

Looking Black at Revolutionary Cuba

by
Jafari Sinclair Allen

What does the promise of 1959—¡Venceremos! (We Will Win!)—mean to blacks in the United States, and what are the possible futures for the continuation and expansion of revolution? As commentary by black individuals who visited or took refuge in Revolutionary Cuba and my own ethnographic work on the island, roughly from 1998 to 2003, show, the vision of Cuba has become more salient and more complex as the position of blacks in the United States becomes more fraught with contradictions. As must any contemporary 50-year-old, the Cuban Revolution must now reconcile intention and effect and chart its future course in a world very different from the one it was born into.

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*I am a black woman who wants to believe
that somewhere on earth black women are free.*

—Farah Jasmine Griffin

*Cuba si, Bloqueo no! . . . Who would you rather come
to Harlem, Fidel or [New York Mayor Rudolf] Giuliani?*

—Elombe Brathe

The only white person I have ever really liked was Fidel.

—Malcolm X

You have landed in Cuba. For whatever reason. No matter what has brought you here—socialist solidarity, scopic drive, erotic imperative, racialized longing—seeing Cuba is more than merely gazing from a tourist taxi, university classroom, or the windows of an air-conditioned Mercedes imported expressly for the comfort of foreigners. To see Cuba—not waiting to be discovered, not unaware of its position in the vast sea, and too busy resolving the issues of the hour to be on watch for the so-called last days—one has to walk. And *look*—like a friend or foe, CIA agent, meal ticket, solidary compatriot, potential lover, exile, escapee, or expatriate, for example.

Jafari Sinclair Allen is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and African American Studies at Yale University. His critical ethnography, *¡Venceremos! Sexuality, Gender, and Black Self-Making in Cuba*, is forthcoming from the Duke University Press.

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In the United States, to see Cuba is in large part to see it through the very particularly conditioned perspectives of Cuban-American “exiles.” On this side of the falsely dichotomous debate, members of the Cuban exile community—overwhelmingly structurally white—and others blame “Castro” for the island’s ills even as they continue to use powerful lobbying organizations to advocate U.S. policies toward Cuba that make life extremely difficult for Cubans, who are largely *of color*. The other side of this polarized discourse is characterized by turning a blind eye to the errors of the revolutionary government and attributing difficulties solely to U.S. imperialism. Factions on both sides of Cuban and Cuban-American ideological, intellectual, and political debates are seemingly loath to acknowledge the fact that complex narratives of race and color, gender and sexuality go to the heart of the future of Cuba and the Cuban Revolution. Looking black at Cuba, on the ground, proposes another way to see Cuba, in sharp contrast to these pretensions to panorama in which texture, color, sound, and contradiction blur into totalized nothingness. This is the Cuba in which antiphonies do not necessarily happily resolve and *serious games* most often have no clear winner.

“WHAT I BROUGHT TO THE REVOLUTION” (BARAKA)

In 1960, months after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the “Negro playwright and poet” then known as LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) traveled to Cuba with a group of other “Negro intellectuals” who had been invited by the Cuban government to see for themselves what life was like in the new revolutionary society. Baraka’s trip transformed him, as encounters with Cuba have transformed other important black intellectuals and activists. His *Cuba libre* (1960: 11), which chronicles this encounter, begins, “If we live all our lives under lies, it becomes difficult to see anything if it does not have anything to do with these lies. . . . I am sorry. There are things, elements in this world, that continue to exist, for whatever time, completely liberated from our delusion.” Fifty years later, Cuba continues to exist, more or less liberated from “our delusion” but also with a number of gnawing contradictions. At the same time, the *lies we live under* in the United States and other places multiply. Owing to very particular historical, material, and existential experiences, blacks in the United States and elsewhere have always had what W. E. B. Du Bois called “second sight” available in contradistinction to the perspectives of our countrypeople. This double consciousness, if it does not always condition insurgency, at least produces sensitivity to lies and delusions. At this moment, as the position of blacks in the United States becomes more fraught with contradictions, the vision of Cuba has become more salient and more complex. This reflection on the complex meanings of the Cuban Revolution for blacks in the United States like me and on possible futures for the continuation and expansion of revolution includes perspectives of individuals like Baraka, Huey P. Newton, Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, Nehanda Abiodun, and others who have visited or taken refuge in Revolutionary Cuba. However, it focuses mainly on reflections of my fieldwork in Cuba roughly between 1998 and 2003 (Allen, n.d.). After some initial observations, we’ll consider a few ethnographic scenes and personal reflections on Cuba at 50.

