

Not Blacks, But Citizens! Racial Politics in Revolutionary Cuba,
1959-1961

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ABSTRACT

DEVYN SPENCE BENSON: Not Blacks, But Citizens! Racial Politics
in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1961
(Under the direction of Louis A. Pérez, Jr.)

My project shows how the post-1959 Cuban revolutionary government highlighted racial conflicts to undermine counterrevolutionary movements and solicit support from Afro-Cubans. Using a variety of sources, including Cuban newspapers, government speeches, and photographs, my dissertation reveals how the new leadership publicly discussed the problems facing people of color, an issue frequently silenced by Cuba's accepted ideology of racial democracy. As with any government sponsored project, however, many Afro-Cubans interpreted the new racialized discourse in ways that went beyond official pronouncements. Thus, I analyze *testimonios* and oral histories from Afro-Cubans to uncover the ways people of color contributed to and challenged the new leadership's claims over racial politics.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Three weeks after revolutionary forces ousted Cuban President Fulgencio Batista in January 1959, journalist José Hernández entered a crumbling housing complex to interview residents about recent changes in their lives. With permission from the apartment's elderly landlady, Hernández took statements from five men and four women, all Afro-Cubans. Each recounted similar life experiences before the 26th of July Movement (MR 26-7) took power in Cuba. Their narratives involved extreme poverty, limited access to resources, and endless searches for affordable housing. In particular, the women noted the awful situation faced by “the black race” in Cuba and told how racial discrimination kept their families from acquiring jobs and renting apartments. Yet, hope for the future was embedded in these stories of sorrow, as the tenants expressed strong faith that the revolution, especially its young leader, Fidel Castro, would put an end to previous injustices. A few days later, *Revolución*, the official organ of the 26th of July Movement printed Hernández's article, along with enlarged photographs of the interviewees, under the title, “*Negros No . . . Ciudadanos!*”¹ While many scholars and social commentators have questioned the extent of Afro-Cuban support for the new government, and classify reports like this one as revolutionary propaganda, it is clear that after January 1959 a public debate arose surrounding the situation of people of color in

¹ J. Hernández Artigas, “!Negros No . . . Ciudadanos!” *Revolución*, January 20, 1959, 16.

Cuba. Plans for ending racial discrimination and integrating Afro-Cubans into the revolution filled the headlines of national newspapers. The title of this particular article, which could be translated as “Not Blacks . . . But Citizens,” suggests that the new government wanted to emphasize that people of color were an important part of the Cuban nation. This dissertation explores emerging revolutionary discourses about racial discrimination to understand how revolutionary leaders solicited Afro-Cuban support, cast their opponents as racists, and depicted the revolution as a global defender of the rights of people of African descent without undermining national unity between 1959 and 1961.²

In its early years (1959-1961), the revolutionary government sought to solidify its power and repeatedly solicited the support of people of color in both domestic and international arenas.³ As white middle and upper class Cubans fled the island, the new government searched for allies among the popular classes, who were disproportionately of African descent. Although people of color comprised nearly one-third of the total Cuban population, their opportunities for social mobilization had been limited. Young leaders employed a racialized discourse as a means of attracting black Cubans to the revolution, while minimizing the alienation of white supporters who had worked to overthrow President Fulgencio Batista.⁴ Conversations about ending racial

² In my project, the terms African-descended, people of color, Afro-Cuban, and black will be used interchangeably to discuss the descendants of Africans living in Cuba. This choice parallels the terms employed in the primary documents, where the words “*negro*,” “*raza de color*,” and “*gente de color*” are seen most frequently.

³ The revolutionary government made various advances to solicit support from African Americans and leaders in various African countries. In doing so, they both increased the numbers of their international advocates, and demonstrated to Afro-Cubans their commitment to racial equality throughout the world.

⁴ This move was necessary because most believed that the force to oust Batista had been primarily from the white middle-class. Afro-Cubans offered indirect support or indifference toward the indiscretions of the

discrimination and improving the situation of Afro-Cubans spread across the island through national newspapers, public speeches, and television debates. As with any government-sponsored project, however, many Afro-Cubans interpreted the new discourse in ways that went further than official pronouncements. Studying this discourse around race and how it was challenged and negotiated by Cubans on a daily basis offers a better understanding of the radicalization of the Cuban revolution after 1959.

The image of revolutionary politics centered on debates about racial discrimination and prejudice conflicts with the usual portrayal of the first three years of the Cuban revolution. Existing narratives analyze the deteriorating relationship between Cuba and the United States, the emigration of the middle class, and the implementation of the Agrarian Reform. The campaign to end racial discrimination began during the same period as the Agrarian Reform and both projects received significant press coverage in Cuba. However, previous works have not addressed the role of racial politics in the gradual transition from a rather moderate nationalist revolution to one that openly supported the communist bloc. It is striking that the existing literature has minimized public debates on race relations. Racial politics were a crucial dimension of the new government's move to more radical policies, especially when considering the large numbers of white dissenters who left the island. My analysis concentrates on the rapid changes occurring during the first years of the revolution, between January 1959, when the new leadership first took power, and its official declaration of Marxist-Leninist ideology in April 1961. I argue that the revolution's early moves to emphasize race and

mulato president and were not as prominent in the guerrilla groups of the 1950s as they had been during nineteenth century wars of independence.

the situation of people of color contributed to its perceived radicalization and alienation from whites both on and off the island.

The use of a racialized discourse in Cuba also addresses a number of broader issues about how popular politics are experienced in multiracial and rapidly changing societies. A study of the use of television, print media, radio, and mass rallies to spread ideas about racial equality provides insight into how the modern media functions in revolutionary settings. Exploring the ways Cubans of color, from various classes, interpreted and responded to post-1959 racial debates uncovers, in turn, how Afro-Cubans experienced the revolution. In addition, this investigation sheds light on the endurance of the Cuban revolution and Fidel Castro's popularity throughout the twentieth century. The survival of a nationalist (and later socialist) government ninety miles from the United States is linked to the 1959 revolution's initial ability to win support from largely poor, black populations. And finally, this project speaks to the roots of Cuban involvement in global racial struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. To appreciate why the new Cuban leadership encouraged African American tourists and militants to visit the island, and later sent thousands of troops to aid African states in their anti-colonial wars, we must look to the implementation of a racialized revolutionary discourse targeting people of color in the early years of the revolution.

Historiography

Despite the uniqueness of this move to emphasize race in the post-1959 era, scholarship of the period has paid scant attention to the new government's discourse highlighted problems of racial discrimination as a means of undermining

counterrevolutionary agendas. Important work has been done on the experiences of African-descended Cubans during slavery, abolition, the wars of independence, and the 1912 “Race War;” however, these analyses fail to interrogate how certain racial attitudes continued or changed after 1959.⁵ In Cuba, tension between different racial groups has a long and painful history. As the last colony in the Americas to abolish slavery, the island has struggled to unite its large African and European descended populations into one nation. The unifying rhetoric of the wars of independence (1895-1898) succeeded in forging an integrated fighting force to defeat Spain, but ultimately failed to establish equality in the new republic. After independence many Cubans embraced the patriotic words of nationalist José Martí, and firmly imagined their country as one “without blacks, or whites, only Cubans.”⁶ This claim, most often articulated as the myth of “racelessness,” permeates nearly every discussion of race on the island. Historians, however, have frequently questioned the genuineness of this ideology, especially when compared to the harsh oppression of Afro-Cuban struggles for equal rights during the first half of the twentieth century.⁷ These studies complicate the ‘reality’ of the rhetoric

⁵ For further discussion on slavery and abolition see Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*, 2nd ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970); Julio Carreras, *Escalvitud, abolición, y racismo* (Havana: Editoriales de Ciencias Sociales, 1989); Olga Portuondo Zúniga, *Entre esclavos y libres de Cuba colonial* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2003).

⁶ For additional information on the formation of the “raceless” ideology during the wars of revolution see Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Raúl Cepero Bonilla, *Azúcar y abolición* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1976); Fernando Ortiz, “Martí and the Race Problem,” *Phylon* 3 (1942), 253-76; Ramón de Armas, “José Martí: La verdadera y única abolición de la esclavitud,” *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 43 (1986), 333-351; José Martí, *La cuestión racial* (Havana: Editorial Lex, 1959). Ferrer argues that the U.S. intervention and following military occupation from 1898-1902 transplanted U.S. racial prejudices to the island and thwarted the success of a racial democracy in Cuba.

⁷ A salient example would be the massacre of over 10,000 black Cubans in Oriente province in 1912 for forming an all-Black political party. For additional reading on this conflict see, Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

promoted during the independence struggles; however, most of this research applies to the pre-1959 period and rarely investigates how these same ideas were rearticulated by the 1959 revolution.⁸ Amongst both North-American and Cuban scholars there has been a reluctance to push analyses of race relations past 1959 and the emergence of the current government. However, between 1959 and 1961, the new Cuban leadership reemployed the nationalist language utilized during the wars of independence and constructed its revolution as the fulfillment of an interrupted historical legacy for achieving racial equality on the island. Because of this strategy and the social transformations it produced it is impossible to understand current battles for Afro-Cuban social mobility and against racial discrimination without a close look at the rapid changes in racial politics that occurred during this the early years of the revolution.

The rapid and unexpected radicalization of the Cuban revolution excited much contemporary and scholarly debate about the new government's leadership and their politics.⁹ Previous works argue that the personal charisma of Fidel Castro was

1995); Louis Pérez, Jr., "Politics, Peasants, and People of Color: The 1912 'Race War' in Cuba Reconsidered," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 66 (August 1986), 509-539; Rafael Fermoselle, *Política y color en Cuba: La guerrita de 1912* (Montevideo, Uruguay: Ediciones Geminis, 1974); Silvio Castro Fernández, *La masacre de los Independientes de Color en 1912* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2002); Tomás Fernández Robaina, *El negro en Cuba: Apuntes para la historia de la lucha contra la discriminación racial* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1990).

⁸ In *Our Rightful Share*, Helg asserts that the myth of "racial democracy" was an oppressive legend used by white elites to restrict the political mobilization of Afro-Cubans. Alejandro de la Fuente disagrees with Helg in his work, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). While recognizing the absence of racial democracy in Cuba, he asserts that Afro-Cubans were able to use the unifying revolutionary language to their political advantage.

⁹ For a better understanding of the relationship between the United States and Cuba, see Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971); Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution: An Empire of Liberty in an Age of National Liberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Edward Gonzalez, *Cuban Under Castro: The Limits of Charisma* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); Samuel Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, Press, 2006).

instrumental to his ability to maintain power and defy U.S. influence in Cuba. Jules Benjamin notes in *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution* that a “unique relationship [existed] between Castro and the Cuban people. He spoke to them directly and emotionally in mammoth rallies and hours-long television speeches in which he seemed to be able to elicit and play upon their most deeply held feelings. He complemented these exercises in mass communication with a personal touch that might have been the envy of a North American politician.”¹⁰ Similarly, Herbert Matthews finds in *Revolution in Cuba*, “It was Fidel Castro’s revolution, a triumph of personality and an outgrowth of Latin American *caudillismo*.”¹¹ These and other studies on the Cuban revolution, including the plethora of Fidel Castro biographies, maintain that the personal charisma of Castro was the determining factor in post-1959 events. Yet, by failing to define the meaning of charisma, these analyses offer only a partial understanding of revolutionary processes. Without investigating how the new government approached racial divisions it is impossible to evaluate why the “masses,” many of whom were of color, supported the new leaders.

Nelson Valdés offers a fruitful analysis of Castro’s charisma in his essay, “Fidel Castro, Charisma, and Santería: Max Weber Revisited.”¹² He concurs that the term charisma has been used too loosely to explain Castro’s leadership over Cuba and stresses the importance of adding a study of the “cultural milieu,” namely the ideas which had meaning for most Cubans, to understand this phenomenon. Valdés argues that a

¹⁰ Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution*, 183-185.

¹¹ Herbert Matthews, *Revolution in Cuba: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975), 124.

¹² Nelson Valdés, “Fidel Castro, Charisma, and Santería: Max Weber Revisited” found in Anton Allahar, ed. *Caribbean Charisma: Reflections of Leadership, Legitimacy, and Populist Politics* (Boulder: L. Reinner Publishers, 2001).

particular event occurred during a mass public rally that christened or gave “birth” to Castro’s authority. He describes how on January 8, 1959 in front of thousands of people, two doves circled above Castro’s head, with one landing on his shoulder. For Valdés, prior to this moment, Castro was popular and fortunate to be at the right place at the right time, but still a normal leader. Whereas, after the doves, which are sacred symbols for Santería worshippers, appeared and landed on his shoulder, Castro was “blessed” by the *orishas* (gods) and transformed into a legitimate charismatic leader. Connecting the new government’s leadership strength to popular Cuban religious beliefs acknowledges the important role Afro-Cuban culture played in legitimizing the revolution. However, other areas exist, outside of the Santería religion, where race and blackness worked as significant factors in the government’s attempts to solidify its position. My analysis builds off of Valdés’s contribution by inserting public discussions about racial tensions and inequalities into the cultural framework of the first three years of the revolution.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a debate arose, mostly between social commentators in the United States, over whether the revolutionary government had achieved its 1959 pledge of eliminating racial discrimination. For many north-Americans the answer to this question was determined by their support or disagreement with Cuba’s socialist revolution, and thus, not entirely focused on investigating the experiences of Afro-Cubans. On one side were those who believed that the Cuban revolution had solved the race problem in Cuba.¹³ In opposition, was another group, including some exiled Afro-

¹³ See Harry Ring, *How Cuba Uprooted Race Discrimination* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1961); Lourdes Casal, “Race Relations in Contemporary Cuba,” in Anai Dzidzienyo and Lourdes Casal, eds., *The Position of Blacks in Brazil and Cuban Society* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1979); Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (1971), 1117-1126, 1432-1434. With the exception of Thomas, who provides only minimal attention to this topic in his 1500-page monograph, these other works are based almost solely on personal visits to Cuba and informal conversations with residents of the island.

Cubans, who saw the new government as fraudulent and maintained that racism had increased in post-revolutionary Cuba.¹⁴ Carlos Moore, an Afro-Cuban of Jamaican heritage, who has lived in exile since the late 1960s, is the most well-known perpetuator of the latter opinion. In his work, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*, he argues that middle class black intellectuals quickly became frustrated with the new government's failure to promote blacks and *mulatos* to leadership positions, while working class Afro-Cubans were duped into supporting a racist revolution. Ultimately, he characterizes the new government's public rhetoric about improving the situation of people of color as a hoax. Rather than prove or disprove the execution of the government's claim, this project examines the re-making of discourses of revolutionary nationalism to demonstrate how an investment in maintaining the appearance of a "raceless" society shaped the daily lives of Cubans after 1959.

In 1989, the collapse of Cuba's largest financial supporter, the Soviet Union, caused a dramatic economic disruption on the island, typically called the "Special Period." Economic transactions came to a near stand-still, the national currency collapsed, and the government scrambled to find other means of income after the loss of its main trading partner. Revolutionary leaders worked to implement new economic policies, including a restructuring of the health care, educational, and agricultural systems

¹⁴ See Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles, California: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California-Los Angeles, 1988); David Booth, "Cuba Color, and the Revolution," *Science and Society* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1976), 129-172; John Clytus and Jane Rieker, *Black Man in Red Cuba* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970); Geoffrey Fox, "Race and Class in Contemporary Cuba" in Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., *Cuban Communism*, 4th ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1981). Carlos Moore is one of the most well-known Afro-Cubans to write about this topic; however his analysis relies heavily on personal recollection and interviews with exiled Cubans, many of whom, like the author, left Cuba in the 1960s in protest of various government actions. See, Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000) for a collection of oral histories showing a more nuanced view of contemporary race relations.

in attempts to stabilize the economy. The entire population felt the impact of these situations, in the form of food shortages, long ques to buy basic essentials, and the instability that comes from not knowing what would happen next. Black and *mulato* Cubans suffered these hardships more than their white counterparts because of limited access to remittances from family members in the United States. Afro-Cubans also encountered an increase in instances of racial discrimination in the spheres of employment and recreation. As a result, there was a growth in studies about race relations in Cuba as residents, public intellectuals, and scholars began to question the seemingly reappearance of racism.¹⁵ Cuban scholars, who had avoided writing about contemporary racial inequalities since the revolution had declared the successful elimination of discrimination in 1960, began to theorize about why Afro-Cubans were facing such different life chances after the Special Period than whites.¹⁶ Afro-Cuban political scientist, Esteban Morales authored one of the most notable studies on this issue.

¹⁵ Young Afro-Cubans of working class backgrounds frequently contributed to this new conversation through the medium of hip-hop. Rap lyrics became a way for non-academics to discuss racial profiling, including the way dark-skinned Cubans were refused entrance into tourist centers and hotels more often than those with a fairer skin color. For additional reading see, Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Cuban scholarship about race and Afro-Cubans written prior to the 1990s typically investigated topics covering slavery in the nineteenth century or racial discrimination in the early republic. With support and funding of the Cuban government, these scholars built a solid literature that interrogated Afro-Cuban experiences in both the colonial period and the republic before 1959. However, this work, for the most part did not question the effectiveness of revolutionary policies toward people of color after 1959 until the 1990s. For additional reading see, Pedro Serviat, *El problema negro en Cuba y su solución definitiva* (Havana: Editorial Política, 1986). Serviat's piece written before the collapse of Cuba's chief financial partner and increased economic difficulties for black and *mulatos*, argues that the post-1959 government eliminated racial discrimination due to the extraordinary work of revolutionary leaders in this area. Other Cuban scholars offer a more nuanced discussion of the benefits and challenges of the how the revolutionary government has tackled racial disparities since 1959, especially harsh realities of the "Special Period" created an opportunity for such debates. Also see, Tomás Fernández Robaina, *El negro en Cuba: Apuntes para la historia de la lucha contra la discriminación racial* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1990); Esteban Morales Domínguez, *Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba* (Havana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 2007); Antonio Martínez Fuentes, "Siglo XXI: Antrología, 'razas' y racismo," *Catauro: Revista Cubano de antropología* 4 no. 6 (July-December 2002), 36-51; Juan A. Alvarado, "Relaciones raciales en Cuba: Notas de investigación," *Temas* 7 (July-September 1996), 37-43.

Morales argues that racial inequalities continued to exist in Cuba in the late 1990s despite early efforts by the revolutionary government to combat these problems in the 1960s because of the ineffectiveness of programs trying to assist Afro-Cubans by increasing the standard of living within the entire population. However, these colorblind policies, he finds, did not solve racial inequities since the populations that were the lowest in the social-economic spectrum, namely Afro-Cubans, started from an unequal position.¹⁷ Using an analogy of running a race, this thesis, popular among Cuban scholars, argues that black and *mulato* Cubans “took off” from a lower social position than white Cubans, and were thus unable to achieve, even with the benefits of revolutionary programs, sufficient stability to cushion them from the crisis of the 1990s.¹⁸ Contemporary debates on racial equality, emerging from the Special Period, are creating new arenas for analyses like my own. My project fits within this trend and provides a historical framework for thinking about current situations.

In *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*, Alejandro de la Fuente offers a provocative overarching analysis of race relations in Cuba throughout the twentieth century. As one of the first historians to deal directly with racial politics during the initial years of the revolution, he argues that since race was such a “major social identity” in pre-1959 Cuba, it was inevitably an important topic for the new revolutionary government. De la Fuente finds that “race and racism did not become issues only when Castro spoke about them. Rather, these issues were brought to public

¹⁷ Esteban Morales Domínguez, “Un modelo para el análisis de la problemática racial cubano,” *Catauro: Revista Cubano de antropología* 4, no. 6 (2002), 70. Morales further develops this argument in his recent book, *Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba* (Havana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 2007).

¹⁸ In personal interviews with Cuban anthropologist Lourdes Serrano and writer Daisy Rubiera Castillo, both used the same metaphor of “running a race” to describe the continued inequity between black and white Cubans in contemporary Cuba.

attention by various social and political actors who perceived the revolution as an unprecedented opportunity to redress previous inequalities.”¹⁹ Using sources from Afro-Cuban Communists, labor movement leaders, and intellectuals he demonstrates how some black Cubans recognized the period after January 1959 as an occasion to bring issues about race and racism to public attention.²⁰ De la Fuente shows how a certain type of Afro-Cuban, particularly middle and upper-middle class intellectuals, participated in revolutionary politics. However, his analysis fails to interrogate how the stories of working class, rural men and especially women of African descent fit with or challenged the claims made by Afro-Cuban elites. While it is difficult to imagine that the Afro-Cubans leaders, discussed by de la Fuente were disconnected completely from the popular classes, it seems that only a certain spectrum of the Afro-Cuban population used the revolution as an opportunity to pressure the new government. Other groups placed their hopes and expectations on incoming leaders to take action and fix a variety of problems, including race relations. And some Afro-Cubans remained ambivalent and at a distance from the political changes occurring in Cuba due to their fight for economic survival.

Method and Theory

To understand the process of racializing the revolution that took place between 1959 and 1961, my dissertation employs a variety of theoretical and methodological frameworks. Given that the new government emphasized racial conflict as a means of solidifying support, what I am calling a racialized revolutionary discourse, my

¹⁹ De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 261.

²⁰ Ibid.

investigation necessitates a definition of discourse and a plan for discourse analysis. Ideas formulated by Michel Foucault, and later elaborated by historian Joan Scott are central to my understanding of these concepts. Scott defines discourse as a historically specific “structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs . . . contained or expressed in organizations and institutions as well as words.”²¹ According to Foucault, discourse analysis requires the researcher to generate an archive of statements about the period of study in order to illustrate and analyze the transformation of a given discourse.²² I use a variety of public sources, such as newspapers, speeches, television and radio broadcasts to describe the parameters of the emerging discussions on race which occurred during the first years of the Cuban revolution. My analysis explores both continuities and contradictions in the public debate about how to eliminate racial discrimination, including how counterrevolutionary elements also invoked a racialized rhetoric to undermine the new government’s stability.

In addition to public texts, I see revolutionary visual culture, such as photographs, political cartoons, advertisements, and posters as central to an understanding of the racialized discourses of the period. I examine images both for their content and the ways they were interpreted differently by distinct audiences.²³ Political cartoons, especially those depicting stereotypical sketches of Afro-Cubans, frequently ran alongside articles demanding the end of racial discrimination. Artists drew characters in cartoons in ways

²¹ Joan W. Scott, “Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory of Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (Spring 1988), 32-50.

²² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). Also see, Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1980), and *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

²³ These ideas parallel those outlined in Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage Publications, 2001).

that were consistent and familiar to audiences. Blacks often appeared as child-like, comical, and with exaggerated facial features, similar to illustrations of people of color before the revolution, even in cartoons celebrating plans for racial equality in Cuba. Thus, my project combines examinations of visual culture with textual analysis, to understand the ongoing tensions and contradictions implicit in revolutionary racial politics.

Moreover, I analyze emerging racialized discourses for what they tell us about the cultural signifiers, that is the values associated with certain words and images, which had meaning for Cubans at the start of the revolution.²⁴ Newspapers and broadcasted speeches by government leaders are essential sources for this approach. They show that the official generators of the new discourse were caught in dialectical process with Cuban audiences, in which each group influenced the other. Revolutionary leaders often tried to persuade listeners of particular views; in order for their arguments to be effective, however, the government had to invoke familiar cultural signs and symbols when making its case. In this way, themes and images repeated throughout the period serve as a two-way lens, providing insight into the attitudes of the Cuban leadership and the cultural norms held by the public as a whole.²⁵

This project also speaks to and employs an African diasporic perspective. By ‘African Diaspora,’ I am referring to what historian Colin Palmer identifies as “peoples of African descent living in various societies who are united by a past based significantly

²⁴ For readings on cultural history, see Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

²⁵ Here my ideas are influenced by the work of historian Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). She offers a nuanced discussion of the relationship between discourse and culture.

but not exclusively upon ‘racial’ oppression and the struggles against it; and who, despite the cultural variations and political divisions among them, share an emotional bond with one another; . . . and who also, regardless of their location face broadly similar problems in constructing and realizing themselves.”²⁶ However, for Palmer and other scholars of the African diaspora, the concept is more valuable as an analytical tool, than as a representation of physical reality. This means studying the situations of people of African descent comparatively, as well as investigating moments when members of the diaspora form political and social alliances. Such linkages are discontinuous, however, and occur only at certain strategic moments, resulting in historical instances of closeness and distance. In Cuba, black political and intellectual leaders have discussed and compared their concerns about race relations and racial struggles with North American audiences at various times since the end of the nineteenth century.²⁷ Similarly, the post-1959 government referenced U.S. racial problems, particularly images of violence against blacks, as a means of highlighting its own progress toward racial equality. My dissertation examines these and other moments of dialogue in order to see how the racialized discourse of the revolution was applied to African Americans and what meanings such comparisons had for Cuban audiences.

²⁶ Colin A. Palmer, “Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora,” *Negro History* (Winter-Spring 2000), 27. Additional readings on the African Diaspora, include Brent Edwards, “The Uses of the Diaspora,” *Social Text* 66, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 64, and James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 9, no. 3 (August 1994), 302-338.

²⁷ For examples of earlier diasporic dialogues between African Americans and Afro-Cubans, see Lisa Brock and Digna Castaneda Fuertes, eds. *Between Race and Empire: African Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). I have also done work on this topic. In particular, two conference papers I presented are relevant. “Tuskegee as a Utopia: Linking Afro-Cubans to African Americans, 1898-1902,” at Carolina and Duke Consortium in Latin American Studies Conference, February 2004 and “On the Corner of 125th and 7th: Constructing Allies in the Cuban and the African American Press, September 1960,” South Eastern Conference on Latin American Studies (SECOLAS), April 2005.

A combination of discourse analysis, cultural history, and African diaspora studies, reveal how and why a particular racialized discourse became salient in Cuba between 1959 and 1961. As the new government struggled to solidify its power, the predominantly white leadership recognized the strategic value in presenting itself as the fulfillment of an interrupted historical legacy. Leaders in 1959 forcibly inserted race into national discussions in order to appeal to a new constituency. This strategy undermined counterrevolutionary attempts to claim that the Castro government was largely white and upper middle class, while incorporating a large sector of the population into the nation. White leaders struggled to find a balance between addressing the grievances of black Cubans and remaining loyal to the imagined ‘racelessness’ of Cuban society, which frequently involved the dismissal of racial categories in favor of a unified Cubaness. More often than not, articles in the national press, such as “*Negros No . . . Ciudadanos!*” (Not Blacks, But Citizens), sought to incorporate Afro-Cubans as deracialized citizens, without alienating white audiences.²⁸ Cuban leaders often focused new plans around issues of black unemployment and economic disparity to make new programs seem tangible to black supporters and less threatening to critical readers. Yet, even more prominent than the application of unifying and appeasing language, was the revolutionary press’s use of sketches and cartoons to humanize Afro-Cubans and lighten radical integrationist goals with humor. In particular, the continued use of stereotypical caricatures for blacks in political cartoons exposes the contradictions between the desire to create a Cuba “with all and for all” and lingering anxieties about Afro-Cuban capabilities.

²⁸ J. Hernández Artigas, “¡Negros No . . . Ciudadanos!” *Revolución*, January 20, 1959, 16.

While the post-1959 government had certain plans, Afro-Cubans frequently interpreted revolutionary rhetoric in their own ways. In order to gauge Afro-Cuban participation and responses to this discourse, this project analyzes Afro-Cuban newspapers and submissions to various political journals during the period. Collected *testimonios* (testimonies) and oral histories by people of color in Cuba offer also insight into how Afro-Cubans experienced the revolution and its racialized rhetoric on a daily basis. On one side these sources reveal that the rise of public debates about ending racial discrimination served as an opportunity for many black intellectuals to demand more progressive reforms. Yet, the official Cuban press also routinely portrayed poor Afro-Cuban communities as dependent and in need of aid because such a relationship rendered the new leadership as strong and in a position to grant aid. Such a paternalistic stance often did not fit with how many people of color privately saw themselves or their communities. Thus, while poorer Afro-Cuban communities may have come to appreciate the physical changes implemented by the post-1959 regime, many of the dominant themes in the emerging discourse, such as characterizations of blacks (both on and off the island) as child-like and only fit for citizenship after undergoing certain reforms, did not represent the perspectives of many Afro-Cubans. Moreover, the need to illustrate people of African descent using familiar cultural markers in political cartoons and advertisements allowed pre-revolutionary stereotypes of blackness as a negative construct to continue.

Organization

““Not Blacks, But Citizens”” is organized around a series of chronological episodes showing the crystallization of the revolution’s racialized discourse. Similar to the techniques used by Roland Barthes, this project analyzes the moments when discourses of race were at their highest to understand how everyday residents of the island understood and experienced the rapid changes occurring between 1956 and 1961.

The next chapter focuses on March 1959, when the new government first announced its racialized revolutionary rhetoric. Here, I explore how the predominantly white leadership initially sought to incorporate blacks into the revolutionary nation, without alienating white supporters. The first half of the chapter analyzes articles and speeches printed in national Cuban newspapers from January through April 1959. The second portion uses *testimonios* and oral histories to illustrate how some Afro-Cubans first experienced the revolution’s integration policies. I discuss moments when the government’s racialized discourse conflicted with how some Afro-Cubans saw themselves.

Chapter Three explores how Cuban leaders labeled counterrevolutionaries as racist to undermine opposition movements. By late 1959, revolutionary leaders publicly linked disagreement and resistance to the new government to anti-black attitudes. Doing so, created the belief among many Afro-Cubans that those choosing to go into exile were privileged whites, unwilling to accept a new, integrated Cuba. In addition to looking at the official discourse and Afro-Cuban responses to this rhetoric, this chapter also uses sources from the Miami exile community to see how Cubans living in the United States understood the racialization of domestic politics.

The fourth chapter discusses how Cubans interpreted visits by African Americans intellectuals and tourists to the island in January 1960. This encounter was based on a historic relationship between Cubans and U.S. blacks occurring since the nineteenth century. Using the business venture between boxer Joe Louis and the Cuban National Tourist Institute (INIT) as a case study, I explore how revolutionary leaders mobilized comments made by African Americans celebrating Cuba as a racial paradise to demonstrate that the island was free of prejudices. Doing so, however, also created opportunities for Afro-Cubans to demand additional reforms when the very tourist centers advertised to U.S. black guests remained closed to black and *mulato* Cubans. Similar to other chapters, this section utilizes Cuban newspapers, official speeches, and popular sources to present multiple views of these events.

Chapter Five investigates the 1960 decision by the Cuban delegation to the United Nations to move from their Manhattan hotel to a black residence in Harlem. The delegation's decision to stay in the Hotel Theresa and meet with African American and African leaders demonstrates how the new government internationalized revolutionary racialized discourses. For Cuban leaders, residing in Harlem allowed them to announce to the world that the revolution had eliminated racial discrimination. In contrast to the opportunities available to condemn lingering racisms while African American tourists were in Cuba, after September 1960 Afro-Cubans had few occasions to criticize racial inequality. Photographs and political cartoons are also an important source for this chapter. Such images suggest that despite claims of racial inclusiveness many Cubans continued to associate people of color, both in the United States and Cuba, with inferiority and immaturity.

In Chapter Six, I explore the iconization of Conrado Benítez, a murdered volunteer teacher, to reveal how the Cuban state mobilized images of black martyrs to celebrate the resolution of the fight against racial discrimination. Cuban newspapers, literacy campaign publicity, and oral histories from this period demonstrate a shift in revolutionary discourses on race. By 1961, leaders chose to downplay the same racial tensions and divisions they had highlighted a few years earlier because such conversations threatened national unity. The story of Benítez and the way he was used as the figurehead for the literacy campaign epitomized these shifts. He served both as a strong black soldier and a symbol of the nation. Revolutionary leaders used his narrative to point to Afro-Cuban incorporation into the nation, while still prescribing certain limits on black citizenship. Thus, it is clear that despite the official “resolution” of the campaign to eliminate racial prejudices certain tensions remained unaddressed.

The concluding chapter discusses the legacies and consequences of implementing a racialized discourse during the first years of the Cuban revolution. This chapter also touches on how initial choices to link race and revolution foreshadowed Cuba’s foreign policy in Africa and a continuance of historical relationships between U.S. and Cuban blacks.

““Not Blacks, But Citizens”” seeks to enrich both academic and public debates about how popular politics function during times of revolutionary change. As we become more accustomed to televised presidential debates, it is easy to forget the appeal Cuban revolutionary leaders must have had when they first broadcasted news of the exile of Batista. Yet, in addition to proclaiming a national revolution, these young men emphasized the need to repair racial divisions and inequalities. An understanding of how

they spoke to Cuban audiences and how listeners responded and understood their plans will illuminate the connections between race and nation, not only in Latin America, where such links are often taken for granted, but here in the United States, where the election of President Barak Obama has raised questions about these connections as well. Ultimately, the struggle to integrate various marginalized groups into the nation is a global one. This project speaks to one way in which this dilemma has been approached. Many consequences of the Cuban revolution will continue to impact the island throughout the twentieth-first century. However, the Cuban government's efforts between 1959 and 1961 to promote racial equality reached beyond the borders of Cuba and touched U.S. Civil Rights struggles and anti-colonial fights throughout continental Africa as well.

Chapter Two:

“Not Blacks, But Citizens!” The First Steps, March 1959

During a heated televised interview in March 1959, Cuban leader Fidel Castro confronted the question of how to end racial discrimination on the island. Noting that the fight against racial oppression was a “fight against ourselves,” he criticized viewers for failing to support revolutionary plans to bring racial equality to Cuba. Castro described a recent public rally where audiences cheered wildly when he discussed lowering telephones taxes, reducing rent prices, and opening private beaches. Yet the same crowd fell silent, or “made ugly faces” when he talked about “helping the negro.” After asking what the difference was between one injustice and the other, the young leader of the 26th of July Movement (MR 26-7) concluded that the discrepancy resulted from “people who call themselves revolutionaries but are racist, [and] . . . people who call themselves good but are racist.”¹ By openly critiquing Cubans for their hypocrisy and silence on racial inequality and publicly addressing the problems of people of color, Castro distinguished himself and other revolutionary leaders from past regimes.

Not since the late nineteenth century had conversations about race assumed such a central place in Cuban discourses. Previously, in 1891, nationalist leaders José Martí and Antonio Maceo demanded unity within the Cuban revolutionary community as a means of ensuring a colonial victory in what would be the final war for independence against

¹ “A ganar la batalla de la discriminación,” *Revolución*, March 26, 1959, 1.

Spain. Issuing the call, “with all and for all,” the two men, one white and one black exemplified the doctrine of the wars of independence and became heroes when racially integrated fighting forces defeated Spain in 1895.² However, Cuban plans to create a republic devoid of racial tensions and discrimination did not become a reality at the start of the twentieth-century. Many Afro-Cuban independence leaders and their descendants continued to struggle for the promised equality throughout the early 1900s. By 1908, a group of black activists, who felt that their demands were unmet by elected officials came together to form a political party focused on Afro-Cuban issues, called the *Partido Independiente de Color* (Independent Party of Color, PIC). Many white elites interpreted the organizing of the PIC as a racist threat to the unity of the nation. In their eyes, organizing based on race was anti-Cuban and overtly radical. As a result, the Cuban army massacred over two thousand members and supporters of the PIC, in what has become known as the “Race War of 1912.”

The horror of the 1912 event issued a public silence on topics of race and racial inequality in Cuba and led both black and white Cubans to look for more established, multi-racial venues to voice ideas and concerns. Public discussions on racial themes became limited, and when they occurred, centered on national unity and a Cuban identity devoid of racial markers. Politicians and officials included plans to end racial inequality and to achieve the dreams of Martí and Maceo in their platforms throughout the first half of the twentieth century; yet, after making a few concessions, most simply maintained the status quo and few chose to address black issues directly. Notwithstanding the 1940 Constitution committed to, “equal privileges before the law,” most Cubans remained

² José Martí, “Discurso en el Liceo Cubano, Tampa, el 26 de noviembre de 1891,” in Emilio Ríog de Leuchsenring, ed., *La revolución de Martí 24 de febrero de 1895* (Havana: Municipio de Havana, 1941), 49.

mute about the limited opportunities available to people of color during the first fifty years of the republic.³

With Castro's speech in March 1959, the new revolutionary leadership broke the silence on inequality in Cuba and inserted public discussions about how to end racial discrimination into national politics. The campaign to end racial inequality in Cuba officially began during a massive public rally in March 1959, when Castro's described how the revolution would tackle the "hated injustice." In front of thousands of people, the young leader outlined plans for black and white Cubans to work and go to school together.⁴ Cuban dailies throughout the island reprinted this March announcement and highlighted the revolution's demand for change. Castro was not the first leader, however, to speak publicly about this issue at the start of 1959. Historian Alejandro de la Fuente appropriately notes that some Afro-Cuban intellectuals and Communist leaders began pushing the new leadership to address concerns of black Cubans as early as January.⁵ Yet, only following the March pronouncement did a public discussion ensue that both incorporated the concerns of the Afro-Cuban elite and used race as a means of drawing the masses into the revolutionary fold.

This chapter explores how plans for ending racial discrimination filled the headlines of national newspapers throughout 1959 in order to analyze how the

³ Article 20 of the 1940 Cuban Constitution states, "All Cubans are equal before the law. The Republic does not recognize exemptions or privileges. Any discrimination by reason of sex, race, color, or class, and any other kind of discrimination destructive of human dignity is declared illegal and punishable. The law shall establish the penalties that violators of this provision shall incur." Unfortunately, for those who had worked hard for its addition, the article had little effect and remained an impotent gesture until its resurrection by the post-1959 government.

⁴ "Un millón de trabajadores: Más unidos que nunca!" *Revolución*, March 23, 1959, 1. "A este pueblo nuestro, de Maceo y de Martí, no lo volverán a oprimir," *Noticias de Hoy*, March 24, 1959, 1. This speech was reprinted in its entirety in the *Revolución* and *Noticias de Hoy*. "La Semana," *Nuevos Rumbos*, March 1959, 3, also published various excerpts and long quotations of the same speech.

⁵ De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 261.

revolutionary first constructed a particular racialized revolutionary discourse. This rhetoric sought to bind Afro-Cubans to the revolution while also harnessing potentially divisive racial prejudices into a national project. In doing so, the new leadership created opportunities for black Cubans to participate in and influence public debates about racial equality. This public discourse, however, frequently had its limits since it demanded a particular type of Afro-Cuban citizenship before granting admission to the nation.

Therefore, the second portion of the chapter explores how Afro-Cubans living in the Havana barrio of Las Yaguas experienced the revolution's integration policies. Using this community as a case study, I explore moments when the government's racialized discourse conflicted with how some Afro-Cubans saw themselves. Oral histories published by the Oscar Lewis team in *Living the Revolution* (1970) show the initial hesitancy many Cubans of African descent felt toward revolutionary intervention in their lives. This chapter compares collected oral histories from the Afro-Cuban neighborhood with articles produced in the Cuban press in order to see how each group conceptualized the campaign to end racial discrimination. Blacks in Las Yaguas understood the actions of the revolutionary government in ways that fitted with their historical experience. As poor people of color that interpretation routinely differed from the perspective of the new leadership. This investigation highlights the moments when these dialogues both converged and diverged about the meaning of the revolutionary project in order to better understand the process of negotiation that ensued between white leaders and Afro-Cubans in the post-1959 era.

Racialized Revolutionary Discourses

During a televised roundtable interview, Castro asked intellectuals and journalists to educate the Cuban population about the legacy of slavery and the situation of blacks and *mulatos* on the island. He specifically challenged social scientists and newspaper editors to open a public forum where Cubans could discuss the lack of scientific reasons behind discrimination and the contributions of blacks and whites to Cuban culture.⁶ In the weeks that followed, the national press ran a variety of articles and editorials answering this call. *Noticias de Hoy* printed a three part series called “Conditional Responses and Racial Discrimination” to discuss the deep roots of racial prejudice and the need for early education to teach white children not to fear darker skin. Highlighting the need for psychologist and psychiatrists to meet and discuss the emotional aspects of racism, the author encouraged an overarching treatment plan to rid the island of racism.⁷ Coupled with reports from sociologists like Fernando Ortiz and Elías Entralgo, these types of articles sought to educate readers and theorize about the feelings behind racial attitudes.⁸ They provided a variety of rationales to explain what some call the “black problem” and others label the “white problem” in Cuba.⁹ In doing so, intellectuals became active participants in discussions with the revolutionary government and the larger population over how to improve race relations in Cuba. As they debated over how

⁶ “‘Esta revolución no se hizo para conservar privilegios ni para acobardarse ante nadie en particular, ni para venderse a nadie en particular,’ dijo Fidel Castro en la TV,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 26, 1959, 1.

⁷ Diego González Martín “Los reflejos condicionales y la discriminación racial,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 31, April 5, April 7, 1959, 1. A copy of the first article describing “conditional responses” was reprinted in the official publication of the revolutionary army, “La lucha contra el prejuicio racial,” *Verde Olivo*, April 20, 1959, 10.

⁸ “Cuba puede y debe dar el ejemplo en cuanto la desvanecimiento de los funestos racismos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 4, 1959, 1. “Cubano es más que blanco, más que negro,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 28, 1959, 1.

⁹ Nicolás Guillén, “Una revisión entre otras,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 29, 1959, 1.

to approach racial tensions in Cuba they constructed a new way of thinking about blackness, whiteness, and *Cubanidad* on the island.

Political cartoonists in *Revolución* also sketched cartoons to illustrate the new government's plans to embrace Afro-Cubans. Prior to the March 1959 announcement detailing plans to tackle racial oppression in Cuba, most political cartoons featured white caricatures. "Julito 26," a small bearded figure, representing the goals and ideals of MR 26-7, and its leader Fidel Castro, was the main character in these political cartoons.¹⁰ Thus, when the new leadership first began discussing strategies to offer more opportunities to Afro-Cubans, the press continued to use humor, through the adventures of "Julito 26," as a vehicle for advancing its goals. The following cartoon ran on March 28, 1959 and shows "Julito 26" running to hug his "*compadre*" (friend). But, instead of embracing the closest person in the cartoon, a white man, he runs and seizes the dark-skinned Afro-Cuban to the right.¹¹



This cartoon coincides with Castro's initial speech outlining the new policy for creating a nation devoid of racial divisions. As the visual representation of the new government's procedures, this cartoon embraces Afro-Cuban readers into the national

¹⁰ Chago Armas, *Revolución*, January 24, 1959, 8. This is the first cartoon to introduce "Julito 26."

¹¹ Armas, *Revolución*, March 28, 1959, 4.

fold. Yet, the confused expression on the white man's face as he stands alone acknowledges the surprise, and potential criticism, experienced by other observers.

