

Reflections

on Cuba

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*History,
Memory,
Race, and
Solidarity*

In 1859, more than fifty years after the Haitian Revolution, black nationalist Martin Delaney published what is often considered African America's first full-length novel, *Blake, or the Huts of America: A Tale of the Mississippi Valley, the Southern United States, and Cuba*. In *Blake*, the title character travels throughout North America and Cuba, planning a massive general slave rebellion. He meets the Cuban abolitionist poet Gabriel de la Concepción, popularly known as Placido, executed in real life by the Spanish in the 1840s. With Placido's poetry for inspiration, the general slave uprising begins.

In 1881, a story and full-page picture of Frederick Douglass appeared on the front page of *La Fraternidad*, Cuba's leading black revolutionary newspaper. In 1884, *Minerva*, a Cuban magazine for women of color, printed stories about women in the African diaspora, including struggles against racism and sex-

ism in the United States. In 1900, the first professional African-American baseball team traveled to Cuba and held games with Cuban teams. The name of the all African-American team was actually the Cuban X-Giants!

Almost 100 years later, the cultural exchange between Cubans and African Americans continues. In 1996, jazz musician Roy Hargrove traveled to Cuba and teamed up with Irekere's Chucho Valdez to create the group Crisol, which produced the CD *Habano*. Hargrove and Valdez were following the tradition of Dizzy Gillespie, Chano Pozo, Mario Bauza, Frank Grillo (Machito), and Charlie Parker, all of whom collaborated in the creation of what has become known as Latin jazz.¹ As we African Americans reflect on the difficult transition faced by Cuba today and interrogate our contemporary relationship with Cuba, it is important to know where we have been. African Americans and



Street scene in Matanzas. Photo by Chester Higgins Jr.

Cubans have had a long and intimate historical tie that predates the revolution. Although there has been a long tradition of interaction and exchange, especially in the sphere of popular culture, there remains a lacuna in the area of our ideological and political assessment of the relationship between Cubans and African Americans.

Some African-American intellectuals throughout history have indeed taken up the challenge of interrogating that relationship. In 1977, for instance, the *Black Scholar* published a special issue on Cuba. The issue combined essays by artists, intellectuals, and activists such as Bernice Johnson-Reagon and Alice Walker, who had traveled to Cuba with Robert Chrisman, the editor of the *Black Scholar*. Johnson-Reagon, Walker, Johnnetta Cole, and others wrote about their experiences and impressions of the Cuban revolution at that time. Despite such instances of

engagement, U.S. blacks have not come together on a national scale—at least not in contemporary history—to reflect on the question of Cuba. In 1872, Henry Highland Garnet held a meeting at New York's Cooper Union, intending to lay a framework for the formation of a Cuban antislavery society. Although today's mission is not as explicit as Garnet's, the example of these earlier activists raises a serious question: What role should African Americans take in relation to Cuba during this current time of crisis? Should we be talking about a national agenda vis-à-vis Cuba? Should we be talking about building (or rebuilding) a highly politicized and organized Cuban solidarity movement within the black community?

As *Souls* editor Manning Marable pointed out in his 1984 article "Race and Democracy in Cuba," "Cuba is the first and only nation in the western hemisphere with a significant

black population to really experience socialism.⁷² Even with its contradictions, the Cuban Revolution has dramatically increased the material well-being of its black population, provided safe harbor for African-American political prisoners, given unconditional development support to small developing nations, and opposed apartheid in southern Africa. Che Guevara, working on behalf of the Cuban Revolution in the Congo in the 1960s, paved the anti-imperialist way for the Cuban and Angolan air forces to defeat the South African troops at Cuito Cuanavale in 1987. This helped to turn the tide in the struggle against apartheid. Moreover, it was the only time in history when a nonwhite, non-Western air force actually defeated a Western one decisively in battle. Given the Cubans' accomplishments, there is real reason for us to work like hell in solidarity with Cuba and to build (or retool) a solidarity base in the black community.

Within the solidarity movement, however, we need a willingness to be self-critical. In recent years, many in Cuba and on the left in the United States have made great strides in this direction. They have become increasingly balanced in their approach to both the advances and the shortcomings of the revolution. Yet the question of race in Cuba remains a major problem. Although the Cuban government has recognized African contributions to Cuban culture and has promoted African cultural initiatives, there continues to be a reluctance to promote a critical discourse on race as an ongoing modern construct in Cuban history and society. The result is a classic folklorist and somewhat nostalgic view of race. This approach to race, while appealing to some, is limiting and problematic for most African Americans who look to Cuba as an experiment in modern race relations. African Americans want to talk with Cubans about race and racism today: How far have you come? How far do you have to go? What aspects of your experience apply to our struggle here?

