit of the revolution must survive.

The revolution is no more. Therefore, symbols must remain to assure a living memory of it. Che Guevara is the icon of the revolutionary spirit. His image is a looming presence, painted on billboards, plastered onto buildings. The visual politics of this image speak a thousand words. Che's image is signifying presence of the revolution *vis-à-vis* Cuban identity. However, the visual representation of Guevara also signifies discipline and sacrifice. This young and handsome fighter was both soldier and martyr, dying because of the sins of capitalism, sacrificing himself for sovereignty. He is Cuba's mythic hero—not myth as untruth, but myth as supreme truth. He is the mythic icon, the metaphor by which a people and a culture live and shape its values. He is the archetypal hero: the journeyer, the transformed, the cast-out, the courageous, the one who offers his body in the ultimate sacrifice of death. Che can live only through our memory, the memory of his sacrifice, and the spirit of the revolution. To defy the state is to defy this living memory, and to defy the revolution is to defy Che Guevara.

The visual sign as political symbol not only generates meaning and story and memory but also forms a mythic and reverential relationship—a kinship—between the spirit and body of the symbol and the spirit and body of ourselves.

In October 1997, Julio Cortazar remarked on the death of Che: "Use my hand once more, then, my brother. It has done them no good to cut off your hands, it has done them no good to kill

you and hide you away with such infamous cunning. Take my pen, and write." Che lives on in the pen, promise, and symbols of Cuban culture.

Perhaps Afro-Cubans defend the racial policy of Cuba partly because the symbol of Che and the symbol of the revolution constantly remind them of the difference between their present and their prerevolutionary past. Perhaps women live and work through the inequities of labor divisions because the memory of the revolution offers hope for a better life. Perhaps, though, these symbols that seal memory and entrench ideology do just the opposite, heightening the revolution's unmet promises. What of those Cubans who do not cherish the mythic Che, the spirit of the revolution, and the lauded leadership of Fidel, who do not revere them as heroes for the defense of freedom and the sovereignty of the state?

The preservation of cultural memory and collective ideology is always contingent upon persuasion and continuity. With each generation, living memory and symbol must be taught again and anew against the landscape of contemporary pressures and change. During the visit, several Afro-Cuban women suggested that the young people talk against the

state because they are mindless and immature and do not know their history. But is it only the young who are foolish, who have renounced memory and history? There are the older Cubans as well, some of whom may

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remember too much, some of whom are not members of the Miami elite, some of whom fought in the revolution. There are those who lived the history, who still revere Che and the

spirit of the revolution, but who lament that their revolutionary dreams have turned into a nightmare of repression and loss.

For some of us, Fidel Castro has made an indelible mark on human history as a great defender of the disenfranchised; for others, he remains a man whose ideological immobility flawed his vision and narrowed his reach. Fidel Castro set Cuba on a path that has reached a crossroads; in this hour of the crossroads, will he budge? Can the international community pressure the U.S. government to do its part in ending the ideological, political, and material demonization of Cuba, to begin a humane and effective normalization process?

Cuba is our greatest hope for a new model of democracy and socialism, for a government that ensures every citizen access to education, health care, housing, a fair wage, and creative expression. It is our greatest hope for a government that guarantees reproductive freedom, freedom of public dissent, freedom of worship, freedom of travel, freedom of the market, and the freedom to form and choose multiple political interests. The question remains, though, whether Cuba can guarantee the welfare of its citizens while also guaranteeing freedom of expression to its fullest capacity.