In addition to written commentaries and political cartoons, numerous public groups met to discuss these issues. Students in the Federation of University Youth gathered at the University of Havana for an event celebrating "equal opportunities for all Cubans in work centers," while the National Movement for National Orientation and Integration held its first meeting on April 4 to "begin the work of the revolution" in implementing Article 20 of the 1940 Constitution."¹² Revolutionary leaders, Raúl Castro and Vilma Espín, even attended a dinner at the Afro-Cuban social Club Atenas to talk about the fight to end racial discrimination.¹³ Ultimately, the rally in March served as a dramatic launch to a campaign that would address the concerns of black Cubans, recognize racial prejudice as a national problem, and denounce anyone who did not support plans to fight racial discrimination as counterrevolutionary. The decision to dismiss the accepted trend of passively appeasing Afro-Cuban voters during election periods in favor of a more aggressive and direct plan of action sparked public debates and forums about how to achieve equality.

Fulfilling a Legacy

Revolutionary leaders frequently invoked the words of José Martí and Antonio Maceo to construct the new revolution as the fulfillment of an interrupted historical legacy for achieving racial equality on the island. In doing so, the new government

¹² "Inician campana de integración" *Verde Olivo*, April 20, 1959, 4. "Integrarán el 4 Comité Nacional de Integración," *Noticias de Hoy*, March 31, 1959, 1.

¹³ "Raciales: Raúl en Atenas," *Nuevos Rumbos*, March 1959, 15.

legitimized its campaign to end racial discrimination and engaged in a dialogue that crossed boundaries of skin color. By 1959, late nineteenth-century promises to unite all Cubans in a “raceless” republic had failed. Yet, the words of independence leaders Martí and Maceo remained central to revolutionary discourses about Afro-Cuban inclusion in the nation because they reached a wide audience. Maceo, in particular, was a useful reference point when explaining the abilities of Afro-Cubans because his legacy was a cultural signifier that did not require explanation and invoked a specific positive memory among Cubans across the island.

Even before the official March announcement describing the revolution’s plans to tackle racially oppressive practices, various Cuban intellectuals discussed the challenge of eliminating discrimination. When doing so, many of the articles written in the press framed the question of contemporary race relations using references to the late nineteenth-century. Juan René Betancourt, the “President of the National Federation of [black] Cuban Societies” noted in January 1959 that the “triumphant entrance” of the integrated army of MR 26-7, “reminds us of the marvelous gesture of [18]95, when Blacks and Whites united with common enthusiasm for liberty.”¹⁴ Similarly, a few days later in an interview with the American press, Castro claimed that the new revolution subscribed to the same attitudes as Martí and that “we would not be revolutionaries, nor democrats, if we did not end all forms of discrimination.”¹⁵ Another journalist concurred that the revolution should follow the teachings of the “Apostle” Martí and “go forward

¹⁴ Juan René Betancourt, “La cuestión racial,” *Revolución*, January 17, 1959, 4.

¹⁵ “Explicó Fidel Castro a la prensa la verdadera acción revolucionaria,” *Revolución*, January 23, 1959, 14.

with the black or not go at all.”¹⁶ These early articulations make direct comparisons between the 1959 revolution and the 1895 war for independence. By claiming that the most recent group of liberators shared the same ideas as accepted national heroes, authors provided legitimacy for confronting issues of race on the island. Moreover, by linking the 1959 revolution to a war that many believed was won only as a result of racial unity, Cuban intellectuals demonstrated the disadvantages of a divided Cuba and strengthened their calls for revolutionary cooperation.

Throughout the spring of 1959, articles and speeches also employed the 1895 war for independence as a way to reduce the discomfort of white Cubans who felt threatened by the new government’s policies toward blacks. In particular, one article by prominent MR 26-7 thinker Carlos Franqui announcing plans to integrate the Cuban workforce blamed the United States for existing racial divisions in Cuba. Franqui found that racist attitudes spread during the U.S. military occupation (1898-1902) interrupted the implementation of a racial democracy in Cuba. For him, the first fifty-nine years of the republic had failed to achieve the racial unity foreshadowed during the wars of independence because of interventions by U.S. leaders.¹⁷ Franqui diminishes the role played by white Cubans in prolonging racial discrimination by blaming racist U.S. statesmen for interfering in Cuban affairs fifty years earlier. Remembering the interrupted legacy of the wars of independence allowed this article to label new plans to end racial discrimination as the fulfillment of the imaginings of Cuba’s founding fathers. Thus, instead of a negative campaign hinging on the sins of white Cubans, invoking the legacy of Martí and Maceo transferred revolutionary racial policies into the realm of

¹⁶ Carlos Rodríguez, “A las filas!” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 27, 1959, 1.

¹⁷ Carlos Franqui, “La discriminación racial,” *Revolución*, March 23, 1959, 1.

national pride. To appease critical readers who might object to integration campaigns, the Cuban press frequently introduced potential solutions for resolving racial tensions in a manner that highlighted past success, while downplaying previous abuses. The idea that the revolutionary government invoked history to buttress its legitimacy is not new. However, it is significant that the narrative told by Cuban leaders frequently involved a less than accurate re-writing of the past to blame the United States for the existence of racial inequality on the island, not Cubans themselves.

Cuban authors also used examples from the late nineteenth-century to demonstrate the abilities of black Cubans. Afro-Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén, concluded that Cuban children needed to learn stories about Martí and Maceo because the pair, especially Maceo, demonstrated that skin color did not determine intelligence. In an essay published in *Noticias de Hoy* Guillén argued that it is important to teach young people that Cuba would not exist without heroes like General Maceo in order to give them a sense of self-worth.¹⁸ Similarly, Castro utilized the memory of the two leaders to offset criticism about his new policies. During a televised round table, the Cuban leader noted, “Here, everyone feels pride in the history of Cuba . . . Here everyone is honored that Maceo has been considered one of the best generals of all time. And Maceo was black.”¹⁹ Castro’s post-1959 description of Maceo as “black” conflicted with historically accepted portrayals of the general as “*mulato*” or the “bronze Titan.” By collapsing familiar color divisions, like black, *mulato*, or *trigueño* (wheat colored) into one group, *negro* (black), Castro openly created a new black constituency. Moreover, he used the image of a “black” Maceo to prove the capabilities of Afro-Cubans, and to prod white

¹⁸ Guillén, “Una revisión entre otras,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 29, 1959, 1.

¹⁹ “El espíritu renovador va a superar al tradicionalista,” *Revolución*, March 26, 1959, 1.

Cubans to accept new revolutionary policies based on the legacy of the wars of independence. Cuban intellectuals linked the campaign to end racial discrimination to positive images of past achievements to increase the likelihood that the plans would be accepted.

Repeated references to late nineteenth-century moments when racial democracy was a popular and accepted ideology reveal how radical revolutionary proposals to end racial discrimination continued to be in 1959 despite half a century of promises of equality. Revolutionary leaders and Cuban authors recognized that a large proportion of their audience needed to be persuaded of the value of programs aimed at ending racial discrimination. Consequently, they strategically linked the post-1959 inclusion campaign to established ideas of Cuban nationalism. In a sense, the ideas of Martí and Maceo were more popular in 1959 than they had been in the 1890s because fifty years had given many Cubans the opportunity to construct ambivalent images of what they stood for. And while crowds cheered when Castro spoke of fulfilling historical legacies, the continued failure to create a society without racial discrimination suggests the distance between celebrating national heroes and building the society they imagined.

A Social Problem

On a Sunday evening in March 1959, Fidel Castro announced his most detailed plan for ending racial discrimination in Cuba during a massive public rally. By Monday and Tuesday of the following week, the Cuban press was already caught in a debate over the meaning of the leader's words because some interpreted his newest proposals as

overtly radical.²⁰ The March announcement claimed that Afro-Cubans experienced inequality in two specific areas, the work place and in cultural or recreational activities. To thunderous applause, the young leader of the revolution described plans to educate black and white children together, open integrated recreational centers, and raise all Cubans as brothers.²¹ Despite the applause, some white Cubans feared that Castro was encouraging racial mixing in the most intimate areas of life. Commentators specifically asked, “What does Fidel want, that the white girls from the Yacht Club, go dancing with the Blacks and the *Mulatos* from the Club Atenas?”²² The revolutionary leadership chose to respond to these criticisms by couching its policies against racial discrimination in the language of social class and social justice. This gesture, which was later repeated throughout the racialized revolutionary discourse, was intended to offer Afro-Cubans tangible opportunities, while presenting a less threatening form of integration to critical observers.

Castro specifically addressed these concerns when accusing his audience of being hypocritical for cheering when he saved them money by lowering apartment rents, but being unsympathetic when he talked about equality for Afro-Cubans.

And I ask what difference is there between one injustice and another injustice, what difference is there between the *campesino* (farmer) without land, and the *negro* who is not given the opportunity to work, don't they both die equally of hunger, the *negro* who can't work and the *campesino*

²⁰ The next chapter will explore more fully the critical ways some Cubans responded to the campaign to end discrimination. The revolutionary government frequently portrayed this group as white and upper class “reactionaries” who opposed everything about the revolution, including its racial politics. However, see de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 264 for additional details on how Cuban “opposition to total and unqualified integration crossed political, class, and even color lines.”

²¹ “Un millón de trabajadores: Más unidos que nunca!” *Revolución*, March 23, 1959, 24.

²² Guillén, “Una revisión entre otras,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 29, 1959, 1.

without land? And why does the revolution have the obligation to resolve the other injustices and not the obligation to resolve this one?²³

Later, in a widely broadcasted roundtable discussion, Castro vehemently denied that he was trying to force blacks and whites to dance with each other. He claimed that his talk the previous Sunday afternoon sought to address “the most grievous discrimination of them all, the discrimination keeping blacks from getting a job.”²⁴ Both in these speeches and throughout other articles, revolutionary leaders established the campaign against racial discrimination as a social justice similar to other inequalities. In doing so, they sought to deemphasize the emotional attachment many Cubans felt towards race relations. By subsuming racial tensions into a matter of social class, Cuban intellectuals made the situation of Afro-Cubans more accessible to white readers and allowed blacks to feel that their concerns were a key aspect of the revolutionary doctrine.

The national press both respected and challenged revolutionary attempts to focus on economic disparities. One reporter for *Revolución* recounted a time when he entered a bank in Santiago to obtain information for a newspaper article. The reporter asked the bank’s administrator if there was any type of racial discrimination occurring at his establishment. The banker replied, “No, here, there is not any racial discrimination. Look, the doorman is of color!” And while, the absurdity of having only one black employee in the position of bellman did not seem to bother the banker, the journalist recognized the need for an increase in the number and types of positions available to people of color. In a subsequent article, he summarized his experiences and reinforced

²³ “El espíritu renovador va a superar al tradicionalista,” *Revolución*, March 26, 1959, 2.

²⁴ “‘Esta revolución no se hizo para conservar privilegios ni para acobardarse ante nadie en particular, ni para venderse a nadie en particular,’ dijo Fidel Castro en la TV,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 26, 1959, 1.

revolutionary discourses by arguing that the racial problem in Cuba was actually a “social issue,” because it hindered blacks from obtaining regular employment, buying houses, or saving sufficient money to fund the education of their children.²⁵ Another intellectual claimed that readers, who were not persuaded by Castro’s humanitarian or social justice rationales for ending racial discrimination, should consider the positive impact Afro-Cuban workers and consumers offered to the developing Cuban economy.²⁶ Similarly, Afro-Cuban Communist leader Lazaro Peña called for a revision in the way employment was awarded in Cuba after noting that there were over five million unemployed Cubans, the large majority of who were black. Peña, however, interpreted the revolution’s plans to give black Cubans additional job opportunities more radically by demanding that Afro-Cubans to be added to the top of the eligible candidate roster, in front of white Cubans who had been privileged for decades. For Peña, the new leadership’s focus on employment based discrimination was satisfactory as long as it was genuine and not “a fake attempt at justice” like the gestures of previous regimes.²⁷

The post-1959 government chose to address issues of racial inequality by opening up the work place to all Cubans. The revolution promised “each Cuban, white or black, a permanent job” by “creating industry, distributing lands, and mechanization.”²⁸

Revolución ran a full page article stating that the primary grievance of residents from one

²⁵ Alcibiades Poveda, “Un problema social en Santiago de Cuba,” *Revolución*, February 9, 1959, 2.

²⁶ Manuel Rey Araque, “Discriminación vs. Desarrollo” *Nuevos Rumbos*, April 9, 1959, 19.

²⁷ Lazaro Peña, “Debemos combatir prácticamente la discriminación racial desde los sindicatos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 29, 1959.

²⁸ Franqui, “La discriminación racial,” *Revolución*, March 23, 1959, 1-2.

Afro-Cuban neighborhood was their lack of “work.”²⁹ Citing plans to fix this situation across the island, revolutionary leaders continued to transfer issues from race to class, while simultaneously answering the calls of some blacks. By framing the race problem in Cuba along the parameters of unemployment and inaccessibility to resources, racism became a situation the government could resolve, in principle. This gesture appeased critical fears that the new campaign encouraged racial mixing and minimized government intervention in private spaces. Unfortunately, it also allowed individual racial prejudices to continue and foreshadowed the lingering presence of racism in Cuba throughout the twentieth century. Some Afro-Cubans were aware and accepted that the government’s choice to focus on employment-based discrimination was strategic. Guillén commented in an editorial that Castro had chosen to focus on economic disparities “because he knows his country and with great tact, he only refers to economic relations.” Like Peña, Guillén accepted this move saying, “it is important [work] because how many blacks or *mulatos* do you know who have access to bank offices, train stations, or even a nice shopping store? None.”³⁰

Throughout March and April 1959, public discussions about race in Cuba centered on giving black and *mulato* Cubans more opportunities. Visual images allowed the Cuban press to show its readers the plight of certain Afro-Cubans and further justify the need for social change. Full page articles and advertisements depicting the poverty of urban Cuba encouraged readers to empathize with the plight of poor black communities, while also demonstrating the similarities between the economic situations facing some

²⁹ José Hernández Artigas, “Barrio de pobres,” *Revolución*, March 2, 1959, 24.

³⁰ Guillén, “Una revisión entre otras,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 29, 1959, 1

urban Afro-Cuban neighborhoods and other rural areas, regardless of race.³¹ Authors frequently discussed the needs of black men when debating employment opportunities in electrical plants, factories, and union membership; however, women and children were the central protagonists in the racialized discourse when recounting black poverty.

Photographs of children with swollen bellies and female prostitutes in worn-out clothing accompanied articles describing predominantly black shantytowns on the outskirts of Havana.³² Similarly, other pieces highlighted the absence of schools, medicines, and safe drinking water in certain communities by showing images of Afro-Cuban children sitting idle in the streets and mothers holding sick babies in their arms.³³ Focusing on women and children provided the revolutionary leadership with a group that most critical readers found non-threatening and weak. Yet, the goals of these articles were not purely informational. Rather, the brevity of the written text, usually two to three paragraphs, which accompanied these full-page feature pieces, suggests that editors for *Revolución* invoked images of starving Afro-Cubans to neutralize a segment of the population that many whites considered to be dangerous. The press demonstrated its awareness of standing gender norms by choosing to illustrate fragile-looking women and desperate children. These images served both to reinforce the desperation of these communities and constructed a situation where the nation would appear unmanly if it refused to intervene with a gentlemanly hand.

³¹ *Revolución*, April 2, 1959, 16. This reference is to the example that opened this section describing the aspirations of a small black boy.

³² José Hernández Artigas, “La revolución transforma ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Revolución*, February 18, 1959, 15.

³³ José Hernández Artigas, “2,000 niños viven en el barrio Las Yaguas,” *Revolución*, February 23, 1959, 28.

Despite potentially benevolent intentions, the campaign to end racial discrimination often centered on reinforcing certain stereotypes. Images of poor Afro-Cubans perpetuated long standing beliefs that most blacks possessed undeveloped intellectual capabilities, limited economic resources, and were in need of salvation. Revolutionary leaders portrayed Afro-Cubans in this way, not only because of the reality of the situation facing some people of color, but also because images of destitute blacks coincided with familiar notions of white superiority. The evidence suggests that the new government reinforced paternalistic attitudes held by many whites toward Afro-Cubans, including leading officials, in its efforts to legitimize policies for reaching out to blacks on the island.

Worthy Citizens

On April 2, 1959 *Revolución* printed a full page “advertisement” featuring a photograph of a young dark-skinned boy. The speech line coming from the boy’s mouth reads, “I am a child too” and was accompanied by a poem describing his aspirations. The author of the piece expresses how the boy wanted to eat fine sweets, study in a good school, and grow up to be a “useful man.” In addition, the writer emphasizes how as an adult the child hoped to raise his own children in a place where people seeing his son, would remark, “there goes a child,” rather than “there goes a *negrito* (little black child).” The poem ends with the question, “Isn’t it true that I am asking for little?”³⁴ The poem indirectly compares the position of the poor child with the opportunities afforded to white Cubans. By implying that certain obstacles had prevented the child from achieving his dreams before the revolution, the author criticizes the injustices facing many blacks in

³⁴ *Revolución*, April 2, 1959, 16.

Cuba. Showing the boy's arms raised in supplication, the photograph of the young black child epitomizes the revolution's campaign to validate Afro-Cubans as citizens. The piece, which resembles an advertisement due to its full page size, and lack of title or byline, stresses the boy's desire for Cuban society to see him only as a child and not a little *black* child. This distinction was a critical aspect of the emerging racialized discourses in Cuba. Writers in the national press routinely sought to validate Afro-Cubans by emphasizing their Cuban citizenship, and deemphasizing their blackness.

Historian Hugh Thomas claims that "Batista's army and police were full of Negroes and Mulattoes. Yanes Pelletier, the officer who arrested Castro in 1953 after Moncada, was [even] black." He contrasts this assertion with the numerous white radicals who fought against Batista and argues that only about 12 percent of the soldiers with Castro at Moncada were black or *mulato*.³⁵ And while, the exact composition of Batista and Castro's armies remains unknown, it was widely accepted in 1959 that MR 26-7 and its leadership were not of color. Nevertheless, Cubans reading a national newspaper in spring 1959 were bombarded with images trying to persuade them otherwise. The national press celebrated the triumph of the new government by printing articles honoring those who had fought against Batista, with a particular focus on black rebels. Page two of *Noticias de Hoy* frequently consisted of a column titled, "Victims of Tyranny," which featured stories about Cubans who had suffered during Batista's repression.³⁶ This section printed a photograph and a brief summary of the experiences

³⁵ Hugo Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), 1122.

³⁶ For additional examples of Afro-Cubans featured in this column see, "Luis Herrera: víctima de horror de la 1a.," *Noticias de Hoy*, January 21, 1959, 1; "El Capitán Peñate y sus cómplices deben pagar las torturas y el asesinato de Carlos Hernández," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 7, 1959, 2; "Hector Jiménez, luchador de la Juventud Socialista desde que tenía 16 años, dio un ejemplo de firmeza revolucionaria," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 24, 1959, 2.

of various individuals, the majority of who had darker complexions, to emphasize how black men like Captain René Wilson and Oscar Fernández Padilla were brutally beaten and tortured by Batista's soldiers.³⁷ In each of these stories, editors highlighted how despite harsh treatment and tough conditions, these soldiers survived and remained dedicated to Castro's vision of a new Cuba.

The story of Afro-Cuban Armando Mestre also received significant press coverage during the first months of the revolution. Mestre died fighting against Batista forces in 1958. A year later, *Revolución* announced that his community was collecting funds to build a daycare in his honor. A photograph of the dark-skinned Mestre accompanied an article celebrating the young man's bravery and valor in battle. Journalists later reported the near completion of the facility and emphasized how Mestre's revolutionary legacy would continue through the youth who attended the center.³⁸ On April 19, popular Afro-Cuban *Comandante* Juan Almeida, who had fought with Castro as well, laid the first brick in the building's foundation.³⁹ Both the center itself and the wide-spread newspaper coverage of Almeida's participation in its development represent the revolution's campaign to celebrate Afro-Cuban rebel soldiers and validate the role they played in overthrowing Batista. Authors highlighted the successes of prominent Afro-Cuban revolutionaries as a means of showing the abilities of people of color to contribute to the nation.

³⁷ “‘Déjalo, que este es comunista y no tiene miedo.’ Así dije un Capitán René Wilson golpeado y torturado brutalmente,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 28, 1959, 2. “Oscar Fernández Padilla fue golpeado salvajemente siete horas seguidas en la 7ma.” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 4, 1959, 2.

³⁸ “Se honora Mestre con un Creche,” *Revolución*, February 20, 1959, 4. *Revolución*, March 5, 1959, 4.

³⁹ “Inician obra e la Creche ‘A. Mestre,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 19, 1959, 1.

Comandante Almeida, a dark-skinned Cuban, was described in the press as valiant, gentlemanly, and honorable.⁴⁰ *Revolución* featured an article detailing how Almeida was a member of MR 26-7 from its inception. The piece demonstrated how his lasting commitment to revolutionary ideals, which was only superseded by his love for his mother and brother, had given him access to upper level positions in the armed forces.⁴¹ The life of Almeida served as a tangible example of the sacrifices dedicated Afro-Cuban supporters had made to bring the new government to power. Castro invoked similar imagery in a televised response to critics of the campaign to end racial discrimination. He asked Cubans to “remember [Armando] Mestre, hero of Moncada, and the exceptional behavior of Juan Almeida one of the best captains . . . in the Battle of Uvero. Thanks to their heroism we had a decisive victory; decisive because if we had lost either of these battles it would have cost us the revolution.”⁴² Revolutionary discourses highlighted the contributions of black and *mulato* Cubans as a means of combating widely accepted ideas that MR 26-7 and its supporters were primarily white and middle-class. Public celebrations of Afro-Cubans who participated in the revolutionary victory also served to show critical observers that blacks deserved additional opportunities as citizens in the new regime. It is unclear how readers received articles highlighting the role of black and *mulato* soldiers. Yet, national discourses certainly worked to locate and publish Afro-Cuban voices to validate Castro and his leadership. For the Cuban press, black involvement in the revolutionary struggle

⁴⁰ Emilio Goraigo Nasser, “Salvó una cuchara la vida a Almeida,” *Revolución*, January 31, 1959, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴² “‘Esta revolución no se hizo para conservar privilegios ni para acobardarse ante nadie en particular, ni para venderse a nadie en particular,’ dijo Fidel Castro en la TV,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 26, 1959, 1.

signified that Afro-Cubans were analogous to other Cubans, and thereby worthy of full citizenship.

Revolutionary discourses celebrated the contributions of Afro-Cuban soldiers, athletes, and artists as a means of legitimizing the campaign to end racial discrimination, while also reaching out to Afro-Cuban audiences. The Cuban press employed the voices and the faces of exemplary blacks to show readers that despite the color of their skin, Afro-Cubans were worthy participants in the nation. Yet, such appreciatory rhetoric frequently centered on notions of Afro-Cuban participants in the nation as “raceless” citizens rather than as blacks. The article “!Negros No . . . Ciudadanos!” (Not Blacks . . . But, Citizens!) epitomized the national trend to define Afro-Cubans as members of the nation, rather than members of a particular racial group.⁴³ By stressing that Afro-Cubans were citizens rather than blacks, the article asks black Cubans, as well as whites, to move into an imaginary discursive space of unmarked or “raceless” Cubanness.

Alleviating Doubts with Humor

In addition, to highlighting the achievements and accomplishments of various Afro-Cuban revolutionaries, the Cuban press also used political cartoons to convey and legitimize its plans for social change in Cuba. Cartoonists used multi-layered images to connect with their audiences and to develop further ideas about the meaning of ending racial discrimination on the island. Cartoons were, and continue to be, powerful indicators of revolutionary political culture because they serve as visual representations of the symbols which have meaning to Cuban society. Residents on the island, regardless of the level of literacy, who perused newspapers in 1959 were able to understand the

⁴³ Hernández Artigas, “!Negros No . . . Ciudadanos!” *Revolución*, January 20, 1959, 16.

meaning behind political cartoons because cartoonists invoked familiar cultural imagery. Themes repeated throughout various sketches provide a better understanding of the attitudes held by national cartoonists and wide-spread public opinions. A series of cartoons printed over a two-month period in *Revolución*, chronicled the campaign to end racial discrimination, while simultaneously reinforcing standing stereotypes about people of color.

Political cartoons explicitly attempted to confront and deny the possibilities of white estrangement by sketching black characters standing among large interracial groups. The two cartoons below show black figures celebrating with “Julito 26” and other Cubans. In one, the crowd is dancing and shouting, “For Nothing! (*Por la libre!*),” while in another three men proclaim in unison, “Everybody knows that when we all come together and unify something good always happens.”⁴⁴



⁴⁴ Armas, *Revolución*, March 14, 1959, 4 and Armas, *Revolución*, April 2, 1959, 6.



In each of these cases, the artist sought to calm the fears of critical observers by drawing enthusiastic and content multiethnic groups. The cartoons suggest that rather than causing chaos or disorder, allowing blacks and whites to work side-by-side would result in celebrations and good fortune. These sketches address racial concerns in a way that both recognizes the need to include Afro-Cubans politically, while not offending or

scaring whites who might have imagined that their positions would be threatened by accepting blacks as equals. Political cartoons were the visual component of the on-going campaign to show readers how both Afro-Cubans and the nation as a whole would benefit from ending racial discrimination. Like the articles describing the attributes of black revolutionaries, these sketches acted to legitimize the new role the revolutionary



leadership sought to bestow on Afro-Cubans.

The political cartoon above, “*Carnaval*” (Carnival) pushes the concept of equality further by suggesting that blacks and whites exchange identities.⁴⁵ In the first part of the cartoon, there are two men, one black and the other white, running into a costume store; while, in the second sketch the two customers leave the store after swapping outfits. The black man is now in “white face” and wearing the clothing of his colleague, while the white man is shown in “black face,” in the opposite outfit. The artist attempts to persuade readers through the use of humor that the revolution has the ability to erase barriers between different racial groups. The pleasant expressions drawn on the faces of the two characters suggest that color switching is not only possible, but desired by both parties. In addition, connecting the color-swap to Carnival reveals the flexibility of racial identities in a non-threatening manner. Readers who might have found this image appalling due to its implication of race mixing could interpret the cartoon as a Carnival joke. Readers hoping for a new Cuba, without racial tensions, could imagine the image as a political statement against racial discrimination.

The repeated use of comedy and humor to discuss racial tensions in Cuba demonstrates awareness by the Cuban press that ending racial discrimination was an issue that needed to be handled carefully. The ways in which cartoonists sketched Afro-Cubans also points to the continued existence of pre-1959 stereotypes about people of color. Artists drew the characters in political cartoons in ways that were consistent and familiar to audiences. Blacks appeared as child-like, comical, and with exaggerated features, similar to depictions before the revolution. Artists sketched characters with curly hair, excessively dark skin, and thick lips to identify them as Afro-Cuban.

⁴⁵ Miko, *Revolución*, April 20, 1959, 2.

Whereas, cartoonists often illustrated white characters as tall, with slim noses, and straight hair. In “Carnival,” the white caricature seems particularly manly and mature in comparison to his shorter and stouter black comrade.⁴⁶ The continued use of an inferior looking sketch to represent Afro-Cubans resulted from a need to distinguish black men from their companions in ways that had meaning for the Cuban public. Cartoons repeatedly represented people of color using certain tropes because audiences equated these signifiers with dark skin color. In contrast, white Cubans were portrayed frequently as mature adults because the young leadership saw itself and the majority of its readers as such. In the end, political cartoons reinforced the explicit race-based stereotypes that writers had denied in articles celebrating the achievements of people of color. During the process of advocating for equality, revolutionary cartoons constructed particular unequal images of the relationship between racial groups in Cuba.

Alleviating Doubts: Afro-Cuban Responses

Throughout the spring of 1959, revolutionary discourses concerning race relations in Cuba used a variety of methods to legitimize the campaign to end racial discrimination in the eyes of critical observers. Thus far, this chapter has focused on how revolutionary leaders invoked the wars of independence, transferred social issues from race to class, and used examples of popular Afro-Cubans to validate blacks as citizens in the new Cuba. Most of these gestures were in response to criticism by hostile white Cubans who feared that the new leadership wanted to eliminate their privileges and encourage racial mixing. However, whites were not the only population that needed convincing in relation

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.

to revolutionary agendas. Many Afro-Cubans initially doubted that the Castro government would succeed in ending racial inequality on the island.

After MR 26-7 succeeded in ousting Batista from power, the new leadership turned its attention to resolving one of Cuba's most glaring social problems, economic inequality. To do so, the new government enacted a series of laws lowering apartment rents, raising salaries, and redistributing arable land in rural areas. Cubans had diverse reactions to these changes. Historians have examined the changing levels of support for the revolutionary government during the period when it sought to consolidate power. In regards to Afro-Cubans, the historiography offers a range of conclusions. Carlos Moore describes how the black middle class quickly became disillusioned with the new government's vocal promises to end racial discrimination, after seeing few tangible examples of people of color in upper-level leadership positions. Moore also argues that the forced closing of Afro-Cuban social clubs and mutual aid societies led to decreased support from some black leaders and intellectuals.⁴⁷ In contrast, Maurice Zeitlin uses evidence from interviews with eighty working-class Afro-Cubans in 1962 to demonstrate higher levels of support for the new government among blacks than whites. Zeitlin argues that Afro-Cuban workers were more likely to be behind the new government because it provided them with a dramatic increase in standard of living.⁴⁸ These cases reveal the futility of trying to offer one all-encompassing Afro-Cuban experience of the revolution. Often divided by class interests, gender, geographic location, or political

⁴⁷ Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles: University of California-Los Angeles Center for Afro-American Studies, 1988), 45-50. His argument is based on his personal experiences as well as Juan Betancourt, "Castro and the Cuban Negro," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 68, no. 5 (May 1961), 273.

⁴⁸ Maurice Zeitlin, *Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban Working Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 66-88.

involvement before the revolution, Afro-Cubans, like other groups on the island, interpreted the policies of the new government in a variety of ways. Examining the varied responses of Afro-Cubans to the predominant post-1959 racialized discourses and its campaign to end racial discrimination offers a better understanding of both the revolutionary government's agenda and black society in Cuba.

The community of Las Yaguas was one of the areas where the new government initially confronted the situation of Afro-Cubans. A slum, located alongside an abandoned quarry in East Havana, Las Yaguas claimed about 3,500 residents in 1959. The majority of these inhabitants were people of color, who had migrated to Havana from various rural towns, in hopes of finding employment in the capital.⁴⁹ Given its reputation as a neighborhood of thieves, prostitutes, and hoodlums, Las Yaguas seemed an unlikely place for a government project. However, headlines from as early as February 1959 demonstrate that "Transforming Las Yaguas" quickly became a priority in the new government's plans to reconstruct Cuba by reaching out to Afro-Cubans.⁵⁰ Writers constructed full page articles, complete with images from the community, to demonstrate the poverty and desperation of its population. Most frequently, the Cuban press portrayed the community as a broken space in need of salvation. Highlighting the area an example of the social problems facing Cuba, authors described plans to "transform" the community and "reintegrate its families" into the Cuban nation.⁵¹ The press built the campaign to "Transform Las Yaguas" off of the neighborhood's reputation as an

⁴⁹ Douglas Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura: Relocation of Slum Dwellers in Postrevolutionary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 5.

⁵⁰ Hernández Artigas, "La Revolución," *Revolución* February 18, 1959, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

uncivilized community of “delinquents,” with few “decent people.”⁵² These types of portrayals fit with revolutionary discourses focusing on Afro-Cuban social and economic problems. However, blacks in Las Yaguas understood the actions of the revolutionary government in ways that fitted with their historical experience. As poor people of color that interpretation routinely differed from the perspective of the new leadership.

Interviews and oral histories reveal that outside opinions of the community diverged from the way many residents of Las Yaguas imagined themselves. Despite their difficult economic situation, some residents of the Las Yaguas neighborhood sustained the routines of daily life. Divided into three barrios, Las Yaguans recognized the leadership of a popularly supported mayor, shopped at one of the eight grocery stores in the community, and engaged in various neighborly activities. Nearly every home in the neighborhood maintained an altar to the family’s preferred Afro-Cuban deity and religious celebrations featured a mixture of Catholicism and Santería.⁵³ One Afro-Cuban resident even recounted how the move from a tenement building in Havana to a house in Las Yaguas affected his wife. “Eloisa was satisfied. For one thing, she had my attention, and for another, she loved to feel that she was, so to speak, the owner of a house. She felt real proud of that.”⁵⁴ For this couple, the move to Las Yaguas symbolized upward mobility and better opportunities, rather than the slide into delinquency. And while hunger and inaccessibility to resources clearly marked the everyday lives of inhabitants

⁵² Hernández Artigas, “2,000 Niños,” *Revolución*, February 23, 1959, 28.

⁵³ Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*, 6-12.

⁵⁴ “Lázaro Benedí Rodríguez” found in Oscar Lewis et al., *Four Men: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 48.

of Las Yaguas, first-person accounts from before 1959 demonstrate that despite its poverty, some members of the community participated in the rituals of civilized society.

The Las Yaguas community was historically the target of government initiatives to eliminate slum housing in Havana. In particular, the legacy of a 1944 incident, in which inhabitants took up arms to defend their homes from destruction, left many residents with suspicious, if not hostile attitudes, toward government intervention in community affairs.⁵⁵ According to anthropologist Douglas Butterworth, who interviewed residents of the community in 1962, “The reaction of many Las Yaguans . . . was at first ambivalent. For many, harassed by outsiders for decades, the thought of joining national political groups seemed absurd. Some were barely aware of the political upheaval that culminated in Batista’s flight from Cuba.”⁵⁶ Similarly, a black resident from the community remembers that the “people’s feelings were mixed when Fidel entered Havana.”⁵⁷ Such attitudes suggest that while the Cuban leadership may have considered Las Yaguas an ideal neighborhood to civilize, its inhabitants were less receptive to government interference than printed articles indicate.⁵⁸

Newspaper accounts also differed from oral histories when describing an incident between revolutionary police and the residents of Las Yaguas. Benedí, a long-time Afro-Cuban inhabitant of the community, remembers being awakened on the night of February 10, 1959 by revolutionary police and accused of plotting against the government. He says, “Even though we supported the Revolution, the people of Las Yaguas were under

⁵⁵ Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*, 12-15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁵⁷ “Benedí” found in Lewis, *Four Men*, 86.

⁵⁸ See “Vecinos de Las Yaguas con la Reforma Agraria,” *Revolución*, March 21, 1959, 12, for an example of Las Yaguans supposed support of the revolution.

suspicion immediately . . . we were herded into trucks and taken to police station 13.”⁵⁹

While at the police station, the black residents were questioned about their involvement in anti-revolutionary plot and charged with marijuana possession. At the end of Benedí’s story the situation was resolved and everyone went back to sleep, mostly as a result of his superior leadership skills. However, despite the self-lauding tendencies of the informant, his narrative of unfair incarceration differs from the account printed in the national press.

Revolución called the episode a “public disturbance,” in which the police entered the neighborhood in pursuit of certain “delinquents.” After which, there was an exchange of blows, and four people were injured, before the intervention of a revolutionary officer prevented the altercation from escalating.⁶⁰ According to one article the conflict ended peacefully with all involved appreciative that the “Revolution would soon be able to integrate these families into the [Cuban] citizenry.”⁶¹ And while Benedí later became an ardent supporter of the new government and grew to appreciate its intervention in Las Yaguas, this initial exchange reveals that the two groups did not always have the same perspective on various events. Instead, many Afro-Cubans resisted government proposals to level the slums and refused to believe that the revolutionary leadership planned to build the promised new low-income housing.⁶² This attitude was based largely on previous negative experiences with national governments. But, the situation also demonstrates the legacy of the pre-1959 racial tensions in Cuba, in which most poor

⁵⁹ “Benedí” found in Lewis, *Four Men*, 86.

⁶⁰ Hernández Artigas, “La Revolución,” *Revolución*, February 18, 1959, 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶² Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*, 19-20.

Afro-Cubans distrusted and tried to distance themselves from projects sponsored by white leaders.

Cuban journalists publicly narrated the “transformation” of Las Yaguas, and blacks in general, in a way that was consistent with its emerging racialized discourse, a campaign that sought to integrate Afro-Cubans into larger nation, but with certain limits. The official press routinely portrayed poor Afro-Cuban communities, like Las Yaguas, as dependent and in need of aid because such a relationship rendered the new leadership as strong and in a position to grant aid. However, the paternalistic stance that the new government publicly took toward black Cubans did not fit with how many Afro-Cubans privately saw themselves. Thus, while poorer Afro-Cuban communities may have appreciated the physical and social changes implemented by the revolution, the portrayal of Blacks as infantile, and in need of rehabilitation, did not fully describe their daily situations. This discrepancy suggests the difficulties of eliminating long standing racial tensions through legislation.

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how race and discussions about racial discrimination became a central part of revolutionary politics in spring 1959. Public debates about how to improve the situation of Afro-Cubans and educate whites about the injustice of racial prejudice filled the headlines and front pages of national newspapers. Within these conversations the revolutionary government struggled to address the doubts of all Cubans. Using the legacy of the wars of independence, examples of both worthy and needy Afro-Cuban citizens, and humorous cartoons to accomplish its goals, the new

government found strategic ways to talk about a historically taboo subject. For the white revolutionary leadership, blacks were valuable citizens when they were athletes and revolutionary soldiers, who vocally supported the revolution. These high-profile characters could then cease to be black and become citizens. Other Afro-Cubans like the residents of Las Yaguas required reform before they could be granted citizenship. Whereas, the small child in the “I am a child too” advertisement distanced himself from the diminutive “*negrito*” in order to become like other children. Ultimately, the new leadership imagined the post-1959 nation as one devoid of racial labels. Yet, in doing so, they also devalued blackness by presenting flawed descriptions of Afro-Cuban communities and requiring assimilation and reform in exchange for full citizenship.

Prominent themes found throughout the new government’s revolutionary discourse reveal the important role “raceless” ideologies and memories of the wars independence played in 1959. Even if the young leadership had wanted to fight against racial prejudice and discrimination directly, they were limited by the responses of their audiences. Bringing Afro-Cubans into the national fold and eliminating centuries of racism were not simple projects that could be resolved with public announcements. Castro and his team were forced to confront a variety of doubts, both within the Afro-Cuban community and among white critics. Moreover, they had to fight against attitudes within themselves. In the months and years that followed the first public announcement, the post-1959 government invoked a variety of strategies to create a national revolutionary project. And, these discourses were always influenced by the popular Cubans reactions.

Cubans who remained unmoved by the diverse reasons presented in the press for ending racial discrimination were labeled counterrevolutionaries. National discourses represented racism and racial divisions as threats to Cuban unity. Thus, any group or individual who disagreed with revolutionary calls to integrate the workplace, promote Afro-Cuban employees, or educate white and black children in the same public school were seen as hostile to the new leadership. This tactic became a powerful way of discrediting enemies of the revolution. The following chapter explores these themes more closely to see how the links between being a racist and a counterrevolutionary impacted Cubans living and leaving the island in 1959.

Chapter Three:

Dancing with the Revolution: Racism and Counterrevolutionary Discourses

Looking back on the first few years of the revolution, sixty-eight year old, Afro-Cuban, Reynaldo Peñalver remembered the speech where Fidel Castro first promised to end racial discrimination on the island. He recalled how after Castro said publicly that Cubans could dance with whomever they wanted as long as they danced with the revolution, “that was the end of the honeymoon [period] and the true start of the exodus.”¹ The exodus Peñalver was referring to is the 215, 000 thousand Cubans who left the country before 1963, choosing to go into political exile in the United States rather than support the nationalist revolution of the 26th of July Movement (MR 26-7) and its allies.² The reasons and motivations behind the departure of these Cubans varied, and most scholars see their exit as a mixed reaction to economic and political events. However, oral histories and essays by black and *mulato* contemporaries reveal that for many Afro-Cubans those persons who left the island between 1959 and 1963 were overwhelmingly white and affluent Cubans who had been critical or uncooperative with government plans to change society, including measures to eliminate racial discrimination.

¹ Reynaldo Peñalver Moral, “Under the Streetlamp: A Journalist’s Story,” in Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 48.

² Richard R. Fagen, *Cubans in Exile: Disaffection and the Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), 17.

Beginning in 1959, the revolutionary government labeled these dissenters “counterrevolutionaries” and frequently called them “racists” as well. This move established the popular idea that anyone who disagreed with the revolution and left the island was privileged, white, and unwilling to share their riches. Cuban politicians had invoked the term “racist” to discredit opposition groups long before 1959, especially during election years in the first half of the twentieth century.³ However, these accusations rarely resulted in more than the loss of a particular voting bloc. When revolutionary leaders re-appropriated this discourse as a component of post-1959 politics, they explicitly connected lingering racial prejudices to opposition groups to garner support from Afro-Cubans and silence potential attacks that the new leadership, who were largely white, were themselves racists. In doing so, the new government transformed on-going conversations about ending racial discrimination into direct attacks against dissenters. Saying that racists were counterrevolutionaries led many people, in particular Afro-Cubans, like Peñalver, to believe the inverse: that most exiled counterrevolutionaries were inherently racist.

National discussions occurring in newspapers, magazines, and on television repeated these themes as Cubans worked to define the norms of a new Cuba. Ultimately, most decided that racism and revolution were incompatible and criticized moments when other Cubans exhibited racial prejudices in response to efforts to equalize educational, employment, and recreational opportunities. Of course, critics of the revolution and Cubans going into exile disagreed and argued that their conflict was not with Cubans color, but with the communist leanings of the new government. The first half of this chapter explores

³ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 83. For example, after the massacre of thousands of Afro-Cubans in 1912, both Conservative and Liberal party members portrayed their opponents as the “butchers” and “assassins of the noble [black] race” to undermine the other group’s legitimacy with voters.

responses to the campaign to end racial discrimination to reveal how Cubans negotiated their fears and discomforts with integration, one of the more controversial moves of the period. Looking at the ways in which residents linked racism to counterrevolution offers insight into how Cubans understood these changes and how racialized revolutionary discourses impacted tough decisions, such as remaining on the island or going into exile.

