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Afro-Cuban Experiences of Exile in the Bronx

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***Cuban Roots/Bronx Stories*. Produced and directed by Pam Sporn. Narrated by Pablo Elliott Foster Carrión. Latino Public Broadcasting, Third World Newsreel, 2000. 57 minutes.**

C*uban Roots/Bronx Stories* is a documentary film, which uses a biographical approach to offer its viewers a somewhat different view to the dilemma of Cuban exile and nostalgia. The more common trope of Cuban migration is one that inveighs against dictatorship and confiscation, hardship and repression. Cuban return migration in this context is often conceived in terms of restoration of past racial and class glories. It is about recapturing memories of times past. In *Cuban Roots/Bronx Stories* the objective seems different if somewhat understated. As Pablo Carrión notes in his introductory remarks, the film is about his family's reflection on cultural, racial, and political identity—about what was left behind, and what was discovered in the Bronx. Part of this journey in time is to provide some clarity for the American-born and raised, young narrator of the film to situate himself within the context of his own *puertorriqueño y cubanidad* multiple identities.

Pablo Carrión's great grand parents moved to Cuba from Jamaica in the early 1900s. Carlos Foster, the patriarch, who still spoke with a distinctive Jamaican accent, recounts the segregated communities of Cuba when the Americans were dominant in that country, he tells much of the family's oral history. He mentions how people celebrated the overthrow of Batista. Despite recognizing the corruption of the Batista government, Carlos Foster felt that there was more peace and tranquility under the political strong man's regime, adding that Batista did not want to control everything. This Foster family was not among the affluent Cuban families. They in fact narrowly escaped being evicted from their home because of a new law laid down by the revolutionary regime of Fidel Castro, which saved them from being homeless and out in the streets.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 ushered in fundamental changes to that society. Its revolutionary Marxian orientation immediately drew serious objections and challenges from the United States—its neighbor, only ninety miles to its north. By 1960 the U.S. imposed a trade embargo on Cuba. This embargo, which is still in existence today, altered patterns of economic behavior and consumption of ordinary Cubans. An added dimension of fear and instability was realized at the time of the Bay of

Pigs invasion, that infamous and unsuccessful effort carried out by Cuban exiles, and orchestrated by the United States in 1961. By this time, the Foster family, already a bit concerned about the prospects of communism, had made a decision to leave Cuba. Diana Elena Matsoukas, Pablo Elliott Foster Carrión's aunt, notes that this uncertainty pushed the family to leave in 1962 for the U.S. The irony here is that Pablo's grandmother feared that the island would be invaded by the U.S., which it was, but rather than seeking safety elsewhere, she chose instead to settle in the United States. Pablo Foster, the father of Pablo Elliott Foster Carrión, our narrator, was at pains to make the reason for migrating clear:

We did not leave because we were against the Revolution, or we had so much at stake, therefore things were taken away from us. We had nothing! We would have been the beneficiaries of the Revolution if we had stayed in Cuba. We left because, we got seven kids, a mother, and the U.S. threatening to invade Cuba—which they did—Bay of Pigs.

The film then turns to the process of adjustment of this family in the United States. Unlike other Cuban émigrés, this is not a family that becomes ensconced in a Cuban community or network of kinship relations. It is a family that faced the challenges of race and language from the very beginning. Pablo Foster recalls that upon arrival in Miami, Cubans were segregated according to race. The family made its way up to the Bronx, where they spent the first five years in a very rough neighborhood, characterized by violence, fights, and the harsh code of the streets. Here too, Diana, Pablo and Rubén Foster, had to negotiate the rapids of race and language in ways that they never anticipated. They had always known themselves to be black, but they discovered in the Bronx, that to speak Spanish had the effect of changing their racial identity; of altering how they were perceived within groups long polarized by ethnic differences, themselves the product of race-making in the United States. To speak Spanish, was to be placed by Spanish speakers, outside of the African American community. To claim blackness while communicating in Spanish was to be considered inauthentic. Somehow, the family managed to bridge this chasm, getting through high school and on to college. In college however, one gets the impression from Diana and Pablo that the Black Power discourse of the time greatly helped them in asserting a radical black identity. For Pablo Forster, the political direction of his homeland also made him more amenable to leftist and radical politics in the U.S.