The Cuban Revolution and its willingness to “export” to the rest of the black world not only a particular brand of revolutionary analysis but also material assistance are reflected, for example, in Maurice Bishop’s Grenada, Michael Manley’s Jamaica, and the political philosophy and action of the Guyanese scholar-activist Walter Rodney in the Caribbean. Of course, Cuban military action in Angola and Mozambique contributed to the toppling of South African apartheid through the undermining of its stranglehold on all of southern Africa. In Havana in July 1991, the African National Congress leader and first postapartheid president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, averred, “The defeat of the racist army at Cuito Cuanavale has made it possible for me to be here today!” Cuba provides safe haven to black and New Afrikan revolutionaries exiled from the United States or escaping prison and offers medical education to black and brown students from the United States alongside Africans and Latin Americans—demonstrating the status of people of color in the United States as a Third World nation in need of doctors. Although scholars such as Carlos Moore cast Fidel Castro and the Revolutionary Vanguard as callous racist elites, the effects of the revolution inarguably improved the relative position of black Cubans. Also inarguable is that *even a revolution* has yet to undo centuries of racist and sexist hegemony that have shaped the nation and threaten to undo the revolutionary project. Still, for blacks in the United States and elsewhere, the mere fact that the avowed antiracist and pro-black-liberation Cuban Revolution triumphed a mere 90 miles away from the segregated shores of the United States in 1959 is instructive and energizing to the imagination of black liberation—perhaps especially in the United States, “the belly of the beast” of imperialism.

In the opening of the short film *Beautiful Me[s]: Finding Our Revolutionary Selves in Cuba*, Yale graduate student filmmakers question white students at Williams College and other sites apropos of what they know about Cuba. There are long pauses and answers such as “Cigars” and “Castro, we don’t like him. I guess he is, like, a dictator.” Then, the scene changes to the streets of Harlem. One young black man says that he thinks that there “are probably a lot of black people there, but living in better conditions.” A member of the Nation of Islam praises Fidel Castro for “standing up” against U.S. aggression for so long. Harlem, one of the imaginary capitals of black life in the United States, currently undergoing dramatic change, of course famously served as a refuge and stage for Fidel Castro when he and the entire Cuban delegation to the 1960 United Nations General Assembly dramatically left their downtown hotel room after ill-treatment to reside at the Hotel Theresa. In his essay “Race and Revolution: African American Perspectives,” Manning Marable (2000: 90) recalls not only this visit but also Fidel Castro’s 1995 return to Harlem’s Abyssinian Church. Reverend Calvin Butts III then welcomed Fidel as a “visionary revolutionary . . . seeking the freedom of all of the people around the world.” And while a man’s being warmly welcomed and hailed a hero in an African American church is not a unique event, Marable correctly asserts that “only Nelson Mandela of South Africa surpassed the moral authority and political credibility that Castro could claim within black America” (91). Although President Castro’s daughter reportedly stood outside the church demonstrating against her father’s presence in Harlem, Elombe Brathe said what the overflowing crowd of black community members expressed through

their exuberance: “Castro has family right here . . . among us” (Marable, 2000: 91). Fidel’s remarks elucidate the connection: “You [blacks in the United States] were never deceived. We [Cuban revolutionaries] were never deceived.”