Revolutionary efforts to deal directly with racism and improve the lives of the masses, who were predominantly of color, touched nearly every aspect of daily life on the island between 1959 and 1961. Racial integration coupled with economic redistribution measures targeting the poor contributed to the belief among some dissenters that the revolution had gone too far or had become too radical. Most scholarly accounts about why critics opposed the revolution and/or decided to flee the island overlook the impact of discourses about racial privilege, when explaining the multiple reasons Cubans went into exile.⁴ Instead, they argue that the post-1959 government enacted a series of changes that fundamentally altered society to the point where many chose to leave even before the revolution's official commitment to a Marxist-Leninist ideology alienated others in late 1961.⁵ This literature highlights measures such as the Agrarian Reform, placing limits on rental prices, and early tensions with the United States as forces distancing many middle- and upper-class Cubans from the new government. And while each of these issues were

⁴ Numerous scholars agree that most Cubans welcomed the anti-Batista revolution and initially supported the new leadership. However, as 1959 progressed more Cubans became dissatisfied with the changes enacted by the new governments. For additional information on the anti-Batista coalition and the political and economic changes occurring after 1959 see Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course and Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 62-63. Pérez-Stable's account does not discuss race or the role of racial discourses played in the solidification of the revolution. Also see Thomas Boswell and James R. Curtis, *The Cuban American Experience: Culture, Images, and Perspectives* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 19. Boswell and Curtis correctly note that "once the radical nature of the economic, social, and political changes became increasingly apparent" much of the initial support ended.

⁵ Lisandro Pérez, "Cubans in the United States," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* vol. 487 (September 1986), 129.

contributing factors to why some Cubans elected for exile, the explanation remains incomplete without an exploration of how plans to offer more opportunities to blacks and *mulatos* and eliminate many of the “white-only” spaces that were previously the norm shaped how all Cubans understood the 1959 revolution. This chapter investigates this silence by building on the work begun by Alejandro de la Fuente in *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. He notes that some whites “found it hard to adjust” to increased integration in the workplace, but had few opportunities to protest because the “revolution had created the dominant ‘ideal’” that “revolutionaries could not be racists.”⁶ This chapter explores how the new government established this “ideal,” namely the connection between racism and counterrevolution, and how Cubans interpreted and redeployed racialized revolutionary discourses both on the island and in exile.

The application of revolutionary racialized discourses to indict the new government’s opponents had particular consequences for Afro-Cubans. Most of the literature overlooks why so few people of color went into exile during the first years of the revolution. Instead, scholars and contemporaries seem to assume that Cubans of African descent could not afford to flee their homes or were ambiguous to the changes happening on the island. María Cristina García, an exiled Cuban author, briefly suggests that the new leadership explicitly called critics and those choosing to leave the island racists to prevent a similar migration on

⁶ De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 278. Similarly, in *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California-Los Angeles, 1988), 58, Carlos Moore finds that “toward the end of 1959 Castro began to refer to the ‘Negro question’ to discredit his enemies” in relation to the trial and imprisonment of a revolutionary leader *Comandante* Huber Matos. Like de la Fuente, Moore’s analysis begins to explore this connection between racism and counterrevolution, but fails to unpack how the revolution constructed this link or how it was interpreted on a daily basis by Cubans living and leaving the island in the early 1960s.

the part of Cubans of color.⁷ However, García fails to explore how this connection was made or how it was used by Afro-Cubans to seek additional reforms. Calling counterrevolutionary and exile groups racist not only kept blacks and *mulatos* from leaving the island, but it also provided people of African descent with a language for attacking lingering prejudicial practices in Cuba. Furthermore, establishing the link between dissent and inequality in the early 1960s helped to build the revolution's international reputation as a government fighting against racism during a time when few other nations, and certainly not the United States, could claim such a stance.

Critical Reactions to the Campaign to End Racial Discrimination

After the revolutionary government announced plans to eliminate racial discrimination, a rumor spread across the island that the new leaders intended for black men to invade elite social clubs and dance with white women.⁸ The previous chapter discussed how revolutionary leaders and their supporters responded to these critiques with a national campaign to clarify their intentions. This public discourse sought to incorporate Afro-Cubans into the revolutionary project, while also offsetting fears of change by emphasizing plans to fulfill the legacy of José Martí and Antonio Maceo and provide Afro-Cubans with equal educational and employment opportunities. Yet, despite even the most cautious language, some Cubans interpreted the opening of private beaches, integration of social clubs, and the nationalization of private schools as threatening. Political scientist Richard R.

⁷ María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 44. García includes only one paragraph about these issues.

⁸ “Esta revolución no se hizo para conservar privilegios ni para acobardarse ante nadie en particular, ni para venderse a nadie en particular,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 26, 1959, 1. This article is printed in *Revolución* as well.

Fagen correctly emphasizes the important role the perceived difference between the new and the old Cuba played in some exiles decision to leave the island. “The rejection of this new way of life was profoundly affected by prior experiences and by allegiance to the old way of life. *Comparisons* as well as *deprivations* are at the core of exile perceptions and motivations.”⁹ The next section explores how revolutionary policies promoting racial integration in schools and the workplace contributed to the view by some middle-and upper-class Cubans that the emerging “new” Cuba was radically different than the “old.”

Allowing access to previously white social spaces was one of the first areas where the revolution encountered resistance. In January 1959, two social clubs, one white and one black, in Santa Clara planned to host their annual parties to commemorate the birth of Martí in separate locations, a tradition stemming from the nineteenth century. Revolutionary governor, Calixto Sánchez, intervened and said that that the two groups should celebrate together. He then invited the black social club to the Liceo, where the white group had planned to meet. Onlookers remarked that the governor’s actions were met with “happiness by some, shock by others, and the revulsion of many.”¹⁰ A Haitian author living in Havana during the early part of 1959 similarly noted that Castro’s speech on ending racial discrimination was received favorably by most white revolutionaries, but that “all the bourgeoisie whites, most of the white petite bourgeoisie (and the accommodates *mulatos*) . . . panicked as if an atomic bomb were coming” when they heard it.¹¹ Reactions such as these

⁹ Fagen, *Cubans in Exile*, 14. See Fagen, 16-28, for demographic information about the Cubans who went into exile between 1959 and 1963. He finds that 23.5% of the refugees in Miami graduated from high school, compared to only 5% of Cubans in the country. Cubans who left for Miami also earned about four times the amount of the income of residents on the island. Overall, he rejects the idea that the early exiles were a heterogeneous “cross-section” of the Cuban population.

¹⁰ “En Cuba no debe existir la discriminación,” *Adelante*, February 16, 1959, 1.

by wealthy white and *mulato* Cubans coupled with widespread accounts describing with horror the idea that Castro sought to encourage interracial dancing reveal early resistance to revolutionary plans to create a new and integrated Cuba. And while Cubans of all colors and classes had interacted previously in certain situations, the idea of sharing “private” social spaces, such as beaches, clubs, and recreational facilities with working-class blacks created anxiety among some whites and *mulatos*.

The dismantling of private schools was another area where the revolution encountered resistance when trying to integrate students of various racial and economic backgrounds. Prior to 1959, most well-to-do Cubans sent their children to private institutions for schooling. These establishments educated predominantly white, middle-and upper middle class students, with the exception of the occasional wealthy *mulato*. Opening educational centers to all Cubans was among the radical social changes implemented by the new government beginning in 1959. A Cuban woman, Marta, remembers being a seventh-grader at Ruston Academy, an elite institution for the children of north-American and Cuban business leaders, diplomats, and government officials at the start of the revolution.¹² “I spent my whole life in this American school and there was not a single black or *mulato*.” After the revolution, she recounts how everyday more and more children were absent from school. She quickly learned that this meant that their families had left for the United States in opposition to the revolution. The Ministry of Education nationalized Ruston in 1961, along with other private educational facilities, and began to require all Cuban children to go to

¹¹ Rene Depestre, “Carta a Cuba sobre el imperialismo de la mala fe” *Casa de las Américas* no. 34 (January-February 1966), 96.

¹² For additional reading on Ruston Academy see James D. Baker, *Ruston: From Dreams to Reality* (Miami: Ruston-Baker Educational Institution, 2007).

public schools. Marta said that for her this was like leaving a “cocoon.” “My old school was beautiful. I only had twenty-four students in my class. But, after, in my new school, there were seventy students in one class and lots of blacks and *mulatos* . . . Many people left Cuba because they did not want to mix with them.” Marta’s parents remained on the island because of their support of the revolution and reluctance to begin a new life in the United States despite their fierce anti-communism and Catholic beliefs. However, she admits that it was a difficult transition to interact with people from different racial and social backgrounds in her new school and other revolutionary organizations.¹³ Her story underscores the anxieties experienced by some Cubans during the early years of the revolution. Racial integration in the realm of education, while not as extreme as in the United States, caused discomfort and led a number of Cubans to criticize the opportunities provided to people of African descent.

As a result of these changes, some white, middle- and upper- class Cubans accused Afro-Cubans of becoming “*insoportable*” (unbearable, intolerable). The repetition of expressions such as, “You give them [blacks] a finger and they will take the hand, and the arm too!” highlights the common perception among critics that blacks and *mulatos* had become overtly disrespectful and demanding of equal rights since the announcement to eliminate racial discrimination.¹⁴ These characterizations of people of color epitomize one set of adverse reactions to shifting social boundaries which previously had kept blacks and *mulatos* in subservient roles. In response to the excitement expressed by some working-class Afro-Cubans toward the revolution, others felt threatened and expressed the need to put

¹³ As told to author in an interview in Havana, Cuba (May 6, 2007)

¹⁴ Depestre, “Carta a Cuba,” 123.

blacks and *mulatos* in their place. An account from an eight-year old boy highlights this concept. He describes being “tortured” by an insolent black maid, Caridad, shortly after the revolution.

She loved Fidel, and she listened to the radio in the kitchen all day long. . . . Caridad used to taunt me when my parents weren’t around. ‘Pretty soon you’re going to lose all this.’ ‘Pretty soon you’ll be sweeping my floor.’ ‘Pretty soon I’ll be seeing you at your fancy beach club, and you’ll be cleaning out the trash cans while I swim.’ With menacing smirks, she threatened that if I ever told my parents about her taunts, she would put a curse on me.¹⁵

The family’s characterization of Caridad as insolent and labeling of her enthusiasm as torture reveal both Afro-Cuban excitement for their new opportunities and white and upper-class alarm and distaste for these changes. Regardless of whether all Cubans of African descent carried themselves with additional sentiments of entitlement, it is significant that others thought they did and reacted to these perceptions. Often before quantifiable changes in the social hierarchy took place, middle-and upper-class Cubans interpreted the new regime’s vocal solicitation of Afro-Cuban support along with positive reactions by blacks and *mulatos*, as indicators that the island was changing rapidly in ways that made them uncomfortable. It was distressing to certain Cubans to imagine working-class people of color moving into their neighborhoods or assuming positions of authority in the new government, because that was an inversion of accepted social norms and an uncommon occurrence in the old Cuba.

Conversations criticizing changing racial norms repeatedly emphasized the dangers or aggravations experienced by white women coming into more frequent contact with black men. A group writing in Miami, lamented the decrease in medical options in Cuba since

¹⁵ Carlos Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 3-4.

“white women are refusing to be handled by Negro Communist practitioners who 'use revolutionary doctrine as an excuse for becoming more and more familiar and bold.'”¹⁶ This statement highlights fears that Afro-Cuban doctors and professionals would interpret revolutionary racialized discourses as permission to express hidden desires for white female bodies. White Cuban women frequently became the protagonists in critical discussions about shifting social and racial boundaries because of the continued salience of gendered customs about white female purity, fragileness, and need of protection. Some Cubans not only disagreed with new revolutionary policies, but framed that criticism in historical discourses about black male sexuality versus white female wholesomeness to reach a wider audience and show the peril of allowing black men entrance into white-only social spaces. These discursive gestures portrayed white women as helpless victims incapable of defending themselves; while marking black men as communists and sexually aggressive opportunists to discredit revolutionary plans to offer Afro-Cubans additional employment and education opportunities after 1959.

Blacks and *mulatos* were aware of these characterizations and frequently linked them with counterrevolutionary attitudes. Assistant Secretary of Labor, Afro-Cuban José Causse described how “*señoras*, influenced by the counterrevolution,” resisted the idea of paying a minimum wage to maids and other domestic workers, many of whom were of color. While, another black observer noted that many respectable women left Cuba because “after Castro’s speech the blacks had become disrespectful.” People of color publicly attributed specific changes such as being fired from a job or learning that an employer’s family was headed to the United States, to white women’s, not white men’s, fear of Afro-Cubans. By mirroring

¹⁶ Unidad Revolucionario, “Letter to American Students,” (Miami: Schneer Printing Corp., 1963), 23.

the oppositional rhetoric that gendered counter-government fears to focus on white female experiences, Afro-Cubans perpetuated the pattern of pitting black men against white women.

Other Cubans spread criticisms about the revolution's policies through the daily use of humor and sarcasm; which often meant cloaking discomforts about new racial policies in popular comments about *insoportable* domestic workers or interracial relationships. It was common for an interracial couple walking through Havana to hear comments labeling them as a pair that "*quema petróleo*" (burned oil) in reference to the white partner's preference for the black or petroleum-colored skin of an Afro-Cuban. Whereas, a white man who dated a black woman was referred to as an "*administrador de ferretería*" (administrator of a hardware store) to suggest the low-class or unrefined nature of dating a person of color or as someone who "*anda con alambres*" (walks with wires) to highlight the curly or kinky texture of a black or *mulato* woman's hair.¹⁷ Relationships between Cubans of different skin colors were not new occurrences, but, rather common and controversial long before 1959. Yet, the continued prevalence of jokes insulting interracial pairs by linking blackness to poverty and pejorative stereotypes about skin color and hair type in the mid-1960s reveal lingering anxieties about the race mixing that some feared would increase due to revolutionary programs eliminating barriers to formerly white-only spaces. Critics worried that the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination would infiltrate private realms, such as dating, and commonly said that a black Cuban could be a revolutionary "brother," but not a brother, as in brother-in-law.¹⁸ More than before some whites saw 'disrespectful' black and *mulato*

¹⁷ Depestre, "Carta a Cuba," 123. These comments were found initially in the Depestre text and verified as common during oral histories.

¹⁸ Repeated in oral histories with author. "*Puede ser hermano, pero no hermano!*" (May 2007).

workers and mixed race partnerships as tangible symbols of a new and revolutionary Cuba, an island which was quickly changing into a different and uncomfortable place.

The following account, told to a Haitian journalist living in Havana in the early 1960s, offers another example of concerns about black uplift. He recounts how it was common to hear stories such as:

A white woman sees a black man walking perilously on the rooftop of a ten story building, and thinks to herself that “*negrito*” [little black] is going to fall and kill himself, when the man plummets to the ground. But, to her amazement, before his feet can touch the street, he straightens up and continues walking as if he had just finished jumping over a short wall. The woman observing the scene exclaims ‘the Virgin of Charity protects you extremely well!’ The man replies, ‘No, it is not that, it’s just that after the triumph of the Revolution, Fidel gave us [blacks] wings.’¹⁹

Similar to comments labeling blacks and *mulatos* as *insoportables*, this story uses humor and sarcasm to express anxieties over the new government’s plan to provide people of African descent with additional opportunities. By suggesting that the black man in the story has religious powers, the author equates the newly acquired position of Afro-Cubans to the supernatural and implies that their post-1959 advancements are undeserved. And while humor was one way that critics called attention to the revolution’s investment in blacks, other popular sayings were more direct. Afro-Cuban author Pedro Pérez Sarduy remembers that the slogan, “Neither black nor red,” was a familiar aspect of “white backlash against major redistributive measures in the early revolutionary years.”²⁰ By calling for “neither a black nor red” Cuba, critics linked blackness to communism and expressed fear of a new government led by members of either group. Ultimately, all of these types of opposition,

¹⁹ Depestre, “Carta a Cuba,” 124.

²⁰ Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *AfroCuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture* (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Ocean Press, 1993), 9.

both implicit and explicit, shaped the way revolutionary supporters, in particular Afro-Cubans, imagined dissenters and counter-government groups.

During the early 1960s, most Cubans were aware of the various popular anecdotes spread by critics and supporters alike. Revolutionary leaders responded to rumors that their plans encouraged interracial mixing, by saying that they would not force Cubans to dance with anyone, “as long as they danced with the revolution.”²¹ In a televised interview, Castro noted that some had said that, “blacks had become *insoportable*” since his announcement. In response, he called for “everyone to be respectful to each other, and that blacks should be more respectful than before because they understand that the revolution is working to eliminate discrimination.”²² As seen in the previous chapter, statements such as these invoked paternalistic rhetoric which reinforced long-held attitudes about acceptable Afro-Cuban behavior, while asking Cubans of African descent to be grateful for the initiation of the integration process. Among themselves, Cubans of color also acknowledged that some whites expected black men to interpret plans to eliminate racial discrimination to mean sexual freedom, especially in relation to white women. Most Afro-Cubans dismissed this accusation and contended that they only wanted to be respected as people and receive equal opportunities to work and go to school.²³ Nevertheless, the frequent repetition of certain rumors and criticisms in popular discourses contributed to the perception by all Cubans, and in particular people of color, that the “true start of the exodus” occurred after the revolutionary government initiated plans to build a new, integrated society.²⁴

²¹ “Esta revolución no se hizo,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 26, 1959, 1.

²² Ibid.

²³ Depestre, “Carta a Cuba,” 98.

²⁴ Peñalver, “Under the Streetlamp,” 48.

White Cubans, however, were not the only ones to have adverse responses to revolutionary plans to integrate the island. Haitian observer, Rene Depestre noted that along with causing panic among some white dissenters, Castro's March 1959 speech concerning racial discrimination produced alarm in the economically comfortable *mulatos* as well.²⁵ The debate over the continued existence of black and *mulato* social clubs was one area where some Afro-Cuban intellectuals criticized revolutionary actions. As the revolutionary government began to integrate and abolish elite white societies and recreational facilities, they faced the question of what to do with similar organizations for people of African descent. These mutual aid societies had existed since the late nineteenth century and served as spaces for middle- and upper-class Afro-Cubans to not only gather and network, but also as avenues for pushing for social and political change. Some Afro-Cubans argued that given the revolution's plans to eliminate racial discrimination and create integrated societies for all Cubans, there was no longer a need for black clubs.²⁶ While others, maintained that Afro-Cuban societies were the most appropriate avenue to assist the new government in its plans to create a racially inclusive Cuba and disagreed with moves to disband them.²⁷ Ultimately, the new government decreased funding to the groups and they eventually disappeared as other racially integrated programs began to fulfill their missions of educating and providing recreational space for people of African descent. Similar to the reactions of middle- and upper-class whites, elite Afro-Cubans expressed concern over these changes and some eventually joined the exile community in the United States.

²⁵ Depestre, "Carta a Cuba," 96.

²⁶ De la Fuente, *A Nation For All*, 281.

²⁷ Ibid, 281. For additional reading see Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*, 48.

Juan Betancourt was an Afro-Cuban lawyer who directed the Federation of Black Societies in Cuba in 1959 before leaving the island in 1960. He criticized the closure of historically black clubs and the publicized integration of white spaces as a plot to deceive Afro-Cubans into believing that they had received advantages from the revolution. Betancourt argued that instead of believing “that they are taking reprisals against discrimination and achieving racial equality by being allowed to patronize previously ‘all-white’ places,” black Cubans should ask why the leaders of the revolutionary government are mostly white.²⁸ The conflict over Afro-Cuban social clubs, as well, as the concern among some middle-and upper-class people of color about the lack of blacks and *mulatos* in high-level government positions highlights the continued impossibility of generalizing about reactions to the revolution and its policies. People of African descent interpreted the policies of the new government based on what was best for their individual daily situation, just like other Cubans. At times, this meant supporting programs that allowed equal access to employment opportunities, while at other moments this meant challenging the closure of Afro-Cuban social facilities.

Similarly, not all white Cubans responded negatively to plans to integrate schools or the workplace. Leaders of the Socialist Party, in particular, backed moves to eliminate racial discrimination.²⁹ And historically white youth groups, like the FEU, were frequently the most vocal supporters of these aspects of revolutionary principles as well. Most Cubans negotiated the rapidly changing society day by day and found themselves more supportive

²⁸ Juan Betancourt, “Castro and the Cuban Negro,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 68, no. 5 (May 1961), 272.

²⁹ The Cuban Socialist Party had been calling for these types of reforms since the 1930s in their party publication, *Noticias de Hoy*.

than critical of government policies overall. Yet, dissenters existed, and as the next section will show, those who openly critiqued the revolution were characterized repeatedly in the national discourse as racists, even when they were people of African descent.

Racism as Counterrevolution

By the end of 1959 and towards the beginning of 1960, revolutionary discourses began to connect racist attitudes to counterrevolutionary actions. And while government leaders might have initiated these links to solidify political authority and discredit dissenters, Cubans across the island repeated this rhetoric in newspapers, magazines, and daily conversations. Doing so, led to the acceptance of the term “racist” as not only an insult, but as a widely acknowledged metaphor for counterrevolution. This situation both reflected and contributed to the perception by blacks and *mulatos* that Cubans fighting against the revolution and choosing to move to the United States were privileged whites unwilling to participate in creating a more equal society.

As the revolution progressed, national discourses sought to distinguish between “true” revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries. Historian Marifeli Pérez-Stable notes that “The revolution polarized Cuba and disallowed neutrality. *Con Cuba o contra Cuba* was the battle cry.”³⁰ A central component of this conversation, which is often overlooked, was whether Cubans agreed with the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination. According to national discourses, true revolutionaries supported plans to rid the island of racial inequity, while counterrevolutionaries did not.³¹ This was a significant shift from pre-1959 discourses

³⁰ Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 77.

³¹ “Esta revolución no se hizo,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 26, 1959, 1.

because being labeled a “counterrevolutionary” carried considerable consequences. In the past, ideologies of “racelessness” and the legacy of the wars of independence might have led some Cubans to call the perpetrators of racial inequality “un-patriotic,” but this label had few tangible penalties. However, enthusiasm for the 1959 revolution, the struggle against Fulgencio Batista, and for Cuban sovereignty meant that those who were seen as outside of the revolution faced pressures to conform, remain silent, or leave the island. This concept applied to both white and black Cubans. As one author noted, discriminatory practices, “are in the language of the moment also counterrevolutionary practices. We have to continue as if we had an enemy in every racist, white or black.”³² Others warned against seeing the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination as the “private vindication of the Negro,” and labeled Afro-Cubans leaders particularly interested in their individual advancement as “opportunistic” and “counterproductive.”³³ And while few people of African descent would have been identified as racist, such gestures sought to create safe parameters for discussions about racial privileges. The new government and its supporters strengthened the movement to rid the island of discrimination while putting forth a particular vision of what the new Cuba would look like by identifying public racism as a counterrevolutionary offense.

Throughout the island, Cuban leaders linked racism to counterrevolution to unify supporters. A representative of the revolutionary army, Jorge Risquet reiterated this idea before a group in the eastern city of Santiago. He noted that critics “were using Machiavellian principals of ‘Divide and Conquer’ to destroy the revolution, by dividing Cubans based on skin color.” Calling these Cubans counterrevolutionaries he told the audience that the “revolution does not have a color, except the olive green color of the

³² “Punto 2,” *Combate 13 de marzo*, January 20, 1960, 8.

³³ “Fidel Castro invitado por el Comité de Integración,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 2, 1959, 1.

revolutionary army.”³⁴ Similarly, Fidel Castro noted in a television appearance that “if on top of the division between rich and poor, we divide ourselves between black and white . . . we will fragment into a million pieces, and the oppressors will defeat us and we will return to the past.”³⁵ These statements recognized that the island’s legacy of racial tension was capable of dividing residents, and sought to diminish this possibility by maintaining that whomever succumbed to past ideals was an enemy of the revolution. Likewise, an Afro-Cuban newspaper condemned racial discrimination by linking it to the nineteenth-century plantation society and calling establishments that refused to serve blacks and *mulatos* as places where the “sentiment of slave discrimination” still live.³⁶ In each of these references Cubans interchanged labels such as oppressor, slave owner, and racist to identify continued racial prejudice as counterrevolutionary. These gestures sought to discredit dissenters while suggesting to Afro-Cubans that the new government would protect their interests better than any “racist” opposition movement. Within such discursive parameters it became impossible to disagree with certain revolutionary policies without being labeled a racist. It was also unfitting to be a revolutionary leader or supporter and to continue to practice, at least publicly, privileges based on skin color.

The case of Amaury Friginals, the leader of the electrical workers union illustrates this point. In spring of 1960, a controversy erupted because Cubaneleco, the private club associated with the electrical union, refused to allow Afro-Cubans entrance into its recreational facilities. Cubans vocally opposed this situation using the language of the

³⁴ Sadie Caballero, “Fué una poderoso demostración de unidad el mitin de anoche,” *Sucro* (Santiago), April 24, 1959, 1. This is an Afro-Cuban newspaper published in the eastern city of Santiago, Cuba.

³⁵ “Esta revolución no se hizo,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 26, 1959, 1.

³⁶ “En Cuba no debe existir la discriminación,” *Adelante*, February 16, 1959, 4.

moment to label the group's leaders as racist counterrevolutionaries. One editorial accused the union of "not entering the revolution" because it continued to discriminate against Afro-Cubans.³⁷ While another found that Friginals was "out of compliance" with the new goals of Cuba and had committed "treason" against the revolution³⁸ A single word, "discriminator," accompanied a photograph of the union leader to emphasize his rejection of the campaign to end racial inequality.³⁹ By December, Friginals and other leaders of the electrical union had been removed from their positions by the new government and went into exile to escape imprisonment. Revolutionary leaders accused Friginals and his partners of plotting against the government and participating in December bombings of critical electrical facilities.⁴⁰ Thus, the immediate crimes that forced Friginals and his partners into exile were investigations of sabotage; however, arguments connecting the union leaders to racist activities had been established months before and would have contributed to the perception that they were counterrevolutionaries.

Discourses linking racism to counterrevolution also provided Afro-Cubans with ways of pressuring local authorities for additional reforms, such as the construction of a new recreational facility or entrance into formerly white-only eating establishments. In the central province of Villa Clara, members of the Socialist Party (PSP) claimed that counterrevolutionaries were continuing the colonial custom of having whites and blacks walk on different sides of the park (*el paseo*) even after the revolution. In a letter to local authorities, the two men said that they planned to "unmask these counterrevolutionaries . . .

³⁷ "Discriminación eléctrica," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 2, 1960, 4.

³⁸ "Renuncian líderes de los eléctricos," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 5, 1960, 10.

³⁹ "Discriminación eléctrica," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 23, 1960, 4.

⁴⁰ "Gran asamblea de la CTC," *Revolución*, December 15, 1960, 1.

as enemies of the revolution, and that they wanted to encourage the [town] Commissioners not to march backwards in their noble and just cause of building a new park.”⁴¹ This situation highlights both the reach of revolutionary racialized discourses into central Cuba and the newly created ability to critique publicly those who continued to practice racial discrimination using revolutionary language and tropes.

Emerging standards about acceptable revolutionary behavior circulated throughout the island, however, they did not guarantee that prejudicial situations would be resolved. Young editors in a student newspaper expressed anger over the disappearance of a new *telenovela* (television soap opera) where black and white artists had collaborated. The author of the editorial blamed the cancellation of the program on “the caprices of counterrevolutionaries and reactionaries,” and implied that only dissenters of the project to end discrimination would terminate a show that both fostered and broadcasted the benefits of racial cooperation.⁴² Similarly, Afro-Cuban poet, Georgina Herrera remembers how racism continued to exist during the first years of the revolution at Radio Progreso, the station where she worked. “There are examples where racism was masked as ‘fear of the black’” she said. One time, the directors of the radio station worried that she along with three colleagues were plotting a conspiracy because they were planning to air a show about the Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire and each of them were of African descent. “A group of blacks were not able to get together to do art and celebrate a black figure, but the whites, they could.” After a tense meeting with the directors, the controversial radio story, like the integrated soap opera, was

⁴¹ “Contra la discriminación en Cruces se manifiesta el PSP,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 1, 1959, 1.

⁴² “Novela integracionista,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 4, 1960, 4.

cancelled.⁴³ Labeling racist activities as counterrevolutionary created a complex relationship between many Afro-Cuban observers and the new government. Revolutionary discourses provided the space to speak publicly in relation to ending segregated practices such as divisions in provincial parks, but once “revolutionaries” cancelled a popular television program or an innovative radio segment it was difficult to blame upper-level leaders for these actions because their revolutionary commitment was seen as unquestionable, therefore they could not be racist or retain prejudicial ideas.

Nevertheless, during the first three years of the revolution, many Cubans came to see racial discrimination and segregation as counterrevolutionary. The sources suggest that once national discourses put public racism into the category of counterrevolution the issue became a salient a marker of the radicalization of the revolution, similar to the highly contested Agrarian Reform. Moreover, once racism became a counterrevolutionary offense, the term “racist” could be used effectively to undermine people the new government saw as troublesome. As the story of Friginals and other electrical labor leaders demonstrates it was not unheard of for a person to be attacked for perpetuating racial segregation initially and later found guilty of direct counter-government activities. Other indictments could have been used to discredit opposition groups. However, the choice of the word “racist” reveals the intensity of racialized revolutionary discourses and the new leadership’s commitment, at least publicly, with relation to Afro-Cuban equality. While it is unlikely that Cubans decided to leave the island solely due to shifts in national racial politics, the consensus of opinion is that many left due to increasing fears about radical social and economic changes. The critical responses explored in this chapter to the campaign to end racial discrimination coupled with

⁴³ Daisy Rubiera Castillo and Georgina Herrera, *Golpeando la memoria: Testimonio de una poeta cubana afrodescendiente* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 2005), 99.

the vocal identification of racist actions as counterrevolutionary contributed to anxieties about the changes occurring in Cuba. Cubans went into exile for a variety of complex and diverse reasons, many of which were connected to the idea that the island and the culture that they knew and loved were being threatened by the revolution. The evidence suggests that integrating Afro-Cubans into previously private and predominantly white spaces was one component of the radical changes occurring that alarmed and alienated Cubans, leading some into exile.

Most importantly to this project however, is that the prevalence of linking racism to counterrevolution succeeding in leading most observers, in particular Afro-Cubans, to connect the two ideas. Many residents of the island would have agreed with the 1965 statement, “there are still some racists in Cuba, the major part of them are counterrevolutionaries.”⁴⁴ Even Cubans writing in exile acknowledged this association. “The word revolution came to symbolize liberty, justice, war against Batista and his criminals, dignity and honor. Counterrevolution came to mean return to Batista, slavery, injustice, and hunger.”⁴⁵ Throughout the years after 1959, the revolutionary government, its supporters, and those pushing to eliminate racial discrimination won the discursive battle over defining the meaning of a “true” revolutionary. As a result, critics of the new government, many of whom had also been labeled racists, and were seen as counterrevolutionaries, left the island. A large percentage of this opposition went into exile in the United States. The following section will explore how exiled Cubans continued to participate in national conversations about the course of the revolution ninety miles away, in Miami, Florida.

⁴⁴ Depestre, “Carta a Cuba,” 123.

⁴⁵ Manuel F. Artime, *Traición: Gutan 20,000 tumbas cubanas* (Mexico City, Mexico: Editorial Just. S.A, 1960), 112-113.

Discourses about Racial Discrimination in Exile

Deciding to leave the island of their birth was not an easy decision for any Cuban. And while immigration to the United States had been a pattern in Cuba since the late nineteenth century, due to various cycles of political instability and economic hard times, most families moving north imagined that their relocation would be temporary as it had been for so many Cubans before them.⁴⁶ Once in the United States, exiles maintained contact with residents on the island, especially during the 1960s. Daily publications frequently responded to events occurring in Cuba and issued commentary on a variety of revolutionary actions. A close exploration of the themes repeated in newspapers, magazines, and organizational literature distributed in Miami reveals that exiles had their own interpretations about the revolution. Rather than seeing themselves as counterrevolutionary or racist, Cubans in the United States, imagined that they were the “true” revolutionaries. The most obvious area of dispute between the two communities was over the economic policies of the new government; however, exile discussions about racial discrimination highlight that their conflict also stemmed from diverging views of what Cuba was and should be.

Most Cuban exile groups remained silent in regards to the situation of Afro-Cubans on the island. Since the exile community was overwhelming white, it did not have to reach out to or respond to the demands of Afro-Cubans in the same manner as revolutionary leaders. Unlike organizations in Cuba, the majority of groups in Miami included few details about ending racial discrimination or increased social mobility for black and *mulato* Cubans in their founding platforms during the 1960s. The initial platform of the Movimiento de Recuperación Democrática (MRR), founded in 1959, outlined the organization’s goals, such

⁴⁶ Lisandro Pérez, “Cubans in the United States,” 127-129.

as restoring democracy to Cuba, a fair Agrarian Reform, and freedom of the press. However, the document is absent of any direct reference to the need for racial equality, other than a brief declaration calling for the restoration of the Constitution of 1940.⁴⁷ Similarly, the position statement by the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE), another popular exile organization, was also oddly silent about the issue that received so much attention in Cuba.⁴⁸ A 1963 letter written to American students visiting the island by the Unidad Revolucionario, a clandestine counter-government group in Havana, demanded freedom of religion, travel, and work, without mentioning the need to equalize opportunity among Cubans of differing skin colors.⁴⁹ The leaders of these groups focused on fighting what they perceived as communist activities on the island and emphasized the need to restore democracy and other rights that they saw as being withheld by the revolutionary leadership. However, these conversations occurred most often without specific reference to racial equality, a topic being heavily discussed just ninety miles away. The difference between the ways the revolutionary government focused on racial discrimination and how the exile community remained silent about the issue demonstrates one of the early breaks between the two groups.

This silence in the exile and anti-Castro community about issues of racial discrimination was not overlooked by Afro-Cubans or the revolutionary government. Former director of the Federation of Black Societies and exiled Afro-Cuban, Juan Betancourt, described the organizations in Miami as “short sighted” groups, composed of “white Cubans, members of the upper and middle class” who “do not exhibit the slightest interest in the fate

⁴⁷ “Plataforma inicial del MRR,” *7 Días del Diario de la Marina en el exilio* (Miami) October 1, 1960, 12. The 1940 Constitution includes a blanket anti-discrimination clause outlawing discrimination based on race or sex.

⁴⁸ “DRE posición nacional,” *Trinchera: Órgano Oficial del Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil* (Havana-clandestine: n.d.), 2.

⁴⁹ Unidad Revolucionario, “Letter to American Students,” 5.

of the Cuban Negro.” Noting that black and *mulato* Cubans are “never mentioned in their pronouncements,” he criticized how “none of the exile groups have committed themselves to a non-discrimination program should they get power.”⁵⁰ This condemnation of white exile groups by a black Cuban, also living in the United States, provides insight into the racialized politics of the period. Afro-Cubans who disagreed with the new government might have been less likely to immigrate to the United States, a country known for its own racial tensions, especially in the south, given the perception that there was little space for concerns about equality within the Miami exile community. Revolutionary discourses claiming ownership over plans to end racial discrimination coupled with language depicting opposition groups as racists helped to create this image, especially among black and *mulato* Cubans. And, the strong silence in regards to racial equality within a large part of the U.S. exile community did little to change this view and reinforced the new government’s claim that those leaving the island were unconcerned with destroying racial and class privileges in Cuba.

Although rare, at times, Cubans living in exile discussed the situation of blacks and *mulatos* on the island and the revolutionary campaign to end racial discrimination. When doing so, these conversations often argued that the 1959 revolution had created or invented tensions among different racial groups and classes. Testimonies from an elderly group of Cubans, many born at the turn of the twentieth-century, express the popular exile view that the island experienced racial unity during the fifty years prior to the revolution. Saying that “relations between whites and blacks in Cuba were very cordial” and that “racism did not exist because many people of color had white friends,” these observers portrayed a racially integrated and harmonious island. While the interviewees admitted that black and white Cubans had attended separate social clubs and walked on different sides of the park, each of

⁵⁰ Betancourt, “Castro and the Cuban Negro,” 24.

them, including an Afro-Cuban grandfather, maintained that racism did not exist on the island and that blacks were appreciated and respected.⁵¹ These attitudes conflict with the history of racial discrimination and segregation frequently described by the revolutionary government and their supporters. However, portraying Cuba as a racial paradise before MR 26-7 and Castro's rise to power was a component of a larger campaign by the exile community to show that the situation in Cuba after 1959 was worse than before.

Leaders of exile organizations reflected these popular beliefs in their publications by blaming the new government for encouraging divisions among Cubans, and claiming that Castro had in fact invented the problem of racial discrimination. Opposition groups held debates and dialogues about post-1959 issues in Miami by distributing newspapers similar to popular periodicals in Havana. The Frente Revolucionario Democrática (FRD) wrote an editorial in *Bohemia Libre*, an exile version of the Cuban weekly *Bohemia*, stating that Castro had created a nation of "poor against rich, and blacks against whites." The article minimized the existence of inequalities during the republic and offered a romanticized image of a unified pre-Castro Cuba by arguing that Cuba had once been, "a country known for its happiness and generosity," but was "now steeped in hate."⁵² Other exile publications followed this pattern and described how Castro had "incited" protests against racial discrimination and "encouraged" class conflicts among Cubans.⁵³

In particular, opposition organizations lamented how the revolutionary leadership had destroyed the island by planting discord among the working classes. An editorial published

⁵¹ José B. Fernández, *Los abuelos: Historia oral cubana* (Ediciones Universal: Miami, FL, 1987), 95-96.

⁵² "Un documento para la historia" *Bohemia Libre* 52, no. 9 (Caracas, Venezuela) December 4, 1960, 59. *Bohemia Libre* was published in Caracas, Venezuela; however, it was distributed and read in Miami as well.

⁵³ "Cubanos-Rusos en Estados Unidos," *Patria* (Miami) June 21, 1960, 3.

in the exile form of the Havana daily *El Mundo*, claimed that Castro had changed after 1959 from the leader of a “bourgeoisie” group of middle-class and educated students, professionals, and Catholics to become the “redeemer of the proletariat and the friend of the blacks.” In doing so, “. . . he planted the first seeds of class conflict. Since before this moment the workers were pretty much satisfied inside the unions.”⁵⁴ By claiming that the island suffered minimal, if any, class or racial conflicts prior to 1959, exile leaders invoked a different version of Cuban history to combat Castro’s claim that ending racial discrimination was one of the most vital projects of the revolution. Writers in exile sought to undermine revolutionary justifications for radical change and explain why they had left Cuba by showing how the revolution had caused previously friendly people to disagree over racial and class privileges. Many exiled Cubans also wanted to unmask the campaign to eliminate discrimination as a ploy to manipulate Afro-Cubans into supporting what the opposition identified as a communist revolution. Portraying Castro as a “friend of the blacks” highlighted the new leader’s supposed choice of one group (blacks) over another (Cubans), and labeled the revolution’s public discussion of racial discrimination as a betrayal of Martí’s dream of racelessness as well.

Cubans living in United States in the 1960s rarely offered a clear plan for tackling



⁵⁴ Álvaro Santiago, “El Mito de las clases,” *El Mundo: Editado en el exilio* (Miami) November 30, 1960, A-4.

issues of racism and prejudice, mainly because they claimed that before 1959 most Cubans lived in harmony and that the revolution had created racial conflict. However, some exile leaders were aware of the racialized discourses occurring on the island and frequently inverted the same tropes to undermine the revolution. For example, opposition groups insisted that Castro and other revolutionary supporters were “counterrevolutionaries,” and argued that they were the ones who had “betrayed the revolution.”⁵⁵ An organization representing the armed forces in exile described the Cuban leadership as “communists disguised as revolutionaries.”⁵⁶

The political cartoon (above), “Blood of the Free Press” visually demonstrates these ideas by sketching a darkly-shaded Castro attacking a surprised woman with the name of the Havana newspaper, *Diario de la Marina*, on her dress. The caption, “the ‘liberation’ movement continues” is a sarcastic jab at what the editor’s see as the revolution’s attack on freedom of expression.⁵⁷ By choosing the word “liberator,” a term frequently used by the revolution’s supporters to describe the new leadership in Cuba, the author signals that rather than freeing Cuba, Castro is violently oppressing it (her). This cartoon is similar to the criticisms discussed earlier where dissenters claimed that the revolution allowed sexually-aggressive black doctors to take advantage of middle-class white women in new public clinics. Here, the cartoonist draws a dark man restraining a helpless-looking white woman to highlight the violence that the revolution is doing to Cuba. This imagery takes the notion of

⁵⁵ “Confederación de trabajadores de Cuba” *7 Días del Diario de la Marina en el exilio* (Miami) September 24, 1960, 12.

⁵⁶ “El hecho y los hechos,” *Comandos 1 no. 6* (Miami) October 1960, 3. This is the official publication of the Comisión reorganizadora de las fuerzas armadas de Cuba (CROFAC).

⁵⁷ Facha, “Sangre de prensa libre,” *7 Días del Diario de la Marina en el exilio* (Miami) October 1, 1960, 3.

Castro as a “friend to the blacks” a step further to paint him as “black” and therefore even more dangerous to the interests of some Cubans.

Conversations in exile also paralleled those occurring on the island by constantly referencing nineteenth century independence leaders José Martí and Antonio Maceo. However, in Miami counter-government groups saw themselves as the heirs to the legacy of racelessness, not the revolution. Using popular quotations from speeches by Martí, exiled Cubans planned to return and build an island “with all and for the good of all,” absent of the class and racial conflicts created by Castro and his supporters.⁵⁸ In fact, one exile writer accused Castro of “offending Martí,” while another said that although the new government might dishonor Maceo’s memory, we will honor it appropriately.⁵⁹ On the anniversary of Maceo’s death, the editors of *Bohemia Libre* complained that the independence fighter must be “rolling in his grave” as a result of the communist infiltration in Cuba.⁶⁰ And, in a scathing criticism of revolutionary *Comandante* Juan Almeida, a prominent Afro-Cuban in the new leadership, a reader accused the commander of “thinking [that] he was the Maceo of today.” Calling Almeida, Castro’s “puppet” and “clown,” this letter to the editor sought to deny comparisons made in Cuba between the revolution’s popular *mulato* leader and the beloved “bronze titan” of the nineteenth century.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Virgilio Campaneria, “Letter from Prison,” *Trinchera: Órgano Oficial del Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil* yr. 1 no. 18 (Havana-clandestine) n.d, 3.

⁵⁹ Radio Swan, “Lo dijo El Mundo,” *El Mundo: Editado en el exilio* (Miami) November 30, 1960, A-4. “7 de diciembre,” *El Mundo: Editado en el exilio* (Miami) December 7, 1960, A-1.

⁶⁰ “Así se forjó la democracia en América,” *Bohemia Libre* 52, no. 9 (Caracas, Venezuela) December 4, 1960, 88-89.

⁶¹ José Correa Espino, “Cartas a El Mundo: Almeida cree que es Maceo,” *El Mundo: Editado en el exilio* (Miami) October 5, 1960, A-4.

