

**The Revolutionary Effect:
An Analysis of the Afro-Cuban Perspective**

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After the overthrow of the pro U.S. dictatorship in 1959, Fidel Castro, who promoted a deep sense of nationalism through socialism, came into power and made it illegal to discriminate against anyone based on race. Castro and other revolutionary leaders despised the racist United States who had a strong hold over the island for decades. During the Revolution, it became a social taboo to differentiate Cubans of color making it impossible to speak out on the subject creating a sense of racial silence over the years. This silencing, in effect, has challenged scholarly analysis of what the social revolution accomplished in terms of the lived experiences of Afro-Cubans. The Revolution's aim was to bring about racial equality, and some scholars indeed suggest that there was a divergence of African and Spanish culture on the island which created "the new Cuban," but this analysis disregards the prevailing systemic issues faced by those of color.¹ According to Castro, Cuba so-called "solved the racism issue."² However, this study aims to analyze the continuation of racial discrimination within the context of the Cuban Revolution and its relationship to the United States.

Scholars who concern themselves with race in Cuba include Ada Ferrer, Alejandro De La Fuente, Aline Helg, and Esteban Morales Dominguez. Ada Ferrer's work is key to understanding Cuban nationalist rhetoric. She focuses on the post-independent years and argues that Cuba became a "raceless nation."³ Both white and black Cubans banded together to fight against colonialism and neocolonialism, creating a nationalistic ideology. Ferrer writes that Cuba looked to the United States as an example of what not to do in terms of segregation, which led to policy

¹ Juan Del Aguila, *Cuba, Dilemmas of a Revolution*, Westview Profiles. Nations of Contemporary Latin America. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984, 95.

² Fidel Castro, "Speech before the United Nations" 1960.

³ Ada Ferrer, "A Raceless Nation," (1991) in Wood, James A. *Problems in Modern Latin American History: Sources and Interpretations*. 4th ed. Latin American Silhouettes. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013, 106.

changes. In fact, some nationalists argued that not only should Cubans of all races be treated equal, but in fact, there was no such thing as race in the first place. What Ferrer's work fails to account for, however, is the complexity of race, culture, and the fact that the Revolution brought about an oppressive regime that perpetuated a deafening push back against racial rhetoric.

Alejandro De La Fuente builds on Ferrer's work by arguing that the Revolution disproportionately aided Afro-Cubans.⁴ The social changes to the system such as the literacy campaign specifically boosted the well-being of non-white Cubans. However, where Ferrer seemed to maintain a potentially optimistic point of view, De La Fuente argues that anyone who chose to acknowledge "race" would be criticized by others for anti-nationalist sentiments. His work brings to light how the discourse acknowledging race was socially shunned and therefore silenced. By analyzing newspapers, films, and government documents, he successfully shows that prior to the Revolution, Afro-Cubans were worse off socio-economically and that their plight improved after the Revolution. However, it is important to challenge the idea that the Revolution successfully made all men and women in Cuba equal.

Using censuses, newspapers, and the well-known Cuban literary work "Reyita," Aline Helg writes about the post Revolution continuation of racial inequalities ingrained in Cuban society and politics. Her work is clearly social and political in nature. For example, she draws attention to the lack of color within the July 26th Movement led by Fidel Castro in contrast with Batista's regime, where black Cuban's were involved, albeit with no real power. She then argues

⁴ Alejandro De La Fuente, "Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba: An Overview." *Latin American Perspectives* 25, no. 3, 1998.

that the Revolution, although it did bring benefits to its black population in terms of employment and literacy, failed in terms of political representation.⁵

Finally, Esteban Morales Dominguez, who was born into an Afro-Cuban family in the 1940's and lived through the Revolution, adds a Cuban perspective to the scholarly discourse. In fact, he was a member of the Aponte Commission to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists as late as 2011. Other scholars tend to analyze Cuban society from a western perspective making Dominguez' criticisms highly insightful. Although he notes that Aline Helg and Alejandro De La Fuente are notable scholars, they do not, "share the vicissitudes of life in Cuba," with people like him⁶. Dominguez ultimately argues that although scholars have made some insightful contributions, he aims to develop a new model for studying and researching the subject.⁷