There is a fundamental difference in the opinions or consciousness of blacks in the United States with regard to Cuba. The politics are certainly informed by a human rights ethic that does not end with the singularly liberal conception of rights that accents rights of expression and eschews economic rights (as we have seen recently, apparently, outside of the right of the so-called free market to survive). This impulse in black intellectual and popular thought can be traced from at least the turn of the nineteenth century and was renewed in the 1950s and early 1960s and invigorated by the Black Power movement and the articulation of U.S. Black Power with liberation movements throughout the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. So, it was not only U.S. delusions that I brought to Cuba in 1998 but also an understanding of the black diaspora, which sees transnational and extranational connections and seeks to elucidate material and psychic similarities and solidarity—not uncritical sameness but kinship born of both similar roots (*si no tiene sangre de Congo, tiene de Carabali*)—and, perhaps more important, similar routes.

The relationship between the Cuban Revolution and blacks in the United States—whose intellectual and political traditions include socialism and revolution but are more centrally organized as a fight against antiblack racism and for recognition as full (increasingly liberal) citizen-subjects—is very complex and demands nuance (perhaps more than can be provided in this short intervention). The way we see Cuba—whether avowed or aspiring revolutionaries, casual or solidary visitors, or scholars endeavoring to negotiate treacherous academic straits—remains conditioned by our experience as black people who have experienced racialized outer-national status, political-economic degradation, and noncitizenship at home. For example, when Angela Davis (1974: 210) asserts in her autobiography about her extended visit to Cuba, “It was clear to us . . . the three black members [of an international delegation to Cuba] . . . that only under socialism could this fight against racism have been so successfully executed,” she is not spouting Fidelista “propaganda,” as some have charged, but offering her typically astute situated analysis that recognizes the inseparability of race and class and demands an intersectional approach. This certainly resonates with the words of the U.S. black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective (1983 [1977]), which make plain and precise the reason to celebrate and respectfully critique the Cuban Revolution today, 50 years into the continuing project:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism, as well as patriarchy. . . . We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. . . . We know that this analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as black women.

As I chronicle and theorize in my larger work, the extension of Cuban socialist analysis has only recently begun. It is starting—on the ground among black Cubans themselves.

The romance between many black North Americans and Cuba begins with the myth of racial democracy—that is, the imagination of a place where racial pluralism is celebrated and difference is nonhierarchical—from prerevolutionary exchanges and rhetorics and becomes more compelling after the revolutionary period, with the exclamation that the revolution had not only ended *de jure* segregation in private clubs, for example, but also *cured* racism. The reality was and remains much more complex. Like that of the literary critic Farah Jasmine Griffin (2003: 74), my love for Cuba is “no idealistic, romanticized love. It [is] difficult, challenging, questioning.” After years of curiosity, Griffin fell in love with Cuba and longed to return following her first visit in 2001. As she was, I had been “set up to fall in love with [Cuba] very early on.” My father had been an avid observer of Cuba since before the triumph of the revolution. Reading books on Cuba borrowed from public libraries, then dancing to Cuban bands, and finally meeting black Cubans in New York City provided information that allowed him to see Cuba and other places in Latin America as an extension of the diaspora to which he himself felt connected through his own southern U.S. and Guyanese heritage. Griffin and I had read Toni Cade Bambara, Amiri Baraka, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur. As progressive intellectuals, how could we not be “in love” with or at least intrigued by a place that, as Griffin remarks, helped Bambara realize, through examples of Cuban writers, “that writing was [her] way of doing [her] work in the world”? Griffin reminds us that Bambara’s visit to Cuba made her “begin to think that writing could be a way to engage in struggle . . . a weapon . . . an instrument for transformational politics.” While Cuba demonstrated to her and to others that the life of the mind could become democratized—that art and intellectual pursuits are not the sole provinces of privileged whites and those born proximate to this privilege—others point out that creativity in Cuba has also at times been limited by political exigency, expediency, or merely custom.