Exile charges that the revolutionary government had betrayed national ideologies reveal the continued salience of the legacies of Martí and Maceo. Both pro-revolution and counter-government groups on and off the island fought for ownership over the memories of the two men hailed as the founding fathers of the nation. In doing so, they participated in an on-going (and transnational) debate over the meaning of “racelessness.” In Cuba, the revolution claimed that providing opportunities for working class blacks and *mulatos* through national social reforms fulfilled this ideology. Whereas in exile, organizations argued that only democratic governance and practicing race-blind policies where “we are all Cubans” adhered to the dreams of nineteenth century patriots. It is notable that both groups were influenced and limited by the same historical discourses about racelessness. They differed over implementation and accused each other of betraying accepted ideologies, but ultimately each position remained wedded to achieving the goals of a raceless Cuba. The significance of Martí and Maceo to the typical Cuban meant that leaders in both places had to engage with their writings and memories. Even Cubans in exile, who might have preferred to stay silent over issues of racial equality, talked about the two figures and ideologies of racelessness because of the centrality of these ideas to being Cuban and building a Cuban nation.

Ultimately, most exile organizations were either silent about the revolution’s plans to eliminate racial discrimination, denied the existence of the problem, or only discussed the issue within the vague parameters of creating a “raceless” society. And while these were the most prevalent attitudes published in the Miami community, at times, a few writers acknowledged that black and *mulato* Cubans had been treated unfairly, and promised to work for a better future once they returned to Cuba. Afro-Cuban exile Juan Betancourt recognized the Christian Democratic Party as one of the few Cuban organizations in the United States

that stated it would improve the conditions of people of color after the fall of the Castro government.⁶² Likewise, an editorial published in *Bohemia Libre* pledged that, “after the disappearance of the red terror . . . we are not going to permit the rise of the white terror.”⁶³ Others argued that rather than oppose Juan Almeida because he was black, Cubans needed to criticize him for being a communist.⁶⁴ This distinction both identified and criticized the exiles who opposed Almeida’s leadership solely based on his skin color. Each of these articulations conceded that racial prejudices existed among Cubans and offered some assurances that after the defeat of communism, leaders in Miami would be open to talking about these issues. However, such gestures were presented almost always as secondary to the primary goal of overthrowing the Castro government and its communist supporters. In the exile community, the familiar notion prevailed that it was not yet the appropriate time to address the situation of Cubans of African descent. A political cartoon titled, “Street Talk” (below) highlighted this idea while reassuring white Cubans that blacks and *mulatos* did not consider them the enemy. In the sketch, a black figure lectures another Cuban, saying, “look doc, the problem (or bad thing) here is not the white, nor is it not the black . . . It is the red.” By focusing on the “red” as the most pressing enemy in Cuba, exile leaders dismissed Afro-Cuban demands for equal opportunity and alienated some blacks and *mulatos* who might have agreed with counter-government ideologies.

In their fight against the revolutionary government led by Fidel Castro, Cubans living in exile rarely mentioned the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination that was occurring

⁶² Betancourt, “Castro and the Cuban Negro,” 274.

⁶³ “Todos somos soldados con meritos iguales,” *Bohemia Libre* 1 no. 3 (Caracas, Venezuela) October 23, 1960, 48.

⁶⁴ “El hecho y los hechos,” *Comandos* 1 no. 6 (Miami) October 1960, 3.

at the same time on the island. Most frequently, the platforms of exile organizations, and the writings of opposition leaders focused on criticizing the communist leanings of the new government. The sources reveal that the majority of Cubans in Miami wanted to return to Cuba with the rights and privileges they imagined they had before the revolutionary leadership came to power. These accepted privileges included the right to travel, express oneself, own property, and practice Catholicism freely. Yet, among the various ways that Cubans in exile discussed the need to “save” Cuba from Castro and his betrayal of the revolution there were few references to the need to end racial discrimination. For most Cubans in Miami, racial equality was simply not the most important issue. Some claimed that racial problems had not existed in Cuba before 1959 and that Castro had invented the tensions between blacks and whites. Others said that they wanted to adhere to the legacy of Martí and Maceo and create a raceless island, but these efforts could only come after communism had been eradicated.

These actions worked to estrange many Afro-Cubans from the Miami exile community. People of color in Cuba and some Afro-Cubans in the United States, came to interpret this rhetoric as a denial of their on-going struggles for equal opportunities on the island. In his essay, Betancourt confirms this point. “Those who affirm that the condemnation of the ills of the Negro and the demand for their elimination



DIALOGO CALLEJERO
-Mire, docto, el malo aquí no es el blanco, ni es el negro.
-¿Y quien es?
-El “rojo” . . .

divides Cubans and creates racial problems are either naïve or unconsciously anti-Negro.”⁶⁵

This comment strikes directly at one of the central ideas accepted by many in the exile community. For Betancourt and other Afro-Cubans, waiting for the establishment of a unified, non-communist government in Cuba before confronting racial discrimination was unacceptable and revealed hidden resistance to addressing these issues. Furthermore, blacks and *mulatos* on the island were aware of this “not yet” attitude among the exiles and saw it as a detriment to leaving the island for the United States.

Conclusions

In the 1960s, Cubans on the island and in Miami, Florida participated in an on-going debate over which group represented the “true” revolution. A key component of these discussions, at least, in Cuba was a vocal commitment to plans to eliminate racial discrimination. Those who continued to exhibit racial prejudices or who opposed the new government’s policies of integration were defined as outside of the revolution. As a result, most Afro-Cubans viewed white and even *mulato* Cubans who refused to accept the opening of private beaches, clubs, schools, and work centers to people of African descent as not only racists, but as counterrevolutionaries. The acceptance of these discourses led Cubans on the island to identify the exiles as racist, while Cubans in the United States labeled the revolution as communist. This distinction highlights how both groups seized popular 1960s language to discredit one another. And while accusations of communism were familiar charges during the Cold War, calling supposed enemies racist was not. This move was initiated to undercut counter-government groups, but it also provided opportunities for some Afro-Cubans to challenge situations when revolutionary programs failed to achieve their integrationist goals.

⁶⁵ Betancourt, “Castro and the Cuban Negro,” 247.

Critics of the revolution, and those who left Cuba, disagreed with these propositions and most claimed that their conflict was not with Cubans of color, but with the communist infiltration of their nation. Once in exile, conversations about racism were limited, but the few that occurred show how counter-government organizations redeployed racialized discourses. By identifying the Castro leadership as counterrevolutionary and claiming to uphold the legacies of Martí and Maceo, exile groups constructed their own version of Cuban history and the 1959 revolution. However, their ideas could not compete with the popular campaign to combat racial discrimination occurring on the island. Few Afro-Cubans went into exile in the early years, and those who did complained of being alienated from the leading groups in Miami.

The language of labeling dissenters as racist, counterrevolutionaries continued and grew. Due to its success as a strategy for discrediting middle-and upper-class dissenters in Cuba and within the exile community, revolutionary leaders invoked the same language to criticize racial discrimination in the United States, South Africa, and throughout the world. The following chapter will discuss how Cuban leaders applied this rhetoric globally to combat U.S. criticisms that the new government was communist, while attracting African American support for the revolution.

Chapter Four:

“Say It Ain’t So Joe”

At midnight on December 31, 1959, former heavy weight boxing champion of the world, Joe Louis, celebrated the arrival of the New Year in Havana, Cuba. Sitting with Fidel Castro to his right and his wife Martha on the left, Louis expressed his support for the Cuban revolution by wearing a typical country hat, while Castro departed from his traditional army fatigues, appearing in a formal suit with a neatly trimmed beard. The men exchanged pleasant conversation and shared a Cuban cigar, while mingling with other party attendees. A year prior, neither man might have imagined that they would commemorate the start of 1960 together in a plush suite in the Hotel Habana Hilton. Yet, on this evening they celebrated their upcoming joint business venture, a plan to increase African American tourism to Cuba. The New Year’s party was just one event among many activities organized for over fifty African American guests by the National Cuban Tourist Institute (INIT) and the revolutionary leadership. The INIT hoped to encourage tourism by showing the visitors that Cuba was an island without racial discrimination, where blacks could enjoy freedoms they were denied in the United States.

Cuba was still in the process of revolutionary change when Louis and other African Americans visited in 1960. The island had witnessed a series of political upheavals in the fifties, culminating in the overthrow of the dictatorship of President Fulgencio Batista on January 1, 1959. A coalition of diverse interests groups participated in defeating the

unpopular U.S.-backed regime; however, the 26th of July Movement (MR 26-7) led by Fidel Castro emerged as the leading organization in the anti-Batista movement. Castro's control was tenuous during the new government's first three years and the young leaders of MR 26-7 worked to stabilize their position by recruiting allies from the popular classes, who were disproportionately of African-descent. Social reforms in the shape of land redistribution, the lowering of rental fees, and the nationalization of foreign businesses benefitted most working-class Cubans and generated enthusiasm for the new government. As Chapter Two discussed, revolutionary leaders sought to broaden their appeal to Afro-Cubans by announcing a campaign in March 1959 to eliminate racial discrimination, and directing potentially divisive racial differences toward a common national project. Inviting Joe Louis and other African Americans to the island to experience "first class citizenship" was a key component of this particular racialized revolutionary discourse. Both domestic and international events influenced how Cubans talked about racial tensions between 1959 and 1961, creating periods when these debates were at their highest, followed by lulls in the discourse, as attention turned elsewhere. This chapter analyzes one of those moments. Forging business relationships with African Americans and inviting U.S. blacks to vacation in Cuba led to comparisons of the similarities and differences in race relations between the two countries. This rhetoric benefited revolutionary leaders who were able to emphasize the progress the new government had made toward achieving racial equality in contrast to their neighbor to the north. These conversations, however, also provided Afro-Cubans with an opening to demand additional improvements when they encountered inconsistencies in revolutionary promises of racial equality.

January 1, 1960 was not the first time African Americans and Cubans shared common interests. The physical and cultural proximity between Cuba and the United States allowed for a variety of political and social relationships between the two groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹ And while some Americans may have seen Cuba as a potential annexation territory or a tropical party destination, African Americans frequently looked to the island for allies in their fight for racial equality. In the 1890s, Afro-Cuban intellectuals both attended and reflected on the education offered by the Tuskegee Institute, a “colored school” in Alabama.² Letters from black soldiers participating in the U.S. intervention in Cuban wars for independence in 1898 reveal that young African American men were at first awed and later intrigued by the racial composition of the island, since they had been led to believe the population was “white” by U.S. standards.³ Similarly, long-standing connections between Harlem poet Langston Hughes and Afro-Cuban author Nicolás Guillén resulted in over three decades of poetry and prose inspired by the social, political, and economic situations of people of color in the United States and Cuba.⁴ Such historical links between Cubans and U.S. blacks, laid the foundation for the INIT to invite African American tourists to participate in the 1960 New Year’s Eve celebration commemorating the first anniversary of the Cuban revolution. This chapter begins in Cuba, follows Joe Louis back to the United States, and then returns to the island to explore how Cubans living in the

¹ For additional readings on the cultural connections between the United States and Cuba see, Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

² Rafael Serra, *Para blancos y negros: Ensayos políticos, sociales, y económicos* (Havana: Imprenta ‘El Store,’ 1907).

³ Williard B. Gatewood, *Smoked Yankees and the Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers 1898-1902* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

⁴ Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes, eds., *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

1960s understood Cuba's changing relationship with the United States, and in particular African Americans, after the 1959 revolution. Examining revolutionary discourses on race through an international lens offers valuable insight into diasporic alliances, the perceived radicalization of the Cuban revolution, and Afro-Cuban involvement in the new government, problems which have not been sufficiently addressed by national histories of Cuba or the United States.

Throughout 1960, the Cuban leadership built on its long-standing, historical relationship with U.S. blacks by encouraging middle-class African Americans to vacation in Cuba and by vocally denouncing racial discrimination in the United States. Photographs of Castro smiling, shaking hands, and hugging prominent African American journalists and businessmen filled the front pages of national newspapers across Cuba and became a central aspect of revolutionary self-representation. Yet, the person who received the most attention throughout the spring of 1960 was boxer Joe Louis. In Cuba, boxing has long been a national past-time in which many residents had followed Louis's career and respected his fighting skills. Cuban leaders invoked the image of Joe Louis as a strong, valiant, pro-revolution boxer to criticize the hypocrisies of U.S. democracy and solicit support from Afro-Cuban communities. Doing so contributed to a resurgence in conversations about how to best end racial discrimination in Cuba and created opportunities for Afro-Cubans to discuss openly lingering unequal and discriminatory practices on the island.

Much of the existing literature analyzing the historical exchanges between Cubans and African Americans, during the 1960s, foregrounds the perspectives of U.S. blacks. These analyses, such as the work by Cynthia Young in *Soul Power*, Besenia Rodriguez in "'De la Escalvitud Yanqui a la Libertad Cubana,'" and Timothy Tyson in *Radio Free Dixie*, provide

insight into how global situations contributed to African Americans' understanding of and participation in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.⁵ In particular, Young, Rodriguez, and Tyson highlight how the 1959 Cuban revolution influenced the thinking of black leftists in the United States, including Robert Williams, Julian Mayfield, William Worthy, Leroi Jones, and Harold Cruse. They find that the nationalist sentiments espoused by the Cuban leadership encouraged and helped build a community of radical internationalists, who envisioned active revolutionary solutions to both the race problems in the United States, and social inequities throughout the world. Such investigations are useful because they demonstrate how global events impact national situations. Yet, because they are most concerned with explaining events in the United States these analyses offer only a partial picture of the ways that Cubans invoked U.S. persons and events to pursue their own domestic agendas.

My analysis builds off of the work done by U.S. historians who have applied a transnational perspective to Cold War and the Civil Rights studies.⁶ Mary Dudziak's claim that the United States constructed its Cold War strategy toward race relations with an "international audience in mind" is a useful tool for analyzing the ways Cuban leaders talked

⁵ Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Besenia Rodriguez, "'De la Escalvitud Yanqui a la Libertad Cubana:' U.S. Black Radicals, the Cuban Revolution, and the Formation of a Tricontinental Ideology" *Radical History Review* 92 (Spring 2005), 62-87; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). For additional reading see Van Gosse, "The African-American Press Greets the Cuban Revolution" in Lisa Brock and Digna Castaneda Fuertes, eds. *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 266-281; and, Brenda Gayle Plummer, "Castro in Harlem: A Cold War Watershed" in Allen Hunter, ed. *Rethinking the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 133-153.

⁶ See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). In particular, Dudziak and Borstelmann explore how international criticism about racial violence in the United States, especially from newly independent African countries and communists in the Soviet Union (USSR), forced U.S. leaders to make limited concessions to black Americans.

about racism in the 1960s.⁷ World events and perceptions influenced revolutionary leaders, especially as they searched for a response to U.S. and some Cuban criticism that the new government was communist.⁸ Cuban leaders saw Joe Louis's visit to Havana as significant not only because it demonstrated continued African American support for the revolution, but also because it provided the opportunity to compare racial segregation in the United States to the publicly celebrated racial harmony on the island. Just as revolutionary discourses discredited Cuban counter-government groups by calling them racist, Cuban leaders pointed to racism in the United States to undermine U.S. opposition to the revolution. The sources suggest that this exchange was most useful to revolutionary leaders when Louis was the figurehead in the campaign to portray Cuba as a racial paradise vis-a-vis the United States. However, once the heavy-weight champion resigned from their joint business venture, he became another washed up boxer who was dishonored for succumbing to imperial pressures, and ultimately ignored. The rapid attitude shift in Cuba towards Louis suggests the weakness or instability of diasporic alliances and points to their usefulness more as domestic political tools than as strong international friendships.⁹

⁷ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 12.

⁸ U.S. leaders and Cuban counter-government groups saw the Castro government as radical and labeled them as communist even before they took power. However, the official declaration of socialism in Cuba did not occur until April 1961. Before that most scholars agree that it was a nationalist, but not necessarily communist government.

⁹ Since the increase in African Diaspora Studies, various scholars have worked to define the meaning of the term. Investigations, such as Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Colin A. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *Negro History* (Winter-Spring 2000), reject the idea of an essential black identity and see the African diaspora referring to peoples of the new world, who share common, but nationally distinct experiences of racial oppression. Like Palmer, I find that the concept of diaspora is more valuable as an analytical tool, than as a representation of physical reality. Much of the work on exchanges between Cubans and African Americans focuses on moments of solidarity, friendship, and alliance. One example is Van Gosse, "The African-American Press Greet the Cuban Revolution" found in Brock and Castaneda Fuertes, eds. *Between Race and Empire*, 266-281. He describes how "black Americans have been the only consistent source of U.S. solidarity with the Cuban Revolution." He goes on to argue how this alliance was forged during the earliest days of the revolutionary struggle, and traces African-American support for Castro and the 26th of July Movement from to

Studying the business relationship between the Cuban National Tourist Institute and Louis's public relations firm also expands understandings of the radicalization of the 1959 revolution and the opportunities available to Afro-Cubans at this time. Most narratives of the Cuban revolution emphasize how the Agrarian Reform, lowering of rental prices, and nationalization of private businesses drew critiques from U.S. leaders between 1959 and 1961.¹⁰ Clearly, each of these factors contributed to how the U.S. government perceived the revolution and cannot be overlooked. However, U.S. attitudes toward the Castro government, as this case study reveals, were also influenced by the new leadership's active recruitment of African American support and vocal commitment to fighting global racial discrimination. Cuban discourses encouraging U.S. blacks to visit Cuba and experience

its struggle for power prior to January 1959 through the 1960 Harlem visit. Yet, while describing the ways that certain Cuban and African-American leaders supported one another and the impacts of such alliances, such interpretations fail to question what "image" was produced to be supported and why. This essay complicates this idea of diasporic alliance by exploring how Cubans used a constructed image of African American second-class citizenship in the United States to further domestic political agendas. In that way, my work is closest to the research done by Ruther Reitan in *The Rise and Decline of an Alliance: Cuba and African American Leaders in the 1960s* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1999). Reitan notes (p. 1) how "misunderstandings shook the nascent alliance between these leaders . . . and, while some of their relationships were long-lasting and mutually beneficial, others were ephemeral and ended in angry denunciations." However, her work is more focused on the late 1960s, and fails to look at one of the earliest post-1959 exchanges between the two groups, namely, the brief business relationship between Joe Louis's public relations firm and the INIT. A close look at this early moment suggests that from the beginning there were conflicts between Cuban revolutionary leaders and African Americans, because each group was using the other as an international point of comparison to wage a particular internal, national battle. From this essay, we can see that given the case of Joe Louis it is not surprising that alliances between the two groups were filled with tension throughout the 20th century.

¹⁰ For additional reading see See Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971); Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution: An Empire of Liberty in an Age of National Liberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). These narratives analyze the deteriorating relationship between Cuba and the United States, the emigration of the middle class, and the implementation of the Agrarian Reform. The legislation to end racial discrimination was passed during the same period as the Agrarian Reform and both projects received significant press coverage in Cuba. However, the above works do not address the role of racial politics in the gradual transition from a rather moderate nationalist revolution to one that openly supported the communist bloc. Racial politics were a crucial dimension of the new government's move to more radical policies, especially when considering the large numbers of white dissenters who left the island. I argue that the revolution's early moves to emphasize race and the situation of people of color contributed to its perceived radicalization and alienation from whites both on and off the island.

racial equality for themselves served to racialize political tensions between the United States and Cuba in 1960. Yet, maybe of even greater significance is the ways in which Afro-Cubans appropriated the same national rhetoric, which claimed that the revolution had eliminated racism, to demand additional reforms, especially in relation to domestic tourism. In *A Nation for All*, historian Alejandro de la Fuente explores how pressure from Afro-Cuban leaders at the start of 1959 forced the revolutionary government to tackle issues of inequality directly.¹¹ This essay builds on this analysis by emphasizing how once created revolutionary discourses about racism became open to manipulation. Government claims of racial harmony were threatened in 1960 by black and *mulato* Cubans, who disputed the achievement of a racial paradise and demanded that revolutionary promises to African Americans be fulfilled for them as well.

New Year's in Havana

Joe Louis arrived in Havana in January 1960, as a representative of the Louis, Rowe, Fisher, and Lockhart public relations firm, along with firm president William Rowe and marketing director Al Lockhart. In December 1959, Lockhart received a telegram from the INIT inviting him to Cuba to discuss a possible business venture that would encourage black Americans to visit the island. Rowe and Lockhart accepted the offer and traveled to Havana in December 1959 to negotiate the deal. They met with Jesús Martínez, the assistant director of the INIT, and finalized plans to invite thirty-five to fifty African Americans to Cuba to participate in the revolution's upcoming "victory celebration." As a result, fifty African American journalists and intellectuals traveled to Cuba on December 31, 1959 to celebrate

¹¹ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

the New Year, including prominent leaders such as John Sengstacke, Publisher-Editor of the *Chicago Defender*, O.D. Dempsey, pastor of Harlem Baptist Church, and Dr. James Cowan, who later served in President Richard Nixon's administration.¹²

Cubans expressed a variety of reasons for collaborating with Louis, Rowe, Fisher, and Lockhart. An unidentified Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) informant claimed that the new government invited African American guests to the island to "demonstrate to the people of Cuba that Negroes could take a prominent place in Cuba, and be completely accepted there."¹³ The informant stated that for Cuban leaders Joe Louis and Willie Mays were "proof that Negroes had the same qualifications and abilities as a white person . . . and that it was worth every cent that Louis and others were being paid to come to Havana."¹⁴ Another FBI source said that the program, called "Operation Negro," was intended to stimulate the faltering Cuban tourist economy by portraying the island as a "desirable vacation spot for Negroes due to the racial equality they might enjoy" in Cuba.¹⁵ In contrast, Castro explained that he wanted blacks to come to Cuba to see how Cuba had changed and realize that people of color were no longer discriminated against as they had been in the past.¹⁶ It is clear that Cuban decisions to reach out to African American leaders and tourists were based on historical relationships between the two groups that predated the revolution.

Moreover, the discussions generated during and after the African American visit fit with

¹² "EU no comprende a Cuba," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 3, 1960, 1. *Combate 13 de Marzo* is the official publication of the Directorio 13 de Marzo (March 13th Directorate). The Directorate, composed mostly of students, was a part of the coalition to overthrow Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s. Its leadership was separate from that of MR 26-7, led by Fidel Castro, and thus represents a distinct arm of the revolutionary movement.

¹³ Memo, March 9, 1960, Joe Louis file, Federal Bureau of Investigation (hereafter cited as JL/ FBI).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "EU no comprende a Cuba," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 3, 1960, 1.

revolutionary discourses implemented in 1959, seeking to incorporate black and *mulato* Cubans into the nation while appeasing concerns that integration would disrupt accepted social norms.¹⁷

Joe Louis was the figurehead in the discourse regarding black tourists on the island. One article heralding Louis as the “famous ex-champion,” said that “while his fighting days may be over, his fame continues. He is considered one of the most notable figures of color in the United States.”¹⁸ The Cuban leadership demonstrated an awareness of the popularity of boxing in general and Louis’s career in particular by connecting the athlete to the project to bring African Americans to Havana and using his voice to talk about domestic race relations. Even publications that did not carry photographs of the boxer described the group of visitors as “the U.S. tourists, including Joe Louis” and highlighted the worthiness of the African American guests. Describing the group as “distinguished representatives and journalists from the most important sections of their nation,” newspapers across the island emphasized the status of the tour group and celebrated their presence in Cuba as proof that prominent black Americans supported the revolution.¹⁹ Yet, photographs of Louis shaking hands with Castro, while wearing a “*tipico sombrero de yarey de nuestros guajiros*” (typical Cuban country hat) were the most prevalent and showed audiences the boxer’s approval of the new government.²⁰ One article featured a photograph of Louis smiling above the caption, “There

¹⁷ In 1959, Castro repeatedly denied criticisms that eliminating racial discrimination meant forcing young black men and white women to dance together.

¹⁸ Alvaro López Conde, “El pueblo de EU defiende a Cuba,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 1, 1960, 1.

¹⁹ “Festejado el año nuevo con orden y alegría popular,” *Diario de la Marina*, January 2, 1960, 1A. “EU no comprende a Cuba,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 3, 1960, 1.

²⁰ For examples see: Photograph, *Diario de la Marina*, January 2, 1960, 9B; Full page of photographs, *Revolución*, January 2, 1960, 20; “Celebra el fin de año el Doctor Fidel Castro en el Hotel Habana Hilton,” *El Mundo*, January 2, 1960, B-6; Grupo de Visitantes Norteamericanos invitados por el INIT,” *El Mundo*, January

is no discrimination.”²¹ As an admired and widely accepted sports character, Cuban leaders invoked Louis as representative of the U.S. black community with the knowledge that many Cubans would have respected and believed his opinions.

Revolutionary leaders linked visits by Louis and other African American tourists in 1960 to the government’s campaign to eliminate racial discrimination, thereby reopening public discussions about race in Cuba that had begun in spring 1959. Castro emphasized to African Americans how “in Cuba we are resolving problems that the United States has not been able to resolve, such as that of racial discrimination. Here everyone lives together without problems. You all have seen and will see that everyone is able to dance together.”²² Similarly, the Cuban press juxtaposed racial integration on the island with the negative images of the revolution published in the United States. Invitations for black Americans to visit Cuba were couched in the language of come and “try out in Cuba the government’s and the people’s preoccupation with eradicating the terrible racial discrimination.”²³ National dailies also reported how African Americans enjoyed the Cuban environment, “where people are not measured by the color of their skin, but by their qualifications.”²⁴ Newspapers highlighted how U.S. blacks were allowed to eat alongside both white Americans and Cubans in Havana’s public spaces, something forbidden in many restaurants in the United

5, 1960, B-8; Alvaro López Conde, “El pueblo de EU defiende a Cuba,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 1, 1960, 1; “EU no comprende a Cuba,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 3, 1960, 1.

²¹ “En Alemania,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 12, 1960, 4.

²² Ibid, 6.

²³ “Cena de fin de año en el Hotel Havana Hilton,” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 1, 1960, 1.

²⁴ “Festejado el año nuevo con orden y alegría popular,” *Diario de la Marina*, January 2, 1960, 1A.

States.²⁵ The presence of African American tourists in Cuba allowed for a comparison of race relations in the two countries. Journalists inserted the situations and opinions of U.S. blacks into ongoing discussions about racial equality on the island.

The Cuban press repeatedly published quotations from interviews with U.S. blacks to validate government claims of eliminating racial discrimination. An article titled, “The United States defends Cuba” describes Louis’s impressions of the island: “This is my third trip to Cuba and I always leave highly content with the treatment I have received from Cubans. They are very hospitable.”²⁶ While, three black journalists said that they “were impressed with the revolution . . . and that the U.S. press was screaming communism at a government that was doing right by its people, without regard to race or class.”²⁷ Cuban newspapers also reported how a black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender* had honored Castro by placing him on the 1959 “List of Honor,” for his work abolishing segregation and discrimination throughout the island.²⁸ Such articulations were prevalent in articles printed during the African Americans’ stay in Havana and publicized U.S. black support for revolutionary reforms. Publishing the opinions of non-Cubans was a regular feature in the Cuban press and outside viewpoints appeared frequently on the international news pages of most dailies. However, by foregrounding commentaries from popular U.S. black athletes and intellectuals, the Cuban press used African American voices to highlight the progress of the revolution and suggested that the situation of people of color on the island was at least better than that of U.S. blacks. Inserting African American opinions about racial equality into

²⁵ “Cena de fin de año en el Hotel Havana Hilton,” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 1, 1960, 1.

²⁶ Alvaro López Conde, “El pueblo de EU defiende a Cuba,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 1, 1960, 1.

²⁷ Vicente Cubillas, Jr. “Analizan nuestra revolución periodistas negros de EE.UU,” *Revolución*, January 6, 1960, 5.

²⁸ “Lista de honor,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 20, 1960, 2.

public conversations about revolutionary politics also mirrored initial gestures made in spring 1959 to locate and publish Afro-Cuban voices supporting the new government.

In the second week of January, the INIT finalized its contract with Louis, Rowe, Fisher, and Lockhart and agreed to pay the agency \$286,000 in exchange for a marketing and promotional campaign targeting U.S. black communities. By March 1960, the public relations drive had begun and Louis's firm ran a variety of advertisements in popular African American magazines and newspapers encouraging black tourists to go to Havana and receive "first class treatment—as a first class citizens." The marketing campaign sparked a debate in the United States over communist infiltration in black communities, became the target of anti-Castro press, and fell under inquiry by the FBI.²⁹ Meanwhile in Cuba, the recent presence of African American tourists combined with the need to counteract criticism by counterrevolutionaries resulted in public denouncements of racial tensions in the United States.

"90 Miles from Cuba There is Racial Discrimination"

Tensions between Cuba and the United States were high by spring 1960 and leaders in both places condemned what they interpreted as inappropriate governance in the other. U.S. officials were suspicious of February trade agreements signed between Cuba and countries in the Soviet bloc. They saw these events as evidence that Cuba leaned towards a communist doctrine. At the same time, the Cuban government felt pressured by U.S. threats to cut long-standing sugar quotas and the support counterrevolutionary exiles were finding in Miami. One way for Cubans to deflect north-American disapproval of the new government

²⁹ U.S. Congress. Senate. Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws, of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Communist Threat to the United States Through the Caribbean, Part 11*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961.

was to stress inconsistencies in the U.S. political and economic system by highlighting the treatment of African Americans. Cuban dailies published articles, editorials, and photographs describing the unfair treatment of African Americans and their struggle for full citizenship ninety miles away. As a result, Cuban audiences became familiar with the contradictions within U.S. claims of democracy, identified black Americans as brothers, and imagined their revolution as the example of genuine participatory government.

Revolutionary discourses invoked examples of violence and discrimination against black Americans to contradict U.S. declarations of freedom and democracy. A front page article titled, “The Yankee Police Attack Blacks in the United States,” was accompanied by photographs of police beating both male and female protestors attempting to gain entrance into a whites-only restaurant. The author of the article emphasized how white police officers brutalized black women by beating and spraying them with fire hoses before transporting the group to jail. Under the photograph, the caption read, “Democracy in the United States” to draw attention to the irony of a country that criticized Cuba for executing war criminals, while simultaneously abusing its own black citizens, and even worse black women who marched peacefully for equal rights.³⁰ In an editorial featuring the opinions of Cuban youth, one high-school student commented that “it is hard to believe that in a country like the United States with a self-titled democracy, awful events occur like beating a man solely because of his skin color.”³¹ While a first year medical student labeled the United States as a “*demokkracia*” (democracy with KKK), and said that it is “absurd for a country that values liberty like the United States to continue to be divided into blacks and whites.”³²

³⁰ “Ataca a los negros la policía yanqui en EEUU,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 13, 1960, 1.

³¹ “La juventud opina sobre: La discriminación racial en EEUU,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 5, 1960, 4.

Cubans criticized racial violence in the United States both because it was a social injustice, but also because doing so served as a response to U.S. critiques of the Cuban revolution. Afro-Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén reiterated this point. “Everyday we are watching black North Americans try to achieve their deserved space, not just in life, but in a restaurant or a bus. Reader, do you think that there is anyone [in the United States] who can come and talk seriously to us about the free world? If there is, they should raise their hand, and step forward, because we would like to meet them.”³³ Another editorial concurred, asking, “How is it possible for Ike to talk about the rights of man, while two million blacks in the South cannot vote? Blacks fought in World War II, slaved on the land, and still they have no rights; and yet, the United States has the audacity to attack the Cuban revolution which is representing real liberty and equality.”³⁴ Similarly, during a popular evening television program, revolutionary leader Raúl Roa rejected a statement made in the U.S. Congress, that “90 miles from the United States is a communist regime,” by replying “well, 90 miles from the Cuba there is racial discrimination.”³⁵ Articulations such as these formed the daily rhetoric among intellectuals, youth, and some people of color on the island. For many Cubans, the continued existence of racism in the United States refuted claims that the country was a genuine democracy and contributed to the popularity of the Cuban revolution as a distinct national project.

Throughout spring and early summer 1960, Cubans expressed solidarity with U.S. movements fighting against racial discrimination and prejudice. Lydia Young, a *mulata*

³² “La juventud opina: Sobre la discriminación racial en Estados Unidos,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 8, 1960, 4.

³³ “Cintillos,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 19, 1960, 4.

³⁴ “La juventud opina sobre: La discriminación racial en EEUU,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 5, 1960, 4.

³⁵ “A 90 millas de Cuba, lo que hay es discriminación racial,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 26, 1960, 6.

student, told a Cuban reporter that “everyone needs to send a message to the United States denouncing these occurrences against our black brothers in the South.”³⁶ Similarly, Casandra, editorialist for the “*Estudiantes*” (Students) column in *Combate 13 de Marzo*, wrote that Cubans “supported their brothers in the North” in protesting white establishments.³⁷ By calling U.S. blacks “brothers,” these Cubans welcomed African Americans into the revolutionary cohort of politicized youth and voiced their respect and support for the Civil Rights Movement. Popular organizations such as the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), University Student Federation (FEU), and the National Federation of Gastronomical Workers in Santiago held meetings and voted to make public announcements condemning the unfair treatment of blacks in the United States.³⁸ These types of statements contributed to public discourses concerning race relations in the United States and reveal awareness among members of organizations across the island of the problems facing black Americans.

Some groups showed their support for U.S. blacks by protesting North-American stores in Cuba. In March and April 1960, Cuban dailies featured numerous articles describing how youth in the United States had decided to boycott Woolworth Stores until the management agreed to serve blacks.³⁹ When students from MR 26-7, the Revolutionary Directorate (DR), Socialist Youth, and the National Integration Movement learned of these

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Casandra, “*Estudiantes*,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 4, 1960, 4.

³⁸ “Condena la FEU la agresión a negros,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 20, 1960, 8; “Fomentarán el turismo laboral,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 5, 1960, 2; Gabriel Molina Franchossi, “Cuando voten esos 20 millones de negros,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, July 20, 1960, 8; “Rechazan los Gastronómicos discriminación racial en EU,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, April 24, 1960, 2.

³⁹ “La segregación en los EEUU: Boycot a la Woolworth,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 25, 1960, 1. “Boicot contra las tiendas al sur de los E.U.” *La Calle*, April 12, 1960, 10.

actions they resolved to assemble a similar protest in front of the Woolworth store in Havana. The students marched outside of a Woolworth store located on the corner of Galiano and San Rafael holding signs that read, “Woolworth Denies Democratic Rights to Black People.” Youth leaders compared recent events, the explosion of a docked Cuban ship (*La Coubre*) and the beating of black female Civil Rights protestors in the United States, to demonstrate how the U.S. government facilitated attacks on unarmed groups. The student organizations felt that the two groups, U.S. blacks and revolutionary Cubans, were “fighting against a common enemy” and “that each victory here or there weakened the forces of bad everywhere.”⁴⁰ After the event, editorialist Cassandra noted that the “protests against racial discrimination in the USA, here in Cuba, reaffirm that for us [Cubans] this problem is beginning to have a just solution. And we owe this to the Revolution!”⁴¹

The Woolworth episode demonstrates the wide-ranging support for the U.S. Civil Rights Movement among student leaders in Cuba. It also reveals the pride Cuban youth felt in being part of the revolutionary movement sweeping their country and their desire to offer this enthusiasm to international social justice causes. Ultimately, some students compared the problems facing black Americans to racial tensions in their home and found that Cuba was having more success in eliminating racism. Like the leaders of the INIT, many Cuban youth thought that African Americans should visit Cuba to experience true freedom. One elementary school teacher was persuaded that, “soon they [U.S. blacks] will triumph, but if this does not happen, then I am sure that here [in Cuba], they will have a piece of free land where equality exists for all men.”⁴² While another agreed that “here in Cuba, our

⁴⁰ “Por qué no boycotear también en la Habana a la Woolworth?” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 26, 1960, 1.

⁴¹ Casandra, “Contra discriminación en USA,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 3, 1960, 4.

revolutionary government understands the importance of fighting against racial discrimination and has handled this project with tact and delicacy that are worthy of admiration.”⁴³

Racial violence and discrimination in the United States became a central component of public discourses in Cuba in spring 1960 as a result of visits made by Joe Louis and other African Americans, and because Cuban leaders and intellectuals realized the need to respond to U.S. criticisms of the revolution. The new government, with the assistance of U.S. black leaders, racialized tensions between the two countries and inserted debates over racial equality into ongoing hostilities over nationalizing foreign businesses and the process of the Agrarian Reform. However, focusing on injustices faced by people of color in the United States also created space for Cubans to talk about the steps taken to eliminate discrimination on the island. Some Cubans concurred with the youth quoted above and applauded the efforts made by the new leadership, while others saw discussions about African Americans as the opportunity to denounce lingering racisms in Cuba.

Domestic Problems despite International Promises

After the announcement of revolutionary plans to eliminate racial discrimination in March 1959, a variety of leaders, students, and activists began to debate the best way to achieve such a goal. Throughout the rest of the year, the new government implemented a series of programs designed to improve the economic situation of all Cubans, including blacks and *mulatos*. These changes along with revolutionary rhetoric claiming to include

⁴² “La juventud opina sobre: La discriminación racial en EEUU,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 5, 1960, 4.

⁴³ “La juventud opina: Sobre la discriminación racial en Estados Unidos,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 8, 1960, 4.

even the most humble Cuban into the national project made it possible for the new government to invite Louis and other African American guests to an island and promise that they would be treated as “first class citizens” despite the color of their skin. As the previous section discussed, this rhetoric benefitted revolutionary leaders who were able to emphasize the progress the new government had made toward achieving racial equality in contrast to their neighbor to the north. Such conversations also provided Afro-Cubans with an opening to demand additional reforms, most notably in regards to domestic tourism and recreation.

Numerous individuals and groups wrote letters and articles to popular dailies describing the unfair treatment of black Cubans between January and June of 1960. Repeatedly editorialists and readers claimed that they wanted to “*denunciar*” (denounce) a certain group or individual and frequently asked the government to “*sancionar*” (sanction) organizations for continuing to discriminate against Cubans of color. Public participation in the revolutionary discourses about racial equality reveal an opening after 1959 for both white and black Cubans to challenge prejudices existing on the island. They also show how Afro-Cubans wanting access to “white-only” spaces, such as social clubs and tourist centers, applied the rhetoric popularized during the African American visit to achieve these goals.

After the revolution, most social institutions either became integrated or were closed and replaced by new state supported organizations. Cubaneleco, the private club of the Electrical Workers Union, however, continued to deny entrance to blacks as late as January 1960. One group of electrical workers, outraged by this situation, visited the offices of *Combate 13 de Marzo* to denounce publicly what they called the “awful attitude of the club members.” Stating that,

the triumph of the revolution in 1959 brought an end to a number of prejudices that had existed for over two hundred years. It is not fair that while

the Banker's Club, the Doctor's Club, and the Telephone workers' clubs have all had to integrate, the Electrical workers' club remains segregated and not following the most elemental principals of the revolution.⁴⁴

Following this visit, Cuban dailies published weekly updates about the situation in Cubaneleco to denounce the leader of the union Amaury Friginals as a traitor. An article titled, "We Are All Equal, But Still," contrasted the continued discrimination in the Electrical Workers Union and the raceless ideology of nineteenth century leader José Martí. The author explains how in many cases the revolution had been successful in fighting against injustices, but that work still remained to be done since Cubaneleco continued to hold "chic parties where certain people could not enter because of being of a somewhat dark skin color."⁴⁵

Public attacks on the union leader, Friginals, labeled him as weak because he refused to implement revolutionary agendas. Editorialists claimed that Friginals was afraid to "open his mouth" and that he privately hoped the situation would be resolved by building another club. Yet, opponents argued that constructing a separate building would only perpetuate racial divisions and called for new leadership to replace the "discriminators" currently managing the union.⁴⁶ After three months of articles denouncing the organization and demanding government intervention to correct the situation, one exasperated woman wrote the editor of *Combate 13 de Marzo* saying, that "if the discrimination does not stop then the club should be closed."⁴⁷ Castro later mirrored this sentiment in a speech to a gathering of workers, stating "in the social clubs there will be no discrimination against any Cuban; the recreational centers will be like the public beaches, where everyone is happy and all is in

⁴⁴ "Discriminación racial en el 'Cubaneleco,'" *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 20, 1960, 1.

⁴⁵ "Todos somos iguales, y sin embargo," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 11, 1960, 2.

⁴⁶ "Discriminación," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 16, 1960, 4. "Discriminación eléctrica," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 23, 1960, 4.

⁴⁷ "Sobre la discriminación en el Cubaneleco," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, March 26, 1960, 4.

order.”⁴⁸ Government legislation in 1959 opened private beaches to the public. By comparing social clubs and recreational centers to the beaches, Castro referred to the fate of Cubaneleco. In April 1960, the club was taken over by the state and transformed into an integrated worker’s circle, similar to other post-1959 state-run unions.

The vocal outpouring of sentiments calling for changes in Cubaneleco during the first months of 1960 reveal the rejection by many Cubans of racial discrimination in public areas. By “denouncing” fellow Cubans as discriminators and racists, editorialists and readers writing into newspapers in 1960 participated in defining what it meant to be a revolutionary: namely a non-racist, at least in public spaces. Moreover, justifying black entrance into Cubaneleco with rhetoric similar to the language used at the start of 1959, such as fulfilling the legacy of Martí and adherence to revolutionary promises, demonstrates the reach of the government discourses initiated only a year before. However, press coverage highlighting the continued discrimination in the Electrical Workers Union also reveals that Cubans had not achieved the racial equality they claimed to their African American visitors.

Reports of Afro-Cubans being denied services due to the color of their skin spread during the spring of 1960. Like revolutionary leaders who compared the island to the United States, Cubans frequently structured complaints about domestic racial discrimination by asking the government to fulfill its promises to have better race relations than the U.S. South. The Victoria Society wrote to *Combate 13 de Marzo* to “denounce” the opening of a new “Ten Cents Cubano” in Camagüey. The author of the letter described how the new store planned to refuse service to blacks like Woolworth in the United States. In response, the editorialist argued that “Cuba cannot support the actions of those who are trying to copy here

⁴⁸ “‘Depura la revolución el ‘affaire’ del Hilton al entregarlo a los trabajadores gastronómicos’ –Fidel,” *La Calle*, June 17, 1960, 4.

the situation existing in our neighbor to the north. This is why the Revolution has to continue to advance.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Afro-Cuban journalist Reynaldo Peñalver compared classified advertisements seeking employees of a specific race to the divisive techniques used by the Ku Klux Klan. Describing how *Diario de la Marina* continued to print ads soliciting a “white” girl as a domestic worker or a “white” man as a chauffeur, Peñalver questioned whether the editors of the newspaper were “aware that Cuba is undergoing a revolution.”⁵⁰ In each of these scenarios, Cubans invoked an international reference point to legitimize the need for change. Authors and readers struggled to make the racial paradise promised by the revolution a reality for themselves by contrasting Cuban practices to those in the United States. This was not the first time that Afro-Cubans had faced discrimination. However, the use of international comparisons coupled with revolutionary discourses to fight racial inequality provided a unique opening in the early part of 1960.