The U.S.-Cuba solidarity movement reflects Cuban reticence in discussions of race. For years, many sectors engaged in Cuba solidarity work have avoided like the plague any dialogue concerning race in Cuba. Some of these groups do not want to accept the fact that socialism alone does not eradicate all superstructural notions, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Others fear that a discussion of race in Cuba might lead to a discussion of race in the United States, which makes many—even in the solidarity movement—uncomfortable. Still others worry that a conversation about race might lead to an assessment of race and racism in the movement itself. This silence and fear of discussing race is a serious impediment to Cuba solidarity work. Without such a discussion, we cannot engage the black community in long-term systematic support for Cuba. For that reason, most organizations within the Cuban solidarity movement today remain largely white.

African Americans themselves who do engage with Cuba, usually outside formal organizations, also have their weaknesses. Too often, they only see race. More problematic, though, is the fact that African Americans often tend to view Cuba through their own nationally constructed identity prism, failing to account for what it means to be black in another society. For instance, black Americans who go to Cuba tend to count the numbers of blacks they see either in high positions or in prison. They get angry when Cubans seem unable or unwilling to answer queries in ways they deem appropriate. African Americans tend to err in the expectation that Cubans will see race exactly as American blacks do. African Americans often do not recognize that Cubans have their own socio-historical constructions of blackness and language. In this way, African Americans often present themselves as national chauvinists when they talk to Cubans about race. They seem to believe that they know more about

"blackness" than anyone else in the world. This is an insult to Cubans of African descent, who have their own identity prisms.

These weaknesses need to be seriously addressed if African Americans are going to work with Cuba seriously today. The right is aware of both our history of ties with Cuba and our contemporary weaknesses. The right, in fact, has been working to break the historic link. One case in point was the 1988 publication of Carlos Moore's *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*. Although Moore's voice was neither the first nor the only one to critique the Cuban revolution for racism, his book does represent the first large-scale race-oriented ideological assault aimed specifically at the African-American community. The book's sole purpose was to undermine African-American support for Cuba and derail any notions that socialism is a viable alternative to racism, joblessness, and capitalism in general. That the African-American community is the target of Moore's work is clear in his language, his anecdotes, and in his underlying assumptions. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the book is a prime example of poor scholarship and is badly written, it is a good piece of propaganda (from the right). It is so good that it is being used in college classrooms and is being read by those interested in Cuba.

The propaganda value of this book can, in fact, be measured by our weaknesses. First, its large readership results from the lack of serious discourse and scholarship on race in Cuba by Cubans. If black Americans want to read a full-length work on race in Cuba today, there is almost nothing from a revolutionary Cuban perspective, with the minor exception of Pedro Sarduy's work. The propaganda value of Moore's book is heightened by the fact that the broad solidarity movement will not discuss the book—even though the black community is reading it—because people in the solidarity movement don't read about or talk about race.

Because of this, the solidarity movement cannot challenge the book's assumptions. The book goes to great lengths to play on African-American chauvinism by belittling Fidel Castro, the revolution, and black support for that revolution. Moore argues that black Cubans have been duped by the revolution. He makes them look stupid and inept. Some black Americans fall for this because they believe that only they really know about race.

If we indeed want to rebuild solidarity with Cuba in the black community, and I think we do, we need to seriously confront our weaknesses. One way that we might begin to do that is to be honest about race in Cuba today. Cuba has made so many advances in the struggle against racism that the black community will appreciate its successes as well as its failures. Honesty will win more African Americans to Cuba solidarity work than will denials and aversions. Ordinary black Americans never expected the Cuban experiment or socialism to solve racism. Showing what the revolution both has and has not done is enough. Also, we on the left and in the solidarity movement have a rich history of Cuban connections that predate the revolution and continue today. We might retool the movement by conjuring up memories that can be used in a political, ideological, and popular way. More broadly, in these times of globalization at the top, we need desperately to figure out how to challenge avaricious capitalism from the bottom. Given our history and our memories, African-American and Cuba solidarity seems a most viable place to start to face the challenges that lie ahead.

Notes

1. This information comes from Lisa Brock and Digna Castaneda, eds., *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans Before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

2. See Manning Marable, "Race and Democracy in Cuba," *Black Scholar* (May/June 1984):22-37.