RACE TOWARD CUBA

Barring none, whatever their opinion of the contemporary political and economic situation, each of my black Cuban respondents refers to “before the revolution” negatively as a time of widespread corruption, as well as U.S. control of the Cuban economy and government and support for the regimes that barred legal recourse for disenfranchised women and sexual minorities. It included wholesale political violence against anyone who opposed the order and perennial targeting of poor blacks. Still, the internal contradictions of race in contemporary Cuba have yet to be fully explored. As Alejandro de la Fuente (2000) asserts in his review of work on race in Cuba, Jorge Domínguez was correct when he pointed out in 1988 that race in Cuban history had been a “classic non-topic” for Latin American studies scholars. Although there is a growing number of historical works on race in Cuba, this remains true for contemporary studies. Notwithstanding this important work, there is a dearth of ethnographic and otherwise empirical social science literature on race in contemporary Cuba. A few important works on the history of Afro Cuba and connections between blacks in Cuba and the United

States in various sites before the triumph of the revolution—from baseball and other sports to literature, music, and popular dance—have emerged following the path-breaking *Between Race and Empire*, edited by Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (1998). Among these, Frank Guridy's (n.d.) *Diaspora in Action: Afro Cubans and African Americans in the U.S.-Caribbean World* lovingly traces cross-Caribbean relationships of black and of-color intellectuals, activists, and businesspeople involved in similar projects of racial uplift. Guridy holds that relationships between Cubans and North Americans of African descent stimulated and inspired black (and of-color) activists in both nations. Diaspora studies provide intellectual and institutional support for such projects, which does not seem forthcoming under the rubric of Latin American studies or Cuban studies.

“PSST—¡DAME CARNET!”

Emerging work on Cuba by black social scientists who performed field research in the late 1990s often includes stories of *entrée*, location, and dislocation in the race/color and gender logics of Cuba. Scholars cite in their works and public presentations the ways in which, for example, self-identified blacks from the United States may become *mulato* or some other Cuban color label and national identities can be misunderstood or collapsed on the basis of phenotype. Gender-normative black women experience gendered and raced surveillance, being mistaken for sex workers in tourist areas. Black male scholars, including Mark Sawyer (2006), have also commented on typical scenes of “profiling” in late 1990s Cuba. Of course, I share some of these experiences. Like these other researchers, I was constantly mistaken for Cuban and therefore subject to police surveillance. I was also stopped near tourist areas every day on my way to various appointments and errands and commanded “¡Dame carnet!” (Give me your ID!).

Still, the game of comparative surveillance must be more fully qualified and pushed farther. As a student of critical social theory and Latin American studies, which suggest that it is class that matters in this region, not color or race, I was anxious to finally more fully experience the privileges of my class position during my initial fieldwork in Cuba. At home in the United States, I am painfully aware that my middle-class status is mostly illegible to nonblacks and especially invisible to the police. In Cuba, I followed the strategies of my Cuban friends and respondents by indignantly and loudly asking why I had been stopped. Curious about the treatment of the “profiled” during these encounters, I answered police hails of head gestures, hand motions, and “psst” in various ways. Sometimes I waited to see if I would be pursued. My performances—mimicking my friends and respondents, who alternately sighed, rolled eyes, calmly reasoned with, or excitedly gesticulated their disdain for the inconvenience imposed on WWB—walking while black—was motivated by my youthful zeal to participate while observing, certainly, but also by my desire to play a different racial game from the one at home in the United States. In Cuba, we “talked back” to the police—attempted to cajole, shame, or playfully tease these young men who could easily be our cousins

(country cousins—*guajiro-guajiro*, my cosmopolitan friend Ulísis would add). One day, Ulísis provided one of a number of extemporaneous performances or creative interpretations of segments from Nicolás Guillén's famous revolutionary poem *Tengo*. Questioning the young police officer from Oriente who had pulled us over on our way to Guanabo Beach because there was a white woman in the car with us who appeared to be a tourist, he boomed, "Is this not my road? . . . my air . . . my sky . . . my beach, my police . . . my country?" Although entertaining to us, his performance fell flat for the police officer. In my own experience with the Cuban National Police, my protests were heard and dismissed until the conversation got involved enough to reach the end of my stretched linguistic ability to sound like an angry Habanero.