Other Cubans recognized the disjuncture between promising that their island was an ideal place for U.S. blacks to visit and the persistence of racial discrimination, especially in provincial tourist centers. In the town of Banes, in Oriente province, a dentist reported that Cubans of color were having difficulty being served at a soda fountain in the local tourist attraction. After calling this accusation “extremely grave,” the writer of the editorial asked the INIT to begin an immediate investigation into this issue because “the Cuban revolution is an example to the world of humanism and generosity and cannot allow representatives of the tourist centers to act in a way that is not fitting with revolutionary ideals.”⁵¹ Peñalver

⁴⁹ “Discriminación,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 8, 1960, 2.

⁵⁰ Reynaldo Peñalver, “Los anuncios clasificados: Se solicita una joven ‘pardo’ como en los tiempos de la colonia,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 29, 1960, 1.

⁵¹ “Discriminación racial, no,” *La Calle*, June 5, 1960, 16.

denounced a similar event in Mayajigua, a small town in central Cuba. He explained how a group of black Cuban workers were treated rudely and not allowed to eat in a tourist restaurant. In this incident, the owner of the eatery told the men that they could not dine in the establishment if they were not members, even though it was supposedly a public venue. The black men immediately left the diner, but not before informing the owner that they planned to denounce the eatery to the press and that “the next time they or someone like them came to eat you will have to serve us because the revolution condemns discrimination of this type.”⁵²

A few days later, members of the workers union in Mayajigua, to which the men belonged, demanded sanctions against the owner of the restaurant for racial discrimination.⁵³ When calling for sanctions against the eatery’s owner, the union members referred to Article 20 in the 1940 Constitution which said that groups or individuals could be legally penalized for discrimination. It is unclear what actions, if any, were taken against the groups in question or how the revolutionary government responded to these critiques. However, the very act of “denouncing” and attempting to “sanction” businesses and facilities that perpetuated racial divisions shows awareness among Cubans that 1960 was a moment when it was unacceptable publicly to be a racist. These situations also demonstrate the frustration experienced by some Cubans of color who encountered challenges when attempting to avail themselves to the very tourist centers that the INIT heralded as perfect vacation destinations for African Americans. Afro-Cuban writer Guillén addressed this contradiction in an essay published in *Noticias de Hoy*. “It would be unfair to say that we are like in 1912 [Race War].

⁵² Peñalver, “Discriminación en restaurant,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, July 20, 1960, 5.

⁵³ “Piden castigo por discriminación en San José del Lago,” *La Calle*, July 22, 1960, 4.

But, the other extreme is equally false, that which . . . we have heard more than once recently, that racial discrimination does not exist ‘anymore’ in Cuba.”⁵⁴ For these Cubans, there was a clear discrepancy between the rhetoric proclaimed to and for African American visitors and the lived experiences of people of color on the island.

In fact, black and *mulato* Cubans threatened revolutionary plans to use the highly publicized visit to discredit the U.S. government by openly stating that Cuba had not yet achieved racial equality. Their actions reveal the complexities of employing the situation of African Americans as a point of comparison in Cuba. Once revolutionary leaders invoked the distinction and highlighted the supposed racial paradise available on the island, they created the space for Afro-Cubans to manipulate this discourse for their own needs. Moreover, while these opportunities were most vocal following the Joe Louis visit, they continued throughout the year and resurfaced, in exile, when the Cuban delegation to the United Nations stayed in a black-owned hotel in Harlem, New York in September 1960. Juan Bentancourt, an Afro-Cuban who left the island and went into exile in 1961, remembers how surprised some blacks and *mulatos* were when Castro returned from Harlem and said that he was going to invite 300 more African Americans to the island to see the “terrestrial paradise.” “Cuban Negro Leaders merely looked at each other when they heard this announcement. They asked: What’s he going to show them?”⁵⁵ The images of a racial paradise presented by revolutionary leaders to African Americans allowed Afro-Cubans to ask these types of questions. It is telling that both blacks and *mulatos* living on and off the island recognized these contradictions in revolutionary discourses and sought to mobilize them to their own benefit.

⁵⁴ Nicolás Guillén, “Discriminación y literatura,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 19, 1960, 2. The original quotation in Spanish is especially interesting because of the quotation marks emphasizing “anymore” or “ya.”

⁵⁵ Juan Betancourt, “Castro and the Cuban Negro,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 68, no. 5 (May 1961), 273.

Of course, not all public spaces were segregated, nor did Cubans solely focus on instances of continued racial discrimination in 1960. Articles describing the success of integrated parks in Las Villas celebrated how revolutionary leaders had eliminated one of Cuba's oldest vices, the "*paseo*."⁵⁶ Since colonial times, Cuban youth had engaged in courtship rituals where men and women walked and greeted each other in the park. In rural towns in central Cuba, these *paseos* (walk-ways) had always been segregated by race. A young Afro-Cuban explained in an interview how this changed after 1959. "The greatest conquest for the people of Santa Clara after the triumph of the revolution is the change that occurred in the everyday lives of the black race. In Santa Clara, the revolution is working intensely to achieve rapid integration. This began when they eliminated the bands of whites and blacks in the park."⁵⁷ For this student and other black and *mulato* youth interviewed about changes in their lives, the parks had been a tangible representation of racial inequality in the provinces and their reconstruction served as a clear example of revolutionary progress. Like the opening of beaches and social clubs in more urban areas, the integration of the parks was one of the many revolutionary changes that the new government highlighted both to international guests and Cubans living on the island.

These situations demonstrate how lived experiences of Afro-Cubans varied depending on factors, such as class and regional location. They also show that the conditions facing most Afro-Cubans were much more complicated than the romanticized versions the INIT presented to Joe Louis and other African American tourists. However, the rhetoric of racial equality and denouncement of race relations in the United States celebrated during the

⁵⁶ Lazara Rodríguez Alemán, "Sobre el progreso de Las Villas," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 20, 1960, 4.

⁵⁷ Esther Ayala, "Sobre Santa Clara: Tras el triunfo de la Revolución," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 16, 1960, 4.

black American visit created an opportunity for Cubans, especially blacks and *mulatos*, to express ideas about race relations on the island. Most importantly repeated statements to African Americans promising that they would receive hospitable treatment in Cuban tourist centers legitimized Afro-Cuban demands that recreational and tourist attractions be open to them as well. And while, it is unknown how the INIT resolved these events, having the opportunity to discuss instances of racial discrimination and expect a response was a key component of racializing revolutionary discourses.

“Say It Ain’t So Joe!”

In the United States, Louis, Rowe, Fisher, and Lockhart, Inc. launched a public relations campaign to encourage black audiences to travel to the island by highlighting the social and political advances of the Cuban revolution. The firm published advertisements depicting the beauty of the island and its people in prominent African American newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender*, *Washington Afro-American*, *Crusader*, *New York Amsterdam News*, and *Jet* magazine. Two key phrases were repeated throughout these full-page advertisements: “Come to Cuba—The tourist paradise, where you get: First class treatment—as a first class citizen” and “Come and Discover the Real Cuba for Yourself, You’ll Love the Difference!”⁵⁸ Filled with photographs of integrated school rooms and black and white youth playing soccer in public parks, these advertisements implicitly compared the racial integration occurring in Cuba with the Jim Crow South.

Many of these promotions contained visual images contrasting darker and lighter skinned Cubans and North Americans mingling together. Images of swimsuit-clad *mulata* women flirtatiously inviting readers to the island mirrored how Cuban women had been

⁵⁸ Display Ad 102-No Title, *Chicago Defender*, May 7, 1960, 45.

portrayed historically in the U.S. media. However, the inclusion of darker-skinned women in the photographs departed from the usual focus on the *mulata* and made these advertisements particular to the African American press.⁵⁹ Other advertisements highlighted the employment and recreational opportunities available to people of color in Cuba, as evidenced by photographs and stories about the successes of Enrique Benavides, an Afro-Cuban official with the INIT, and Teddy Rhodes a black golfer.⁶⁰ Doing so, depicted Cuba as an integrated and racially mixed society where all shades of African Americans would be welcomed. Joe Louis and other black leaders often insisted that Cuba was one of the few destinations where African Americans could travel and vacation freely, a sharp contrast to most U.S. resorts. Images used in the promotions reinforced these claims by appealing to disgruntled African Americans searching for a sunny vacation destination.

Even though some Cubans might have disagreed with how the public relations firm portrayed their island, the campaign had sufficient credibility with African Americans both to generate responses in the black press and warrant exploration by the FBI. The FBI began to explore Louis and his partners' connection with the island as early as January 1960 out of concern about the potential communist infiltration of U.S. black communities that could result from visits to Cuba. This investigation included tracing Louis's phone calls, tracking his travels throughout the United States, and putting a "discrete mail cover" on his mailbox to inspect incoming correspondence.⁶¹

⁵⁹ In particular, one editorialist for a U.S. black newspaper commented that "Joe Louis is hunting for dark-skinned girls to send to Cuba on a tourist promotion deal." Ole Nosey, "Everybody Goes When the Wagon Comes," *Chicago Defender*, May 7, 1960, 18.

⁶⁰ "Cuba Calls!" *Chicago Defender*, May 7, 1960, 44. "Racial Integration Advances in Cuba," *Chicago Defender*, May 10, 1960, 12 and May 21, 1960, 7A.

⁶¹ Memo to Director, March 18, 1960, JL/FBI.

In April, news of Louis's affiliation with Cuba became public in the United States after his firm registered as a foreign agent with the Department of Justice, a necessary step for conducting business in another country. Critics of Cuba reacted immediately to the announcement using anti-communist and paternalistic rhetoric. An article titled, "Say It Ain't So, Joe" criticized Louis for being duped by Castro. Claiming that the business venture with Cuba was "evidence of how far he has fallen" from his fighting bouts and his days as a poster-boy for American soldiers in World War II, the author called Louis weak and said that he "pitied him."⁶² The author also argued that only Louis' innocence and naiveté allow him to dismiss the fact that the Cuban government was using his name for "anti-American" and "communist friendly" purposes. Similarly, the *New York Times* labeled Louis a "foreign agent," while the *New York Mirror* called the heavy-weight champion a "drumbeater for Fidel Castro's Cuba."⁶³

In each of these situations, U.S. authors dismissed claims made by many of the advertisements that African Americans could only find "first class treatment" outside of their own country and assumed that blacks were being fooled by communist manipulators. Cuban attempts to invite African American tourists to the island were read by some critics in the United States as communist attempts to infiltrate domestic racial politics. Facing such allegations, Louis responded that his firm was not involved in Cuban politics and that their agreement was with the INIT only and not Castro. He also pointed out that a white-owned

⁶² Jimmy Cannon, "Say It Ain't So Joe," *American Weekly*, April 17, 1960.

⁶³ "Joe Louis Agency Engaged by Cuba," *New York Times* May 26, 1960, 4. "Louis Works for Cuba," *New York Mirror*, May 26, 1960.

public relations agency had been hired at the same time by the National Cuban Tourist Institute to promote travel among white Americans, yet no one was criticizing them.⁶⁴

Many African Americans felt Louis and his partners were being misunderstood and vilified in the white press because they were black and supported the firm's decision to work with Cuba. One author suggested that "those folks who're criticizing Joe Louis and his associates for accepting the \$287,00 fee for publicizing Cuba are apparently forgetting that Joe, and no other Negro, could get a similar job at home in the good old U.S.A."⁶⁵ Other U.S. blacks questioned why no one was challenging companies, like General Motors, Coca-Cola, Esso Standard Oil, and many others, who had been and were continuing to conduct business in Cuba.⁶⁶ Louis, Rowe, Fisher, and Lockhart also received dozens of letters from supporters encouraging them to continue providing travel opportunities for the black community.⁶⁷

Despite this support, Louis ended his association with the public relations firm in June and denied having any connections with Castro. Initially, Lockhart and Rowe planned to continue the business venture without Louis as the headliner. However, by July the other men were forced to terminate the contract as well, due to continued pressure from critics. Firm president, William Rowe, sent a letter to Baudilio Castellanos, director of the INIT on July 7, 1960 to explain.

We understood and appreciated the banning of discrimination in Cuba, and felt prone to publicize Cuba as a new Utopia, where the promise of first-class treatment as first-class citizens would be a reality for American Negroes . . . However, the conflict of interest, of which you are familiar, has continued to

⁶⁴ "Joe to Continue Tourist Work," *Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1960, 2.

⁶⁵ Masco Young, "They're Talking About," *Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1960, 16.

⁶⁶ Jackie Robinson, "Editorial," *Chicago Defender*, June 13, 1960, A11.

⁶⁷ "Joe's Firm 'Not Yielding' On Cuba," *Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1960, 1.

multiply, and the failure of the (INIT) to overcome its financial problems leaves us no alternative except to resign.⁶⁸

After this decision, the debate over the actions of Louis and his partners calmed in the United States, but consequences remained. Louis's reputation as the American hero who encouraged U.S. soldiers to fight in World War II was tarnished permanently in the eyes of those who questioned his patriotism and decision-making skills. U.S. critics of communism saw the Cuban solicitation of African American tourists as further proof of the divisive and radical nature of the new Castro regime. Many African Americans, however, continued to be fascinated by reports that Cuba had eliminated racial discrimination, a situation which foreshadowed visits by Robert Williams, Harold Cruse, and others to the island during the summer of 1960 and beyond. Most importantly, however, African Americans became familiar with images and rhetoric portraying Cuba as a racial paradise. These ideas resurfaced easily when Castro and the Cuban United Nations delegation relocated to Harlem in September 1960 to stay in the black-owned Theresa hotel. The historical relationship between Cubans and African Americans continued as crowds of U.S. blacks surrounded the Harlem establishment to show their awareness and support for the anti-racist policies of the revolutionary government.

Un ex-campeón acostado

Cubans learned of Louis's decision to distance himself publicly from the new government in June 1960. They expressed their surprise, disappointment, and criticism concerning his resignation in a variety of ways. Some blamed his actions on pressure from

⁶⁸ Letter to Baudilio Castellanos dated 7 July 1960 found in U.S. Congress. Senate. Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws, of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Communist Threat to the United States Through the Caribbean, Part 11*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961.

the U.S. government and remained supportive of the ex-boxer. Others, however, disapproved of Louis's weakness for succumbing to U.S. coercion and portrayed him as a fallen hero.

Many Cubans struggled to explain the change in Louis's thinking and his rejection of the revolution without disturbing his celebrated iconic status. One high school student found that "the declarations of Joe Louis attacking the revolutionary government of Cuba are a consequence of the racial problem in the United States. This is nothing more than pressure that has been exercised [on him] by the discriminating Americans which causes him to lie to win the indulgences of Uncle Sam."⁶⁹ Director of the INIT, Baudilio Castellanos issued a public statement explaining the position of the government in relation to Louis's resignation. He argued that Louis was a "victim of U.S. oppression," and that the boxer had only renounced his agreement after enduring a public "character assassination" in the U.S. press. Castellanos emphasized that it was well known that Louis was a "great friend and sympathizer" of Castro and Afro-Cuban *Comandante* Juan Almeida; but, intense pressure from the U.S. government forced him to deny those associations.⁷⁰ Additionally, the INIT leader highlighted how Louis had enjoyed his previous visits to Cuba and the enthusiasm the boxer felt for the new government's moves to eliminate racial discrimination. By labeling Louis as a victim who continued to support the revolution privately if not publicly, Cubans justified the boxer's actions using familiar themes, namely that the racist democracy of the United States caused his betrayal. Castellanos's choice to stress the continued personal connection between Louis, Castro, and Almeida also suggests that he wanted to repair

⁶⁹ "La juventud opina sobre: La discriminación racial en EEUU," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 5, 1960, 4.

⁷⁰ This statement was printed in all three of the following newspapers: "Agresión a Cuba la actitud de Joe Louis," *Revolución*, June 3, 1960, 1; "Declaraciones de Baudilio Castellanos," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 4, 1960, 1; "Nueva agresión a Cuba la actitud de Joe Louis," *El Mundo*, June 3, 1960, A-11.

relationships between African Americans and Cubans, which might have been damaged by the boxer's hasty dismissal of his Cuban ties.

Cuban newspapers published opinions from African American leaders to support their claims that the disapproval Louis encountered in the United States was influenced by his race. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Montgomery Reynolds noted that he was “disgusted” by the Louis situation and ironically called the pressure against Louis an example of the “racial equality” that exists in the United States. “This sin of discrimination should be eliminated in the United States, in the same way it has been eliminated in Cuba.”⁷¹ Similarly, *El Mundo* reprinted an editorial from the *Chicago Defender* that contrasted how some “white” companies were allowed to continue their business in Cuba without disapproval, while Louis and his associates were called traitors to their country.⁷² Not only do these examples demonstrate the transnational reach of conversations about racial politics occurring between Cubans and African Americans, they also reveal a pattern in the Cuban press of locating and circulating U.S. black voices to legitimize domestic racial politics and denounce the United States. Together with official statements by Castellanos, these articles represent a faction of Cubans who viewed Louis and his partners as victims of forces beyond their control and sought to continue to defend the ex-champion even though he could no longer openly support Cuba.

⁷¹ “La Revolución Cubana es la más linda que he visto,” *Noticias de Hoy*, June 4, 1960, 7.

⁷² “Enjuicia Robinson la actitud de Joe Louis,” *El Mundo*, June 7, 1960, A-2.



Other Cubans focused on the personal weakness of Louis as the reason behind his resignation. Building from the assumption that Louis faced significant pressure from the U.S. media, some critics portrayed the former boxer as weak and old for succumbing to such tactics. One writer described Louis as having an “expression of defeat” on his face during a press conference. Saying that he looked unhappy and incapable of resisting,” the journalist seemed to pity Louis.⁷³ While another contributor depicted

a “confused” Louis, who having spent most of his earnings from boxing was now “impoverished,” in debt for delinquent taxes, and forced to renounce his contract with the INIT.⁷⁴ These images portray a man without the strength to stand up for himself or his beliefs, and contrast sharply with the descriptions of Louis published in January when he celebrated the New Year with revolutionary leaders. Rather than seeing him as the glorified former heavy weight champion of the world, these Cubans viewed Louis as the epitome of black helplessness against U.S. influence and pressure.

Political cartoons illustrated these attitudes in visual form. Published shortly after Louis and his partners renounced their contract with the INIT, this cartoon (left) shows a small character waving its arms and shouting at a much larger liberty statue.⁷⁵ The small

⁷³ “Joe Louis en apuros,” *La Calle*, June 5, 1960, 7.

⁷⁴ Rogelio Caparrós, “Louis se rajo o lo rajaron,” *Revolución*, June 2, 1960, 1.

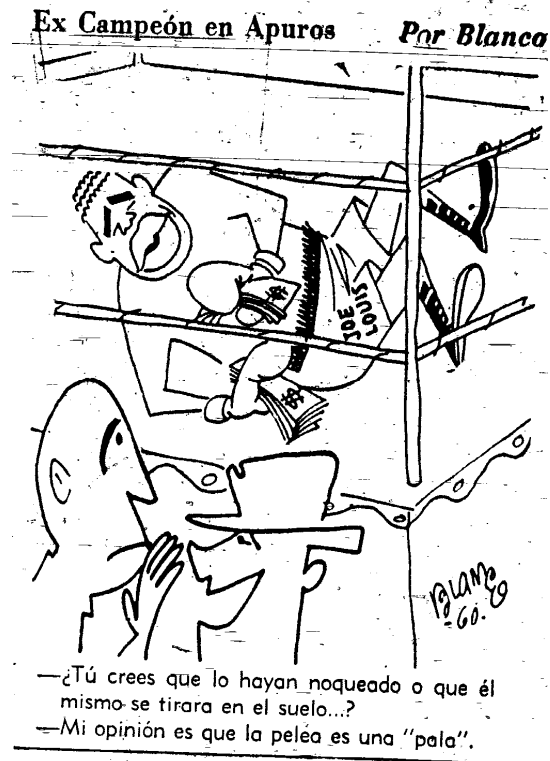
sketch is drawn using characteristics similar to depictions of Afro-Cubans in other political cartoons and represents Louis and his associates. The cartoon reflects how Louis was powerless to pursue his economic and political interests in the United States. The title of the cartoon “Without words” (*Sin palabras*) suggests that Louis and other U.S. blacks were voiceless in their nation. The title also implies that readers would have understood the sketch without a caption or supplemental editorial, because Cubans were familiar with the unequal and second class position of African Americans.

Some Cubans felt that Louis was not only weak and powerless, but also lacking dignity. A writer for *La Calle* agreed that Louis had encountered formidable pressure from the U.S. media; however, he argued, so had many others before him. The columnist claimed that in the face of oppression and challenges some chose the solitariness of exile, others went to prison, even more resisted, but that many, like Joe Louis gave into pressure. In the case of Louis, this writer concluded that “the old, the great, the valiant gladiator of the ring has no more weapons with which to fight. And that a lover of the good life, he prefers to sell his decorated dignity in exchange for the ability to play golf in the afternoon.”⁷⁶ Saying that he was ashamed of Louis, this editorial is accompanied by a political cartoon of a small black man crying at the feet of a hooded Klansman, carrying a dollar sign. Both the cartoon and the editorial demonstrate that a section of the Cuban population was angry and humiliated by Louis’s failure to confront and defy his oppressors like a true revolutionary.

⁷⁵ Chago, “Sin palabras,” *Revolución*, June 3, 1960, 2.

⁷⁶ Siquitrilla, “Un pobre ex-campeón acosado,” *La Calle*, June 3, 1960, 16.

Another cartoon (right) linked Louis's resignation with his desire for material wealth and poked fun at the former heavy-weight champion. This sketch shows two men observing Louis in the boxing ring. One asks the other, "Do you think they knocked him out or that he threw himself onto the floor?" The second man responds, "In my opinion, the fight was a fixed fight."⁷⁷ The discussion between the onlookers implies that the U.S. government paid Louis to renounce his contract with the



INIT in order to neutralize any positive comments the fighter had made about the Cuban revolution. The disapproving look on the faces of the two men, coupled with language labeling the situation a "fixed fight," the ultimate insult to a boxer, demonstrates a growing disgust with Louis for his participation in this scheme and a rejection of his glorified boxing past. It is unknown how Cuban readers reacted to these of cartoons; however, the themes of betrayal, anger, and shame illustrated in the cartoons suggest that many Cubans expected more from Louis and were disappointed in his refusal to support the revolution unconditionally.

The INIT persisted in encouraging African Americans to visit Cuba despite the termination of the public relations contract with Louis, Rowe, Fisher, and Lockhart. INIT director, Castellanos, sent a letter to the United States inviting people to the island, saying that "Cuba was a place without segregation or discrimination," where all people were

⁷⁷ Blanco, "Ex campeón en apuros," *El Mundo*, June 3, 1960, A-4.

welcomed.⁷⁸ Consequently, U.S. blacks continued to visit Cuba. In June, African American students celebrated their ability to dance with white women in a Cuban hotel, a “liberty denied to young black men in their own country.”⁷⁹ While, Robert Williams visited the island in July to see what had caused Louis so many difficulties.⁸⁰ FBI pressure may have succeeded in removing Louis’s face from the campaign to attract black tourists to Cuba, but the INIT remained committed to appealing to what they considered an overlooked group in the United States.

Conclusions

After June 1960, the number of articles in the press about African Americans or racial discrimination in Cuba declined. Cuban journalists returned to writing about U.S. aggression, the Agrarian Reform, and new revolutionary programs. Nevertheless, the brief business venture between the National Cuban Tourist Institute and the Louis, Rowe, Fisher, and Lockhart public relations firm had lasting consequences. Extensive press coverage in Cuban newspapers of the experiences and opinions of African Americans visitors served to remind Cubans of existing racial tensions and inequalities in the United States. This situation benefitted revolutionary leaders by providing a response to U.S. and counterrevolutionary disapproval of the changes occurring on the island, and turned into a lasting critique about the character of democracy in the United States. However, Cuban invitations to African Americans and the new government’s vocal disapproval of the treatment of U.S. Blacks

⁷⁸ “Declaraciones de Baudilio Castellanos,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 4, 1960, 1.

⁷⁹ Peñalver, “Esto sí es democracia,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, June 18, 1960, 1.

⁸⁰ “Prominente líder negro de EEUU viene a Cuba a conocer a la Revolución,” *La Calle*, June 12, 1960, 16.

contributed to the perceived radicalization of the revolution in the United States. By welcoming African Americans and offering an alternative to second class citizenship to people of color throughout the world, Cuban leaders alienated some groups both on and off the island.

Discussions about the violent and segregated conditions faced by U.S. blacks encouraged Afro-Cubans to be grateful for the new opportunities provided by the revolution and likely discouraged black and *mulato* Cubans from joining the growing exodus to Miami. At the same time, the rhetoric used to entice African Americans to visit Cuba, namely that the island had eliminated racial discrimination, created a space for Cubans to debate domestic racial concerns. The claim that tourist centers would welcome people of color from the United States allowed Afro-Cubans to denounce and challenge publicly instances where this was not the case for Cubans of color.

By spring 1960, government discourses had evolved from announcing plans to end racial discrimination to international claims at having succeeded in the endeavor. However, at home, Cubans maintained space to debate progress toward racial equality. External conversations about Cuba and initiated by Cubans described a less complex scenario in order to promote African American tourism and to use race as fuel in the moral fight over which country represented a genuine democracy. This gesture foreshadowed the Cuban position toward global racial politics declared at the 1960 United Nations meeting and latter proclamations that the revolution had eliminated racial inequality entirely.

Chapter 5:

On the Corner of 125th and 7th: Internationalizing Racial Politics, September 1960

At seven o'clock p.m. on September 19, 1960, the Cuban delegation to the United Nations, led by Fidel Castro, packed their bags and departed in a motorcade from their suites in the Manhattan Shelburne Hotel, en route to the U.N. headquarters. The reason for the after-hours visit was simple. Castro and his group were dissatisfied with their treatment at the mid-town hotel and went to the United Nations to demand a more hospitable residence.¹ Threatening to sleep in Central Park if the issue was not resolved, Castro filed a complaint, returned to his Oldsmobile, and headed to lodging where he felt his group would be more welcome—he moved to Harlem. U.N. officials were mystified by this sudden departure and ordered various police cars to follow the Cuban caravan to its unknown destination, both to provide security to the delegates and to monitor their actions. Thus, 10 p.m. arrived with a mob of traffic spilling into uptown Harlem, including police cars, the eighty-person Cuban delegation, and an assortment of

¹ Max Frankel, "Cuban in Harlem," *New York Times*, September 20, 1960, 1. This article also provides a more detailed description of why Castro left the Shelburne hotel. He notes that initially the Cuban delegation had difficulty finding a place to stay in New York. Once they arrived at the Shelburne, the manager asked for \$10,000 in cash as insurance on the room. Since the Cubans did not have the money and were insulted that this was asked of them and not of other guests, they refused to pay. The last complaint resulted from the hotel's refusal to fly the Cuban flag over the building, a common courtesy for diplomatic guests. Alvin White, "Historic Theresa in News Again," *Washington Afro-American*, September 24, 1960, 2.

newspaper reporters. This diverse group was met by a cheering, albeit surprised, crowd of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans standing on the corner of 125th Street and 7th Avenue, outside of the aging Theresa Hotel. The Theresa was well known in the African American community for housing popular black figures and celebrities during the twentieth century, such as Josephine Baker, Congressional Representative Adam Clayton Powell, and boxer Joe Louis. However, that evening in September was the first time in history that its suites were occupied by a foreign head of state.

Both Cuban and African American audiences were already acquainted with each other when Castro landed on Harlem's doorstep in September 1960. As the previous chapter discussed, advertisements encouraging U.S. blacks to travel to the island combined with north-American press about the events occurring in the neighboring country, provided many Harlem residents with an awareness, at least partially, of revolutionary programs targeting people of color. Similarly, Cubans were sensitive to the reality of racial segregation and violence in the United States and the desire by some African Americans to visit the island, because of the recent encounters with Joe Louis and Robert Williams. However, when the Cuban delegation moved from the Shelburne hotel in Manhattan to the Theresa, in Harlem, the new government's racial politics received added international attention. Unlike the previous exchange which occurred in Cuba and in a space mostly controlled by revolutionary leaders, the new interactions between Cubans and African Americans occurred on U.S. soil, a situation which immediately escalated tensions between the two governments. Revolutionary leaders proclaimed to African American crowds, world leaders attending the United Nations, and

Cuban readers at home that the post-1959 new government had eliminated racial discrimination and would support other oppressed groups fighting for equality. This chapter investigates this moment in Harlem to provide a better understanding of the evolution of revolutionary discourses on racism and the changing relationship between Cubans and African Americans in the latter part of 1960.

Both contemporary journalists and recent scholars have offered various interpretations about the motivations behind Castro's surprising move to Harlem. Most often these readings focus on assessing the successes and failures of the Cuban campaign to attract African American support for the revolution and the role U.S. blacks played in defending the post-1959 Cuban government.² Yet, concentrating on whether or not U.S. blacks supported Castro fails to explain why the two groups sought out each other and

² Carlos Moore offers one interpretation in his work *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles, California: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California-Los Angeles, 1988), 77-88. He labels the event the "Harlem Show" to emphasize what he sees as the theatrical quality of the move. Moore highlights Castro's "political cunning, his penchant for effective theatrics, and his capable handling of the racial weapon" as a means of critiquing the Cuban leader's motives. This analysis relies heavily on the author's recollection (he was in Harlem at the time) and interviews with ex-delegation members, many of whom, like the author, left Cuba in the 1960s to protest various government actions. In contrast to Moore's focus on Castro, Van Gosse, in "The African American Press Greets the Cuban Revolution" found in Lisa Brock and Digna Castaneda Fuertes, eds. *Between Race and Empire: African Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 266-281 describes how the support the African American press demonstrated toward the Cuban Revolution in its early years "reflected an impulse toward Third World solidarity that in 1959, at the height of the decolonization drive in Africa and elsewhere, ran deep in black America." He also concludes that this alliance foreshadowed an emerging African American critique of imperialism that would later impact the "'Black Power' movement, the Black Panther Party, and the multiracial movement against the war in Vietnam." In a similar manner, Brenda Gayle Plummer argues in "Castro in Harlem: A Cold War Watershed" in Allen Hunter, ed. *Rethinking the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 133-153, that the Cuban delegation's stay in Harlem altered the way the U.S. government understood its foreign policy in relation to people of color and led African Americans to situate the Civil Rights movement in the international arena. Plummer sees the Harlem visit as a watershed moment that "served notice that neither domestic nor international politics could not be predicated on the invisibility of peoples of color." Yet, while describing the ways that certain Cuban and African American leaders supported one another and the impacts of such alliances, these interpretations fail to question what "image" was produced to be supported. This chapter supplements previous works by offering a close reading of the articles generated surrounding the 1960 event. Analyzing the discourses created by the press gives insight into how leaders in various national spaces imagined each other. The chapter works with the notion that it is too simplistic to describe an alliance without a clear understanding of how allies are frequently imagined or misrepresented in the particular ways to further current political goals.

what they gained through constructing particular images of one another. Similar to the conversations occurring during Joe Louis's visit to the Havana, articles generated throughout the Cuban delegation's stay in Harlem suggest that both African Americans and Cubans invoked a particular concept of the other to further their domestic agendas.³

This chapter explores how Cuban leaders used the United Nations meeting as an opportunity to assert internationally that their policies towards people of color were different from previous administrations. The Cuban press highlighted the revolution's stance against racial segregation in the United States with visual images of the new leadership in a black hotel, eating in a "colored" restaurant, and leading crowds of U.S. citizens to shout "Cuba, Sí, Yankee, No!" By enthusiastically accepting lodging in a black-owned business, despite their ability to stay in a more prestigious Manhattan hotel, the new government announced its growing interest in global racial politics and transferred on-going domestic conversations about black and *mulato* Cubans to debates about racism in the United States and anti-colonialism in Africa. However, the evidence also reveals that alongside positive images of revolutionary leaders surrounded by cheering African Americans, Cuban readers also encountered representations of U.S. blacks as juvenile and helpless. Similar to photographs published in 1959 depicting Afro-Cubans as down-trodden, poor, and in need of reform before they could become citizens, images of African Americans in the Cuban press perpetuated notions of black inferiority in contrast to white revolutionary might.

³ Both presses generated an extensive paper trail that reached many readers. Cuban newspapers printed articles from all parts of Cuba, including pieces describing how cities as far east as Santiago pledged their support for African Americans. In the United States, *The Washington Afro-American* was the most widely circulated black newspaper in the United States in 1960. Van Gosse recounts in "The African American Press Greet the Cuban Revolution," how it had four regional editions that were published throughout the country. The *Carolinian*, the southern most U.S. newspaper in the sample, helped spread ideas through the black community by reprinting articles from the *Washington Afro-American* and routinely running advertisements for businesses in New York and other northern states.

Most importantly, the Harlem event highlights a crucial shift from open conversations about how to best eliminate racial discrimination to a public consensus that the new government had achieved this goal. As discussed earlier, in the spring of 1960 Afro-Cubans wrote articles calling for additional reforms and denouncing establishments that continued to practice racial prejudice in response to promises made to African American tourists. However, Cuban newspapers published very few criticisms disturbing the idea that racial discrimination had been removed from the island, while Castro and the delegation were in Harlem. Most histories of Cuba identify 1962 as the official closure of conversations about racial equality. Alejandro de la Fuente finds that “the initial campaign against racial discrimination waned after 1962, leading to a growing public silence on the issue—except to note Cuba’s success in the area.”⁴ And political scientist Mark Sawyer concurs that that “revolution’s early dialogue on race ended in 1962 when the problem was declared officially solved.”⁵ The silence about domestic racisms in the Cuban press while the delegations was in Harlem reveal that debates about ending racial discrimination closed long before 1962. Afro-Cubans, on the island, could not and did not publicly contradict the official stance that the revolution had achieved racial equality in September 1960. In fact, most Afro-Cuban leaders participated in the national consensus celebrating the revolution’s elimination of racial discrimination. Only exiles in Miami criticized publicly the move to the Theresa hotel as a propaganda-seeking “show.”

⁴ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 279.

⁵ Mark Q. Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2006), 60. Sawyer notes that “discussions of race . . . shifted from being a domestic issue to being an international issue.” However, he fails to fully explore how and when this happened, or more importantly its effects on Afro-Cubans.

The immediate suppression of racial issues and a closing of debates about racial equality after the initial opening in 1959 foreshadowed future problems for Afro-Cubans. By failing to create a positive language for talking about race and inequality, the Cuban leadership silenced future dialogues and limited possibilities for progress. Yet, these were tough decisions made by both revolutionary leaders and Afro-Cubans as criticism from the United States grew and the threat of intervention seemed eminent. Revolutionary leaders found it more important to discredit U.S. democracy and protect national cohesiveness than talk about lingering racial prejudices. Cuban newspapers depicted outrage for the plight of U.S. blacks without mentioning the situation of people of color in Cuba, because, by the latter part of 1960, it was easier to discuss the troubles of blacks in the United States than disturb the romanticized image of Cuban racial equality. Talking about instances of global racism also opened doors for alliances with the newly independent African countries, a contingent some Cuban leaders saw as an important partner in the battle against U.S. aggression.

Prelude to Harlem

Leaders in the United States and Cuba knew that the 1960 New York meeting of the United Nations assembly would be unique. For the first time, representatives from newly liberated African countries attended the summit, along with increasingly popular leaders from the Soviet bloc and revolutionary Cuba. However, until a few weeks before the meeting, the U.S. government believed that President Osvaldo Dorticós would head the Cuban delegation, not Fidel Castro. Growing tensions between the two countries changed this plan and Castro decided to travel to New York to represent Cuba and

respond to U.S. criticisms of the new government. Events occurring prior to the Cuban delegation's arrival in Harlem foreshadowed the highly publicized conflict that eventually occurred between leaders from the two countries during the international summit. The insertion of conversations about which country provided the best opportunities to people of African descent might have been expected given the debates that occurred while Joe Louis was working with the INIT; however, the physical relocation of the Cuban delegation to a black-owned hotel was a radical move that generated much excitement and speculation from on-lookers in New York and readers on the island.

Cuban representatives went to the United Nations to challenge the Declaration of San José, a document approved by the Organization of American States (OAS) on August 28, 1960 in San José, Costa Rica. The declaration was a proposal sponsored by the United States and passed by a majority of other Latin American leaders that condemned the nationalist character of the Cuban revolution and agreed to enact sanctions against the country, if Cuba aligned itself with the Soviet bloc. At the OAS meeting, Raúl Roa, Cuba's Foreign Minister, offered a scathing rebuttal to the declaration, but was unable to prevent the passing of the agreement. Cuba responded by issuing its own proclamation, the Declaration of Havana on September 2, 1960. Announced in front of a crowd of over one million Cubans, the Declaration of Havana summarized the politics of the revolution and condemned imperialist actions, reactionary interest groups, large landowners and corporations, and those who discriminated against "Blacks, Indians, and women." Castro asked the massive audience if they approved the declaration and amidst shouts of "*Si*"

and “*Ya, votamos con Fidel*” (We vote with Fidel) the crowd gave its answer.⁶ Cuban leaders asserted that the declaration had been voted for and approved by the “National General Assembly of the Cuban People,” and took it as a mandate to continue with revolutionary programs. In the following weeks, organizations and individuals across the island wrote to national newspapers to express support for the Declaration of Havana.⁷ The declaration served both to express Cuban discontent with U.S. interference in domestic affairs and set the tone for the upcoming U.N. meeting. And while little specific attention was paid to the concerns of Afro-Cubans, the declaration highlighted racial discrimination among a list of important injustices that the revolution planned to fight internationally.

A few weeks later, Castro led the Cuban delegation to the United Nations to convey this message to the world. Castro’s decision to head the group surprised the U.S. State Department and they retaliated by restricting the Cubans’ movements to the island of Manhattan. This limitation was applied to Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union, and representatives from the Hungarian and Albanian delegations as well; however, in Cuba it was interpreted as another insult in a growing trend of hostilities between the two nations. One cartoonist used this situation to undermine U.S. democracy by sketching the statue of liberty crying after becoming aware of the travel restrictions imposed by the State Department.⁸ With these competing decisions, leaders from both countries began and continued what would become a cycle of reacting to one another’s

⁶ “Con las banderas de nuestra patria desplegadas, Camaguey proclama: Patria o Muerte! Venceremos!” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 20, 1960, 10.

⁷ “Untitled,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 17, 1960, 1.

⁸ “Como ven los caricaturistas extranjeros el confinamiento de Fidel y Jruschov,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 18, 1960, 2.

actions with excessively dramatic counter-measures. This push and pull cycle ultimately spilled over into Harlem.

When the manager at the Shelburne hotel asked the Cuban delegation to pay an additional \$5,000 deposit for their rooms, increasing the total amount to \$10,000, the conflict reached a critical peak. Castro said that he would rather sleep on the lawns of Central Park than continue to be treated as an unwelcome guest in New York and proceeded to file a formal complaint with the U.N. Secretary General. Following the meeting with U.N. leaders, the Cubans packed their bags and moved to the Theresa hotel in Harlem, where they were met by crowds of cheering African Americans. A number of competing stories exist describing how the Cuban delegation came to stay in the Theresa. Some critics characterized the move as a purposeful, propaganda-seeking choice.⁹ While others claimed that the delegation received poor treatment at the Shelburne and moved to Harlem to find more hospitable accommodations.¹⁰ An article in *Verde Olivo*, the national Cuban publication for the revolutionary armed forces, reported that prior to arriving in New York the Theresa had offered lodging to the delegation. Castro initially

⁹ Comment by Andrew Berding found in “La voz de la Revolución: Un reportaje de la sección en Cuba,” *Bohemia* 52: 39, September 25, 1960, 69. In *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*, 79, Carlos Moore argues that originally Castro wanted to leave the Shelburne and camp in front of U.N. headquarters to embarrass the United States for its inhospitable actions. However, before this could occur, supporters from the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) proposed that the delegation move to Harlem. According to Moore, who was in New York at the time and has interviewed members of the 1960 Cuban delegation while in exile, Castro enthusiastically agreed and said, “We will deal the Americans a strong blow” by moving to Harlem.

¹⁰ Reynaldo Peñalver Moral, “Under the Streetlamp: A Journalist’s Story” in Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds. *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000, 47. Afro-Cuban journalist, Reynaldo Peñalver, was also in Harlem as a correspondent for the *Prensa Latina* news agency. He describes how Foreign Minister Raúl Roa spoke with Malcolm X about the possibility of the Cubans staying at the hotel Theresa and attributes the move to this conversation.

refused this invitation, because of existing plans to stay at the Shelburne; however, once free of those obligations, he decided to accept the offer.¹¹

While it remains unclear who initiated the move to Harlem, it is apparent that residing in the Theresa hotel became a significant metaphor for speaking to domestic issues faced by both Cubans on the island. The move allowed revolutionary leaders to compare the mistreatment that the Cuban delegation felt in Manhattan to the discrimination African Americans and other groups felt daily. Castro addressed this issue in his speech in front of the U.N. General Assembly when he criticized the “humiliating and degrading measures” the Cuban delegation had faced upon coming to the United States.¹² Similarly, *mulato* author Nicolás Guillén wrote an editorial pondering how the leader of the Cuban nation could be invited to an international meeting and then repeatedly bothered by the police and denied a simple room in a hotel.¹³ Cuban leaders highlighted how the delegation had been treated differently than other foreign leaders visiting the United States, drawing a parallel between their experiences and the race-based discrimination frequently encountered by people of color in the United States, Africa, and Cuba. Doing so, allowed revolutionary leaders to continue to expose the contradictions inherent in U.S. democracy, while allying Cuba with the plight of oppressed and discriminated groups worldwide.

Yet, revolutionary leaders quickly realized that in order to build relationships with U.S. blacks and representatives from newly liberated African countries, the delegation needed to appear as racially integrated as possible. As a result, after moving to Harlem,

¹¹ “Cuba en las Naciones Unidas,” *Verde Olivo* 1: 30, October 8, 1960, 26-34.

¹² Fidel Castro speech, “Vinimos a la ONU a hablar muy claro,” *Revolución*, September 27, 1960, 3.