My research takes a socio-cultural approach by analyzing testimonies, policy changes, and speeches of political leaders during the 1950s and 1960s. Many testimonies which address race more openly are modern-day interviews. The story of John Clytus will be central to analyzing an African American perspective of race in Cuba. Clytus's story is important to my research in efforts to add to the conversation by further analyzing the correlation between Cuba and the stronghold the United States had on the island. Clytus' and other stories, in conjunction with speeches and policies authored by the leaders of the Revolution, will provide a more comprehensive pool of information to gain an understanding of the gaps that have been left in

⁵ Aline Helg, "Race and Politics in Cuba" in *Contemporary Caribbean cultures and societies in a global context*. by Aline Helg Knight, F., & Martínez Vergne, T. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, 185.

⁶ Morales Domínguez, Esteban., Gary. Prevost, and August H. Nimtz. *Race in Cuba: Essays on the Revolution and Racial Inequality*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013, 19.

⁷ Esteban Morales Dominguez, *Race in Cuba*, 20.

terms of the experiences of non-white Cubans. This research aims to expand on existing literature that argues that the Revolution fought to unite Cubans under one nationality and “eliminate” racial discrimination but by doing so, silenced the issues non-white Cubans faced by failing to acknowledge the very existence of racial differences.

Ultimately, this research seeks to expand on the types of sources that have been addressed by previous scholars. My contribution lies in the emphasis on United States imperialism in conjunction with race. I argue that a disdain for the United States by Cuban citizens from years of exploitation allowed for the silencing of race and fueled the society’s desire to give an illusion of unity against outside forces. Further, I argue that the Revolutionary period hindered social progress for Afro-Cubans by refusing to acknowledge that Afro-Cubans were not treated equitably. Individual racist attitudes in conjunction with a culture that refused to address racial discrimination led to a hindrance in true social equality for non-white Cubans. Racial discrimination, therefore, persisted as a cultural norm without reproach. Afro-Cubans continued to face oppression during a social Revolution which claimed to aid their social mobility.

The layout of my research will begin with a historical background on the history of race as well as the impact of United States imperialism and how that translates to social norms in Cuba. Following this description, the focus will shift to how Afro-Cubans were affected by the Revolution. The sections will be divided first into the institutionalized ways in which Afro-Cubans faced discrimination. The institutionalized factors will include rhetoric by revolutionaries and interviews by Cubans juxtaposed with examples of the lack of political representation. Secondly, the role of social discrimination will be addressed, including romantic

relationships between white and black Cubans and cultural practices. The paper will conclude with a connection to modern day politics and end with an analysis of why this topic is still important to study in today's society.

The issue of racial discrimination in Cuba towards its African population has a long and complicated history. African slavery is the most critical aspect to start this conversation. As early as the 17th century, Spanish colonizers wiped out the Taíno peoples of Cuba and needed manpower to work the land. Like many other cash crop economies, the colonies looked to Africa for free labor. African slaves were brought in and exploited by the white Spanish elite; however, this was not without resistance. By the late 19th century, the African slave population entered into a tough fight, which Cuba refers to as “cien años de lucha,” or the hundred years war.⁸ After abolition in 1865, Afro-Cubans were placed at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Race had remained an area of contention on the island post-abolition and would continue to shape the Cuban Independence movement. As Matt Childs explains it:

“the anti-colonial ideology inspired by Martí to create a nation free from racism provided an opening for political mobilization by blacks in concern with whites to overthrow Spanish colonialism but limited the degree to which organization by race alone could be used to challenge social inequalities after independence.”⁹

The Revolution sought to nationalize in efforts to push back against the lingering effects of colonialism. This required a united front of all Cubans and thus again closed the door on negotiating racial and social hierarchies.

⁸ James A. Wood, *Problems in Modern Latin American History: Sources and Interpretations*. 4th ed. Latin American Silhouettes. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013, 105.

⁹ Matt D. Childs, Expanding Perspectives on Race, Nation, and Culture in Cuban History, *Latin American Research Review*, 39 no. 1, 2004, 297.