The gulf between these annoying tête-à-têtes with Cuban National Police, many of whom are black men from the Oriente region of the island, and the terror one feels and remembers, driving from Eastern ivy-covered gates to the deepest part of the U.S. Deep South—pulled over at 73 mph on a 70-mph road—is wider and deeper than the Florida Straits. To be pulled over by the Cuban National Police on the way to the beach with friends or interviewing respondents on a street corner or in a bar was to be annoyed by the interruption and the reminder that the revolution is not yet complete. The situation in my home country—land of the ubiquitous stop and frisk, of the 35-mph pull-over, of multiple blows, multiple shots, irrespective of occasion, nationality, or temperament—is quite different. I know the routine "Down South," and, following Malcolm X, anything south of Canada qualifies (though increases in racialized violence there call this into question, too). Say as little as possible. Call him/her "officer," "sir," or "ma'am." Do not say "brother," "comrade," or "compay" as my Cuban friends do. Move slowly. Try to show your university ID or business card as you slip out your driver's license—ever so slowly.

On occasion, I violated the law and good sense by not carrying my passport and visa. I often dressed like Cubans. Yet the novelty of being taken for a "native" in my adopted home wore off after several recurrences of this hailing during each research trip over the course of four years. The weariness of being constantly "profiled" set in eventually, even as I appreciated the qualitative difference in the hailing, which could be the difference between life in Cuba and death in the United States. While conscious of having to comply with the personal strategies of black Cuban men when walking or hanging out in public with them, when alone I simply refused or de-recognized the hail. I ignored the signals, pretended I did not understand Spanish, or merely cheerfully waved hello when eye contact was made and I was "waved in" or called over by the police. On one or two occasions, on the way into a hotel, I simply and arrogantly flashed my U.S. passport—ashamed, as if "passing," but having saved a bit of energy. As much as a backpack, designer clothing, and a fast-paced purposeful walk, my attitude of mutual misrecognition and performance of ignorance marked me as a privileged foreigner and therefore outside of the purview of certain types of state discipline in Cuba. This was both a matter of consternation and humor for black Cuban friends. One evening, as we contemplated being approached by police who were watching us, Arturo began, "They think they know you're Cuban, so they call out to you, 'Hey, give me your ID,'" but if you don't look back or act like you know it's you they're

calling, they will most likely not bother you." Gerardo, however, adds a critical piece apropos of interpellation or hailing that makes this a risky enterprise: "Well, yes, but if they do catch you, you've really made them angry because you've had a lack of respect for their right to call you." Laughing, he continued, "You can do this because we will call the U.S. Interest Section and Fidel will deliver you back to [black liberation fighters living in Cuba]. You're our brother, but we're not so lucky here. Maybe in New York, you can do the same for us!" Of course, this is not likely. One need only ask the family of Sean Bell what role police (of any color) play in our communities in the United States.¹

My fieldwork in Cuba must therefore be characterized as a chronicle of crossings (see Alexander, 2005). It is animated and enabled by my own subject position as black and gay. But most centrally it is motivated by my own longing for the *larger freedom* my research subjects and I sought in religious ceremonies in which we encountered our ancestors, Orishas, and ourselves, in all-night parties where Cuban rum flowed freely and complex interpersonal dramas unfolded, and in transnational political solidarity movements of folks who understand that, as the mother of a U.S. sister-exile put it to me, "They are trying to fight a cruise missile with a slingshot."