¹³ Nicolás Guillén, “Si hubiera boniatos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 22, 1960, 2.

Castro immediately invited Afro-Cuban *Comandante* Juan Almeida to join the overwhelming white group in New York.¹⁴ “I want the black leaders of Harlem to meet the leader of our armed services,” Castro declared.¹⁵ The request for Almeida to come to New York reveals an awareness among revolutionary leaders of the importance of not simply stating that the revolution had eliminated racial discrimination, but of showing how new policies had allowed Afro-Cubans to obtain prestigious positions in the government. An editorial in the magazine *Verde Olivo* contrasted the opportunities the revolution had provided for qualified black and *mulato* Cubans with the unfair limits facing African Americans. “The people of Harlem have to ask themselves: How is it that in our *democracia* there is not one Black Minister, high executive in the armed forces, or ambassador? Is it because in twenty thousand people there is not one capable one?”¹⁶ Articulations such as this one demonstrate a consciousness among leading Cubans that the unequal treatment of U.S. blacks was an exploitable weakness of United States.

Harlem: Through Cuban Eyes

The Cuban delegation occupied its rooms the Hotel Theresa for ten days. During this period, Cubans on the island published numerous editorials and articles that worked to give the event multiple meanings. These discourses routinely inserted African Americans and the Harlem community into on-going conversations about the hypocrisies

¹⁴ In *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*, 81, Carlos Moore argues that the Cuban delegation was composed of all white Cubans before Almeida arrived, although there is evidence that some Afro-Cubans traveled with the delegation as journalists, if not official members. See Peñalver’s testimony for the fact that he was present.

¹⁵ “La voz de la Revolución: Un reportaje de la sección en Cuba,” *Bohemia* 52: 39, September 25, 1960, 55.

¹⁶ “Punteando,” *Verde Olivo* 1: 29, October 1, 1960, 18.

of U.S. democracy, the popularity of revolutionary leaders, and the success of the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination. The most prominent theme throughout national conversations in 1960 was the claim that the Cuban revolution had achieved racial equality in the island. Opinions printed in the national press, while Castro was in Harlem, sought to speak to Cuban audiences about this topics and other domestic issues through the lens of the U.S. black community. Similarly, African American leaders described the Cuban residence in the Hotel Theresa in ways that benefitted them. This section explores the significance both groups, but in particular, Cubans, gave to the 1960 U.N. meeting. Doing so, reveals the shift that occurred in Cuban discourses about race between 1959 and 1961. Instead of talking about how to eradicate domestic racism from the island, revolutionary leaders began to focus on battling global racial injustices. As a result, Cubans were inundated with press about the positive reception their leaders received from blacks in Harlem to show all reader, but especially Afro-Cuban audiences, the revolution's continued investment in racial equality. Similar to the discursive gestures discussed in previous chapters, the Castro government repeatedly sought ways to highlight its racial politics without alienating white Cubans. Dialoguing with African Americans allowed the young revolutionary regime to demonstrate its support of racial equality without undermining national solidarity.

Post-1959 racialized discourses invoked and emphasized U.S. race relations to ridicule the hypocrisies of U.S. democracy. The move to the Theresa hotel in Harlem served as an occasion to reiterate these inconsistencies, especially as U.S. and counterrevolutionary criticism of the revolution increased. As the last chapter demonstrated, this was not the first time U.S. race relations served as a poignant example

of the limits of north-American democracy. Nevertheless, Cuban journalists emphasized



the comfort the new leadership felt surrounded by people of color in Harlem, in contrast to unwritten rules keeping black and white Americans from socializing in together, to distinguish their progressive racial politics from those of

U.S. leaders. A political cartoon titled, “Demokkracia” featured a black silhouette hanging from a large cross, surrounded by a group of hooded men highlighted the U.S.’s long history of racial violence.¹⁷ While another cartoon titled, “The Ku Klux Klan is like that,” featured a Klansmen undressing to reveal the figure of Uncle Sam beneath the hood.¹⁸ These cartoons, along with another sketch (left) of Castro’s beard strangling a Ku Klux Klansman compared

racial violence in the United States with revolutionary claims of equality.¹⁹ Images of Klansmen, blacks swinging from nooses, and Uncle Sam’s tall hat had meaning for Cuban readers because of the cultural closeness between the United States and Cuba. These images also contributed to the popular belief that the Cuban revolution had achieved racial equality, while the United States had not. Castro voiced these contradictions in his speech to the United Nations. Cuban newspapers ran transcripts of both his talk and ones given by Raúl Castro, as a means of showing readers how their

¹⁷ “Demokkracia” *Revolución*, October 4, 1960, 2. Emphasis added. See Appendix B for cartoon.

¹⁸ Frémez, “El Ku Klux Klan es así,” *Bohemia* 5: no. 39, September 25, 1960, 76. See Appendix B for cartoon.

¹⁹ “Untitled,” *Lunes de Revolución*, October 3, 1960, 16.

leaders confronted the inconsistencies of U.S. ideals while in Harlem. Cuban journalists also proposed relocating the United Nations to another country since the U.S. State Department had neglected to guarantee suitable lodging for attending foreign leaders.²⁰ Each of these actions was a part of an ongoing project to inform readers of the myth of U.S. democracy. Such articulations were well-known by Cuban audiences, but the Harlem trip served as the immediate reworking of accepted ideas.

In a similar strategic manner, U.S. blacks inserted the delegation's residence in the Theresa into contemporary calls for desegregations and full citizenship. African Americans, including those who denounced the Cuban revolution as communist, argued that its appeal to black America endangered democracy. These authors used the September event as further proof of why blacks deserved equal rights. They concluded that failure to treat all Americans as citizens was an embarrassment to U.S. articulations of liberty and democracy, and increased the risk of communist infiltration into disillusioned black communities. One anti-Castro columnist warned against "dangling democracy" in front of U.S. blacks without following through. "It cannot be denied that a color-struck democracy is fighting against fearful odds," he wrote, especially with Khrushchev and Castro "forcing themselves into the forefront" of the debate.²¹ The African American press used the Cuban revolution as a metaphor to express long-standing arguments for equal rights. With Castro in the Theresa hotel, the Cold War opened a new front in Harlem. And while, this was not the first time black intellectuals had framed the civil right issue using anti-communist rhetoric, the events of September

²⁰ "Organizaciones negras con nuestra revolución," *Revolución*, September 20, 1960, 1.

²¹ Gordon Hancock, "In Between the Lines: Tribulations of a Color-Struck Democracy" *Washington Afro-American*, October 1, 1960, 4. This editorial, as well as another one by the same author, were reprinted in the *Carolinian*, October 1, 1960, 4.

1960 served as a salient example of the potential dangers of ignoring the African American community. Similar to, the tactical ways Cubans mobilized the event, African Americans also used it as a means of making additional demands for an integrated society.

Cuban writers frequently used military references when talking about the delegation's move to Harlem to connect the event to the on-going fight against U.S. imperialism. A reoccurring column in *Revolución, Zona Rebelde* (Rebel Zone), printed an article titled, "The Battle of New York" to identify the U.N. meeting as another "historic battle of the Cuban revolution." Noting that the United States would receive "a great defeat," Harlem was to be a "victory for Cuba."²² Similarly, *Noticias de Hoy* identified the event as the "Battle of Harlem" and said that Castro would triumph as the true "liberator" of U.S. blacks.²³ Like arguments over Joe Louis's loyalty, the delegation's move to Harlem firmly placed racial politics at the center of conflicts between the United States and Cuba. It is significant that Cuban authors used military language to describe the U.N. meeting and imagined Harlem as the newest front in the battle for Cuban sovereignty, because it reveals a willingness on the part of revolutionary leaders to use racism as a moral weapon against the United States. Doing so, however, was only valuable if the new leaders could demonstrate that they were not racists and did not practice racial discrimination. Residing in a black-owned hotel legitimized this claim and allowed Cubans to link pledges to eliminate racial discrimination to other revolutionary battles. President Osvaldo Dorticós explained this idea in front of

²² "Zona rebelde: La batalla de New York," *Revolución*, September 20, 1960, 1.

²³ "La batalla de Harlem," *Noticias de Hoy*, October 1, 1960, 1. For other articles labeling the event as a battle see, "Fidel ganó dos batallas: La de la ONU y la de Harlem," *Verde Olivo* 1:30, October 8, 1960, 4, and "Primerías Victorias," *El Mundo*, September 20, 1960, A-8.

thousands of Cubans during a mass rally outside of the presidential palace. “The actions of the U.S. government [at the U.N. meeting] are its response to the Cuban revolution, the Agrarian reform, the nationalization of exploiting yankee businesses, the revolutionary government’s politics of independence and sovereignty, the measures to benefit popular [groups], the defense of racial equality and the respect of the dignity of man.”²⁴ By claiming that the restrictions placed on the Cuban delegation were a part of the U.S.’s reaction to revolutionary principles, including programs to eliminate racial privilege, Dorticós aligned the United States with oppression and Cuba with freedom and justice. The move to Harlem opened a new front in U.S.-Cuban relations. With their residence in the Theresa hotel, the Cuban delegation showed that it was willing to accept African Americans, and implicitly Afro-Cubans, into the revolutionary fold.

African American leaders utilized similar metaphors to encourage radical black mobilization against racial inequality in the United States. One article noted how prior to January 1959, Afro-Cubans had been discriminated against in the same way African Americans had been. The author wrote, “On a recent visit to the island I saw proof that it doesn’t take decades of gentle persuasion to deal a death blow to white supremacy.”²⁵ In a direct attack on the non-violent tactics of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), many U.S. intellectuals held up the Cuban revolution to legitimize aggressive action in the struggle for civil rights. Other writers chastised African Americans for continuing to pursue peaceful steps toward political inclusion. According to a black Councilman in New York “Even the Africans, the Caribbeans [sic]

²⁴ ““El imperialismo carece hasta de la capacidad moral para ofender,”” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 21, 1960, 8.

²⁵ Julian Mayfield, "Cuba Has Solution to Race Problem," *Washington Afro-American*, October 1, 1960, 20.

and other foreign colored people feel superior to American Negroes because of their apparent willingness to accept second-class citizenship without fighting hard enough to achieve full equality.”²⁶ On one hand, this statement compares African Americans to people of color throughout the world and suggests a race or phenotypically-based link to African descended people in other places. However, the author is also arguing for immediate and direct action from within the U.S. black community to combat racial inequality. These articles utilized the presence of the Cuban delegation in Harlem to rearticulate reasons for meeting violence with violence. Writers were willing to invoke an international community of color to make comparisons about their situation, yet like Cubans, they envisioned potential solutions on the national level.

The Cuban press also emphasized the warm welcome Castro received in Harlem to demonstrate the revolution’s ability to win allies in international politics. Images of crowds applauding the delegation were communicated to audiences on the island as a means of legitimizing the young government and its leadership. National dailies favored photographs of Cuban leaders surrounded by large crowds repeating revolutionary slogans. This imagery implied that Castro could entice hundreds of black Americans to chant “Cuba, Sí! Yankee, no!” in the same way he commanded Cuban demonstrations outside of the presidential palace in Havana.²⁷ These visuals made sense to Cuban audiences familiar with mass mobilization as a means of showing political support. In particular, a full-page layout titled, “Harlem: Police vs. the People” showed six different images of police officers harassing crowds fighting to get close to the Theresa Hotel to

²⁶ Earl Brown, “Visitors to Harlem,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 1, 1960, 11.

²⁷ “Organizaciones negras con nuestra revolución,” *Revolución*, September 20, 1960, 1. In Cuba, the chant is “Cuba, sí! Yankee, no!” The English translation, “Cuba, yes! Yankee, no!” was used in the United States.

catch a glimpse of the popular Cuban leader. Captions under the photographs noted that in “the zone where the most humble and poor citizens (*los humildes*) live, is where you find Fidel Castro.”²⁸ When describing the crowds of African Americans who applauded the Cuban delegation in Harlem, authors repeatedly referred to blacks as “*los humildes*.”²⁹ For Cubans, identifying people of color in the United States as “*humildes*” signified that blacks were poor, humble, and uneducated, but also hard-working and honest. Authors invoked this language because Castro identified himself and the 26th of July Movement (M 26-7) “as a rebellion of *humildes* and for *humildes*.”³⁰ This conceptualization transferred the relationship between the two groups from the sphere of race to class and allowed poor Cubans of all colors to relate to the struggles facing African Americans. Moreover, by repeatedly printing photographs of Castro surrounded by large crowds, newspapers dared readers to doubt the legitimacy of the new government and showed that the appeal of the revolution superseded national boundaries. Castro and his administration were natural leaders wherever they went since a majority of people throughout the Western hemisphere, especially people of color, supported the 1959 revolution.

Cuban journalists published details from meetings between revolutionary leaders and well-known African Americans to show that black intellectuals supported the new government as strongly as the crowds of *humildes* gathered outside of the hotel. On the same evening that the Cuban delegation arrived, Malcolm X visited Castro at the Theresa

²⁸ *Revolución*, September 23, 1960, 18.

²⁹ “Almorzó Fidel con empleados del Teresa,” *Revolución*, September 23, 1960, 1. The headline above this reads “Es un honor comer con los humildes (It is an honor to eat with the humble people).”

³⁰ Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81.

and the two men spoke about the relationship between their countries. Castro asked the black leader why African Americans had rejected the propaganda published in the U.S. media and welcomed his group to Harlem. Malcolm X responded that U.S. blacks were “aware that Fidel was against discrimination and in favor of the oppressed people in the world.”³¹ In response, Castro praised the savyness of African Americans and extended an invitation to Malcolm X to visit Cuba. Revolutionary leaders also met with other U.S. blacks while at the Theresa, including the hotel’s manager Love. B. Woods. In an interview with Afro-Cuban Reynaldo Peñalver, Woods compared the mistreatment the Cubans had faced at the Shelburne to the discrimination he encountered throughout his life in the United States. “I do not care what they do against me or the people of Harlem for giving Castro the lodging he deserves . . . [because] in every way, with or without Castro, we have suffered from repression since we were born.”³² For Cubans reading such statements, the implied message was that revolutionary leaders had earned an international reputation for fighting U.S. imperialism, implementing social justice projects, and eradicating racial prejudices. When printed in national Cuban newspapers, stories of these encounters also worked to show readers that the delegations had succeeded in forging alliances with African Americans based on their parallel positions as outcasts from mainstream U.S. society.

In addition to being a moment to ridicule U.S. democracy and show Cuban readers the international popularity of revolutionary leaders, moving to Harlem also announced, internationally, that the new government had abolished racial discrimination. This claim dominated Cuban conversations in September 1960. Castro stated in an

³¹ Robert Taber, “Visita a Fidel un líder negro de EEUU,” *El Mundo*, September 20, 1960, A-1.

³² Reynaldo Peñalver, “Tengo un caballero en mi casa,” *El Mundo*, September 27, 1960, A-11.

interview, “in nineteen months the revolution has terminated racial discrimination” by eliminating privileges.³³ While, to the applause of thousands of onlookers in front of the presidential palace, President Dorticós explained how revolutionary leaders would show the blacks in Harlem how “every man and woman [in Cuba], regardless of the color of their skin has equal rights.”³⁴ Similarly, another journalist argued that staying in the Theresa demonstrated to African Americans the “true and just character of the Revolution,” namely its ability to “fix” inequalities between blacks and whites.³⁵ These comments departed from previous Cuban discourses by portraying racial problems in Cuba as resolved rather than a work in progress. And while, many would have argued, at least privately, that racial discrimination had yet to be eliminated, the announcement met little resistance from Cubans on the island.



Cuban journalists invoked the symbol of popular U.S. president, Abraham Lincoln, as a metaphor for the revolution’s successful elimination of racial discrimination. Images of Lincoln had meaning for Cuban audiences, because many readers were familiar with his role in freeing American slaves. While in Harlem, Castro received a bust of Lincoln from the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), during a reception with FPCC members and employees from

³³ Robert Taber, “Invita el Dr. Castro a 300 personalidades negras para que visiten a Cuba,” *El Mundo*, September 22, 1960, A-10.

³⁴ ““El imperialismo carece hasta de la capacidad moral para ofender,”” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 21, 1960, 8.

³⁵ “Fidel ganó dos batallas la de la ONU y la de Harlem,” *Verde Olivo 1*, no. 30, October 8, 1960, 4.

the Theresa hotel. The African American president of the committee, Richard Gibson, said “it is only fair that we give you this bust of Lincoln, the liberator of the slaves in this country, because you are the liberator of our friends the Cuban people.”³⁶ Cuban newspapers highlighted this reception by repeatedly printing articles describing the event, but also through visual images linking Castro and Lincoln. The political cartoon “Happy” (above) illustrated Castro talking to a small black figure in the foreground and Lincoln in the background commenting, “At last someone who understands me.”³⁷ Similar, to 1959 discourses connecting Castro to José Martí, these characterizations suggest that the young revolutionary leader was the contemporary heir of the abolitionist president.³⁸ Another cartoon, “We Want Castro,” depicted the Cuban leader sitting at a table dinning with U.S. blacks with a poster of President Lincoln watching over the meal, and giving the meeting his blessing.³⁹ Comparisons between Castro and Lincoln reiterated that the Cuban leader had eliminated racial discrimination in the same way that the U.S. president had freed the slaves. Suggesting that the revolutionary government acted in the spirit of Lincoln also worked to undermine critiques about their economic policies while demonstrating a solid commitment to racial equality.

The United Nations meeting served as an opportunity to announce to the world that two years of revolutionary programs had eliminated racial discrimination. Moving to a hotel in Harlem and garnering praise from the U.S. black community affirmed this claim both to Cuban and international audiences. In addition to photographs and articles

³⁶ *El Mundo*, September 24, 1960, A-2.

³⁷ Blanco, “Feliz,” *El Mundo*, September 23, 1960, A-4.

³⁸ For additional information about popular comparisons between Castro and Martí see Chapter two.

³⁹ “We Want Castro,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 21, 1960, 1. See Appendix B for cartoon.

describing African American support for the revolution's racial politics, Cuban newspapers also reprinted translated articles written by U.S. blacks to defend the existence of racial equality on the island. *Revolución* ran excerpts from an article in the *Crusader*, a U.S. black newspaper that described the advantages of living in Cuba, and implied that the island was a racial paradise. According to black activist, Robert Williams, "Cuba was a land where brotherhood is available to everyone, without taking into account skin color."⁴⁰ Editorials by Williams Worthy appeared in national newspapers as well, and praised the equalizing advances made by the revolution in contrast to the limited democracy practiced in the United States.⁴¹ When reprinted in Cuban dailies, these claims showed readers that U.S. blacks recognized that the revolution had achieved racial equality. The statements portrayed the Cuban leadership in a positive manner to all Cubans; nevertheless, the frequency of articles supporting the cause of African Americans also appealed to black Cubans without overtly talking about race on the island. For revolutionary leaders, the Harlem episode permitted the island to have a conversation about racial injustice through the issues of U.S. blacks that did not jeopardize national unity.

Unlike spring 1960, when Afro-Cubans had contested openly absolute claims of equality, by September national dailies published few articles or editorials disputing this image of Cuba as a racial paradise. The lack of printed materials contesting the achievement of racial equality reveal the closing of public discourses about race in Cuba in favor of constructing both an external and internal image of national unity. Most articles highlighted how Castro, despite being a "white man," did not hold any racial

⁴⁰ J.M. Vázquez Mora "Lo que no pudieron impedir" *Lunes de Revolución*, October 3, 1960, 13.

⁴¹ William Worthy, "Cuba triunfará," *El Mundo*, September 23, 1960, A-4.

prejudices, nor believed in the separation of people based on skin color.⁴² Raúl Castro stressed this point by saying, “The Cuban nation knows that among its people there flows a fraternity based on blood kinship and identity” with “our black brothers in the North” and independence fighters in the Congo.⁴³ Yet, despite such claims the sources suggest that Cuba had not eliminated racial discrimination. In fact, this very discourse was littered with paternalistic references and metaphors imagining African Americans and Afro-Cubans as dependent clients of the state, rather than equal partners in an alliance or full citizens in the nation. The following section explores these contradictions to highlight the paradoxes that arose when pledges to eliminate racism were structured in inherently unequal ways.

Contradictions within Revolutionary Discourses about Blackness

In the 1920s, Harlem was well-known among many Cubans as an energetic and lively artist center. Intellectuals such as Langston Hughes and Arthur Schomburg, a Puerto Rican of African descent, strengthened the connection between African Americans and Afro-Cubans through their writings and visits to the island. One historian noted, that “To race-conscious Afro-Cubans, Harlem---the race capital of African Americans—epitomized the struggle taking place in the United States.”⁴⁴ Historic links, such as these, offered some Afro-Cubans a different lens for understanding the African American struggle and the economic situation in Harlem. Despite this awareness, by

⁴² Nicolás Guillen, “El cancer y la tisana,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 29, 1960, 8.

⁴³ Raul Castro, “Speech” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 21, 1960, 8.

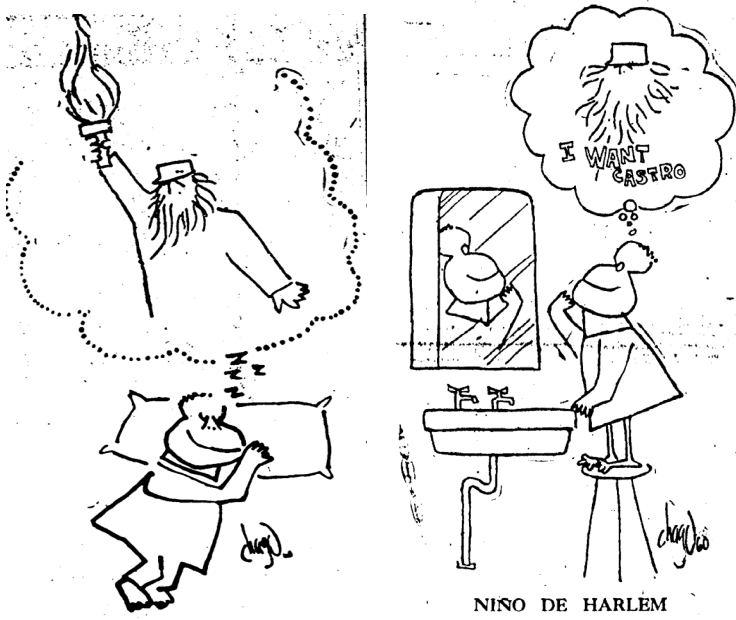
⁴⁴ Rosalie Schwartz, “Cuba’s Roaring Twenties,” in Lisa Brock and Digna Castaneda Fuertes, eds., *Between Race and Empire: African Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 109.

1960, the national rhetoric concerning Harlem had shifted from viewing the neighborhood as the energetic center of black culture to an explicit example of everything that was wrong with U.S. race relations, namely segregation and poverty. At the same time that revolutionary leaders claimed to respect and belong with African Americans in New York, they also belittled them by portraying U.S. blacks as inferior and in need of Cuban aid.

Political cartoons depicting the friendship between revolutionary leaders and African Americans frequently contradicted Cuban claims of racial equality and demonstrated lingering prejudicial attitudes toward people of color. In contrast to images celebrating the artistic and cultural creativity of Harlem that might have been expected given the historic relationship between Cubans and African Americans, cartoonists applied paternalistic metaphors of father and child to illustrate the revolution's relationship to U.S. blacks. The presence of cartoons featuring black characters with exaggerated features

disrupted notions that revolutionary leaders saw people of color as equal partners in the growing alliance.

In first sketch (left), printed three days after Castro arrived in New York, the cartoonist drew a sleeping child dreaming of Castro wielding



the liberty torch.⁴⁵ Like, metaphors likening the revolutionary leader to Abraham Lincoln, this cartoon positioned Castro as the source of liberty and freedom for U.S. blacks. The following day, a very similar cartoon appeared, with the same infantile figure stroking his smooth chin, while picturing a bearded Castro and thinking “I want Castro.”⁴⁶ Titled, a “Child from Harlem,” (second sketch-above) this cartoon contrasted the maturity of the bearded Cuban leader, with the naivety and inexperience of the young black boy. Chago, the cartoonist for *Revolución* who authored these images, sketched six other cartoons illustrating African Americans as underdeveloped children while Castro was in New York.⁴⁷

Cartoonists for other national newspapers used comparable imagery. “In Harlem,” (right) depicted a child wearing a fake beard while carrying a pop-gun and a poster with the phrase “dignity or death.”⁴⁸ The child’s parents appear shocked to see him passionately mimicking revolutionary leaders. Some cartoons showed



Castro shaking hands or patting small black figures on the head.⁴⁹ While another (below) illustrated a smiling minstrel-looking character waving a Cuban flag above the caption, “Fidel this is your house.” The prevalence of paternalistic gestures in Cuban political

⁴⁵ ‘Chago,’ *Revolución*, September 21, 1960, 7.

⁴⁶ ‘Chago,’ “Niño de Harlem,” *Revolución*, September 22, 1960, 3.

⁴⁷ See Appendix B for additional examples.

⁴⁸ “En Harlem,” *Verde Olivo I*, no. 29, October 1, 1960.

⁴⁹ See Appendix B for additional cartoons. “Sin Palabras,” *Verde Olivo I*: 29, October 1, 1960. “Untitled,” *Verde Olivo I*: 29, October 1, 1960, 79.



¡Fidel, ésta es tu casa...!

cartoons suggests a belief among the press and the leadership that African Americans should admire and ultimately imitate the Cuban revolution. Cartoonists simplified the complex and often tenuous political association between the two groups by employing the trope of a happy, black, simpleton eager for Castro's attention. Moreover, this type of imagery undermined reports celebrating meetings between African American leaders and revolutionary authorities, by portraying the alliance between Cubans and U.S. blacks as inherently unequal.

To convey these skewed images of the Harlem community, cartoonists drew political sketches of U.S. blacks using the same style applied when illustrating Afro-Cubans. In the past, Afro-Cubans had appeared in political cartoons as child-like, with markedly dark coloring, and exaggerated features.⁵⁰ The U.N. meeting and the delegation's residence in an African American hotel allowed cartoonists to transfer these notions beyond Cuban borders. Such images suggest that revolutionary leaders did not see people of color as equals in any alliance, domestic or international. By drawing both groups in similar ways, cartoonists reinforced pre-revolutionary prejudicial attitudes labeling people of African descent as immature, ignorant, and in need of salvation. Photographs depicting African Americans as beneath and reaching up toward Cuban

⁵⁰ See cartoons in Chapter Two for examples of how Afro-Cubans were sketched after the revolution. *Diaria de la Marina*, *Bohemia*, and *Carteles* also carry pre-revolutionary cartoons showing how the Cuban press represented African descended peoples before 1959.

leaders mirrored the imagery in political cartoons.⁵¹ Such portrayals of U.S. blacks suggested a hierarchal distinction between the two groups. Cuban editors routinely imagined and pictured their leaders as potential saviors for the African American community. This gesture succeeded in producing favorable images of Castro, but also characterized Harlem blacks as downtrodden, child-like, and in need of aid. These types of characterizations were a familiar aspect of revolutionary discourse about blacks in Cuba, and their projection onto African American leaders reveal the prevalence of norms linking blackness to inferiority even among the most ardent revolutionaries.

Friendship and Solidarity: Responses by Workers, Women, and Afro-Cubans

While the delegation was in Harlem, Cuban newspapers routinely printed letters to the editor supporting Castro's move to the black-owned hotel and publicly praising U.S. blacks for providing their leader with hospitable lodging. Published alongside speeches by revolutionary leaders and daily columns written by high-ranking officials, these pieces offer a more popular perspective on how the Harlem event was interpreted by some Cubans. These sources have to be read and interpreted carefully since, by 1960, there was a tightening within Cuban's ability to contradict government claims.⁵²

⁵¹ For an example of these photographs see, *Revolución*, September 28, 1960, 16. In a series of images, the first picture showed Castro and Almeida waving to crowds from the balcony of their hotel. While, in the second photograph, black supporters stood cheering in the street below, holding a sign saying, "Stand-Up for the Struggle of Negro Liberation in America."

⁵² Most historians agree that by 1961 the Cuban press was linked closely to the revolutionary government. See Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 324 and Lillian Guerra, "'To condemn the Revolution is to condemn Christ': Radicalization, Moral Redemption, and the Sacrifice of Civil Society in Cuba, 1960," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89: 1 (February 2009), 83-91. Pérez notes that by late 1960 nearly all oppositional newspapers, such as *Avance*, *El Mundo*, *Diario de la Marina*, and *Prensa Libre* "had been seized by the government or closed down all together." Similarly, Guerra shows how workers, with or without state support, took over the national newspaper offices and forced editors and administrators who published articles critiquing the revolution to resign. They then replaced those editors with journalists more aligned with the new policies.

However, because letters to the editor are among the few existing written materials revealing the voices of non-leaders, exploring how workers, women, and Afro-Cubans envisioned their government's solidarity with African Americans provides some insight into what was important to these groups at the time. For the most part, Cubans writing into national dailies agreed with the rhetoric expressed by the government. The existence of such overwhelming public support about the achievement of racial equality in the same newspapers that six months earlier had denounced lingering racial prejudices and pushed for additional reforms shows an increase in revolutionary control over the press and conversations about racism. On one hand, such a consensus highlights the success of the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination because of the overwhelming acceptance among different Cubans that racism did not belong in revolutionary Cuba. However, the silence on the part of Afro-Cubans, in particular, foreshadowed the closure of debates about racial equality and their inability to push the new government to act when it was needed.

Cuban unions and trade associations frequently echoed revolutionary discourses by pledging support to U.S. blacks. Workers and employees from a hotel in Vedado wrote to the Socialist Party newspaper explaining how they had changed the name of their establishment to the Hotel Theresa in honor of the community that offered lodging to revolutionary leaders.⁵³ Shortly afterwards, a sugar mill in Santiago was re-christened the "Mina Harlem," as well.⁵⁴ Renaming was an accepted revolutionary tool used to remove U.S. markers from the island and replace them with meaningful symbols of the

⁵³ "Denominan 'Theresa' al hotel St. John's" *Revolución*, September 22, 1960, 16. "Untitled caption," *Noticias de Hoy*, September 22, 1960, 1.

⁵⁴ "'Mina Harlem' la de Charco Redondo," *Revolución*, October 3, 1960, 3.

people. However, the move by workers to change the name of a hotel located in the middle-class, white neighborhood of Vedado to celebrate a black establishment in Harlem was unprecedented and showed the popularity of revolutionary anti-racist discourses. Other groups, such as the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), also wrote letters thanking the Harlem community for its efforts and expressing solidarity with the African American fight for equal rights.⁵⁵ In one letter, CTC representatives assured their “dear friends in Harlem” that Fidel Castro represented the Cuban revolution which had eliminated “all forms of discrimination” from the island and that he would fight to end the injustice throughout the world.⁵⁶ And while these outcries of support did not make their way to Harlem, their frequent presence in Cuban dailies demonstrates how the delegation’s move to the Theresa resonated with some readers.

Cuban organizations also declared the period Castro was in Harlem as a “Week of Solidarity with the U.S. Negro.” Similar, to the Havana Woolworth protest which coincided with Civil Rights boycotts in the United States, the week of solidarity emphasized Cuban support for equal rights for all North Americans.⁵⁷ Leaders of the National Executive Committee of Orientation and Integration, among them Afro-Cuban Salvador García Agüero, initiated this move in a letter to the editor of *Noticias de Hoy*. They claimed that the week would commemorate the African American struggle for

⁵⁵ For examples of letters see: “Protestan mujeres Cubanas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 22, 1960, 8. “La carta de hoy,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 29, 1960, 8.

⁵⁶ “Llevó Almeida mensaje de la CTC a la población de Harlem,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 22, 1960, 3.

⁵⁷ “Clausuran semana de solidaridad con el pueblo negro de los Estados Unidos” *Revolución*, September 26, 1960, 1.

democratic rights and salute Castro's decision to move to Harlem.⁵⁸ Popular appreciation thanking Harlem for welcoming the Cuban revolutionaries ranged from specific letters to the manager of the hotel Theresa, to more general expressions of gratitude to the entire U.S. black community. Each of these gestures reflected an increasing trend to extend support to African Americans, while at the same time agreeing that the Cuban revolution had eliminated racial discrimination.

Editorials and short stories located on women's pages of popular dailies reveal the opinions held by some Cuban women about the move to Harlem. A letter by Vilma Espín, the highest ranking female revolutionary and president of the Federation of Cuban women, criticized the treatment the delegation received in New York, while offering words of encouragement to U.S. blacks.

All the people of Cuba are aware of the discriminatory politics imposed by the financial oligarchy that governs that country and [works] against the black population of the United States. We condemn repeatedly the inhumane conditions in which live thousands and thousands of black north American citizens. Keep your faith that the same way in which Cuba has achieved its liberation from these reactionary interests, black north Americans, you will find together with all your people the true road to dignity and liberty as well.⁵⁹

The letter mirrored revolutionary discourses by discrediting U.S. claims of providing democracy and freedom to all and condemning the unfair treatment of African Americans. Espín also encouraged blacks in Harlem to find comfort in knowing that they could overcome their situation in the same way that Cubans had managed to eradicate racial injustice from the island, thereby highlighting the revolution's success in an area

⁵⁸ "Semana de solidaridad con el pueblo negro de EEUU," *Noticias de Hoy*, September 22, 1960, 1. For another letter describing the week see, "Semana de solidaridad con el pueblo negro estadounidense," *Noticias de Hoy*, September 24, 1960, 3. This letter was signed by members of MR 26-7, Directorio, Partido Socialista Popular, CTC, FEU, and Juventud Rebelde.

⁵⁹ Vilma Espín, "Protestan mujeres Cubanas," *Noticias de Hoy*, September 22, 1960, 8.

where the United States continued to fail. Another letter to the editor came from a woman who identified herself as a mother ready to defend her country against a U.S. invasion. She thanked the Harlem community for its hospitality to the delegation and celebrated Castro's efforts to tell the U.N. assembly the truth about the Cuban revolution.⁶⁰ Both women represent a growing movement to denounce U.S. democracy and racism at the same time. These letters reveal the different ways various Cuban factions mobilized revolutionary discourses about race in daily situation.

The following short story, "La Nina Negra" (The Little Black Girl), published on the women's page of *Noticias de Hoy* offer another more subtle example of this concept. In the account, a group of white children are playing outside, when one of them begins to talk about a particular girl in their class. An older classmates inquires, "Isn't she black . . . my grandmother said that blacks are not like us," implying a negative distinction between the two groups. Immediately, one of the other children interrupts, "You are behind the times, everyone knows blacks are like us . . . they just have different skin color, hair, and noses, but in regards to intelligence and nobility they are just like us . . . my grandfather said so, and he is smarter than you, because he fought with the guerillas." As the play group is having this conversation, the little black girl arrives, "looking sweet, nicely dressed, and with a beautiful smile."⁶¹ Each child is quickly enamored with her and offers her a piece of their candy. The story ends with the whole group playing together happily. This account reflects how some women imagined fiction as an ideal way of discussing changing racial norms and revolutionary programs among themselves and with their families. The account readily credits the "guerrillas" and the new

⁶⁰ Celia Delgado, "La carta de Hoy," *Noticias de Hoy*, September 29, 1960, 8.

⁶¹ Renata Vigano, "La nina negra," *Noticias de Hoy*, October 4, 1960, 8.

revolutionary government with teaching Cubans to accept people of varying skin colors and labels continued racial prejudices as outdated. While the narrative concurred with government claims that “everyone knows blacks are like us,” the fact that at least one character in the story maintained preconceived notions about people of color suggests awareness by the author that certain Cubans had yet to change. They correct the erring boy and persuade him to discard prejudices about Afro-Cubans based on revolutionary principles. However, this account also defines an acceptable code of black behavior, another component of revolutionary discourses about race. The author pointedly notes that the little girl is embraced due to revolutionary teachings about equality and because she is pretty and kind, with luminous dark eyes, and a starched white dress. For her and other Afro-Cubans, impeccable standards of behavior and appearance were required, before they could be welcomed into the nation.

Most Afro-Cubans also applauded the delegation’s move to Harlem and mirrored the attitude of revolutionary leaders who saw the event as component of the battle against the United States. During a rally with over a million Cubans, Raúl Castro linked the discrimination faced by the Cuban delegation to the unfair treatment suffered previously by Afro-Cubans.⁶² A black Cuban of Jamaican descent claims that the crowd which was composed almost entirely of blacks and *mulatos*, responded to Raúl Castro by demanding that he tell his brother, “Fidel, free American Negroes too! Fidel turn Harlem into another Sierra Maestra! Fidel, sí, Ku Klux Klan, no!”⁶³ For these Cubans of African descent the opportunities provided by the revolution and Castro’s move to a black-owned hotel

⁶² Raúl Castro’s speech was reprinted in “Qué no digan luego que exportamos la Revolución a los Estados Unidos,” *Revolución*, September 20, 1960, 1.

⁶³ Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*, 80.

inspired enthusiasm and support. Similarly, in a letter announcing the week of the solidarity with African Americans, Afro-Cuban Salvador García Agüero highlighted the Cuban residence at the Theresa as an example of the new “anti-racist” and “revolutionary” policies of the government.⁶⁴ While Afro-Cuban, Jesús Soto, agreed that the revolution had removed racism from the island in a telegram to *Comandante* Juan Almeida, who was with the delegation in New York. The note asked Almeida, the black leader of the Cuba armed forces, to tell the people of Harlem that “Castro represented the Cuban revolution which had eliminated all forms of racial discrimination.”⁶⁵ Nicolás Guillén reinforced this idea by saying that “the population of Harlem saw in Castro a defender of their rights; a white man without racist prejudices, an integral revolutionary, for who does not exist nor can exist the separation of human beings by skin color.”⁶⁶

These statements represent a near consensus among some Afro-Cuban leaders that the Cuban delegation was correct in telling African Americans audiences in Harlem and foreign leaders at the United Nations that the revolution had eliminated racial discrimination. Such statements conflicted with critiques published by blacks and *mulatos* six months earlier asking the new government to provide Afro-Cubans with the same rights they promised U.S. black visitors. In April, Guillén argued that “It would be unfair to say that we are like in 1912 [Race War]. But, the other extreme is equally false, that which . . . we have heard more than once recently, that racial discrimination does not

⁶⁴ “Semana de solidaridad con el pueblo negro de EEUU,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 22, 1960, 1

⁶⁵ “La Solidaridad de los pueblos: Envía la CTC un mensaje a vecinos del barrio de Harlem,” *Revolución*, September 23, 1960, 4.

⁶⁶ Nicolás Guillén, “El cancer y la tisana,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 29, 1960, 2.

exist ‘anymore’ in Cuba.”⁶⁷ It is unlikely that in six months these Afro-Cuban leaders had come to agree that the revolution had eliminated racial discrimination completely even with the gradual disbanding of private clubs, schools, and beaches. Rather their responses are most likely evidence of the consolidation of the Cuban press and a growing inability to discuss racism on the island in late 1960. Each of these men were also members of the Socialist Party (PSP), a group that had previously been vocal in pressuring Cuban governments before 1959 for racial equality. When members of M 26-7 assumed power in January 1959, they continued that struggle and even criticized revolutionary leaders who did not act quickly enough to resolve racial tensions. However, by September 1960, García Agüero, Soto, and Guillén each held high-ranking positions either within the CTC (Confederation of Cuban Workers) or the PSP, and were connected heavily to the new government. It is possible that such associations also kept them from questioning, at least publicly, the rhetoric claiming that the revolution had achieved its goal of racial equality.

Regardless of the reasons for the shift, it is significant that by September 1960 national conversations reveal an almost complete silence among Cubans who previously had used government claims of creating a racial paradise to push for access to tourist centers, trade associations, and leadership positions. This silence represents the closing of public domestic debates about racial discrimination, but also the foregrounding of pledges to fight racism abroad. The battle shifted from being about Afro-Cubans to becoming a means of fighting the United States and forging alliances with people of color around the world. Privately, some Afro-Cubans expressed concern over government claims and criticized the hypocrisies they saw in revolutionary discourses. Juan

⁶⁷ Nicolás Guillén, “Discriminación y literatura,” *Noticias de Hoy* April 19, 1960, 2.

Betancourt, an Afro-Cuban who left the island and went into exile in 1961, remembers how surprised some blacks and *mulatos* were when Castro returned from Harlem and said that he was going to invite 300 more African Americans to the island to see the “terrestrial paradise.” “Cuban Negro Leaders merely looked at each other when they heard this announcement. They asked: What’s he going to show them?”⁶⁸ And while other testimonies agree that some racism continued to exist after 1960 in the form of “fear of the black,” discomfort in the workplace, or difficulties obtaining certain influential positions, national discourses on the island did not reflect these attitudes.⁶⁹

Ninety miles away in Miami, however, Cuban exiles disagreed with claims made by revolutionary leaders while in Harlem. Calling the event, the “Harlem Show,” popular counter-government groups said, “obviously this was an act to discredit and humiliate the United States in its own territory.”⁷⁰ While another writer claimed that Castro had not faced any hardship at the Shelburne hotel, rather he had orchestrated the move to Harlem to “inflare” negative sentiments toward the U.S. government.⁷¹ In attempts to undermine pledges of solidarity between African Americans and Cuban officials, Miami exiles also suggested that revolutionary leaders had bribed U.S. blacks to cheer outside of the Hotel Theresa, and that other groups were simply there to protest the communist infiltration of

⁶⁸ Juan Betancourt, “Castro and the Cuban Negro,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 68, no. 5 (May 1961), p. 273.

⁶⁹ For examples see, Daisy Rubiera Castillo and Georgina Herrera, *Golpeando la memoria: Testimonio de una poeta cubana afrodescendiente* (Ediciones Unión: Havana, 2005).

⁷⁰ “Harlem Show de Show en ‘Tecnicolor,’” *Patria: el periódico de Martí, sin Martí* (Miami), September 20, 1960, 4. For other articles calling the event a “show” see “‘Declara’ a Fidel el Show de la ONU,” *Patria: el periódico de Martí, sin Martí* (Miami), September 27, 1960, 4.

⁷¹ “Tributan ‘Calido’ recibimiento a Fidel en Nueva York,” *7 Días del Diario de la Marina en el exilio* (Miami), September 24, 1960, 20.

their neighborhood, not support Castro.⁷² Mirroring revolutionary discourses which reprinted positive feedback from African American leaders, Miami publications also published the dissenting voices of Adam Clayton Powell and Jackie Robinson to demonstrate that not all U.S. blacks supported the new Cuban government.⁷³ Comments in the exile press, however, did not declare or deny the existence of racial discrimination on the island. Instead, they saw September 1960 as another moment to link the new Cuban government with communism. As one author noted, at the New York U.N. assembly “Fidel celebrated his wedding with communism” by meeting with Nikita Khrushchev and other socialist leaders.⁷⁴ Some of these newspapers probably made their way back to Cuba and were circulated clandestinely, thereby adding to conversations about the meaning of the delegation’s stay in a black north-American community. However, since they too failed to interrogate claims of racial harmony, it is unlikely that they could have served as an outlet for any Afro-Cubans frustrated by the inability to publicly discuss lingering racial prejudices.

