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PARA LAS CHICAS CUBANAS

by Farah Jasmine Griffin

The New York to which I returned in mid-May of 2001 was gray, cloudy and sweater-weather cool. This only exacerbated my emotional state as I had fallen deeply, desperately in love with Cuba and longed to return. It's not the first time I've fallen in love with a place. I fell for South Africa in 1997 and I've always considered New York City one of the great loves of my life. But this was different. This was no idealistic, romanticized love. It was difficult, challenging, questioning.

In those first few weeks after my return, I went everywhere to hear and try to speak Spanish, found Cuban restaurants and bakeries, read every book I could find about the country, novels, short stories, essays, and academic treatises. I read pro-Castro, anti-Castro, pre-Castro and those praying for post-Castro.¹ I listened to Cuban music and re-listened to the music of my favorite jazz artists who had gone there, especially Roy Hargrove. I talked to everyone who had been there—What did you know about my love before I met her? What was your impression of this, of that? I tried to convince anyone who ran an institute, center or organization to plan another trip so that I could get back to her as soon as possible. Those weeks following my return were hazy, unclear, emotionally cloudy.

Let me start at the beginning. Not of the trip but at the beginning of my consciousness about Cuba. You see, I had been set up to fall in love with her very early on.

Stories of the Revolution, of Castro's coming down from the mountains. Tales of his having opened luxury hotel pools to Cuba's poor children and his legendary stay at Harlem's Hotel Teresa helped to create a larger than life image of the man and the Revolution. When I was a young adult, Black intellectuals such as Amiri Baraka and Toni Cade Bambara helped to define Cuba as space and place. The promise of a land of racial equality and the possibilities offered by Socialism made Cuba a dreamscape. Unfortunately, prior to my trip, I had not read a great deal about Cuba by Cubans of African descent. This would severely limit the way I was prepared to understand much of what I saw while I was there.

For the last few years, a postcard reproduction of a photograph of a little black girl staring intently into the camera graced the wall in front of my computer. On the back it read simply "Cubana." To me, she looked like little black girls everywhere, her bow-adorned thick hair neat but not tamed to submission. Her pleasant but pensive face suggesting an intricacy and an innocence. This singular photo of an individual child did much to convince me of commonalities between black girls worldwide and very little to remind me of differences of region, history, class and other important factors.

A different version of this essay will appear as "How Do You Measure a Revolution: Lessons Learned from Toni Cade" in a special volume devoted to her life and work to be published in 2003.

When finally our plane landed in Havana in the wee hours of the morning that early May 2001, my imaginary love affair had already started. Certainly, few potential lovers could live up to the myth. That the object of my affection might reject me never occurred to me. I was prepared to be critical but my allegiance was a foregone conclusion.

Upon our arrival in Havana a crowd of taxi drivers, men who offer to be our guides and men who offer to carry our bags, meet us. As we walk to the taxi, a beautiful dark brown young pregnant woman approaches my male friend and offers herself to him for \$1.00 U.S. Soon she is joined by her competition, all black, all young. I am sure there were a number of other things going on all around us at this time, but I remain fixated on this point. These women look like young black women I see in New York—almost exactly like them, they are even dressed like them. “This is not New York,” I say to myself. “Do not insist on reading race in Cuba the way you might in the United States,” I remind myself. We get in the taxi and speed through the broad boulevards of this magnificent city. Even though it is dark, I can see the colorful public art: the large murals, the billboards with political slogans instead of advertisements. In 1995, China was the first Communist country I ever visited, but somehow this is different because the people look so familiar to me and because it has loomed so large in my imagination for all these years.

As we head toward the hotel, I find myself wondering what Toni Cade Bambara’s first impressions were. I recall Baraka’s “Cuba Libre” and note that we are staying in the same hotel he stayed in—El Presidente. I suppose many Americans might come to Cuba and look at it through eyes informed by Hemingway. Throughout, Baraka and Bambara, two of my most important intellectual guides, inform mine. Baraka because of the extended essay, Bambara because I had just finished teaching a seminar on her work. When Charles Rowell, our trip’s organizer and editor of *Callaloo*, invited me to join the trip and present a paper on “La mujer negra: feminismo y teoria del feminismo” or “Black Women: Feminism and Feminist Theory,” I immediately knew I wanted to use my brief time to talk about Toni Cade Bambara. What I didn’t know was how reading Bambara would influence the way I saw, thought about and interpreted Cuba.