Under the Batista regime of the 1940s and 50s, US companies were flourishing in Cuba. Once a Revolution was underway in the late 50s, the United States was quick to proclaim that Cuban nationalism was somehow translated as communism. Cuban nationals sought to regain control of their own economy for the benefit of locals, but with the heavy presence of foreign investment. The US turned the issue into a political one by proclaiming the nationalist movement of Cuba as communist. The July 26th Movement fought for human rights, education, and land distribution, but this would mean taking land from the rich and powerful or US investors. It is important to note that because of the Cold War, the fear of communism was at an all-time high and therefore any country that did not align itself with US interests became a threat.

United States Imperialism and The Connection with Cuba

United States intervention in Cuba began with the Spanish-American War of 1898.¹⁰ Cuba's independence was cut short and ultimately the island switched hands from a Spanish colony to a stronghold of the United States. The U.S. viewed Cuba as a "low hanging fruit," ready to be picked.¹¹

¹⁰ Alejandro De La Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011, 23.

¹¹ Fidel Castro, "Speech before the United Nations" 1960.



"Patient Waiters Are No Losers / Dalrymple.," The Library of Congress.

About three years later, in 1902, and under constant U.S. military occupation of the island, a delegate from the United States, Senator Orville Platt, added an amendment to the draft of the Cuban constitution.¹² Over 50 years later, Castro expressed that the amendment essentially made Cuba a territory of the United States and the country “was forced by legislature” to “grant the U.S. the right to intervene and to hold naval bases” on the island.¹³

For another thirty years, the United States exploited Cuba via monopolizing their natural resources, mines, public utilities, commercial concessions, and land—to mention a few.¹⁴ Castro also expressed, that the military may have been gone, but “left behind were a growing number of investors who were in a privileged position to implement their racist ideas through

¹² Fidel Castro, “Speech before the United Nations” 1960.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fidel Castro, “Speech before the United Nations” 1960.

discriminatory practices in the labor market and social activities.”¹⁵ This in conjunction with prohibition in the United States which pushed Americans to vacation in Cuba, the island felt the enormous presence of Americans and American culture. When Fulgencio Batista came into power in the 1940’s, this reality only intensified as Batista quickly became a puppet of the United States, allowing ‘business as usual’ on the island.¹⁶

For 50 years after independence, the United States controlled monopolies throughout the island such as banking, electric, and sugar companies.¹⁷ In 1960, Castro reflected on the regime of Batista stating, “the government of Fulgencio Batista was a typical government force, a government which suited the United States monopolies in Cuba. But it was not, of course, the type of government which suited the Cuban people.”¹⁸ Fidel notes in a speech to the United Nations, the history of United States involvement in Cuba and how it refused to serve Cuban interest. The Revolution aimed to do the opposite and nationalize Cuba both in terms of economic policies and socio-cultural structures.

In July 1953 students, workers, and many others took up arms once again to overthrow Fulgencio Batista, the United States backed dictator. By 1959, a terrified Batista fled the island—the Revolution had succeeded. Cuba was now being led by Fidel Castro, a president of Cuba for the Cuban people—women, the poor, and people of color. Prior to the Revolution, race

¹⁵ Alejandro De La Fuente. *A Nation for All*, 53.

¹⁶ Fidel Castro, “Speech before the United Nations” 1960.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

played a crucial role in terms of class in Cuba, but the Revolution would aim to change this dynamic invariable. Thus, race took a backseat and “the new Cuban” was born.¹⁹

The “new Cuban” was a way of building a national identity. Cubans would no longer distinguish between themselves as white or black, but solely as Cuban. Building a national identity is not unique to Cuba, of course, but the island’s approach differed in that a black Cuban could not refer to himself or herself as Afro-Cuban in fear of being labeled “counterrevolutionary.”²⁰ Cubans who had a sense of pride in their Revolution, now pointed to the United States as a racist nation while denouncing racism on their island.

Disdain for United States imperialism perpetuated a sense of opposition among Cubans, and this was particularly evident regarding racial attitudes. Resentment, along with a long history of struggle against oppression pitted the Cuban people against outside forces. Strong animosity enhanced the desire for Cubans to minimize the discourse surrounding discrimination within Cuba and focus on the United States as the bigger enemy instead. This is evident through Cuban propaganda where magazines depicted the African American population as “poor negroes” who “couldn’t help themselves.”²¹ This in turn unified black and white Cubans, as they both saw themselves as superior to the United States. The Cuban Revolution had eliminated racism, classism, and sexism, or so propaganda led one to believe.

