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Callaloo, Volume 26, Number 1, Winter 2003, pp. 103-105 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2003.0020>



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## ENCOUNTERING CUBA Grace Under Pressure—Boatloads of it

by Audrey Thomas McCluskey

“Cuba is not a paradise, but neither is it hell.”

Those words from Cuban poet Nancy Morejón set a useful tone for my recent visit to the island nation of 11 million. I was there to attend “The Changing Academy in the United States,” a conference in Havana sponsored by *Callaloo*, the premier journal of African-American letters.

The conference sought to promote dialogue among American scholars and artists and their Cuban counterparts. Morejón’s words were a reminder that a balanced perspective has been sorely missing from U.S.-Cuba relations for more than 40 years.

I grew up in Miami amidst the histrionics of the first-wave mass influx of Cubans fleeing Fidel Castro’s communist revolution that overthrew the U.S.-backed Batista regime. Ever since, Cuba has been a source of both fear and curiosity for me.

Fear? Our teachers told us Castro’s actions, especially the installation of Russian missiles on the island, would ignite a war between the United States and the Soviet Union and that Florida, only 90 miles from Cuba, would be the first casualty.

And curious? Cubans complicated my notion of race. In the early 1960s Miami was still a very segregated place. There were schools for blacks, like Booker T. Washington Junior-Senior High, where I attended, and for whites, schools like Thomas A. Edison High. When the first Cubans came, their children were sent to Edison although many of them had brown skin. I later learned they were considered *mestizaje* in Cuba, and had been reclassified as white when they defected. There may have been envy, too. The Cubans were greeted with fanfare and financial assistance while black Americans seemed to drop even lower on society’s totem pole.

As the exodus continued, my school, Washington, eventually enrolled a few Cuban students whose parents declared themselves black. It was my first lesson in the social construction of race.

In the intervening years, I learned more about the entangled circumstances of Cuba’s history. Its allure as the largest and arguably most naturally wondrous island in the Antilles has beguiled numerous suitors, who contrary to Morejón, considered Cuba a paradise. Christopher Columbus landed there in 1492 and reportedly declared the island “the most beautiful thing human eyes ever beheld.” Spanish colonizers

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A version of this essay was first published in the *Bloomington Herald Times*.

followed, exploiting its abundant resources and enslaving Africans to turn its sugar cane into gold. After recurring rebellions, those overlords were the last in the hemisphere to abolish slavery.

The mingling of Hispanic, African and native peoples has resulted in a syncretic culture in which “everyone is mixed and everyone has some black in them,” says Nisia Agüero, director of the National Theater of Cuba. Thus discussions of race have been more nuanced in Cuba than in the United States. Following the 1959 Revolution, Castro announced the end of racism and proclaimed racial equality by fiat.

Many Afro-Cubans, as I learned during my one-week stay, applaud their improved status—equal access to free health and education, and an infant mortality rate that is lower than in Washington, D.C.—but do not agree that racism has ended. An unconfirmed story circulating among conferees had South African President Thabo Mbeki, during a state visit to Cuba, asking a shame-faced Fidel, “Where are the blacks in your government?”

Mbeki was referring to the disproportionately low number of higher-level black officials. There is a similar absence of black faces on Cuban television.

During most of Castro’s 42-year rule, would-be liberators from American shores have launched ill-fated invasions, reportedly planted exploding cigars on Castro, and even poisoned his Evian water in James Bond-like plots meant to undermine his tenacious grip on power. Boatloads of people have continued to risk life and limb to leave that struggling nation for the promise of America.

Ironically, it may be the introduction of the American dollar, legal since 1993 (a post-Soviet economic necessity), that accomplishes what exploding cigars could not. The dollar, relished everywhere in Cuba, is unequally available to those employed in tourism or who have had remittances from relatives in the U.S. The situation favors relatives of the first-wave “white” Cubans who have established themselves in America. The growing gap between those who have access to dollars and those who have only government-issued pesos appears portentous and undermines socialist rhetoric of shared sacrifice.

My strongest impression was of a people living under tremendous pressure, yet maintaining a certain sense of grace and generosity. This is true despite the crippling effects of the United States embargo that denies Cubans access to the most basic goods. The rationing of toilet paper, medicine and food is emblematic of the daily struggle of the Cuban people. It is a country of empty shelves and limited choices. The occasional begging woman or child or afflicted person made Havana feel like an American city, minus visible homelessness. This impression was juxtaposed with images of the faded majesty of Havana’s Spanish architecture, and American cars more than 40 years old rolling defiantly along wide boulevards, or being studiously worked on by small groups of men. This enterprising spirit is also evident in the bicycle taxis that pull well-fed tourists along Old Havana streets, and the *paladares*, small restaurants in private homes.

Another memorable image was of school children, neatly uniformed, singing and clapping in praise of socialism in the schoolyard across from my hotel each morning.

Also striking is the affection and closeness between lovers, mothers, children, fathers and friends. The pace of everyday life seems slow—evening meals last into the

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night, as do gatherings along the crumbling, salt-sprayed eight-mile seawall called the Malecón. Construction projects, without modern equipment, seem interminable.

And then there is the music. If African Americans had not invented blues and jazz, Cubans would have. The same historical elements feed both musical traditions.

Cuba offers such a confounding cacophony of impressions and images that one is left with the notion that perhaps it is not a matter of paradise or hell, but, depending upon one's angle of vision, an odd mixture of both.



Old Habana Square

Photo by Marcia Minter



**Callaloo Band**

**Left to right: Joel LaRue Smith, Miguel Miranda López (Cuban)  
Salim Washington, Willie Thompson (Cuban)**

**Photo by Marcia Minter**



Photo by Fred Moten

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