LOOKING BLACK AT CALLEJÓN DE HAMEL

As we talk loudly above the din of the crowd and the recorded music between live rumba sets, I notice yet another tourist (anthropologist? CIA agent?) aiming a camera at Lao, Herman, and me. We must look like a piece of revolutionary prop-art—huddled together in our various shades of brown skin against the blue-and-yellow-painted wall—Lao's Chinese grandfather asserting himself on Lao's face but not his hair, Herman's curly hair made coarse by beeswax and styled as dreadlocks, and me with the markers of Lùcumí religion around my neck and wrists, Kongo ancestry on my face, and no phenotypical hint of ivy-covered walls or black bourgeois *brought-upsy*. As my friends seemingly unconsciously give a "thumbs up" sign for perhaps the third cameraman of the afternoon, who has made no attempt to ask our permission to be his/her object, I unconsciously "out" myself and my very different relationship to surveillance and objectification by yelling in English, "I did not give you permission to take my picture! Get out of here!" Then, following the blank look I receive, expletives follow. The stunned look of a spurned tourist expecting a happy, friendly native convince me that I should try French: "Allí!" I want to have said, "Why do you call up images of the tropical black picturesque? You do not know that I am an anthropologist from New York—you don't know me!" This day, with no camera to indicate the class/national privilege to objectify that I hold, despite my *very black* blackness, no designer eyeglasses marking me as middle-class and no backpack full of bottled water and toilet tissue marking me as a foreigner, wearing *ilekes* and drinking from a plastic bottle of *ron de la calle* (street rum) passed liberally among three dark young men, to the crowd I have dissolved into the sea of black men watching women—and, more furtively, cruising other men—laughing and joking under the bluest of Caribbean skies and the hottest

Havana sun. In Cuba, my U.S. passport and U.S. dollars—poor by my standards but rich by theirs—were the major separation between me and my Cuban respondents and friends. Still, the fact that my position in the global political economy was different from that of my respondents did not prevent various forms of identification. Trading stories seemed to invite Cubans' comparisons and incisive critique of local (U.S. and Cuban) and global systems of race/color hegemony like that of Hermán. He offered, apropos of the gaze of tourists, "They do not really see you." His theorizing is eerily similar to that of Arturo and Gerardo. Today it is not the state apparatus but the gaze of tourists and other outsiders. He continues, "but only a guayabera, a big smile, some rum, a cigar, and [gesturing with his finger on his hand to indicate] 'black skin,' and—bam!—you're a postcard!"

While it is debatable to what degree Cubans believe in slogans like "¡Venceremos!" which proclaim eventual victory of the downtrodden brave enough to resist, it is clear that this seemingly quixotic rhetoric and the political education it represents have conditioned subjectivities of "entitlement" in Cuba. This entitlement is unmatched in the black diaspora. Cubans, especially young adults who have experienced the height of revolutionary society, feel that it is their birthright to enjoy human security (e.g., free health care, education, and subsidized food and housing), as well as to express themselves freely as human beings, even if material realities and political exigencies find them merely subsisting in spaces of lack and uncertainty. From the first moment of contact with Cuba, one is struck by the social ethos—¡Venceremos! (We will win!). As for me—writing and living in the United States, post-civil rights, post-Black Power, post-women's liberation, post-queer liberation, in this moment of increasing politically conservative attacks on the gains of the recent past, increasing social disparities, and proliferation of the lies we accede to live under—like my Cuban teacher and friend Sr. Ferrer, who explained that ¡Venceremos! is more of a prophecy than a statement of unqualified victory, I am also compelled to have faith. As he put it, "We must. . . . There is no other solution [for any of us]."

Onward. *Vamos a vencer.*

NOTE

1. On November 25, 2006, 23-year-old Sean Bell was killed on the morning of his wedding day by a team of New York City police officers in Queens, New York. Two of his friends were severely wounded in the hail of 50 shots fired by both plainclothes and uniformed officers—two of them African American and another Latino. Charges ranging from manslaughter to reckless endangerment were leveled against four of the police officers. Each was found not guilty.

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