One notable story is John Clytus, an African American man who in 1964 left the United States, for Cuba in hopes of a better opportunity.²² Rumors reported that the Cuban Revolution

¹⁹ Juan M. Del Aguila, *Cuba, Dilemmas of a Revolution*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1984, 94.

²⁰ Ada Ferrer, “A Raceless Nation,” 106.

²¹ John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba*, 56.

²² John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba*, 17.

successfully brought about support for all Cubans, regardless of race, class, or gender.²³ It had been five years at this point since the rebels had officially overthrown the United States backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Revolutionary leaders advocated for social justice and the elimination of discrimination in terms of gender and race by eliminating a class system, which, they argued, was perpetuated by western capitalism.²⁴ Clytus was thrilled to leave the racist United States but soon became disillusioned with the reality of racism in Cuba. Clytus was an English teacher in Cuba and found that only a handful of his student in every single one of his classes were black.²⁵ Further, as he would sit outside on his breaks, he observed that for every one black man working in the ministry in Havana, there were about fifty white men.²⁶ On other occasions, he noticed that it was common for black Cuban women to date white men but not the other way around.²⁷ The issue surrounding dating will be addressed further in this paper, but as for sheer observation, it is clear that five years after the Revolution succeeded, the racial equality that Castro claimed did not represent Afro-Cubans in terms of education and political power within Havana.

Institutionalized Racism

Prior to the 1959 Revolution, former slaves and their descendants, due to issues such as illiteracy and limited job skills, remained as agricultural workers in the rural countryside, all of

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ Fidel Castro, "Speech before the United Nations" 1960.

²⁵ John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba*, 23.

²⁶ Ibid., 23.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

which held them in a state of poverty. The reported percentage of the Afro-Cuban population varies greatly, but it is safe to assume that since the Revolution succeeded, the number of Afro-Cubans increased because a majority of those who left Cuba to the United States after the Revolution were white and upper-middle class.²⁸ The majority of Afro-Cubans left behind lived in poverty, and illiteracy also plagued women in Cuba in particular, as many previously colonized societies were structurally patriarchal. During the pre-revolutionary years, black women were limited to positions as a domestic servant or a waitress.²⁹ Not much had changed fifty years after Cuba's Independence in 1898. If you were not a white man in Cuba, chances of moving up socio-economically were slim. It is true that the Revolution implemented a very successful literacy campaign, but education did not guarantee a secure financial position.

Since the United States held monopolies throughout Cuba, and the U.S. had their own history of racism, this discrimination transferred to the business world. Once Castro's regime took hold in the late 1950's and nationalized corporations, economic mobility remained an issue for the black population. For example, jobs in the service industry were quite lucrative versus being a professional, due to the possibility of earning a higher wage through unregulated tips from foreigners. After the Revolution, the lucrative jobs that related to tourism remained predominately white due to the fact that European tourists would be put off if there were too many dark faces working.

²⁸ Alejandro De La Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 251.

²⁹ Maria Antonia Carrillo in *Voices of Resistance: Testimonies of Cuban and Chilean Women* edited by Judy Maloof, Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1999, 65.

In 1959, Che Guevara addresses the issue of education via a racially charged speech at the University of Las Villas. The university gave him an honorary degree which he was pleased about but expressed that he could only accept it on behalf of the army. He states that anything of value must be what it says. Che was speaking about the degree, but he is possibly alluding to the anger he has felt for the Batista dictatorship. Guevara encourages the university to be more diverse in color in both students and professors. Specifically, he wanted to blur racial and class lines by having people of color from rural areas become educated which would be more representative of Cuba's population.³⁰ Universities were another way in which Afro-Cubans faced challenges prior to the 1950s. Education was one way in which Afro-Cubans were aided the most in terms of social benefits under the Revolution.

According to Chinese-Cuban general Sio Wong, "the socialist revolution was made precisely to eliminate inequalities. To bring about social justice. To end discrimination against blacks, women, and the poor. To close the gap between the rich and the poor."³¹ One intention of the Revolution was to be more inclusive of blacks and mulattos in terms of education, literacy, and job opportunity. Castro's regime was successful in reducing illiteracy and improving public health care but was widely criticized for stifling economic and political freedoms. The literacy campaign that took hold in Cuba aimed to teach every single Cuba on the island to read within a

³⁰ Ernesto Guevara, Speech at the Central University of Las Villas, December 28, 1959. *The University Must Color Itself Black, Mulatto, Worker and Peasant*. Quoted in Ernesto Guevara, "Che Guevara Talks to Young People." Pathfinder Press (2000): 69.