Bambara actually made two trips to Cuba, one in 1973 and another in 1986. The 1973 trip appears to have had a significant impact on her, so it seemed only fitting to turn to her work for this occasion. Because I also believe that much of the contours of black feminist theory emerge in works that are not immediately labeled “theory” it made perfect sense that Bambara would also have something to teach about both our theorizing and our politics. Finally, she seemed particularly appropriate because she is one of the founding voices of contemporary black feminism; she was a writer who always tried to establish links between the African-American liberation struggle and similar struggles worldwide.

During her first trip to Cuba, she met with women’s organizations and women workers. She credits the trip with inspiring her to think further about the connections between writing and social activism, though students of her work will know that she seemed always to be thinking about and writing about and through these connections. Nonetheless, she told writer/critic Mari Evans:

I did not acknowledge to myself that I was a writer, that writing was my way of doing my work in the world until I returned from Cuba in the summer of 1973. There I learned what Langston Hughes and others most especially my colleagues in the Neo Black Arts Movement had been teaching for years—that writing was a legitimate way, an important way to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me.

In another interview, this one with filmmaker Louis Massiah, she notes:

When I came back from Cuba in 1973 I began to think that writing could be a way to engage in struggle, it could be a weapon, a real instrument for transformation politics . . . Let me take myself a little more seriously and stop just having fun I thought.

While Bambara's early short stories show a woman with a strong political consciousness as well as a gift for her chosen craft, her second collection, *The Seabirds Are Still Alive* (1977), clearly reflects the experience of her travels to Cuba and to Viet Nam as she begins to make connections between revolutionary movements around the world. Though she does not devote an entire story to Cuba, the nation does pop up in several of the stories in the collection and much later in her second novel, *These Bones Are Not My Child*. She also co-authored a collective piece "Some of Us Had A Different Trip" published in *Liberation* (May/June, 1974).

When I decided I wanted to talk about Bambara in Cuba, I did so because of the generosity of her vision and because I wanted, as I imagined Bambara wanted, to express a sense of solidarity with the Cuban people and the goals of the Cuban revolution. I wanted to acknowledge the importance of her visit to Cuba to her art and her politics. I also thought it would allow me to share some insights about black feminist thought and writing. And in many ways it did all of these things. But it also complicated my life and my trip in ways that I could not have imagined.

With Bambara in my head and Cuba growing larger and larger in my heart each day, I went about the difficult task of trying to know my new love. On our first full day we attended a rumba—a street festival/religious celebration. The people we met were warm, friendly, curious, and loquacious. They practiced their English and let me practice my Spanish. They asked many questions about the United States, especially about Black Americans. One wore a Lakers' jersey, another a LAPD tee shirt. We talked about the LAPD, about Rodney King and the L.A. uprising.

It was Mother's Day, and there were flowers everywhere. A lovely, shy little girl, whose skin was the color and texture of dark brown velvet, gave me white flowers. I talked with her, asking her questions, complimenting her. Throughout the afternoon I caught her peeping at me from various locations. Her face haunted me throughout the rest of my trip.

Toni Cade Bambara's short fiction is filled with independent, precocious, fierce little girls. In Bambara's work, in her vision, in her politics, little girls, be they from Harlem or North Vietnam, matter. Her internationalism centers the most vulnerable

and the most disenfranchised—little girls of color—as active agents and participants in the struggle for their people’s freedom. Consequently, the adults in her short fiction are often measured by the extent to which they work for a world free of sexism as well as white supremacy and poverty, a world where these little girls are able to grow up as free women.

What does it mean to take Toni Cade Bambara’s ideas seriously? What does it mean to see the world in the way she teaches us to see it? Trying to address these concerns, I walked the streets of Havana, wanting to learn as much as I could from the city and its people. “What would it mean to follow the little black and brown girls of Cuba and of the United States? What possibilities do our respective societies offer them? What does the future hold for them? What does the future look like through their eyes? How will they measure their true value?” Bambara’s fiction insists that I measure the success of social movements in the United States, in Cuba and elsewhere by the status of black and brown girls. Her nonfiction insists that I be self-reflective, critical yet open, and willing to be both constructively critical and appreciative of my new love and myself.

