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REVIEW/HARLEM HOSPITALITY AND POLITICAL HISTORY: MALCOLM X AND FIDEL CASTRO AT THE HOTEL THERESA

Fidel and Malcolm X, by Rosemari Mealy (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean View Press, 1993)

> The Theresa is now best known as the place where Fidel Castro went during his UN visit, and achieved a psychological coup over the U.S. State Department when it confined him to Manhattan, never dreaming that he'd stay uptown in Harlem and make such an impression among the Negroes. — Malcolm X, 1964.

> I always recall my meeting with Malcolm X at the Hotel Theresa, because he was the one who supported us and made it possible for us to stay there. We faced two alternatives. One was the United Nations gardens—when I mentioned this to the Secretary-General, he was horrified at the thought of a delegation in tents there. But when we received Malcolm X's offer—he had spoken with one of our comrades—I said, "That is the place, the Hotel Theresa." And there we went. So I have a personal recollection very much linked to him." — Fidel Castro, 1990.

THE ABOVE QUOTATIONS from Malcolm X and Fidel Castro appear in Rosemari Mealy's *Fidel and Malcolm X*. The very brief but historic meeting between Malcolm X and Fidel Castro occurred on September 24, 1960 at the instigation of the U.S. State Department (much to its chagrin), which had pressured the Shelburne Hotel to cancel its contract for accommodations to the Cuban Delegation, headed by Fidel Castro. Having just successfully waged a revolution for independence within the U.S. "sphere of influence," the Cubans found their delegation, which was scheduled to participate in international meetings at the United Nations, harassed by the U.S. government. However, at the suggestions of Harlem activists, the disruptions in securing accommodations were transformed into a momentous opportunity for cultural-political expressions of solidarity and anti-racism. When the Cuban delegation accepted the warm welcome of the Hotel Theresa's owner Love B. Woods, ideological and political ties between progressive African Americans and Cuban revolutionaries were cultivated.

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By detailing the observations of both African Americans and Cubans present during the delegation's stay at the Hotel Theresa, Mealy uncovers an important narrative, an oral history of radical activists reflecting on the significance of an event that transpired three decades ago. The meeting of Malcolm X and Fidel Castro in Harlem came to symbolize an era of post World War II decolonization movements and human rights struggles of Black and Third World people on several continents. Mealy recovers that meeting and its political significance by providing the transcripts of recent interviews with those present, and press coverage of the meeting, as well as Malcolm's and Castro's reflections on the occasion. Although the use of extensive quotations interspersed with little text makes reading the narrative difficult, this documentation brings attention to an encounter usually relegated to a footnote in most accounts of contemporary NorthAmerican political history.

According to *Fidel and Malcolm X*, while scores of reporters from the U.S. mainstream or White press waited outside the Hotel, African American press were granted entry to record this event. Only Jimmy Booker of the *Amsterdam News*, Ralph D. Matthews of the *New York Citizen-Call*, and photojournalist Carl Nesfield were allowed to cover the meeting in Harlem between Malcolm X and Fidel Castro at the Hotel Theresa. Mealy interviews these journalists for their impressions. A photographer for Malcolm X, Nesfield notes that the meeting between Malcolm and Fidel "showed the kinship between certain Cuban people."

Nesfield emphasizes that not all Cubans and Black Americans, particularly those in Miami, shared this affinity; however, "the militants here at the time [viewed] that things had become better for the dark skinned Cubans under Castro than they had been under their predecessor Batista."(46) Reprinting articles from newspapers such as the *New York Citizen-Call*, Mealy portrays the sentiment of the Black progressive and leftist press which saw the 1959 revolution as a gain for AfroCubans who had suffered under the previous racist (and U.S.- supported) dictatorship. One *New York Citizen-Call* September 1960 article read:

> Some 2,000 brown New Yorkers stood in the rain Monday night waiting for Cuba's Premier Fidel Castro to arrive at Harlem's famous old Hotel Theresa . . . . from the conversations among this rain soaked mass of humanity, the idea began to build that Castro would come here to stay because he had found out, as most Negroes found out, the nasty ways the underdog was treated downtown.
>
> To Harlem's oppressed ghetto dwellers, Castro was that bearded revolutionary who had thrown the nation's rascals out and who had told white America to go to hell.(48-49)

Alongside these irreverent quotations from the "alternative" press, Mealy quotes Malcolm X's observations of Fidel's visit to Harlem. In one passage she recounts his statements at a meeting where he discussed Che Guevara's aborted visit to Harlem in 1964. According to Mealy, at that December 13, 1964 event, Malcolm X read the following letter from Guevara:

> Dear brothers and sisters of Harlem,
>
> I would have liked to have been with you. . .but the actual conditions are not good for this meeting. Receive the warm salutations of the Cuban people and especially those of Fidel, who remembers enthusiastically his visit to Harlem a few years ago. United we will win.(59)

Mealy writes that Malcolm prefaced his reading of the Cuban revolutionary's note to the gathering by warning: "don't let somebody else tell us who our enemies should be and who our friends shoud be." Referring to Che Guevara, Malcolm also stated "I love a revolutionary. And one of the most revolutionary men in this country right now was going to come out here . . . ." Guevara's visit to the U.S. and Harlem was discouraged by anti-Cuban groups in the U.S. With characteristic defiance, Malcolm assured those in attendance:

> you don't see any anti-Castro Cubans around here—we eat them up. Let them go and fight the Ku Klux Klan, or the White Citizens Council. Let them spend some of that energy getting their own house in order. Don't come up to Harlem and tell us who we should applaud for and shouldn't applaud for. Or there will be some ex-anti-Castro Cubans.(58-59).

Mealy relays the voices of that era and their perspectives on the links between two oppressed people seeking independence and self-determination embodied in famous, and, in Western mainstream journalism, vilified political radicals. One of the most important contributions of *Fidel and Malcolm X* is Mealy's coverage of contemporary reflections on that meeting and on the relationships between African Americans and Cubans. Particularly useful, given the U.S. embargo which blocks the flow of information from Cuba, is her reporting on the Havana, May 1990 "Malcolm X Speaks in the '90s Symposium" which President Castro attended. *Fidel and Malcolm X* provides excerpts from a May 24, 1990 speech made by Fidel Castro reflecting on Malcolm X's political legacy; and most significantly, Castro's comments concerning the political aspirations of revolutionary Cubans today:

> We have always been in solidarity with the struggle of Black people, of minorities, and of the poor in the United States. We have always been in solidarity with them, and they have been in solidarity with us.
>
> We must fight to defeat the campaigns, the schemes, and the lies, all that is aimed at separating us. I think that in these times we need that friendship more than ever, and we need your solidarity more than ever. And we fully appreciate it, because we understand that one has to be very courageous to [support] . . . Cuba in the United States. . . .

> Cuba has an important role to play, a very big responsibility, because there were people who thought that the revolution here would collapse just like socialism [in Europe] . . . . But of course, this country will resist. We are waging three great battles: the political battle, where we maintain the unity of the people, the support of the people, the determination of our people; the economic battle, which is even more difficult here than elsewhere given the conditions we face; and the battle for defense.
>
> We have to work in these three directions. But we are not doing this for ourselves. We are doing it for all the just causes of the world, at a time of skepticism. Optimism and the hope of the peoples will again be born, because the negative forces will not prevail. (59-61)

Rosemari Mealy's compilations of the testimonies, reflections and recollections surrounding the 1960 meeting between Malcolm X and Fidel Castro explore the historic and contemporary ties of African American progressives to the Cuban revolution. She provides useful data for understanding the attitudes of progressive activists towards two political leaders who were then, and remain now, political symbols inspiring contemporary thought and activism.