³¹ Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, Moisés Sío Wong, and Mary-Alice Waters, *Our History Is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution*, 1st ed. New York: Pathfinder, 2005, 92.

year.³² Amazingly, they were successful. Some Cuban citizens claimed it was “the magic of the social revolution.”³³ Rather than magic, it was students and young citizens who made the literacy campaign victorious.

While the Revolutionary Cuban government claimed to have gotten rid of class, Nancy Morejon, an Afro-Cuban woman who grew up during the 1960’s recalls racism and racial discrimination at a very young age.³⁴ Very interestingly she mentions that although she went to a private school, there were other schools that were better for the “elite ruling class.”³⁵ This commentary leads to the conclusion that although the Cuban government prided itself on the successes of the revolution,³⁶ there indeed was still room for systematic discrimination that allowed for certain groups of people to receive benefits over others.

Limited representation was an issue in other ways for Afro-Cubans. By the 1970’s, of those in positions of political power, only a small percentage were Afro-Cuban. For a socialist regime that claimed to have “eradicated racism” by the 1960’s, the lack of political representation seemed bleak to say the least. This lack of representation continues to persist long after the Revolution succeeded, as one sixty-six-year-old black man suggests:

“Right here in Cuba at the university the percentage of students with those majors that lead to good jobs are white. And the majority of university is white. And the Central Committee has like four or five blacks, Almeida, Lazo, the one from the unions, that’s it. Three! On television during political events or programs they

³² Jonathan Kozol, *Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools* (New York: Delacorte, 1978), 182.

³³ Jonathan Kozol, “Children of the Revolution,” 184.

³⁴ Nancy Morejon in *Voices of Resistance: Testimonies of Cuban and Chilean Women* edited by Judy Maloof, Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1999, 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶ Fidel Castro, “Speech before the United Nations” 1960.

direct the camera to the blacks that are present, boom, boom, boom, one, two, three so that they come out on television. There! Three blacks!”³⁷

Evidence is also found in the lack of color in the July 26th Movement. The image below is just one photo of many that shows the front runners of the Revolution none of whom are Afro-Cuban. Aline Helg has argued that Afro-Cubans’ inability to influence the political arena is a reason as to why they have not been able to progress.³⁸ Since the political leaders of the Revolution were not representative of people of color, this also impacted issues that Afro-Cubans faced because there was hardly anyone with political power representing them.



Leaders of units of July 26 Movement and Revolutionary Directorate at Directorate's camp at Dos Arroyos. Standing left to right: Jorge Martin, Humberto Castello, Faure Chomon, Rene Rodriguez, Rolando Cubela, Che Guevara, Ramiro Valdes. Kneeling at left, Jose Moleon, Raul Nieves. Photo Courtesy of Institute of Cuban History.

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³⁷ Anonymous interview with a sixty-six-year-old black male (2008) in Kristina Writz, *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History*, 2014, 170.

³⁸ Aline Helg, "Race and Politics in Cuba" in *Contemporary Caribbean cultures and societies in a global context*. by Aline Helg Knight, F., & Martínez Vergne, T. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2005), 183.

³⁹ Myles B. Kantor, "Interview With Dr. Miguel Faria (Part I)," Hacienda Publishing, July 14, 2002, accessed May 6, 2019, doi:10.3897/bdj.4.e7720.figure2f.