Conclusions

Ultimately, Cuban leaders used the 1960 U.N. meeting to announce to the world that their revolution had successfully achieved racial equality. For Cubans, this meant a closing of conversations about racial prejudice on the island. It also signaled the shift in revolutionary racialized discourses from their previous focus on Afro-Cubans to a global

⁷² Ibid; “Actos Anticastroistas en Nueva York,” *Avance Criollo* (Miami), September 30, 1960, 1.

⁷³ “El lamentable viaje del tirano comunista de Cuba Fidel Castro a New York y los shows escarnecedores que causan estupor,” *7 Días del Diario de la Marina en el exilio* (Miami), October 8, 1960, 12.

⁷⁴ “‘Declara’ a Fidel el Show de la ONU,” *Patria: el periódico de Martí, sin Martí* (Miami), September 27, 1960, 4.

battle based on the situation of Africans and African Americans. Yet, despite declarations that the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination had been resolved, Cuban leaders continued to imagine people of color as inferior, clients of the nation. Choosing to mobilize the stories of African Americans for state purposes foreshadowed the 1961 martyring of a murdered Afro-Cuban teacher as a soldier for the year long literacy campaign. The following chapter investigates this episode to see how celebrating the sacrifice of a black youth symbolized the symbolic end of conversations about racism in Cuba.

Chapter Six:

Poor, Black, and a Teacher: Black Martyrs, the Revolution's Safest Icons

When questioned in 2007 about the 1961 Literacy Campaign, Cubans who served as teenage *brigadistas* remember learning about the brutal murder of eighteen-year-old volunteer teacher, Conrado Benítez. More than one *alfabetizador* recalled how counterrevolutionaries assassinated Benítez outside of his schoolhouse in Escambray, because he was “poor, black, and a teacher.” Using nearly identical wording, these now elderly Cubans, recounted how a band of counter-government rebels tortured and killed Benítez because of his support for the revolution *and* his marginalized race and class status.¹ It is not surprising that these Cubans remember almost verbatim the story of Benítez’s death since they each participated in one of the numerous memorial services held in his honor and later joined national teaching brigades. Youth across the island marched together in demonstrations protesting the murder of the young teacher and saw images of such mobilizations on television and in the newspaper during the spring of 1961. The lasting narrative of Benítez’s life and death, fondly remembered today, as the young man who sacrificed himself for the nation, was created and solidified through a variety of community events and literacy campaign publicity. Revolutionary leaders held mass rallies where they proclaimed that the murder of Benítez epitomized Cuba’s ongoing struggles against

¹ From interviews with author conducted spring 2007.

imperialism, counterrevolution, and social injustice. National media outlets repeated the words announced by Prime Minister Fidel Castro, explaining how the young man had been murdered for being a “poor, black, teacher.”² By linking Benítez’s assassination to counterrevolutionary distaste for Afro-Cubans, the new government created and transmitted a narrative of the young man’s life that both declared the successful end to the campaign against racial discrimination, and further discredited counterrevolutionaries as racists. Moreover, the public discussions of the young man’s virtues worked to incorporate Afro-Cubans into the revolutionary nation, albeit in particular, non-threatening ways.

In 1961, Benítez emerged as an icon for both the literacy campaign and the revolution in general. Cubans discussed his life through a narrative that centered on his martyrdom, humble origins, and blackness, to outline the values of the new nation. Conversations about Benítez’s murder were linked frequently with reports about the assassination of two other black men, Jesús Menéndez and Patrice Lumumba, to create a pantheon of revolutionary black male icons.³ Popularized images of these men allowed the revolutionary government to insert darker-skinned faces into a national leadership cohort that was almost completely white, with the exception of Rebel Army leader, Juan Almeida. The story of Benítez, in particular, was invoked to vilify counter-government groups by labeling them as racist murders, willing to kill innocent teachers. Blaming his death on counterrevolutionaries funded by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) allowed Cuban leaders to depict the

² ““El maestro asesinado es un mártir cuya sangre servir para borrar la incultura e ignorancia,”” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 25, 1961, 3.

³ Jesús Menéndez was an Afro-Cuban Communist leader in the 1930s and 40s. He organized the sugar workers and protested the government of Ramón Grau San Martín. He was assassinated by opposition forces in January 1948. For additional reading see Gaspar Jorge García Galló, *Esbozo biográfico de Jesús Menéndez* (Havana: Editora Política, 1978). Thirty-five year old, Patrice Lumumba, was the nationalist leader of the newly independent Congo before being captured and murdered by rebel forces in January 1961.

“Year of Education” not only as a movement against illiteracy, but as a battle against U.S. imperialism, coded as “white” and “racist” as well.⁴

Transforming Benítez from a victim of rural hostilities into a national icon also worked to discursively deracialize blacks into citizens. The decision to make a dark-skinned youth the face of the literacy campaign sought to demonstrate that the revolution had not only eliminated racial discrimination, but that dedicated blacks were worthy of representing the nation as Cubans. A close exploration of the conversations surrounding Benítez’s death reveals how revolutionary leaders resolved national discussions about racism in early 1961. The martyred Afro-Cuban youth gave Cubans a means of asserting that they had achieved a raceless nation where blacks, like Benítez, could be seen as the counterparts to other national icons like José Martí and Camilio Cienfuegos.⁵ At the same time, the stories used to explain the deaths of Benítez, Menéndez, and Lumumba fashioned lasting impressions about appropriate Afro-Cuban behavior and acceptable black contributions to the revolution. The emphasis placed on Benítez’s humble background and his loyalty to the revolution celebrated a vision of patriotic blackness that highlighted a particular non-threatening Afro-Cuban citizen, who was both grateful and dependent on the new government.⁶

⁴ Each year since 1959 has had a particular focus and was named as such. 1961 was the Year of Education.

⁵ Camilio Cienfuegos was a revolutionary figure close to Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara. He was apart of the group aboard the Granma when it sailed to Cuba to overthrow President Batista. Cienfuegos was a part of the ruling coalition until his tragic death in October 1959, when he his plane disappeared in route to Havana. He has been celebrated by the post-1959 government as an exemplary revolutionary and held up as one of the revolution’s first martyrs. See Appendix C for a full page image of Castro, Cienfuegos, and Martí found in “Muerte al invasor!” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 1, 1961, 15. At the start of 1961, these men were the most glorified contemporary Cuban icons.

⁶ This chapter explores the creation of the “martyred black revolutionary male” to shed light on how national mobilizations like the literacy campaign served not only to teach Cubans how to read, but offered residents across the island an education in revolutionary ideals about the role of Afro-Cubans in the new nation. This analysis builds off the work of political scientist Richard R. Fagen in *Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) and the *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964). In *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education*, 11, Fagen

Similar to moments discussed previously when conversations about race, racism, or people of color were at their highest, certain contradictions underlie the iconization of black martyrs. Therefore, this chapter investigates how Cuban leaders created an image of a safe, strong, committed black patriot that left little space for other (living) Afro-Cubans to disagree or challenge the course of the revolution. Benítez was non-threatening because he was a martyr and could not contest the revolution's portrayal of him or his life. The absence of women, white, *mulata*, or black, from these conversations also suggests the limits of who could serve as a symbol for the Cuban nation in the 1960s.⁷ Stories about why and how this young black man died have endured for nearly fifty years and are repeated in a similar manner by Cubans across the island.⁸ Thus, it is imperative to overall understandings of the Cuban revolution and its legacies to explore the processes that constructed certain men as the revolution's safest black icons.

1961: The Year of Education

Revolutionary leaders announced plans for a campaign to educate all Cubans while attending the 1960 United Nations meeting in New York. "In the coming year, our people intend to fight the great battle against illiteracy, with the ambitious goal of teaching every single inhabitant of the country to read and write in one year." Noting that student

correctly argues that the literacy movement "furnished or refurnished the minds of students with the historical, ideological, and political images which the regime felt were appropriate to the new social order, [i.e.] political education." However, in addition to instructing Cubans on the perils of U.S. aggression and the benefits of the Agrarian Reform, movements like the literacy campaign also worked as a means of reiterating claims about how the new government had eliminated racial and class privileges and created a raceless, unified Cuba.

⁷ The one exception to this is the figure of Mariana Grajales Coello, the mother of Antonio Maceo. She was at times held up as an example of Cuban motherhood. Additional research needs to be done on how prevalent this discourse was during the first few years of the revolution.

⁸ In interviews with the author, residents from Yaguajay, a small town in central Cuba repeated the same narrative about Benítez's death.

organizations, teachers, and workers were preparing for the task, Castro promised that “Cuba will be the first country in the Americas which, after a few months, will be able to say it does not have one single illiterate.”⁹ Back on the island, the Ministry of Education established a National Literacy Commission to oversee the project and recruit teachers from urban youth groups.¹⁰ Conrado Benítez volunteered for one of these pilot brigades and spent the final two months of 1960 training with 1400 other new teachers in the Sierra Maestra. The culmination of their preparation occurred on New Year’s Eve 1960, when Benítez’s group along with nearly 10,000 other Cuban youth attended a large rally in Havana. During the demonstration Castro announced the goals of the literacy campaign and gave the students certified diplomas identifying them as official *brigadistas* in Cuba’s national education drive.¹¹ From the start, revolutionary leaders publicized the campaign as a fight not only against illiteracy, but also counterrevolutionary interests. The murder of Benítez by counter-government rebels supplied this battle with its first and most famous martyr.

Benítez was killed on January 5, 1961. According to testimonies from his friends and family, he wanted to return to his students in Villa Clara and left the capital shortly after the New Year’s celebration. Official reports claim that while traveling to his school a band of counterrevolutionaries captured and assassinated Benítez along with a local worker and a militia member.¹² Within a few weeks, revolutionary leaders and the increasingly consolidated national press named the young black man a national hero and the official

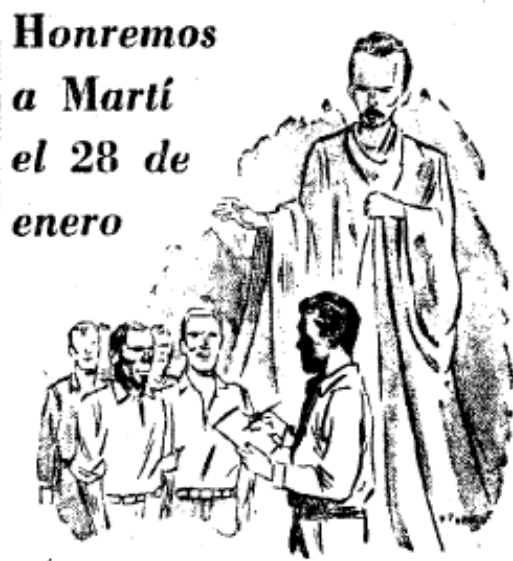
⁹ Fidel Castro, United Nations speech 1960, <http://www1.lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1960/19600926.html>.

¹⁰ Fagen, *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education*, 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Olga Montalván, *De Conrado a Manuel* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1994).

symbol of the literacy campaign.¹³ The sources suggest that having a black youth serve as the representative for the year of education was an unexpected decision, since the Ministry of Education had planned for nineteenth century nationalist Jose Martí to act as the figurehead for the campaign. Before Benítez's death, posters of Martí decorated rallies celebrating volunteer teachers and quotations from the historical figure repeatedly accompanied newspaper articles announcing the upcoming campaign. Revolutionary leaders even set January 28, Martí's birthday, as the official kick-off date for the battle against illiteracy in honor of the nineteenth century intellectual.¹⁴ The image (below) was printed on the "Literacy Campaign" page of *Noticias de Hoy* before information about Benítez's death had become widely known and encouraged Cubans to honor Martí by joining the brigades.¹⁵



After the murder of Benítez, however, Cuban leaders changed these plans and made the young teacher and the story of his brutal death the rallying force for the campaign. To be fair, the image of Benítez did not erase completely Martí's presence from the year of education. Quotations from the intellectual, along with signs with his photograph continued to decorate some literacy

¹³ See Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 324 and Lillian Guerra, "'To condemn the Revolution is to condemn Christ': Radicalization, Moral Redemption, and the Sacrifice of Civil Society in Cuba, 1960," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89: 1 (February 2009), 83-91 for more information about the consolidation of the Cuban press by 1961.

¹⁴ "Iniciara el pueblo hoy el censo de analfabetos," *Noticias de Hoy*, January 15, 1961, 1. "Alfabetizamos," *Noticias de Hoy*, January 21, 1961, 6. Even though Conrado Benítez was killed on January 5 news of his death did not reach official news sources or become popularized until later in the month.

¹⁵ "Inscribiendo alfabetizadores," *Noticias de Hoy*, January 21, 1961, 6.

rallies and materials. Yet, future groups of volunteer teachers were named after Benítez, not Martí, and calls for youth to join the movement were framed as “Honor the Martyr Teacher! Join the Conrado Benítez García brigades!”¹⁶ The poster (below) is an example of the publicity used once revolutionary leaders named Benítez the figurehead of the campaign.¹⁷ The image of the young teacher dressed in a suit and tie became the standard representation of the literacy campaign and endured in the memories of Cubans throughout the twentieth century.¹⁸ Selecting a dark-skinned, working class, youth from outside of Havana as the symbol of a national education movement over a white independence leader was a strategic decision in line with previous discourses about incorporating Afro-Cubans into the nation.¹⁹

This was not the first time, however, that the revolutionary government had emphasized black heroes. As earlier chapters have discussed the pattern of locating and publicizing Afro-Cuban voices to support the new leadership had occurred since 1959. Similarly, frequent visits from African Americans had provided the revolution with opportunities to show how people of African descent from the United States admired and enjoyed the equalizing measures implemented since the new government came to power. And while publishing



HONRA AL MAESTRO MARTIR!
INSCRIBETE EN LAS BRIGADAS
"CONRADO BENITEZ GARCIA"

¹⁶ Photograph caption, *Noticias de Hoy*, February 18, 1961, 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Again, interviews with a variety of Cubans who lived through the 1960s demonstrate a common awareness of what Benítez looked like and why he was killed.

¹⁹ It is significant to note that the other two men who were murdered along side Benítez, a white worker and militia member, remained unnamed and faceless in the national narrative about his death and the literacy campaign.

commentaries by Afro-Cuban intellectuals and African American leaders was useful for demonstrating the popularity garnered by the revolution from people of color, the limits of this discourse quickly became apparent when these same men and women attacked the revolution's policies. For example, when Afro-Cuban Juan Bentancourt, the Castro appointed leader of the Federation of Black Societies, went into exile and began to criticize vocally claims that the new government had eliminated racial discrimination, Cuban leaders lost one of their most prominent supporters of color. Likewise, Joe Louis's public denouncement and distancing from revolutionary leaders showed the danger of highlighting the opinions of blacks and *mulatos*, who were as capable of changing their minds and choosing not to support the new government as any other citizen.²⁰ In contrast, revolutionary leaders had successfully invoked the memories of black men like nineteenth century nationalist Antonio Maceo, and Amardo Mestre, fellow MR 26-7 member who was killed in the 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks, to reach out to Afro-Cubans without increasing white anxieties about black social mobility. By calling upon the memories of slain Afro-Cuban men to legitimize their authority, revolutionary leaders signaled awareness that black support was necessary to the success of the new government. Yet, these gestures also revealed an underlying belief that Cubans of color were safest when they could be controlled and their stories manipulated.

The iconization of young Benítez followed from this history. A close look at his narrative and the way it was first told suggest that making him a national hero allowed the leadership to speak to certain reoccurring themes in the official rhetoric. The following

²⁰ The case of Robert Williams also comes to mind. He visited Havana in June 1960 and received a hero's welcome. He returned to live in Cuba in 1962 to escape imprisonment in the United States. Like some others, he ultimately became disillusioned with the revolution and broke with its leadership in 1965, after realizing that racial discrimination had not been eliminated and that the new leaders refused to talk publicly about its continuation.

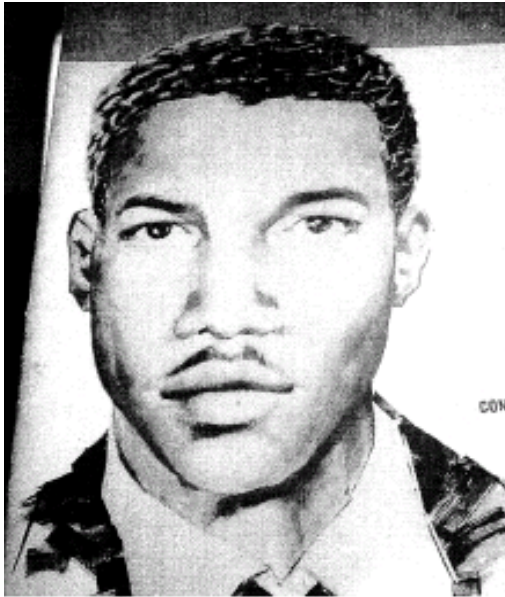
section explores how martyring Benítez created an archetype of patriotic blackness that glorified Afro-Cubans with humble backgrounds and fierce revolutionary devotion as symbols of the new nation.

The Black Teacher-Martyr

On February 7, 1961, Cubans attended a massive demonstration to protest the murder of Benítez. Leading the parade to the rally, two Afro-Cuban students carried a large poster of the slain teacher with the words “Glory to the Martyr” written in black ink and decorated with white flowers. Thousands of other young people marched behind this poster carrying signs, flowers, and Cuban flags to the presidential palace where they listened to comments by Fidel and Raul Castro and President Osvaldo Dorticós. The next day, almost every national newspaper printed the text of these speeches along with a photograph of Benítez’s image ringed with carnations and a caption reading, “We can not let the living memory of the Conrado Benítez, the volunteer teacher assassinated by counterrevolutionaries, falter. . . The young sacrificed teacher is now a guide and an example for all revolutionary youth.”²¹ With these few sentences, *La Calle* summarized a growing public narrative about the young man which contrasted his commitment to the national project with the misplaced intentions of counterrevolutionary groups. Revolutionary leaders used rallies such as this one along with other visual media and editorials in Cuban publications to create a lasting symbol of the slain Benítez that promoted certain values in the new nation, often through the use of religious metaphors. Cubans learned humility, dedication, and racial inclusiveness through the narratives of sacrifice revealed in the life of the murdered youth. However, teaching these

²¹ “Gráficas del desfile estudiantil” *La Calle*, February 9, 1961, 9. “El acto estudiantil: Gran Victoria a Cuba,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 8, 1961, 1.

lessons through particular representations of safely constructed black men frequently meant portraying Cubans of color as dependent on the new government.



The representations of Benítez celebrated by revolutionary leaders emphasized a particular set of characteristics that some scholars have referred to as patriotic blackness.²² Images of the young teacher most frequently portrayed a clean-cut, dark-skinned man wearing neat clothing.²³

Benítez usually appeared in a simple white button-down shirt, suit jacket, and tie. Ironically, given that he served as the symbol for the literacy

campaign, editors rarely depicted the young teacher in his *alfabetizador* uniform. Instead, the familiar photograph of Benítez in respectable business wear decorated literacy badges, identification cards, education workbooks, and the pages of national dailies throughout 1961. The popularized image of the slain teacher differed from the typical revolutionary archetype of a white bearded man in army fatigues suggesting a hesitation to portray black men as dangerous, armed combatants. Benítez's photographs also clashed with the regular portrayal of impoverished Afro-Cuban law breakers featured on the crime pages of national dailies. Rather, revolutionary discourses emphasized his well-kept appearance and outlined a

²² Robert C. Nathan presented a paper at the 2009 American Historical Association Conference using the term, "patriotic blackness," to describe how the legacy of Antonio Maceo has been mobilized since the wars of independence titled, "Black and *Bronce*: Nationhood, Manhood, and Race in Cuban Memory of Antonio Maceo, 1896-1936."

²³ Popularized photograph of Conrado Benítez from "Cover," *Arma Nueva* 2:1 (January-March 1961). *Arma Nueva* was the official Organ of the National Literacy Commission published by the Ministry of Education.

prototype for acceptable Afro-Cuban behavior that glorified respectability and loyalty to the nation.

Public demonstrations celebrating Benítez allowed Cubans across the island to become familiar with his story and the principles with which he was identified. Mothers of volunteer teachers attended meetings where they signed petitions condemning Benítez's assassination and demanding the execution of his murderers.²⁴ Youth in the Havana neighborhood of Regla marched through the streets shouting "Firing wall!" for his killers and "Long live the revolution!"²⁵ While the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC) hosted an event where President Dorticós, his wife, and Minister of Education Armando Hart spoke against counterrevolutionary activity in front of a large banner bearing the teacher's face and repeating the words "Glory to the Martyr."²⁶ In each of these gatherings, the same photograph of Benítez was featured prominently and speakers referred to the young man as a national hero who was killed because he was "poor, black, and a teacher." Repeatedly, the publicity accompanying the literary campaign stressed that the young black man was killed due to his dark skin color and economic status. Cubans attending state sponsored events learned a particular narrative of Benítez's death that demonized enemies of the revolution, while celebrating humble supporters who were committed to the new government. However, even those unable to go to a memorial service would have been familiar with how these men died, since national discourses highlighted their class, race, and occupation to contrast the

²⁴ "Celebran concentración los padres y familiares de maestros voluntarios," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 5, 1961, 5.

²⁵ "Jovenes rebeldes y patrulleros," *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 28, 1961, 4.

²⁶ "Lealtad a la memoria a Conrado Benítez," *Verde Olivo*, February 12, 1961, 12-15.

demographics of the masses, many of whom were poor and black, with the growing opposition movement, depicted as rich and white.

Narratives about the volunteer teacher also highlighted his modest origins to promote the new government as a revolution of *los humildes*. Revolutionary leaders repeatedly identified themselves and the 26th of July Movement “as a rebellion of *humildes* and for *humildes*” as a means of redefining what it meant to be Cuban after 1959. For Cubans, “*los humildes*” signified that someone was working-class, humble, and possibly uneducated, but also determined and honest. This idea was the formula for the new man and representations of black martyrs glorified the concept.²⁷ Cuban leaders specifically named Benítez a “*humilde* teacher” and used examples from his background and work ethic to outline this new type of citizen.²⁸ Castro told crowds of graduating teachers that the slain youth was just like them and others said he was a “man of the people” to link the dead teacher to the popular masses.²⁹ Distinguishing Benítez as “a shoe shine boy, a bread maker, and a student who went to night school because he worked during the day,” *La Calle* applauded his willingness to sacrifice to get an education and encouraged others to do so as well. Cuban leaders also celebrated the modest life of the martyred teacher in contrast to the supposed extravagant existence of counterrevolutionaries by pointedly noting that Benítez had not been to Miami, did not drive a Cadillac, and was not the son of a businessman. Instead they praised how he was from a black working-class family in Matanzas, where his father was an agricultural

²⁷ Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81.

²⁸ “El maestro asesinado es un mártir cuya sangre servir para borrar la incultura e ignorancia,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 25, 1961, 3.

²⁹ ““El maestro asesinado es un mártir cuya sangre servir para borrar la incultura e ignorancia,”” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 25, 1961, 3. “Diario de un maestro voluntario,” *La Calle*, January 27, 1961, 2.

worker and mother a domestic servant.³⁰ Doing so, disguised the upper class, white, and highly educated status of the new leadership, while simultaneously reaching out to the masses, especially Afro-Cubans, for support.

While such editorials and photographs might have elevated a new idea of national character dependent on sacrifice and humility, continual references to the meager class backgrounds of the black martyr depicted Afro-Cubans as indigents in need of government aid. Photographs of Benítez's parents crying in a crumbling apartment depicted a black family that was helpless due to its limited economic power and inherently grateful to Cuban leaders for the opportunities they provided. These associations routinely depicted people of color in safe and harmless ways that emphasized their poverty and allegiance to the new government. By celebrating the stories of working-class Afro-Cubans who had dedicated themselves to the revolution, MR 26-7 prescribed the ideal type of black citizen, namely someone who had come from nothing, was indebted for the opportunities provided after 1959, and faithful to the new government as a result. Cuban leaders demanded loyalty from all citizens during this period; therefore, this practice was not uncommon and was applied frequently to white working-class Cubans as well. However, it had particular consequences for people of color on the island. The disproportionate punishments dealt to Afro-Cuban participants in the April 1961 Playa Girón invasion demonstrated that Castro expected additional fidelity from blacks and *mulatos*. Afro-Cuban members of exile Brigade 2506 were treated more harshly than white combatants because the leadership of MR 26-7 counted

³⁰ "Diario de un maestro voluntario," *La Calle*, January 27, 1961, 2.

on black gratitude in response to the campaign to against racial discrimination, not criticism.³¹

Cuban discourses also mobilized black martyrs as a means of teaching the importance of determination and sacrifice in the struggle for national sovereignty. A central component of the literacy campaign and the values it promoted among *alfabetizadores* was the idea that it was noble to fight and die for the fatherland. Audiences across the island repeatedly encountered articles and editorials explaining how the counterrevolutionaries had offered to free Benítez and allow him to live if he would only join their forces. “Conrado said no! ‘I am a revolutionary and will not betray my people. Do to me what you will!’”³² Publicity about the young teacher repeated this narrative and encouraged young volunteers to remain faithful to the revolution, regardless of the sacrifices requested of them. In the same way, the code for the Conrado Benítez brigades pledged, “We will not abandon our task no matter how great the deprivations, difficulties, or sacrifices. A Conrado Benítez *brigadista* never will be a deserter.”³³ This code and a photograph of the slain teacher appeared on the back of the identification cards carried by members of the Benítez brigades to remind young Cubans of their obligations to the revolution. And while these responsibilities were told through the story of an Afro-Cuban, national discourses coded them as universal characteristics found in “true revolutionaries” of all colors. Such paradoxes reveal the different ways revolutionary leaders invoked the memory of Benítez. Sometimes he was portrayed a poor and black to

³¹ See *Playa Girón: Derrota del imperialismo*, vol. 4 (Havana: Ediciones R, 1962), 455-59, for examples of how Castro treated Afro-Cuban prisoners captured during the Bay of Pigs invasion. The following chapter will discuss this theme in more detail.

³² *Conrado Benítez García: Síntesis Biográfica* found in the Archivo del Museo de Alfabetación (Havana, Cuba).

³³ “Decalogo del Brigadista,” found in the Archivo del Museo de Alfabetación (Havana, Cuba).

appeal to the masses, and reach out to Afro-Cubans, whereas in other moments his narrative sought to teach a group of shared values to all Cubans.

Conversations about Jesús Menéndez, an Afro-Cuban union organizer murdered in 1948, were combined with the Benítez narrative in 1961 to highlight the historic contributions of Afro-Cuban citizens to the nation. It is likely that Cubans would have celebrated the anniversary of the Menéndez's death on January 22 even if Benítez had not been murdered during the same month, since the slain union leader's commitment to racial equality and anti-imperialism fit with the on-going revolutionary projects. However, with the assassination of the young teacher, Cuban leaders inserted plans to commemorate Menéndez's life into a larger national conversation about black patriotism. The union organizer was portrayed as the predecessor to Benítez, and Cuban journalists frequently emphasized his humble background and blackness as well. For example, a political cartoon (below) honoring the union leader, labeled him as unassuming man whose grandparents had fought alongside Maceo in the wars of independence.³⁴ Like comments reporting Benítez's personal history, highlighting that Menéndez was from a poor family, albeit one with a strong revolutionary background, worked to teach Cubans that the revolution respected commitment and hard work, not previously valued economic status.



³⁴ Political Cartoon, *Noticias de Hoy*, February 11, 1961, 2.

Cuban discourses about black icons also appealed to certain spiritual beliefs by relating the assassination of Benítez to how Jesus was crucified on the cross during biblical times. Fidel Castro characterized the dead teacher as “a martyr whose blood will erase ignorance.”³⁵ Claiming that Benítez had “noble blood,” Castro offered to construct a monument to honor the spot where the youth’s blood fell.³⁶ An interviewed literacy worker concurred, saying that the blood of Benítez has made Cubans more eager to “rise up” and end illiteracy during the year of education.³⁷ In each of these comments, the blood of the slain youth was called upon to work for the revolution and the literacy campaign. It was Benítez’s sacrifice, like that of Christ, which was going to allow Cubans to achieve literacy, fight imperialism, and become better people. Other spiritual references concluded that the soul of the young martyr continued to live on and encouraged Cubans to see his death as a light which would brighten the way for future revolutionaries.³⁸ By labeling Benítez as a martyr and discussing his legacy using religious metaphors, Cuban leaders substituted traditional Catholic icons with revolutionary ones. A line from the chorus of the Conrado Benítez brigade song, “*Estudio, trabajo, fusil*” (Study, work, gun), illustrated this point.³⁹ In 1961, Raul Castro proclaimed the phrase the “new trinity” to replace the Catholic version of the

³⁵ “‘El maestro asesinado es un mártir cuya sangre servir para borrar la incultura e ignorancia’” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 25, 1961, 3.

³⁶ Núñez Jiménez, “Antes la patria era una teoría una simple idea y ahora la patria es una realidad,” *La Calle*, January 28, 1961, 6.

³⁷ Pedro J. Riesgo Lujan, “‘Voy con la tranquilidad de dejar a mis hijos en buenas manos,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 4, 1961, 6.

³⁸ Gerado Sábado Lago, “Mensaje de Luz,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 8, 1961, 6. The discourse of glorifying death and sacrifice for the nation dates back to the nineteenth century wars of independence. See Louis A Pérez, Jr., *To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

³⁹ Eduardo Saborit, “Conrado Benítez Brigade Song,” found in the appendix of Matilde Serra Robledo, et al., *El pueblo dice: Vivencias de la campaña alfabetización de Cuba* (Havana: Ciudad de la Habana, 1999).

“father, the son, and the holy ghost.”⁴⁰ The narrative of Benítez’s life, popularized by revolutionary leaders celebrated each of these elements along with sacrifice to the government as the new national ideology.⁴¹

As a martyr, Benítez emerged as a symbol for the literacy campaign, but also for the defense of the revolution more broadly. Through his narrative, revolutionary leaders celebrated a version of patriotic blackness that valued sacrifice, humility, and devotion to the nation. National renditions of his life romanticized poverty and silenced moments when Afro-Cubans disagreed with the leadership, in order to depict him as a staunch revolutionary who idealized the new government. In doing so, this discourse prescribed a formula for how all Cubans could join the nation as true revolutionaries. For people of color, this idea of patriotism also required gratitude for the eradication of discrimination and a public silence about lingering issues of racial inequality. The popularized stories of his life left little room for Afro-Cubans to question if the new government had eliminated race-based privileges. Instead, they celebrated an uncomplicated account of social mobility through allegiance to the state. The following section explores how Cubans applied this same rhetoric to other black martyrs, especially slain African leaders, thereby further internationalizing revolutionary racialized discourses.

Internationalizing Blackness

Cuban revolutionaries iconized another black figure, Patrice Lumumba, less than one month after the public martyring of Conrado Benítez. When rebel forces captured and

⁴⁰ Raul Castro, “Sepan que hoy el estado tiene mas fuerza que nunca!” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 8, 1961, 11. In this speech and another poem, Indio Nabori, “Al son de la historia,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 8, 1961, 6, the trinity is “*trabajo, estudio, fusil*” (work, study, gun), but one of the words is switched in the Benítez song, possibly to create a better rhyme scheme.

⁴¹ For additional reading on the revolution as the new religion see, Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power: Revolution and Redemption in Cuba, 1956-1971* (forthcoming 2009).

murdered thirty-five year old Lumumba, the nationalist leader of the newly independent Congo, Cubans returned to the streets to express solidarity with the man known as the “African Fidel.”⁴² Along with ceremonies honoring the death of Benítez and 1930s Afro-Cuban, union organizer Jesús Menéndez, January and February 1961 saw an outpouring of support for three slain black men. Cubans applied existing narratives about domestic patriotic blackness to discuss Lumumba’s death, thereby further internationalizing the revolution. The parallels between the ways Cubans celebrated the lives of national heroes like Benítez and Menéndez, and the international figure of Lumumba foreshadowed the revolution’s participation in African anti-colonial struggles in the 1960s and its plans to globalize racial conflicts.



Cuban leaders applied the same tropes used in creating the narrative of Benítez’s death to memorialize Lumumba. Visual images of the Congolese revolutionary depicted him with a clean shaven face and wearing respectable clothing like the popularized sketches of young teacher.⁴³ The wire-rimmed eye glasses worn by Lumumba in this popular sketch (left) signaled his intelligence and offered an appropriate model

of blackness based on propriety and a commitment to revolutionary values of hard work and education. Revolutionary leaders also used religious metaphors to honor Lumumba. Similar

⁴² “Un comentario: Lumumba,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 14, 1961, 1.

⁴³ Popularized photograph of Patrice Lumumba from *Hoy Domingo*, February 19, 1961, 11. Example of cartoon series honoring Jesús Menéndez from, “Heroes del Pueblo: Jesús Menéndez,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 19, 1961, 2. There were over ten parts to this series published over a course of two months.

to the Christian references used to comment on Benítez's murder, Nicolás Guillén said that Lumumba had been "crucified" by the Yankees.⁴⁴ While *Noticias de Hoy* suggested that the soul of the Congolese nationalist would endure by calling him an "immortal symbol of African rebellion."⁴⁵ And, a poet writing in *Bohemia* claimed that in death Lumumba would be "more grand and victorious" than in life.⁴⁶ Repeated allusions to the spiritual longevity of black martyrs solidified their position in Cuban memories as symbols of revolutionary blackness.

As a global figure, celebrating Lumumba linked Cuba to its African ancestors and legitimized the revolution's future participation in global social struggles. An editorial titled, "Two Martyrs, One Same Idea" epitomized this connection by applying the language used to explain Benítez's death to discuss Lumumba's murder in the Congo. "Why did they kill Patrice Lumumba? Because he was a leader, a teacher of his people, and a black . . . Conrado Benítez and Patrice Lumumba are not two martyrs of distant lands . . . they are two brothers in the same fight, two martyrs fallen for the same cause, two teachers."⁴⁷ In this piece, the editorialist related the common phrase "poor, black and a teacher" to Lumumba by claiming that he was targeted by Congolese counterrevolutionaries for being a "teacher of people" and a black man. Doing so, both offered an explanation for the leader's assassination, and worked to connect Cubans to their "brothers" in Africa. Similarly, *Noticias de Hoy* claimed that messages of support sent to the Congo after Lumumba's "are not routine pieces of diplomacy." "Cuba is interested in strengthening relationships with all the young states from

⁴⁴ Nicolás Guillén, "Un ejemplo dramático," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 15, 1961, 2.

⁴⁵ "Sobre el vil asesinato de Patricio Lumumba," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 14, 1961, 1.

⁴⁶ "Lumumba: canto al negro heroico," *Bohemia* 53: 15 (April 9, 1961), 106-107.

⁴⁷ "Una opinión: Dos martires y un mismo ideal," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 16, 1961, 8.

which many of our grandfathers came. Whose sons were the Maceos, the Moncadas, the Quintíns and whose grandsons were named Jesús Menéndez, [Juan] Almeida, and Conrado Benítez.”⁴⁸ With this comment, the article reminded readers of the ancestral connection between Cuba and black Africa by identifying people of color as the grandfathers of the nation. It also linked popular black revolutionary figures like Lumumba, Menéndez, Almeida, and Benítez, to Afro-Cuban independence heroes to legitimize their roles as contemporary icons. However, calling African countries, “young states” continued to imply that they needed Cuban assistance to achieve success, without acknowledging the existence of the early African civilizations or the role Spain, Cuba’s other grandfather, might have played in extracting human and natural resources from the region.⁴⁹

Ultimately, adding an international figure to the pantheon of revolutionary black icons continued to link the Cuban revolution to global racial struggles. Like the measures taken by the government to reach out to African Americans in 1960, these gestures made sense to Cubans because they fit with on-going narratives about the revolution’s conflict with U.S. imperialism, often depicted as white and racist. Moreover, most Cubans found meaning in the celebrated story of Lumumba’s assassination because it paralleled the familiar narrative of Benítez’s death. Named martyrs by revolutionary leaders and their followers the rhetoric surrounding the lives and deaths of these men reiterated the most common components of post-1959 revolutionary discourses. The following section explores how

⁴⁸ “Cuba junto al Congo,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 17, 1961, 1. The quotation refers to black heroes of the Cuban wars of independence Antonio Maceo, Guillermo Moncada, and Quintín Banderas.

⁴⁹ This argument that African states needed the Cuban revolution resurfaced when the Cuban government explained why it needed to send troops to Angola in the 1970s. For additional details see, Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Carmelo Mesa-Lago and June S. Belkin, eds., *Cuba in Africa* (Pittsburgh: Center for Latin American Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1982).

Benítez provided a black icon that allowed a mostly white leadership to reach out to Afro-Cubans by discrediting counterrevolutionaries as racists.

Patria or Muerte! (Fatherland or Death!)

After the murder of Conrado Benítez in January 1961, Cuban conversations about the literacy campaign became increasingly militarized.⁵⁰ Revolutionary leaders invoked the martyred teacher and other black figures as soldiers for the nation, especially in the on-going discursive and physical battles against counterrevolutionaries and U.S. aggression. One way of doing so was to claim that counter-government groups killed innocent Cubans simply because they were black, poor, and loyal to the new government. This move created an “us” versus “them” mentality, where Cubans of color were pushed to support revolutionary leaders, since according to popular representations counter-government groups murdered blacks. Editorials published in 1961 linked the death of Benítez and Lumumba to the opposition’s aversion to the revolutionary “cause” and blackness. These discourses allowed Cuban leaders associate themselves with the minority position, since they too were outcasts from counterrevolutionary groups funded by the United States and thus open to attack by “imperialists,” even though they were not black. Defining men like Benítez and Lumumba as revolutionary icons meant that they could act as black soldiers in on-going hostilities between the Cuban government and counterrevolutionary groups. This move appealed to standing perceptions about the inherent physical strength of black men.

⁵⁰ For additional reading see Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 99. Pérez-Stable notes that “The struggle to survive infused these mobilizations with a military mission,” when talking about the literacy campaign. However, her analysis does not explore how certain black figures were used as national warriors in these battles.

Throughout the spring of 1961, revolutionary leaders invoked black martyrs as warriors for the nation. In the case of Benítez, organizing volunteer corps in his name served to insert the slain teacher into the enduring struggle against oppositional forces. Across Cuba, young members of Conrado Benítez brigades wore army-



like uniforms, saw themselves as members of an educational army, and marched to the tune of spirited lyrics about defeating the counterrevolution.⁵¹ *Brigadistas* wore patches on their sleeves (image, right) identifying them as members of the Benítez “Army of *Alfabetizadores*.”⁵² Additionally, most descriptions of the literacy campaign imagined it as a “battle” against ignorance, and encouraged Cubans to equate acquiring an education with defeating the enemy who wanted to keep the island illiterate. Lyrics to a song popularized by *brigadistas* claimed that the alphabetizers were “fighting for peace” and encouraged them to “bring down imperialism and lift up liberty.”⁵³ Imaging the literacy campaign as a national battle both against illiteracy and counter-government forces raised the intensity of the movement. Stories of slain black martyrs along with the revolutionary discourses encouraging Cubans to “overcome or die” served to push Cubans to interpret the campaign in increasingly militarized ways.

⁵¹ See Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, *Historia de una batalla: Recuerdo de 1961, el año de educación* (Havana, 1962) for a film depicting the experiences of the alphabetizers. In the film the young men and women are shown in the uniforms singing the Conrado Benítez song.

⁵² Cover of a pamphlet used as publicity in literacy campaign. *Brigadas Conrado Benítez*, found in Archivo del Museo de Alfabetación (Havana, Cuba).

⁵³ Eduardo Saborit, “Conrado Benítez Brigade Song,” found in the appendix of Serrra, *El pueblo dice*.

A poster (below) advertising the Week of Cuban Youth illustrated the role revolutionary figures had allocated to Benítez as a soldier in this national battle.⁵⁴ Unlike most images of the teacher, here he is shown without his customary suit; rather, he wields a large pencil as a weapon to stab, and thus defeat, Cuban illiteracy. This poster, created by the Association of Cuban Youth, contributed to national discourses invoking Benítez as a warrior for of the nation. Cubans had used the bodies of black men to fight national battles previously during the wars of independence, where Maceo was often referred to as the strength behind Martí's leadership.⁵⁵ In 1961, revolutionary discourses invoked a similar trope of strong, black masculinity, through the image of Benítez, to defeat ignorance and undermine counterrevolutionary movements. However, both Maceo and Benítez had died before revolutionary leaders applied their muscle to Cuban battles. Popular representations were careful to assert a particular type of patriotic blackness that used martyrs, not living Afro-Cubans, as soldiers for the nation. In doing so, revolutionary leaders continued to celebrate an image of black masculinity that was safe and non-threatening, because it belonged to black (dead) heroes and thus was unquestionably loyal to the state.

⁵⁴ "Muerte al Analfabetismo," Publicity for Literacy Campaign found in Archivo del Museo de Alfabetación (Havana, Cuba).

⁵⁵ For additional reading on how Maceo complemented Martí and acted as the soldier in nineteenth century discourses see the forthcoming dissertation by Robert C. Nathan, "The Cuban Pasts: Memory, Race, and Nation, 1898-1861," University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.



Cuban leaders also publicized narratives of how these men died to vilify anti-government groups as racists and thus reach out to Afro-Cubans. In a speech before the Popular Socialist party (PSP) committee, *mulato* Blas Roca discussed how counterrevolutionaries claimed they killed Benítez because he was a communist. Roca disagreed, “the young teacher was no communist,” rather “with anti-communism they want to preserve the imperialist regime, colonial oppression, inhumane exploitation, racial

discrimination, and unemployment.”⁵⁶ *Noticias de Hoy* concurred saying that the “*gusanos* (worms) assassinated him for being a worker, for being black, and for being poor,” not because he was a spy.⁵⁷ While, Castro called the murder of Lumumba a few months later a mixture of “imperialism, colonialism, and savagery.”⁵⁸ Articulations such as these worked to demonize counter-government groups as savage, racists and created a paradigm where anyone who disagreed with the revolution was so as well. The case of the principal of the private school, La Luz, illustrated this point. Eight students from the school wrote letters to *Noticias de Hoy* saying that they had been expelled for holding a rally protesting the murder of Lumumba. In the letter, they characterized the principal as a counterrevolutionary, whose entire family lived in exile and called for his termination because he did not support their demonstration against imperialism.⁵⁹ Other private schools were condemned for failing to participate in activities objecting to the assassination of Benítez as well. One editorialist claimed that members of the privileged classes remained silent unless threatened with losing their “precious private” institutions.⁶⁰ By linking counterrevolutionaries to the killings of the Benítez and Lumumba, these Cubans further vilified opposition to the state. This move allowed the new government to identify other whites as racists without having to respond to questions about their personal preferences. Moreover, these conversations continued to divide the island into two groups: those who supported the revolution and therefore publicly

⁵⁶ “Lo que determina y condiciona la actual situación de Cuba, son los éxitos alcanzados por la revolución,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 2, 1961, 8.

