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# Strengthening Nationality: Blacks in Cuba

Gisela Arandia Covarrubias  
*Universidad de la Habana*

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*Gisela Arandia Covarrubias*

## **STRENGTHENING NATIONALITY: BLACKS IN CUBA\***

**T**HE STUDY OF BLACKS in Cuba, as in the case of other so-called “minorities,” encounters obstacles from the very beginning. It is well known that we have not reached the stage of development in Cuban social sciences to deal with this subject adequately. In contrast to highly developed studies in medicine and biotechnology, Cuban social sciences have been subject to the prejudices of Eastern European research interests and the legendary indolence towards studying racial attitudes born with the Spanish colonization. These obstacles are compounded by Cuban subordination to the United States until 1959. Spanish and U.S. policies alike were directed at maintaining the Black Cuban population as second class citizens.

Bourgeois historiography and its legacy have tended to abstain from any reflection on the achievements of Blacks. This, along with stereotypes that have become part of popular entertainment, contributed to the reaffirmation in the minds of the Black population of their supposed inferiority. Sadly, it can be said that, with the exception of a few authors mentioned below, the subject of Blacks in Cuba was not considered a topic to satisfy intellectual curiosity.

### **RESEARCHERS AND WRITERS**

For more than half a century, few serious works have been written about the life of Black Cubans. One of the few authors to have approached this subject is Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969). Considered the “father” of Cuban anthropology, Ortiz left an extensive series of writings. Ortiz studied in Madrid, Barcelona, Rome and Havana. A lawyer as well as anthropologist, his first publications addressed judicial themes bearing upon racial equality and the barbarity of slavery. Fernando Ortiz also covered diverse topics such as the religious, economic, linguistic, and artistic life of Blacks in Cuba. Undoubtedly, if he had lived longer, his intelligence and insight would have left behind a more contemporary analysis of the role of Blacks in the history of Cuba.

Another major source of information on this topic is Lydia Cabrera (1899-1989). Born in New York, Cabrera died in Miami, having lived as an adult in both Cuba and, after 1961, the United States. Cabrera brought forth extraordinary stories dealing with the complexities of AfroCuban religions. Her narratives on African oral traditions in Cuba rely upon the testimonies of slaves or their descendants. These stories, often told in the first person, represent a formidable source of information for those interested in

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\* Editor's note: translation by Isabel Valiela.

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religion. Her most famous book, *El monte [The Hill]*, was published a few years ago in Cuba. Other noteworthy but lesser-known authors include Juan Gualberto Gómez (1854-1933), this famous Black intellectual and “independentista” was an assistant to José Martí (1853-1895). Born in Mantanzas, Gualberto Gómez lived and wrote in Paris, Mexico, Spain and the United States. One of his most important works is *Por Cuba Libre [For a Free Cuba]*. In addition to Gualberto Gómez, the researcher José Luciano Franco (1891-1989), tirelessly worked in the National Archives to reconstruct events surrounding the Cuban wars of independence, from which he extracted a new and dignified vision of Cuban Blacks — in particular his writings note the significant role played by Antonio Maceo (1845-1896). Luciano Franco’s books have been translated into English, French, Portuguese, and Russian.

An important but relatively unknown work is *Los independientes de color [The Independents of Color]*, written by Serafín Portuondo Linares, the son of a veteran of the war of independence. A valuable work dealing with an important moment in the struggle of Black people in Cuba, this quite controversial book, which describes the assassinations of three thousand Blacks in 1912, has not been re-issued but can be found in some Cuban libraries.

A more contemporary writer on Black Cuban history is Pedro Serviat (1914-). Serviat participated in the 1940s struggles for civil rights for Black Cubans. Author of *El problema del negro en Cuba y su solución definitiva [The Problem of Blacks in Cuba and its Definitive Solution]*, he affirms that after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959 the racial problem found its solution. Serviat confessed to me in an interview that he had wanted to write a second part to this work which would include a more critical outlook on contemporary race and social reality; but ill health and advanced age impeded him. Serviat is a Black man with integrity; like other old fighters, had he found a more favorable context for this subject, he would have been capable of providing a more in-depth vision of racial reality after 1959.

Pedro Duchamps Chapeaux (1913- ), author of *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo XIX [Blacks in the Economy of XIX Century Havana]* gives a view of the situation of free Black Cubans in the 1840s. During this period predating the wars of independence, an emerging group of professionals and artisans achieved considerable economic status, even to the point where some became slave owners.