The Cuba I visited in the spring of 2001 is not the Cuba Bambara visited in 1973; nor is it the Cuba of her second trip in 1986. The Revolution isn’t as young as it was when she came. The forty-year United States-imposed embargo has taken its toll, and everywhere I looked it seemed as if little black and brown girls would grow up to bear the heaviest weight of this condition. Among the youngest they seem no different from their counterparts, little boys and girls of every hue in the rainbow, dressed in their school uniforms, playing, walking, practicing instruments (there is music everywhere). But it is difficult not to note the number of extraordinarily beautiful young (I guess 14-15 year old) Afro-Cubanas and Mulatas, some still in school uniforms, with middle-aged, balding, white foreign men from Europe, Latin America and the United States. Some are with black foreign men but the overwhelming majority are white. It is a scene as common as the huge colorful murals with socialist slogans painted on them. It is a scene that breaks my heart, as I find myself falling deeper and deeper in love with this nation and with its lovely, smart and generous people. It breaks my heart because I am a black woman who wants to believe that somewhere on earth black women are free. There are those who probably argue that these young women are exercising their free will—choosing options that allow them a degree of economic independence, pleasure and leisure. Even if this is the case, and I am doubtful that it is in every instance, one cannot ignore the nation’s economic crisis and its impact on young women. Instead, I agree with Amalia Lucia Cabezas’ astute argument that “Sex work appears . . . as a strategy for many women to cope with the painful economic consequences of global capitalism.”²

The women in Cuba are the most beautiful I have ever seen. They range in color from the indigo black, cherry bark brown, deep cinnamon red, honey / caramel to sun-kissed apricot. I don’t recall any very fair maidens, but I suppose if I saw them they would have been beautiful as well. The women I see are every shape, size, height and age. It’s not that the Cuban women actually look any different from women I see in Harlem, Washington Heights, North Philadelphia or any number of places; it’s the way they carry themselves. There seems to be a level of comfort in their skin, a sense

of confidence in their being and their sensuality. Unlike so many women in the United States, they do not seem to be at war with their bodies. In some of the very young girls I find myself wondering if they are sexualized too early; I still do not know. It is a question that nags me throughout.

I also find myself concerned about what might happen if American corporations get their way: Will they bring with them fashion magazines, music videos, popular movies, and therefore create the celebrity obsession, the longing for goods and products, the growth in anorexia, bulimia, and the diet industry that plague the United States? And then it occurs to me, as I notice the large number of black and brown young people, that they are the perfect “market demographic” here, and suddenly I am praying that BET as it is currently constituted never be allowed to broadcast videos widely throughout this nation.³

During the day, everyone I meet in an official capacity tells me there is no racism in Cuba; the Afro-Cubans I meet on the street during long, late night walks speak differently. It’s interesting: they whisper their support for the revolution, note that the revolution has done much to erase institutional and state-sanctioned racism, but insist that attitudes have not changed, that there is still a racial hierarchy, that while all Cubans are suffering economically, many of the poorest are Black. Many white Cubans have family in the United States who supplement their income, and the tourist industry, especially the hotels, tends to hire lighter-skinned Cubans who therefore have greater access to the dollar. It seems the greatest opportunities in the tourist industry for black women are in the sex trade.

When I raise these issues among the people I meet at El Presidente or at Casa de Las Américas or at any number of tourist sites I visit, they remind me that the revolution has eradicated racism. When I raise it among leftist Americans upon my return, they treat me as if I am a narrow-minded, provincial African-American, a crude black nationalist. They seem to suggest that even raising the specter of race and racism is anti-revolution, anti-Cuba. But at night on the Malecón, sitting on the wall, drinking rum from shared glasses with brown and black-skinned Cubans, my observations are not dismissed; they are complicated. Because the poets and the musicians in our group read and perform with Cuban poets and musicians they meet during our stay, I have the opportunity to talk with artists who are willing to discuss the difficult and complex issues of race in Cuba with me in ways that are ultimately more satisfying than the official conversations. Unlike the poets and musicians, we scholars do not “perform” with Cuban scholars. We present papers to them. One of the scholars in our group organizes an impromptu meeting between our group and Cuban scholars; her efforts result in our establishing ways to have journals and books sent to Cuba and to meet with and possibly house visiting scholars in the United States.