⁵⁷ “Con cien ojos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 3, 1961, 2.

⁵⁸ “Fidel y el asesinato de Lumumba,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 15, 1961, 1.

⁵⁹ “La Gomilla,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 17, 1961, 7. Benito, “Expulsan a estudiantes de ‘la Luz,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 17, 1961, 7.

⁶⁰ Casandra, “Escuelas privadas para qué?” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 26, 1961, 4.

embraced the black martyrs and those who did not, namely counterrevolutionaries. By spring 1961, these camps had already been forged, but inserting the death of the young teacher and the Congolese leader into national conversations served to reiterate previous ideas.

Discussions about the three slain men often contrasted the disdain counterrevolutionaries held toward people of color with the implied notion that the new government had eliminated racial discrimination and embraced Afro-Cubans. Castro summarized these comments in a speech where he noted that counterrevolutionary forces would use anti-communism as a justification to assassinate every “worker, *humilde*, and black.”⁶¹ Others argued that the United Nations forces, led by the United States, must only protect whites, since they allowed Lumumba to be assassinated while occupying the Congo.⁶² While, *La Calle* concluded that Uncle Sam only approved of people of color when they conceded the sidewalk to white women or played the guitar in tourist venues in Havana. According to this piece, “imperialists” sought to eliminate blacks and latinos when they tried to learn, teach, or rebel against the status quo.⁶³ Cubans mobilized stories about the three black men to show that counterrevolutionaries, financed by the U.S. government, wanted to kill supporters of the revolution, especially black advocates like Benítez and Lumumba. By popularizing the idea that the opposition movement would murder innocent people of color because they feared change, revolutionary leaders worked to solidify Afro-Cuban loyalty to the new government. Yet, implicit in these conversations was the view that prejudicial

⁶¹ “El maestro asesinado es un mártir cuya sangre servir para borrar la incultura e ignorancia” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 25, 1961, 3.

⁶² “Servicio para blancos,” *La Calle*, January 25, 1961, 14.

⁶³ “Tambien en México asesinaron maestros,” *La Calle*, January 26, 1961, 14.

attitudes, belonged to the “other side,” not to Cuban revolutionaries who had waged successfully the war against racial discrimination.

For the most part Afro-Cubans responded to militarized versions of the year of education with overwhelming public support. Both the literacy campaign and the argument that the revolution had eliminated racial discrimination went uncontested by Cubans of color. Similar to late 1960 when Castro was in Harlem, spring 1961 provided few, if any, official spaces to protest these claims. Black and *mulato* youth joined the Conrado Benítez brigades in large numbers alongside white Cubans.⁶⁴ Newspapers printed multiple photographs of mixed-race groups sitting together and talking about their recent adventures as *brigadistas* in the Sierra Maestra.⁶⁵ And while these images presented a romanticized view of the experiences of literacy workers in rural Cuba, the repetition of overwhelmingly positive photographs in the national press reveal the significance of showing publicly that a diverse group of Cubans participated in the revolution’s newest project. Interviews with Afro-Cuban militia members show that like other Cubans, they too imagined the United States as the “Yankee aggressor” and were willing to sacrifice themselves, in the same manner as Benítez, for national sovereignty.⁶⁶ Similarly, *Verde Olivo*, the national publication of the armed forces, published two cover features illustrating black women, each more than a hundred years old, who not only supported the new government, but credited Castro personally for

⁶⁴ Georgina Duvallon, “Hablando con los maestros voluntarios,” *Verde Olivo*, February 12, 1961, 46-48. This article interviews a number of black youth, including three women. They each recount how glad they are that they became volunteer teachers. Doing so, allowed them to help others and give back to their country.

⁶⁵ Senande, “De los picos de la Sierra a las alturas de la Habana,” *Verde Olivo*, January 8, 1961, 36-38.

⁶⁶ “Patria para los Cubanos, muerte para el yanki invasor,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 7, 1961, 4.

sending someone to teach them how to read and write.⁶⁷ Given the consolidation of the Cuban press by spring of 1961, it is important to read these articulations of loyalty as potentially cleverly chosen pieces, selected because they coincided with the unifying agendas of revolutionary leaders. However, it is still significant that the post-1959 government worked diligently to locate these voices and include them in national conversations. Doing so, contributed to the ways that Cubans participated in and remembered the literacy campaign and its slain teacher.

Despite revolutionary claims to have eliminated racial discrimination, personal testimonies about the year-long educational mobilization reveal the continued existence of anxieties about Afro-Cubans, especially in the private domain of the home. Discussions over where the *alfabetizadores* would sleep often revolved around skin color and the comfort level some white farmers felt toward people of African descent. In Holguín, a city on the eastern corner of the island, a young *guajiro* (farmer) described how his grandfather was hesitant to offer a black *brigadista* quarters in their home during the campaign. Noting that the lanterns the literacy workers carried were appealing, the young man said that his grandfather finally allowed the “sweet black girl” to sleep in their house, simply so the family could use her lamp.⁶⁸ Another volunteer teacher told a similar story when describing the debate over lodging that occurred when his group arrived in Guantánamo.

We met to divide up the available rooms. Some men did not want boys sleeping in the house with their women. Some women refused to provide lodging for pretty girls from Havana, who they feared would seduce their husbands. And another group would not agree to accept the three or four

⁶⁷Jaime Soler, “Por qué Isidra quiso a ir a Playa Girón,” *Verde Olivo*, July 2, 1961, 46-47. “Nunca es tarde para aprender: Fidel vencimos, leemos, y escribimos,” *Verde Olivo*, July 5, 1961, 36-39.

⁶⁸ Serra, *El pueblo dice*, 173.

blacks, who were as dark as the night. I resolved the situation by reminding the group of the words of the Commander and Chief, where he highlighted the role the popular masses had to play in defending and spreading the Revolution. In this work especially, age, sex, nor race were as important as overall unity.⁶⁹

These situations reveal the continued anxieties toward racial integration existing in Cuba in 1961, especially in private spaces, such as the home. In each case, certain aspects of revolutionary discourses worked to settle the issue. In the first, the girl was allowed entrance into the house because she was an acceptable type of Afro-Cuban; she was “sweet” and came bearing a Chinese lantern, a technology that the rural family did not possess. The literacy worker in Guantánamo invoked the rhetoric of MR 26-7 and national calls for unity to encourage reluctant elements to admit Afro-Cubans, but not without pointing out that the four alphabetizers in question, were “black as the night.” A dark skinned woman named María, remembered that she encountered similar resistance when she seeking housing from a white rural family as a *brigadista* in 1961. “I was going to stay with one family, a white one, but they decided that it would be best for me to stay in a black house, so that the counterrevolutionaries would not notice my arrival to the region.”⁷⁰ By referencing the threat counter-government militants presented to María, this household was able to deny lodging to the black youth without facing the stigma of being labeled racist. In fact, the family invoked the very paranoia revolutionary leaders had publicized when claiming that the counterrevolutionaries wanted to kill black teachers to steer the Afro-Cuban girl to another residence. And while, the intentions of this particular family remain unknown, it is likely that other rural whites, who might have been uncomfortable with having blacks and *mulatos* sleep

⁶⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁰ Interview with author, May 2007.

under their roofs could have marshaled the same arguments. Similar to scenarios when Afro-Cubans used revolutionary discourses to push for additional reforms, this situation highlights again how once Cuban leaders promoted a particular ideology they were powerless to control how it was manipulated.

Conclusions: Eliminating Racial Discrimination and Turning Blacks into Citizens

The iconization of black martyrs that occurred in 1961 served to celebrate the end of the campaign to end racial discrimination and transform Afro-Cubans into citizens of the nation. By the start of the literacy movement, national conversations about racism claimed that the problem had been solved. The growing threat of U.S. intervention and counterrevolutionary opposition pushed Cubans toward national unity. However, publicly announcing the completion of national projects was a familiar aspect in revolutionary moves to consolidate state control. In December 1961, in front of crowds holding flags decorated with the name and symbol that had come to symbolize Conrado Benítez, Castro declared “Cuba a territory free of illiteracy.”⁷¹ For the youthful, mixed-race audience, the moment came to be remembered as a turning point in Cuban race relations. And while, racial prejudices continued to exist privately, revolutionary leaders used the figures of black martyrs and the integrated work of the literacy campaign to conclude the debate over racial equality opened in 1959.

The publicity distributed for the literacy campaign celebrated how the revolution had delivered racial equality to the island. Conrado Benítez *brigadistas* used lessons from *Alfabetizamos*, the official manual for literacy instruction, to teach their students about topics

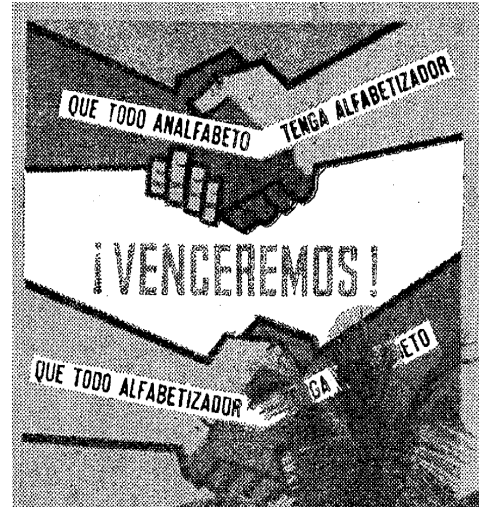
⁷¹ Fidel Castro speech, *Revolución*, December 23, 1961, 1.

such as the Agrarian Reform, U.S. imperialism, and the role of the Institute of Tourism in opening the beaches to the public. Theme ten of the manual covered “Discrimination” and described how Cuba was a country composed of different ethnic groups, whites from Spain and blacks from Africa. The chapter emphasized how “Martí y Maceo, Guillermo Moncada y Calixto García, Fidel Castro y Juan Almeida” had fought successfully together, despite different skin colors, since the colonial period to achieve national independence.⁷² By including both the theme of racial discrimination and examples of the role black and white male heroes played in building the Cuban nation, this workbook spread revolutionary values across the island. These lessons taught both *brigadistas* and their students that Afro-Cubans were a key component of the country, especially when they served as soldiers in national battles. And while this manual and the primer for arithmetic discussed the violence and continued discrimination facing African Americans in the United States, the texts remained silent about the presence of lingering racial prejudice in Cuba.⁷³ Rather, like other revolutionary discourses in 1961, resources for the literacy campaign, proclaimed that the country had accomplished the goal set in 1959 of ridding the island of racial discrimination. Consequently, the literacy campaign and the press that accompanied it acted as commemoration of the government’s declared victory, even as revolutionary leaders positioned Cuba for its newest battle against counterrevolution.

⁷² Gobierno Revolucionario, Ministerio de Educación, Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *Alfabetícemos: Manuel para el Alfabetizador* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961), 41.

⁷³ The index for *Alfabetícemos*, 85, included the terms “discrimination” and “KKK, Ku Klux Klan.” The book defined “KKK” as a “Racists north-American organization that persecuted black citizens.” Gobierno Revolucionario, Ministerio de Educación, Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *Producir, Ahorrar, Organizar: Segunda Parte* (Havana, 1962) found in Fagen, *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 68. *Producir, Ahorrar, Organizar* was the mathematics workbook *brigadistas* used to teach arithmetic. Word problems in the manual show the way educational resources invoked racial violence in the United States in contrast to the supposed racial equality in Cuba. For example, 68, “There have been 3,000 lynchings in the United States in the last 20 years. What has been the average number of lynchings per year in that country?”

National dailies echoed these sentiments by publishing pieces that marked the end of racial discrimination and expressed gratitude for the work of Cuban leaders. One article describing how the “thanks to the Revolution” we have this “marvelous example of human solidarity” included images of a white family entertaining a small black child to show the progress of racial integration. Throughout the article, the author attributed the prevalence of mixed-race classrooms and groups to



the successes of the revolutionary government.⁷⁴ In doing so, he portrayed white leaders and the white Cubans who had fulfilled their demands as the heroes of racial equality. An article in *Combate 13 de Marzo* not only applauded revolutionary efforts to eliminate racial discrimination, but argued that the martyred Benítez believed that the new government had accomplished this feat as well. Benítez, the journalist wrote, “Looked to the future with faith, having the security that the new country was free of racial prejudices and constructed for everyone.”⁷⁵ By invoking the popular black martyr to thank the new government for creating a more positive future for Afro-Cubans, this author linked the voice of Benítez to the successful elimination of racial discrimination. Doing so, perpetuated the idea of black gratitude not only to revolutionary leaders, but to all Cubans. Continually thanking white Cubans for eradicating prejudices and welcoming Afro-Cubans into the national fold

⁷⁴ Oscar F. Rego, “Del campo llego la Revolución, del campo llegan los niños,” *Bohemia* 53: 15 (April 9, 1961) 56.

⁷⁵ Reynaldo Peñalver, “Lleva hasta el ultimo rincón de la patria la luz de la enseñanza, sera el mayor homenaje a la memoria de Conrado,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 1, 1961, 8.

depicted blacks and *mulatos*, including the figure of the teacher-soldier Benítez, as indebted to the revolution.

Visual images agreed with these ideas and further emphasized the elimination of racial divisions in favor of Cuban unity. The billboard for the 1961 Congress on Literacy (above) supported this declaration by showing sketches of black and white hands coming together.⁷⁶ While a drawing appearing regularly in *Noticias de Hoy* showed four different Cubans, black, white, male, and female, walking together (below).⁷⁷ Dressed in army fatigues this image envisions the Cuban army as inclusive of all citizens. Such visuals differed from images produced at the start of 1959, because rather than encouraging Cubans to begin a conversation about racial equality, 1961 representations celebrated the achievement of the goal. The very act of glorifying a black martyr as a symbol of the nation fit into this trend.

National
conversations about black
icons discursively
transformed people of color
into Cuban citizens by
identifying men like Benítez



as symbols of the larger nation. During rallies honoring the dead men, flags flew at half mast and Cubans sang the national anthem to further link the martyrs to the nation.⁷⁸ President

⁷⁶ Congreso Nacional de Alfabetización, *Segundo Congreso de Consejos Municipales de Educación* (Havana, 1961), cover page.

⁷⁷ "Sketch," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 23, 1961, 4.

⁷⁸ "Mesa redonda y acto en CMQ en homenaje a Lumumba: Busta a su memoria en la Habana," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 15, 1961, 3.

Dorticós publicly called Benítez a “hero of Cuban history,” and encouraged others to try and live by his example.⁷⁹ Additionally, the idea that the slain teacher served as a model of ideal revolutionary behavior was repeated in editorials calling him an “example of the new order.”⁸⁰ In labeling the murdered teacher a martyr and a symbol for the nation, Cubans pushed the parameters of campaign to end racial discrimination to transform certain blacks into citizens. In the case of Benítez, this meant stitching his face on badges won by literacy workers, naming youth brigades after him, and framing calls to action with his story. Doing so, allowed the government to continue to claim that it had eliminated racial privileges, even when it had not. Publicizing black icons while pushing for a racially inclusive literacy movement let the MR 26-7 leadership say that it had incorporated all Cubans into the new nation, despite the lack of Afro-Cubans in high-level administrative positions

Revolutionary leaders applied the same rhetoric identifying black martyrs as citizens to other Afro-Cubans. In an editorial appreciating the government’s unifying policies, one author insisted that a black child who “yesterday was ‘*negrito*’” is today a “brother in Martí’s beautiful country.”⁸¹ Like to discussions which shifted Benítez from being a “poor, black, teacher” into a national icon representing the literacy campaign, this journalist sought to transform the small black child into a full-fledged citizen with a stroke of a pen. It is interesting that the youth remained a “brother to Martí” like a Maceo, rather than a son,

⁷⁹ ““En manos de la docencia y de la educación está la responsabilidad de crear a los nuevos hombre,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, February 7, 1961, 2.

⁸⁰ ““El maestro asesinado es un mártir cuya sangre servir para borrar la incultura e ignorancia” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 25, 1961, 3. Yaselis, “Las aulas de los montes nunca más se cerrarán,” *Verde Olivo*, February 5, 1961, 18-21. “Maestro y soldado,” *Combate 13 de Marzo*, January 26, 1961, 14.

⁸¹ Oscar F. Rego, “Del campo llego la Revolución, del campo llegan los niños,” *Bohemia* 53: 15 (April 9, 1961) 56.

because it calls attention to the subtle limits of appropriate Cuban lineage. Martí could have brothers or companions in arms who were black, but not children. During an address to crowd in July, Castro invited a one-hundred year old Afro-Cuban woman to the podium to further honor blacks as Cuban citizens. After she described how she had learned to read for the first time during the literacy campaign, the young leader thanked her for her participation in the year long national mobilization. “We are going to have you as a true example of what a citizen can do,” he said. The woman responded that she would be happy to serve the nation as a “mascot” and proceeded to tell her life-story to the crowd, ending with the line, “Thank you, Fidel.”⁸² In each of these cases a particular type of Afro-Cuban became a revolutionary citizen: a dead black youth, a small child, and a fragile, elderly woman. While entrance into the nation was open to Afro-Cubans in 1961, such possibilities seemed dependent on appropriate behavior, gratefulness, and loyalty to the revolution.

Despite these contradictions, official discourses were successful in persuading most white Cubans to accept blacks into the nation and of convincing many Afro-Cubans to join the revolutionary movement. A photograph of two, young, upper-class white women working at a desk with the poster of Benítez in the background best summarized how as a national figure the black martyr, and through him other Afro-Cubans, gained entrance not only into the homes of white families, but into their hearts as well.⁸³ For these two women the story of the murdered teacher and the needs of the revolution led them to renounce the monastery in favor of volunteer service. The fond memories held by other *ex-brigadistas* for the education campaign and its black martyr show that the literacy movement did not only teach Cubans how to read, but created opportunities for blacks and *mulatos* to join the nation,

⁸² “Nunca es tarde para aprender: Fidel vencimos, leemos, y escribimos,” *Verde Olivo*, July 5, 1961, 36-39.

⁸³ Manuel Navarero Luna, “El llamado de las raíces,” *Bohemia* 53: 20 (May 14, 1961), 6.

albeit in limited positions. The iconization of Benítez, Lumumba, and Menéndez presented Cubans with an archetype of patriotic blackness that celebrated humility, loyalty, and sacrifice while showing that revolutionary leaders recognized the significance of including black faces in the upper ranks of the government even if these figures came from the memories of dead men. With these actions, Cuban leaders concluded the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination. This move had lasting consequences, in the form of positive reforms and opportunities made available to Afro-Cubans.

However, the growing silence and limited public space to voice concerns about lingering racial prejudice seen throughout national conversations in 1961 foreshadowed future inabilities to confront the issue directly.

Chapter Seven:

Conclusions

Cubans interviewed in 2007 claim that there was a black man among those that invaded the island at Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs) on April 17, 1961. According to the informal account told by these now elderly Cubans, when Fidel Castro caught a glimpse of the dark-skinned prisoner during a public interview, the young leader became enraged. Castro called the black prisoner over, and asked, “What are you doing here? With everything that I have given you blacks, why are you fighting against the revolution?” In response, the black man stepped forward and answered, “No sir, I didn’t board the boat to fight, I’m just the cook!”¹ Older Cubans recounting this humorous narrative follow the “punch-line” with laughter, saying, “You get it? He was the cook; he was not helping the invaders.”

In reality, an estimated fifty Afro-Cubans participated in the exile expeditary force Brigade 2506. And while transcripts from the interrogations describe how black and *mulato brigadistas* were abused by the revolutionary army and questioned about their choice to fight with the “Yankees, who treated their Negroes so badly,” no one tried to avoid being punished by claiming to be a menial laborer.² Yet, the anecdote recounted above represents one of the

¹ As told to author in multiple interviews May 2007.

² *Playa Girón: Derrota del imperialismo*, vol. 4 (Havana: Ediciones R, 1962), 455-59. During the interrogations conducted in a stadium full of on-lookers and televised across the country, Castro asked some of the black prisoners, “What are doing here?” The prisoner responded that he recognized that that question was in reference to his skin color and that growing up blacks had experienced certain difficulties because of their skin

many ways Cubans have come to remember the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination begun in 1959. Castro's questioning of the black combatant reveals the common belief that the revolutionary government "gave" Afro-Cubans unprecedented opportunities, including access to education, employment, and health care. In return, blacks and *mulatos* supposedly owed the new government and needed to pay that debt with unquestioning loyalty. And finally, the anecdote's "punch-line" identifying the Afro-Cuban as the cook, positioned him in the familiar role of a non-threatening, domestic servant. In doing so, the comedic story mocks the political naiveté of the black man, and depicts him as someone incapable of forming his own critical opinions. He appears as a helpless, if amusing figure, open for manipulation by both counterrevolutionaries and the Castro government.

This anecdote and its nuances resonated with Cubans because of the government's public campaign to tackle racial discrimination between 1959 and 1961. When MR 26-7 entered Havana in 1959, they recognized the importance of solidifying their power by enlisting popular support. One way that it accomplished this goal was by reaching out to Cubans of color and pledging to fulfill nineteenth century promises of racial equality. This strategy opened a brief dialogue across the island about racism that coincided with the radicalization of the revolution. "Not Blacks, but Citizens" has looked closely at racialized

color, but that he realized now that those issues were economic problems and that they had now been overcome. Castro then proceeded to ask the Afro-Cuban if he had been allowed entrance into the Nautical Club. He responds, "No." The revolutionary leader then says, "Yet, you have the audacity to team up here to fight the Revolution along with that other gentleman [a white Cuban prisoner, who was previously a member of Nautical club], with who you were not allowed to bathe. You could land here on the beaches of Playa Girón to fight the Revolution, but you were not allowed on the beaches for recreation. Nevertheless, you came together with that gentleman who never cared whether or not you were let into the club to bathe, as if the seawater could be stained by your skin color!" The black prisoner responds, "The fact is that I did not come to Cuba out of considerations of whether or not I could be allowed on the beach . . ." To which Castro interrupts, saying "Very well, that is not the point . . ." This exchange is clearly different from the one told in the popular anecdote where the Afro-Cuban concedes to Castro's pressure and claims to be the cook. Yet, Cubans interviewed in 2007 told me the anecdote when I asked about racial discrimination during the first years of the revolution. This occurred most frequently without any mention of the Playa Girón invasion on my part.

revolutionary discourses in order to show the multiple ways Cuban leaders constructed the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination. The symbols and images they used to legitimize radical policies expose the cultural signifiers and concepts that resonated with Cubans during this period.

Revolutionary leaders repeatedly invoked history to justify the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination. The new government mobilized the legacies of José Martí and Antonio Maceo to press for integration and to demonstrate Afro-Cuban capabilities. This strategy reveals the continued salience of the two independence heroes as fathers of the nation in 1959; so much so, that Castro and other revolutionaries sought to portray themselves as the heirs of these icons. Yet, maybe one of the most fascinating aspects of national discourses about race was how they employed a “new” version of the Cuban past to blame the U.S. intervention in 1898 for the failure of racial democracy in the republic. Cuban leaders deemphasized how white privilege had contributed to continued inequality, thereby erasing the historical role white Cubans played in limiting black and *mulato* social mobility in the twentieth century.

Contemporary racial violence in the United States was also a central component of revolutionary discourses used to discredit enemies in the United States and internationalize racial struggles. Revolutionary leaders were able to discourage black emigration to the United States and show the progress of Cuban battles against racial discrimination by comparing the situation of African Americans to that of Afro-Cubans. Incorporating the plight of U.S. blacks into national conversations also allowed Cubans to portray North American hostility, and any opposition group linked to U.S. interests, as white and racist. Doing so, gave revolutionary leaders a moral weapon to use in the battle against U.S.

criticism, and a focal point for solidifying Afro-Cuban and popular support. In the 1970s, these early events provided the social context for Cuban contributions to African anti-colonial movements and the island's willingness to offer sanctuary to African American militants hiding from the U.S. government.

Revolutionary leaders celebrated the end of the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination with the iconization of black male martyrs. Afro-Cuban teacher, Conrado Benítez emerged as an icon of both the literacy campaign and the defense of the revolution more broadly. The narrative of his murder enabled the new government to cast its opponents as racist, and racism as anti-revolutionary. National conversations about the slain teacher continued to declare public racism as unacceptable in the same manner that conversations had previously identified counter-government groups as anti-black. This tactic depicted revolutionary leaders as the defenders of Afro-Cubans without having to address lingering instances of racial discrimination directly. The story of his life and death also spoke to appropriate black contributions to nation. Similar to the ways that revolutionary leaders invoked the legacy of Maceo, Benítez represented a suitable black role model due to his loyalty to the nation and humble background.

Despite public celebrations about the elimination of discrimination, racism still existed in Cuba after 1961. However, the available space to address these concerns continually diminished in favor of a more unifying national rhetoric. The continuing presence of racial discrimination despite government attempts to address the injustice occurred for a number of reasons. Primarily, it was an ambitious and possibly unachievable goal to try and abolish attitudes and practices that had been a part of the Cuban daily existence for so long

through such a brief conversation. Secondly, certain contradictions existed within revolutionary racialized discourses that undermined Cuban commitments to racial equality.

At the same time that revolutionary leaders highlighted the blackness of Afro-Cubans to construct a supportive constituency that could fight U.S. funded counter-government groups, they also worked towards a goal of a raceless Cuba. The frequent repetition of comments claiming to transform “blacks into citizens” or “*negritos* into Cuban children” reveals strategic intentions to open a discussion about racism, “achieve” the elimination of discrimination by reforming blacks and *mulatos*, and then close these national conversations by declaring that “we are all Cubans.” Yet, revolutionary leaders frequently imagined these same Afro-Cuban citizens as dependent clients of the state. National discourses portrayed people of color as indigents in order to promote popular acceptance of social programs among critical audiences and decrease fears about black uplift. And while, light-hearted political cartoons might have sought to encourage Cubans to welcome blacks and *mulatos* into the national fold, they also undermined promises of racial equality by depicting Afro-Cubans as child-like and infantile. Portraying blacks and *mulatos* in this way helped form the opinion that people of African descent, both domestically and internationally, needed the revolutionary government to rescue them from their blackness before becoming acceptable citizens.

Another paradox within conversations about eliminating racial discrimination was the ways revolutionary leaders solicited Afro-Cuban support, while simultaneously prescribing a type of acceptable black contribution to the nation. Blacks were encouraged to participate in the revolution as loyal and grateful citizens. Like the question Castro posed to the black counterrevolutionary at the Playa Girón interrogation, asking “why” he would undermine a

government which had provided Afro-Cubans with so many opportunities, national discourses highlighted the appreciation white leaders expected from black clients. Such attitudes led to frustration among some Afro-Cubans and African Americans. Intellectuals like Juan Betancourt, Carlos Moore, and Robert Williams interpreted these interactions as evidence of underlying sentiments of black inferiority among white leaders. Ultimately, constructing the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination around the tropes of parent/child or state/client relationships foreshadowed an early and unfinished end to the program once the new leadership proclaimed the project achieved.

As discussed, Cubans responded to and influenced how revolutionary leaders constructed national discourses on race. In particular, Afro-Cubans living in the Havana neighborhood of Las Yaguas were hesitant to accept the interference by a mostly white government in their daily lives. We have also seen how Cubans living in exile engaged with these discussions by denying that racial inequality existed, claiming that revolutionary leaders created the problem, and pledging to tackle the issue themselves after the removal of communism from the island. The centrality of charges of racism to revolutionary critiques against counter-government groups in the United States forced the exile community to address how to incorporate Afro-Cubans in the nation. Likewise, this project has examined how some Afro-Cubans mobilized revolutionary racialized discourses at different times to press for additional opportunities, such as entrance into recreational and tourist facilities. In each of these cases, the sources clearly show how rhetoric initiated by the state was open for manipulation by residents. Popular involvement reveals the impossibility of separating conversations about ending racial discrimination from understandings of what it meant to be a Cuban between 1959 and 1961. The considerable participation in these discussions by

students, workers, intellectuals, and Cubans from different geographic, class, and racial backgrounds highlight the pervasiveness of race to revolutionary culture.

Moreover, the common narratives remembered by diverse Cubans fifty years later, that identify the exile community as racist, Harlem residents as *fidelistas*, and Benítez as a martyr assassinated for his race and class status, demonstrate how particular representations about racial equality and its meaning to the revolution not only took hold between 1959 and 1961, but endured and became a central component of Cuban national memory. However, as seen in the anecdote about the black Playa Girón prisoner and the exaggerated solidarity attributed to African Americans these popular recollections do not always correspond to historical events. If anything, such fascinating inconsistencies suggest that Cuban conversations about race worked more to support the state, unify the masses, and demonize the United States than to describe actual occurrences.

Footage from a 1969 work camp in Camagüey province demonstrates that the Afro-Cuban interpretations of revolutionary discourses, discussed in this project, were the foundation for how blacks and *mulatos* experienced the revolution after 1961. The film clip shows a group of working-class women, many of whom were former prostitutes, gathered in a circle during an unplanned musical interlude. As a well-dressed, white, female, revolutionary leader watched, one of the black women started to drum a rumba. Another *mulata* woman joined in, singing impromptu lyrics, while the other workers acted as the chorus. The spontaneous song celebrated Castro's leadership, communism, and the revolution. Nevertheless, in a fascinating visual of Afro-Cuban interpretations of national discourses, the *mulata* brushed her forearm with her other hand, to refer to blacks, while

saying, “We are the *columnistas*,” or we are the revolutionaries.³ The scene portrays all of the contradictions within revolutionary pledges of equality: a white paternalistic on-looker, smiling in a motherly-manner at Afro-Cuban playfulness; and, poor, women of color living in a labor camp away from the city where they are supposed to learn modes of appropriate behavior from Communist Youth leaders. Yet, it also provides a glimpse into the ways blacks and *mulatos* made the revolution their own by mocking the white leadership and calling themselves the “true” revolutionaries. This project has used collected *testimonios* and oral histories to examine how Afro-Cubans initially experienced the revolution on a daily basis. The aforementioned footage, however, suggests that 1959-61 responses laid the foundation for future black and *mulato* incorporation into the nation. It also points to possibilities for future research, especially in regards to the ways working-class Cubans of color interpreted paternalistic gestures of the new government after 1961.

The wide reach of revolutionary racialized discourses described in this project also help explain the perceived radicalization and longevity of the Cuban revolution. Ultimately, the story of the 1959 revolution cannot be recounted adequately without including these themes because of the crucial role conversations about race played in giving meaning to the Cuban national project, especially in opposition to counter-government groups. Central to the popularity of Castro and other revolutionary leaders was their ability to characterize the new government as fighting against U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs. This anti-imperialistic project was successful, in part, because it emphasized U.S. racial segregation,

³ Original Reel 15, *Columna Juvenil de Centenario* (1969) found in box 38U of Yale University, Cuban Revolution Collection. This is unedited footage filmed by Adolfo Mekas and Barbara Stone for the making of the documentary *Compañeras y compañeros* (1970). However, only a small percentage of the footage went into the film, the rest has recently been acquired by Yale library. Afro-Cubans frequently brush their forearms to indicate that they are talking about people of color. At times this gesture replaces actually saying “*negro*” or “*mulato*” aloud, other times it is accompanied by verbal references to people of African descent.

violence against blacks, and refusal to support anti-colonial movements in Africa as racist. Talking vocally about race, racism, and the experiences of people of color was a drastic move in 1959, but in Cuba it laid the foundation for a lasting critique of counterrevolutionary groups and the United States. Inversely, counter-government groups and representatives of the U.S. state, both of which were more conservative in terms of social justice than the revolutionary leadership, came to see the Cuban solicitation of black support as a part of the revolution's radical and later communist program.

The story told in "Not Blacks, but Citizens" also points to the roots of Cuban involvement in global racial conflicts. The decision by revolutionary leaders to send troops to Angola came out of international relationships between Cubans and people of African descent initiated between 1959 and 1961. These associations had varied outcomes throughout the twentieth century, but this project has shown that they were not unprecedented. Rather, strategies for reaching out to people of African descent began in 1959 when pledges to eliminate discrimination on the island were seen as instrumental to the revolutionary formulations of Cuban nationalism.

Appendix A: Political Cartoons from Chapter Five

Figure 1: "We Want Castro," *Noticias de Hoy*, September 21, 1960, 1.



Figure 2: Chago, "Untitled," *Revolución*, September 23, 1960, 2.



Figure 3: Chago, "Untitled," *Revolución* September 22, 1960, 2.



Figure 4: Chago, "Untitled," *Revolución* September 24, 1960, 2.



Figure 5: "Untitled," *Verde Olivo* 1, no. 29, October 1, 1960.



Figure 6: "Untitled," *Verde Olivo* 1, no. 29, October 1, 1960, 79



Figure 7: "Sin Palabras," *Verde Olivo* 1, no. 29, October 1, 1960.

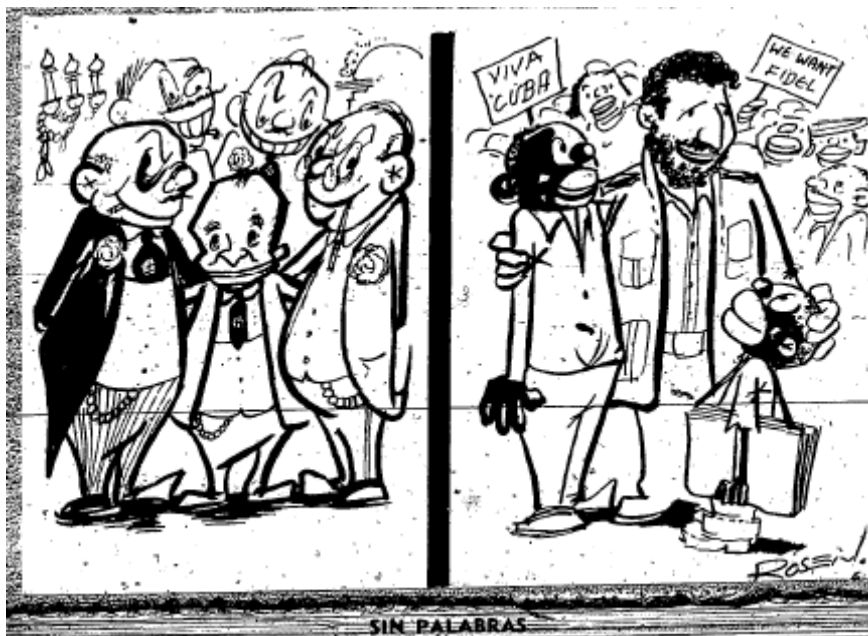


Figure 8: Frémez, "El Ku Klux Klan es así," *Bohemia* 52, no. 39, September 25, 1960, 76.

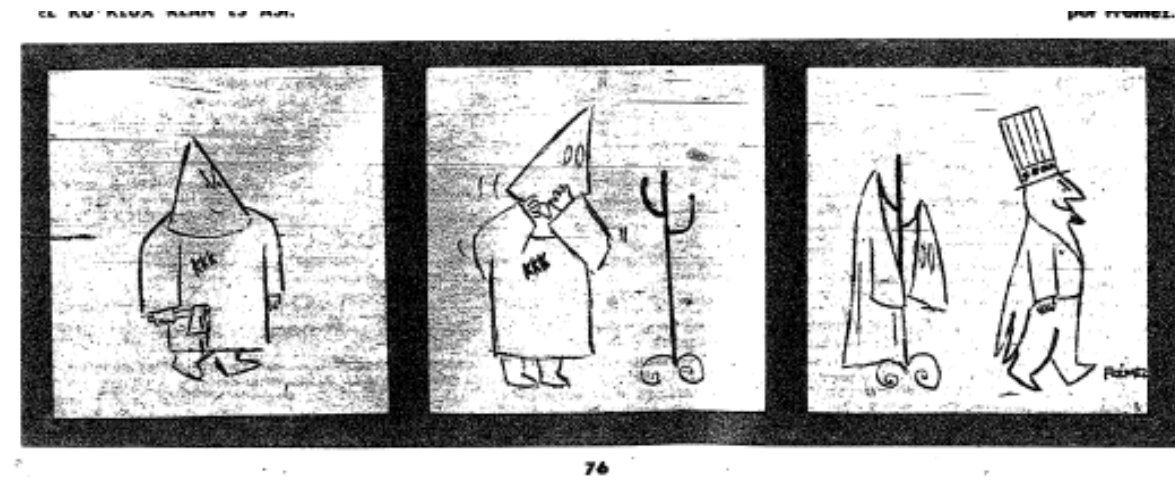
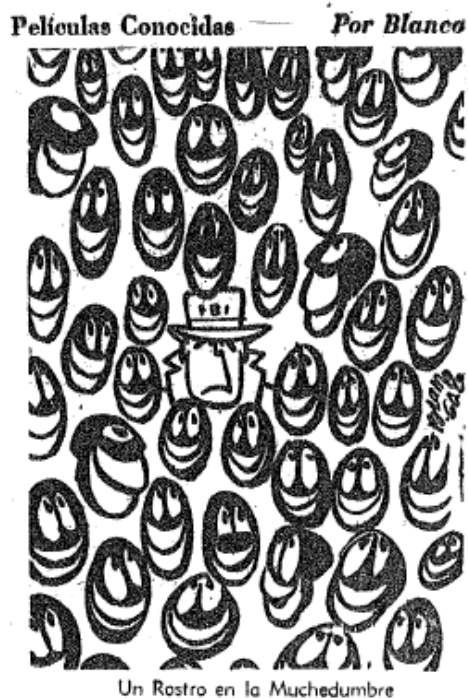


Figure 9: Blanco, "Películas Conocidas," *El Mundo*, September 21, 1960, A-4.



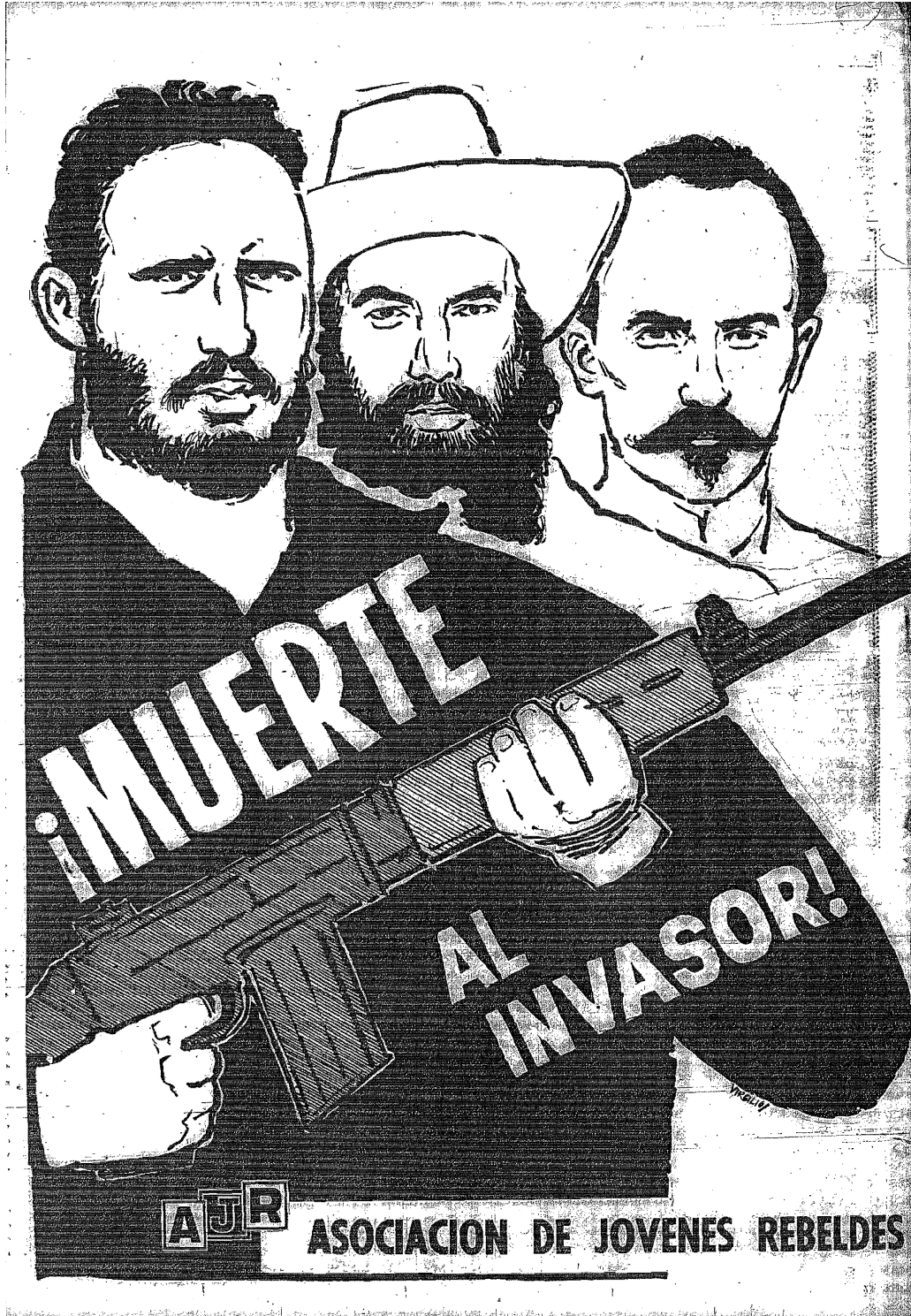
It is interesting to compare these two cartoons. One portrays an FBI agent in Harlem and clearly characterizes the community as being comprised of blacks. While the second cartoon depicts Castro's return to Cuba and illustrates the crowd of Cubans meeting him with only white faces.

Figure 10: Blanco, “El regreso de Gulliver del país de los Enanos,” *El Mundo*, September 29, 1960, A-4.



Appendix B: Additional Images from Chapter Six

Figure 1: "Muerte al invasor!" *Noticias de Hoy*, January 1, 1961, 15.



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