The remainder of *Cuban Roots/Bronx Stories* is devoted to an examination of how the Foster family consolidated their life in the United States. It quickly becomes a familiar story of two brothers, Pablo, who made in as a doctor, while the other, Rubén, is swallowed up by the

hustle of the streets, a drug habit that spirals out of control and a culture of despair. When Rubén finally hits rock bottom, a stranger who offers Christian hope, a kind word and a cup of coffee rescues him. Though initially skeptical about the Christian charity, Rubén eventually turns his life around and devotes his life to the Church, where he becomes an active member.

The Fosters have lived in the United States for thirty-two years. The family embodies the classic tension of which James Clifford speaks: “the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (1997:255). Unlike the Cuban Diaspora of Miami, for example, there is no mention of a community to which the Fosters could turn. There is a sense that assimilation is an option that cannot be ignored without social costs. There is a missed opportunity in this film to explore the racial dimensions of this isolation, which Afro-Cubans experience in opposition to the predominantly white Cuban émigrés of Miami and New York. It is perhaps why Pablo Foster says: “I don’t feel like a full-blown Cuban. I feel more like an American.” The comment in part reflects the lack of social connections to a Cuban community, but it is also influenced by the restrictions placed on travel to Cuba. The restrictions imposed on travel to Cuba by the United States produces what Adriana Méndez Rodenas calls a “recurrent obsession” (2007:151) with their place of origin. In the end however, Pablo Foster, his wife and his daughter, became the only members of the original family who settled in the Bronx, to make it back to Cuba, albeit surreptitiously, via Canada.

Pablo Foster’s return to Cuba after thirty-two years in the United States was understandably emotional. Reconnecting with relatives, familiar locations, former places of residence, even the banality of everyday existence in Cuba, all triggered deep-seated, emotional memories for Pablo, who broke down in tears of joy that he had been given the opportunity, once again, to relive the memory of his childhood.

Cuban Roots/Bronx Stories is an important documentary about one family’s odyssey in overcoming migration, language difficulties, culture and personal tragedies, to settle in and prosper in the United States. It would have been helpful for viewers if the film had explored the connection this family made or tried to make to other Diasporas in the multicultural and complex Bronx community. There is also some inattention to folkways of re-territorialization in this film. Beyond the shared nostalgia of the three family members whose experiences frame this film, at no time does the viewer get a sense of the way the Foster family imposes its cultural past on its new environment. There is no reflection about Cuban cultural legacy in its Bronx experience—no rituals practices, no food preparation, no preference for musical expression of difference. In

short, we get no real sense that the Foster family has made any headway in terms of colonizing their space within their host country.

Finally, though the film certainly throws some light on the Foster family genealogy, one is not sure that for the young narrator Pablo Elliott Foster Carrión, it would have resolved the issue of helping him to embrace his multiple identities. In the end, the film made a more powerful case for assimilation to the American cultural mainstream, than it made for the articulation of cultural differences. The real contribution of the film however might be better located in the telling of the story of migration from an Afro-Cuban perspective, which is clearly at variance with the story of exile and nostalgia of white Cubans—an angle, which never manages to claim a place of prominence in the film.

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Looking into the Nation's Heart: Gloria Rolando's Approximation to 1912

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***Las raíces de mi corazón (Roots of My Heart)*. Directed by Gloria Rolando. English subtitles. Images of the Caribbean, 2001. VHS. 51 minutes.**

Most Cubans still know very little about the Partido Independiente de Color (PIC), a racially-defined national political party that was created in Cuba in 1908, was declared illegal in 1910, and staged an armed revolt in 1912. Most do not know that the revolt of the PIC in the mountains of Oriente was met with swift military repression, which resulted in the killings of the main leaders of the Party, Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet, as well as many of their followers. The precise