When comparing the 1940 Constitution with the one written in 1976, it is telling in terms of structural changes that affected the society. The 1976 Constitution was modeled after socialist ideas and took a lot of its inspiration from the Soviet Union. Articles 43 specifically made it illegal to discriminate based on race.⁴⁰ Under Fidel Castro, rhetoric concerning race became intolerable. Revolutionaries argued that because the social revolution abolished segregation and illiteracy across the island, it therefore did not concern itself with color. By the 1960's, rhetoric that dated back to Jose Marti, returned. Together, white and black Cubans fought against Spain in 1898 and then again in 1950's when they pushed the United States out. These battles built a sense of brotherhood (or sisterhood). "There were no white Cubans or black Cubans, just Cubans" as one revolutionary author told Mario, a black Cuban author.⁴¹ In 1964, Mario had been writing about African history when Cuban officials barged into his home and confiscated his writings. Acts of repression surrounding African history were not uncommon. It was important to the revolution to band Cubans together, and repression of "black" versus "white" history was important. That is, Cuban revolutionaries wished to undo what years of colonialism and slavery had done, which was to make black Cubans believe they were genetically different and therefore inferior. Under a socialist regime, eradicating these differences was key. "The absence of blacks in official history of Cuba creates ignorance about the black contribution but also creates a false sense that blacks, if not present in the history books, must not have done much."⁴²

⁴⁰ Cuba's Constitution of 1976 with Amendments through 2002. Translated by Falk, Pam, Gavilan, Milagros M., and Vellve Torras, Anna I. Oxford University Press, Inc, 1976.

⁴¹ John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba*, 76.

⁴² Danielle Pilar Clealand, *The Power of Race in Cuba: Racial Ideology and Black Consciousness during the Revolution*, Transgressing Boundaries. 2017, 186.

By the 1960's, the silencing of discourse concerning race created a fear amongst black Cubans which pushed them to praise the Revolution in fear of being deemed counterrevolutionary. According to Clytus, Afro-Cubans were extremely supportive of the social revolution and defended it wholeheartedly.⁴³ The Revolution created job opportunities and eradicated illiteracy, but also eliminated the articulation of all racial discrimination. Many Cubans he encountered stated that race altogether did not exist and Clytus's acknowledgment of race and African heritage was the real racism.

Socio-Cultural Ways in Which Discrimination Persisted

Dating and marrying white was a form of social mobility but it looked different for males versus females. Black women were able to "marry white" with less repercussion, meanwhile black men dating white women was almost unheard of. This phenomenon was true before and after the Revolution but exemplifies the continuity of how interracial relationships worked. The well-known story of an Afro-Cuban woman, Reyita, is example of "whitening" through marriage. She expresses that she did not have contempt for her race, but marrying a black man would limit her and her children since one of the only lucrative careers for a black in Cuba was being a boxer.⁴⁴ Post-revolution, this stigma did not change, as one interviewee expresses:

"On the television the black man is always a musician, or athlete, or a slave!! And from slavery the idea of the black man as strong or a worker with good physical attributes still remains. That was born in the mind of the Cuban and exists today."⁴⁵

⁴³ John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba*, 17.

⁴⁴ Maria De Los Reyes Castillo Bueno, and Daisy Castillo Rubiera, *Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Women in the Twentieth Century*, 2000, 156.

⁴⁵ Anonymous interview with a forty-year-old *mulata* women (2008) in Kristina Writz, *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History*, 2014, 170.

For this reason, Reyita married a white man, which was not uncommon, even in pre-revolutionary years. Her white husband provided Reyita with an economic baseline of a “house, food, doctor, and medicine,” which was enough to ease some struggle she would be more likely to face marrying a man of color in this era.⁴⁶

John Clytus on the other hand was a black man in Revolutionary Cuba. He shares his experience of dating a white woman, except, this woman was not Cuban, she was European. In a high majority of cases, a white Cuban woman would find no reason to date a black man and the Revolution did not change this dynamic. White women still sought white male counterparts. Whether women’s decisions were economic or social are unclear but likely a combination of both. Clytus recounts sitting on a bench one day in the mid-60s and noticing numerous couples composed of black women and white men, but not the other way around.⁴⁷ He writes that since white men, throughout history, used black women as their slaves, whores, and concubines, but made the white woman an “untouchable” for black men” he had “felt challenged to pluck this forbidden fruit.”⁴⁸

Afro-Cuban culture is another important factor to analyze during the 1950s through the 1960s. Afro-Cuban practices, such as Santeria were forbidden. In one study, scholar Kristina Writz found that “the question regarding Afro-Cuban culture produced a result where 55 percent reported Cuba does not recognize Afro-Cubans cultures and values.”⁴⁹ This interview was done well after the Revolution but is evidence of lingering romance from the social changes which

⁴⁶ Maria De Los Reyes Castillo Bueno, *Reyita*, 85.