*El ingenio [The Sugar Mill]* by the White historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals (1920- ), is considered a true classic of Cuban history, analyzing in detail the sugar plantation economy and the role of the slave in the accumulation of capital. There is also the recent publication of Tomás Fernández Robaina’s, *El negro en Cuba 1902-1958 [The Blacks in Cuba 1902-1958]* which examines the Independientes de Color (the Black Independents) from a contemporary perspective.

Not to be discounted in this listing are Rafael López Valdés (1941- ), Director of Ethnographic Sciences and a prominent scholar of religious subjects. Also included are creative writers and poets, such as the national poet Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), Nancy Morejón (1944- ), Miguel Barnet (1940- ), Rogelio Martínez Furé (1937- ); and, playwrights Eugenio Hernández (1936- ), Gerardo Fullea Leon (1942- ), Tomás González (1938- ), Abraham Rodríguez (1942- ); as well as the filmmakers Sara Gómez

(1940-1973), Sergio Giral (1937- ), Rigoberto López (1944- ), and Gloria Rolando (1953- ).

There are other authors and important works, I do not pretend to do an exhaustive review. However, the above are significant writers dealing with the situation of Black Cubans. Therefore, in the social sciences and humanities these works of these authors should serve as an incentive or a bridge towards further studies. Hopefully these and other works provoke in the Cuban intelligentsia a search for that gallery of heroes and unknown characters from the Black population, who, although instrumental in Cuban history, are still relatively unknown, and insufficiently studied in the schools.

### **HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In Black Cuban history, there are key events concerning race and repression: since 1844 the movement of “Libertos” [Free Blacks] had reached considerable economic development, to the point that Libertos controlled certain professions and jobs that permitted them a measure of financial security. National Archive records confirm that the Spanish government decreed laws and took strong repressive measures against Free Blacks because it feared the emergence of a powerful Black middle class. Those who survived this violent repression of the “Libertos” joined the slaves fighting in the wars of independence. After the victory against the Spanish and the birth of the Republic, the social justice aspirations of Black Cubans were unrealized. The stories of these protagonists are silenced or manipulated to become what we now call “stereotypes of the strong Black man.”

It is necessary to recall the historical situation of the island in order to understand the current racial problem. Bourgeois historiography, which includes the republican period, created and strengthened a systematic mechanism of “blanqueamiento” [whitening]. The Hispanic Caribbean was characterized by a permanent racial paternalism; although it was not a habitual practice to lynch Blacks as in the United States, neither was there a recognition or acceptance of their participation in the shaping and strengthening of nationality. The role of Blacks in strengthening Cuban nationality is explored by Esteban Morales Dominguez Cardenas (1942- ). This economist and Director del Centro de Estudios Sobre Estados Unidos (The Center for the Study of the United States) observes:

La NACIONALIDAD debe verse como un proceso en movimiento, que sigue fortaleciéndose, consolidándose, y nunca debe verse como el resultado definitivo, como un fenómeno acabado. Este enfoque nos permitirá de modo coherente reivindicar la participación de la población negra en la creación y afianzamiento de la NACION CUBANA.

[NATIONALITY should be seen as a process in movement, one which continues to strengthen and consolidate itself, and should never be seen as a definitive result, as something finished. This point of view allows us to claim in a coherent way the participation of the Black population in the creation and strengthening of the Cuban nation.]

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If we follow more deeply this line of reasoning, we see that the Hispanic racism of the new Republic feared the Black presence emerging from the battlefields in the war of independence from Spain, with the predominantly Black Cuban “Ejército Mambí” [Mambí army] at the front. To this was added a third negative aspect for the future of Blacks in Cuba: the presence of the U.S. military with its first intervention in 1898. Combining with the racism of Spanish colonization were the racialized ideas of Whites from the United States. From the racism of slavery we passed to the racism of the Republic, more finely designed, but profound for a small nation so close to the United States. According to John Quincy Adams’ famous theory of the “Ripe Fruit,” sooner or later Cuba would fall in the hands of the U.S. government, becoming an extension of Florida, only 90 miles away.

Alongside these factors, and as a consequence of them, appeared the frustration of the veterans of the wars of 1868 and 1895 who were excluded from the new 1902 government, headed by Tomás Estrada Palma. As Cuba’s President, Palma, a U.S.-educated Cuban with annexationist tendencies, despite his participation in the independence movement governed until 1919. According to the historian Eduardo Torres (1942–), the Independence Party had two well defined tendencies, the so-called Moderate Independentistas, influenced in one way or another by annexationist thinking, and the Radical Independentistas, who favored a nation free of dependencies, led by José Martí and Santiago-born Antonio Maceo, the Black leader of Cuban independence.