During these encounters and especially during the late night discussions with average, ordinary Cubans, I learn that race in Cuba is not the same as race in the United States, but that racial hierarchies do continue to exist. These certainly predate the Revolution. They confirm what many scholars have noted: that since the 19th century, Cuban Nationalism has always had a place for all Cubans regardless of their race. In contrast for many years United States Nationalism “was . . . intertwined with white supremacy” (Marable 8). Instead of treating me with contemptuous condescen-

sion, the Cubans I meet tell me that my eyes are not lying to me, but they might not reveal the whole story in all of its complexity. My conversations with them encourage me to think a little more deeply about what I see, to try and gain a sense of understanding about race and gender in this place that may be compared but not likened to race and gender in the United States. It also reminds me that conceptions of race from abroad help to drive much of what I see there. After all, the clients of the young women I encounter are foreign men with their own stereotypes about black and Latina sexuality. The desires of these men help drive the market in which the women sell their labor. In this way, the sex workers in Cuba are part of a “transnational sex industry” that includes other countries in the Caribbean, Central America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.⁴

In 1973 Bambara and a group of her fellow travelers wrote, “Certainly racism has not been wiped off the Cuban map. And yet certainly, too, racism is being dealt with actively.” This is still true, I think, but it is disheartening to see that here, as everywhere I have ever been on the planet, there is a strong correlation between poverty and skin color. Furthermore, the aesthetic devaluation of blackness seems alive and well in Cuba: more than one dark-skinned Cuban mother told me of her tremendous pride in the color of her much fairer child. They would say this to me as if I would have an appreciation for their sense of accomplishment at having given birth to light-skinned daughters. While the mothers seemed most desirous of light children, it is the darkest women who seem the most desired partners of foreign men. Perhaps they are also the most available, because they are the poorest. Perhaps it is more noticeable than a young white or light-skinned prostitute with an older white man might be. In that case I might have mistaken them for husband and wife or father and daughter, their common skin color hiding the nature of their liaison. Perhaps these couples are members of genuine, loving relationships. Perhaps. In an article titled “Picking the Flowers of Revolution” (*New York Times Magazine*, February 1, 1998), Andrei Codrescu documented the range of relationships foreign men set up with young Afro-Cubanas ranging from marriage to one-night encounters, all fueled by the economic needs of young women and families in dire poverty.

Of course, not all the black women I meet are prostitutes. They are also mothers, workers, administrators; but most of the many prostitutes are also black.

No doubt literacy rates and access to health care in Cuba benefit black Cubans just as much as others; without question, the revolution, which would not have been possible without Afro-Cuban involvement, helped to transform the lives of black Cubans for the better. And much of what I am seeing is no doubt the result of the United States embargo. As if the U.S.-imposed embargo was not enough, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the Communist Governments in Eastern Europe, Cuba has experienced a profound economic crisis. Castro decriminalized the U.S. dollar and encouraged corporate investment from Europe. These changes have had tremendous impact on race in Cuba.

However, throughout my stay I find myself wanting to say there has to be a way to talk about race and racism here, without feeding into the propaganda of the Right-wing in the United States. I can see where talk of Black Nationalism can do just this. One “entrepreneur” I meet speaks in Black Nationalist rhetoric not unlike the Black Capitalist/Black Power advocates of the early 1970s. Too often Black Americans are

manipulated by appeals to our sensitivity about race and white supremacy. Cuba and the United States have inherited different and distinct legacies of white supremacy.

Just as the eradication of legal Jim Crow in the United States did not eradicate centuries of white supremacy, the Revolution could not erase its history in Cuba. African-American intellectuals, from Toni Cade Bambara to my colleague Manning Marable, have noted the impossibility of the young revolutionary government to completely eradicate centuries of structural and behavioral racism. Marable writes:

The new anti-discrimination laws, land reform, and the mass literacy campaign all had the greatest impact upon black Cubans . . . but the ideology of black inferiority and white privilege could not be shattered simply by government edicts. It would require a deeper cultural transformation, the radical restructuring of the hegemonic ideas about race, color and class that defined social reality for most Cubans. (13)

The persistence of what I see to be racial hierarchy in Cuba does not make me decry the failures of the revolution. I am still in awe of a nation whose founding principles included the eradication of racial inequity. Instead, it makes me even more aware of the persistence of white supremacy, of its strength even in the face of profound social change. It makes me cognizant of what progressive black intellectuals, from Richard Wright to Du Bois, have understood about the significance of race in the 20th century.