⁴⁷ John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba*, 75.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁹ Danielle Pilar Cleland, *The Power of Race in Cuba*, 186.

occurred. The staggering statistic suggests the lack of acknowledgment of the cultural heritage of Africans, which of course is part of the Revolutionary goal. African dance, music, and religion was appropriated by the dominant culture and labeled as “Cuban folklore.” In conjunction, appropriating African cultural practices and renaming such rituals fails to acknowledge the very diverse ethnic groups that exist in Africa.⁵⁰ Without scrutinizing this, it seems as if the Cuban government became more tolerant, and one could argue that it did. The changing of the term must be addressed, however. In 1961, Castro expresses in a speech that “within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, no rights at all.”⁵¹ Kristina Writz suggests that Castro is insinuating that “folklore” is of the Revolution and therefore is an extension of Revolutionary ideology.⁵² Ultimately, this transforms inherently Afro-Cuban practices into something new and the title “Cuban folklore” takes away agency from its African roots.

Afro-Cubans were seemingly enthusiastic about the freedom to express their unique practices, which they had not been able to during the Batista regime. This is likely the reason why Afro-Cubans did not resist appropriation of their culture by the dominant white society. Well-known Afro-Cuban author Nancy Morejon expressed enthusiasm that Afro-Cuban music and dances “were no longer devalued or considered taboo.”⁵³ If the goal of the revolution was to eliminate racial differences, allowing Afro-Cuban rituals to be done by all Cubans in some ways accomplish this. However, artists like Morejon made a point to keep history and culture alive. In an interview, she is careful to acknowledge Afro-Cuban culture such as music and dance while

⁵⁰ Kristina Writz, *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History*, 2014, 5.

⁵¹ Fidel Castro (1961), in Kristina Writz, *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History*, 2014, 221.

⁵² Kristina Writz, *Performing Afro-Cuba*, 221.

⁵³ Nancy Morejon in *Voices of Resistance*, 84.

still uplifting the Revolution. This is a common theme among outspoken Afro-Cubans who lived through the Revolution. It is important to remember that exile and long prison sentences were a common threat throughout Cuban Revolutionary history for anyone who did not agree with the government in power. Outspoken artists such as Morejon survived because of one main reason, they supported the Revolution. In other words, Afro-Cubans were unable to express their African pride without societal persecution; nationalism was more of a priority than expressing pride in cultural background.

Conclusion

My work has thus far illustrated that racial discrimination persisted in various ways under the social Revolution although it was “de-institutionalized.” Segregation was abolished and yet discrimination still persisted via social norms. Due to lingering attitudes of racism, the silence concerning the issue delayed true equality across racial lines. Within a “classless” society, tensions with the United States pit nationalism above racial issues. However, a sense of nationalist pride along with disdain for the racism of the United States led to political and social reforms that altered Afro-Cuban cultural heritage. Under the revolution, Afro-Cubans were allowed to perform cultural practices, but it lost all African agency. Scholarship leaves room to address specifically how racism within the United States directly affected attitudes in Cuba or vice versa.

So why does examining remnants of racial discrimination matter to citizens of a democratic society in the United States in 2019? In a polarized political society, arguments have been made that we should move past slavery and refrain from further discourse surrounding discrimination in order to move forward from our past. Democratic socialists argue that

socialism a step towards equality and an end to racial discrimination. By examining the only successful communist revolution, we can see that even an eradication of class still amounted in discrimination for people of color. I am in no way arguing that racial equality and human rights should not be fought for, but analyzing the Cuban Revolution further is crucial in understanding why racism continues to exist even when it is seemingly eradicated.

The Revolution sought to eliminate class, race, and gender and bring education and healthcare to the masses, but individual racism persisted socio-culturally which in turn effected positions in tourism and political positions of power. The Revolution reveals how a social hierarchy based on race plays out in society, even after it aims to eliminate such divisions. The Revolution specifically sought to eliminate the social construct of race but instead this silenced discourse which enabled discrimination to persist via individual attitudes. Most scholars are aware that race is a construct and brought forth by the conquest but throughout time these “differences” became very real for people of color who have been set back socio-economically. Studying the Revolution further can give scholars insight to why racism continues to persist even decades after discrimination is deinstitutionalized.