Only four years after the creation of the new nation, a considerable number of veterans, convinced that they would not be allowed to participate in the new government, created the “Revolución del Seis” [the Revolution of the Sixth]. Those who took part in this event, Blacks from the demobilized “Ejército Mambí,” planned a new uprising but were unable to bring it about. However, many of them, under the leadership of Evaristo Estenoz, built the party of the “Independientes de Color” with the hope of achieving participation in government and a decent retirement income for their oldest veterans. The errors and successes of the “Independentistas de Color” have scarcely been studied. The subject of a party that is based solely on ethnicity is a valid debate for all of Latin America, not only for the problems of Blacks, but also for the indigenous world. Héctor Díaz Polanco, a Mexican-Dominican social anthropologist, notes that:

La problemática étnico-nacional se presenta históricamente como una relación conflictiva entre Estado y agrupaciones humanas que mantienen ciertas lealtades y cierta identidad, derivado de concepciones basadas en el proyecto ETNOCENTRICO . . . . Cualquier solución requiere considerar las raíces históricas, pero ancladas en las necesidades actuales de los grupos étnico-nacionales . . . . En este análisis la cuestión nacional no se reduce a la desigualdad de clases sociales, sino que involucra — también a sectores de la población que se han mantenido en jerarquías diferentes. . . . Es evidente que estos problemas tan sólo podrán resolverse después de haber conquistado el poder y que forman parte de la NUEVA NACION, ahora y simultáneamente.

[The issue of ethnicity and nationality is presented historically as a conflictive relationship between the State and human groups that maintain certain loyalties and a certain identity derived from conceptions based upon the ETHNOCENTRIC project . . . . Any solution requires the consideration of historical roots, but these must be tied into the current needs of the ethnic-national groups . . . . In this analysis the national question is not reduced to the inequality of classes, but it also involves sectors that have maintained their place in different hierarchies . . . . It is obvious that these problems can only be resolved after the taking of power, and that they are part of the NEW NATION, now and simultaneously.]

With this concept of the ethno-nationality historical approach in mind, the “Independentistas de Color” and their leader, Evaristo Estenoz, agreed in 1912 to launch a new uprising as an only alternative. The U.S. government warned the authorities of the island that if they did not stop the uprising, the U.S. would intervene militarily. This was in spite of the fact that the uprising was primarily symbolic in nature, since the group had no arms and its main aim was to awaken public opinion in favor of civil rights for the Black population. Under the threat of intervention, the army did not hesitate to kill Estenoz and his followers. The resulting massacre in a region owned by U.S. sugar companies went beyond the “Independentistas de Color” to include three thousand Black Cubans killed. These killings had disastrous consequences for the Black movement in Cuba. Only after 1925, with the creation of the “Partido Socialista Popular” [Popular Socialist Party], the first communist party, would the Black population find an avenue for its struggle. From that moment on, new and important Black leaders emerged, including Jesús Menéndez, a leader of the sugar workers’ movement, and Aracelio Iglesias, a port union leader, both of whom were later assassinated.

The Cuban Republic designed and occupied by the United States, since the end of the 19th Century with the support of Cuban annexationists, reached its peak in the 1950s. The ever-increasing presence of U.S. capital created an economic atmosphere that relegated the Black population to an even more marginal position in society. The so-called “Black middle class” saw its space reduced by the racist currents prevalent in that era throughout the U.S. and Latin America. The only employment possibilities for the great majority of the Black population were in low-paying jobs, such as service jobs working for the largely White Cuban bourgeoisie of the 1950s. Except for a few rare cases, Blacks in Cuba were at the lowest economic scale. During this decade a process of immigration to the United States began. The dreams of becoming a North American Black middle class were dispelled by the reality of the U.S.’s need for racialized, cheap labor; such disillusionment has been the case of thousands of other Hispanics emigrating in search of the “Promised Land.” This migratory process was influenced by U.S. Black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey. Known only to a few Black Cuban intellectuals, nevertheless, their ideas and writings created a feeling of hope that turned Black Cuban eyes toward the United States.