We descendants of slaves in the United States and Cuba have much to teach each other about our respective nations and our own struggles with indigenous, particular brands of white supremacy. As a start, there is the history of the Cuban nation itself, starting with its fight for independence against Spain. Ada Ferrer writes, "In an age of ascendant racism, as scientists weighed skulls and as white mobs in the U.S. South lynched blacks, Cuba's rebel leaders denied the existence of race, and a powerful multiracial army waged anticolonial war."⁵ Cuban national identity sought to transcend race. Imagine how differently our own history would have unfolded if at any point our founding fathers had done the same. That they did not meant hundreds of years of racialized exploitation and domination, which helped to make it very difficult for progressive class-based organizing across racial boundaries. It also meant that those persons deemed Black or Negro were able to construct an identity of resistance; an identity that ultimately was not something to be ashamed of, embarrassed about or for that matter "transcended." While our struggle here has been to become "American," it has also been to make "America" recognize that it is not "white."

In this land where Oshun reigns and ancestors are revered, I find myself wishing for a visitation from Ms. Bambara. Throughout the trip I return again and again to her writing. Her work leads me to the girls. It insists on informed, constructive critique. It insists that I take it all in—that I etch the beauty and the love into my memory as well as the painful images.

On my last night in Cuba, walking the Malecón for the last time, I think of my new friends: the exquisitely talented and beautiful multi-instrumentalist who invites me into her home to celebrate her birthday and has her husband deliver me a gift of her

CD; the gracious and warm friend of a friend in the States, whose delicate beige hand holds mine as she guides me through Havana's streets, takes me to hear the symphony and to visit the homes of others who give me pastry, *cafecito* and share books on Afro-Cuban culture; a young corn-rowed poet who recites his Negritude poems to me in a gentle voice just above a whisper. I try to remember every word of the babalao whose insights into my personal and professional life so startle me and whose somewhat sexist suggestions about how I conduct my personal life anger me just enough that I cannot bring myself to go back to him as he has requested. (I find myself thinking that black spirituality here is as much for sale as black sexuality. And then I think of the tourist buses that travel through Harlem and descend only at the churches to hear "authentic" gospel music and watch the Negroes worship.) I vow to hold the sound of children's laughter in my ears and the colors of the murals in my eyes.

I left Cuba reluctantly. I left with a sense of exuberance and admiration for this exquisite experiment. I left with the uncanny feeling that the things about which I am most concerned would only get worse. I left with the desire to come back, a desire I am sure Bambara must have shared. I left wanting to know even more about the history and the culture of the place, with the desire to read more Cuban authors on the questions that preoccupy me. I left with the sound of Cuban music in my ears and the sight of the colorful murals, the grand boulevards, the warm people and the beautiful little girls and young women. More than anything they dominate my mind's eye. Reading like the black feminist Bambara has taught me to be, I am haunted by the little girls who circle the city.

Back in New York, I begin to frequent a Chinese Cuban Restaurant on Broadway and West 78th. On the tables there are paper placemats. One of those kind you often find in diners, they usually have games and interesting tidbits on them. This one has an informative map of Cuba in the center. Beneath the map, on the left, there is a brief history of the nation's various wars and revolutions; above it, on the right, a list of facts ranging from the etymology of the name to the island's length and width. At the end of a list of 13 facts is the following: "Three-fourths of all Cubans are white, of Spanish descent."

NOTES

1. I have found four books especially helpful: *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, edited by Pedro Perez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs; *Afro-Cuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture*, edited by Sarduy and Stubbs; Robin D. Moore's *Nationalizing Blackness: Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*; *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, edited by Lisa Brock and Digna Castaneda Fuertes.
2. Differing arguments about the resurgence of prostitution in Cuba are discussed in Amalia Lucia Cabezas' "Discourses of Prostitution: The Case of Cuba" (85).
3. For more on consumerism and Cuban youth, see Mary Patillo-McCoy's "Consumer Culture Among Cuban and Black American Youth."
4. See Cabezas. See also Coco Fusco's "Hustling for Dollars: Jineterismo in Cuba."
5. See Ada Ferrer's *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898*.

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Callejón de Hammel