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**CONTEMPORARY REALITY**

The triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959 eliminated the legal mechanisms that upheld racial discrimination. It also began a process of redressing claims by social groups historically denied their most elemental rights, including the Black population, which identified the Revolution as a vehicle for justice. The changes brought about in education, medicine, and culture are evident. Even the Cuban scholar Jorge Domínguez, in his prologue to Carlos Moore's *Castro, The Blacks and Africa*, recognizes that Black Cubans have experienced a considerable improvement in their standard of living.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that the problems of Black Cubans have totally disappeared. Evidence of the persistence of this problem can be seen in the migratory process toward the United States, especially during the Mariel boat lift, when the number of Blacks that left Cuba was higher than that of Whites for the first time in more than twenty years. I personally consider that this exile had a sociocultural rather than an economic character. It is important to analyze the situation of the Black Cubans that arrived in the United States after '59 as a group. Even though they may have solved some of their material problems, in the area of political aspirations they were frustrated once again. The White racists who left Cuba have had ample opportunity to develop their xenophobia, especially in Miami. At the same time, these Black Cubans were also rejected by the Whites from the U.S. and by a considerable number of Afroamericans that perceive them as "aliens" and somewhat servile. Regarding this point Black Cuban writer Carlos Moore (1942- ), who left the island in 1963, states:

El negro cubano en Miami es invisible. Se hace invisible para no atraer la atención. Aquí hay racismo por parte del cubano blanco, el mismo racismo que había en Cuba. El afrocubano aquí vive una vida doble, porque teme que los blancos cubanos tomen represalias en contra de ellos. Los cubanos blancos se creen superiores a todos . . . . (*El Nuevo Herald*, 11 de noviembre 1990).

[The Black Cuban is invisible in Miami. He makes himself invisible in order not to attract attention. Here there is racism on the part of the white Cuban, the same racism that had existed in Cuba. The AfroCuban lives a double life here, because he is afraid that the white Cubans will retaliate against him. The white Cubans think they are superior to everyone . . . . (*El Nuevo Herald*, November 11, 1990).]

**CONCLUSION**

In spite of the early admission by Cuban President Fidel Castro, on March 22, 1959, of the difficulty of resolving the racial problem in Cuba, resolutions to the problem met great obstacles. On the one hand, it was ingenuous to think that with the legal elimination of discrimination, racism would automatically disappear. It was also erroneous to deny the existence of a problem that is currently universal and that, unfortunately, appears to be increasing.

The mechanisms of racism, discrimination, and prejudices accumulated over a period of five centuries. Their tracks are difficult to erase over a short period of time, even when there are laws prohibiting discrimination and protecting the Black popula-

tion. Those Cubans who did not accept Blacks before the Revolution but did accept the Revolution continued to manifest, and in a non-declared way develop, what the Spanish social anthropologist Tomás Calvo Bueza calls the “doble moral racial” [the “racial double standard”]:

El racista se hace, no nace. . . . Estas actitudes se aprenden y muchas de ellas se transmiten de generación en generación como parte del contenido cultural, durante un largo período y constituye un código informativo-valorativo que se transmite a cada individuo en el proceso de socialización . . . . (Tomás Calvo Bueza, *Los racistas son los otros* Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 1988)

[The racist is made, he is not born. . . . These attitudes are learned and many of them are transmitted from generation to generation as part of the cultural content, during a long period, and constitutes an information-value code that is transmitted to each individual in the process of socialization . . . .]

On the other hand, it is possible to analyze the problems of Blacks in Cuba solely from an ideological-political perspective. In the last two years I have conducted dozens of taped and “off-the-record” interviews and have been able to conclude that there are particular types of Cuban, especially among the youth who have been educated during the revolutionary process, who have not rid themselves totally of these problems, but who are susceptible to change. The majority of those interviewed, White and Black, had not thought about racial conflicts and had simply reproduced the cultural model imposed by family and society. Treating social thought not skin color as the problem, it is possible to expand perceptions on racial equality through special programs in education, theater, film, television, and of course, through government policies that are guided by these goals.

Through the 1986 Third Congress of the Cuban Communist Party a system of quotas was established for countering racial inequalities. Nevertheless, the method of numerical participation is not enough. It may even produce an adverse reaction: racists may promote Black Cubans known to be incapable of exercising the power of their positions, thereby creating a negative attitude toward the incorporation of Black Cubans. Since skin color does not determine conduct, and as Franz Fanon stated there are Blacks with White souls, quotas may be a device to strengthen discrimination against the Black population.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the biggest mistake concerning the treatment of Blacks in Cuba has been the denial of the existence of a dilemma that the Revolution did not create, but merely inherited from previous societies. Today we look disconcertingly at how hidden ethnic problems in many of the old socialist countries were passed along and proclaimed to be only class conflicts. I believe that the problems of Blacks in Cuba can be resolved only within the space of their own nation, and not outside. The solution to the racial problem in Cuba cannot be reduced to mathematical formulas, but can be found within a group of historical, social, economic, and cultural circumstances which allow the strengthening of nationality through racial equality.



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