Confluence
Conscience, Color, and Cuba
by
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Ever since the Cuban Revolution challenged the Monroe Doctrine by asserting a right to independence and mutuality between the United States and Cuba, no effort has been spared to gain control of the island. The National Endowment for Democracy, which has long pursued regime change in Cuba in the guise of democracy promotion, has recently “discovered” Cuban black people and manipulated the discourse of nonviolent civil disobedience to charge Cuba with racism. In 2009, an open letter from the esteemed Abdias do Nascimento and a document signed by 59 respected U.S.-based public figures of African descent became part of this effort. This process was enhanced in 2013 with visits to the United States by Afro-descendant Cuban dissidents and the increase of the reward for the capture of Assata Shakur, an exiled political activist currently living in Cuba. The original charge was countered by Cuban artists and writers and by U.S. Afro-descendants in support of Cuba’s history of mobilization against discrimination and racial prejudice. If there is one way in which Cubans are taking to heart what Fidel Castro once called “the monopoly of knowledge,” it is combining the full-throated struggle against racism with the objective to improve socialism at all levels of society.

Desde que la revolución cubana desafió la doctrina Monroe al afirmar el derecho a la independencia y la reciprocidad entre Estados Unidos y Cuba no se han escatimado esfuerzos para tomar control de la isla. El National Endowment for Democracy, que durante mucho tiempo ha buscado un cambio de régimen en Cuba, recientemente ha “descubierto” a los cubanos negros y manipulado el discurso de la desobediencia civil no violenta para acusar a Cuba de racismo. En 2009, una carta abierta del estimado Abdias do Nascimento y un documento firmado por 59 respetadas personalidades de origen africano en los Estados Unidos se convirtió en parte de este esfuerzo. Este proceso se ha intensificado con visitas a los Estados Unidos de disidentes cubanos afrodescendientes y un aumento en la recompensa por la captura de Assata Shakur, una activista política exiliada que vive en Cuba. La imputación original ha sido debatida por escritores y artistas cubanos y por...

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afrodescendientes estadounidenses que apoyan la lucha histórica cubana contra la discriminación y los prejuicios raciales. Si hay una forma en la que los cubanos están tomando en serio aquello que Fidel Castro llamó “el monopolio del conocimiento” es combinando la lucha contra el racismo con el objetivo de mejorar el socialismo a todos los niveles sociales.

**Keywords:** Cuba, Afro-descendants, “Acting on Our Conscience,” National Endowment for Democracy, Racism

During a visit to The Evergreen State College in 1991, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano told the audience that the “true history of all of America—the North and the South—is a source of astonishing dignity and beauty” that has been distorted by the official histories imposed on the peoples of the Americas. “The masked heroes reduce [the hemisphere’s] dazzling reality to a victory of the rich, the white, the male, and the military.” He invited those present to do something not easily done in the United States: to think of themselves as part of the Americas and the Western Hemisphere at large. What would become visible, he seemed to ask, if the lens included other interpretations, other perspectives?

The power and validity of Galeano’s words are revealed on any journey through North and South America and the Caribbean (see esp. Galeano, 2010). The hemisphere is awash in historical narratives that (1) privilege the history and experience of Europe while those of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples are hidden or disdained; (2) emphasize the deeds of the wealthy over those of the poor and/or laboring classes who developed their countries; (3) glamorize violence and wars as opposed to cooperation among different groups; and (4) reify the acts and ideas of men over those of women. Official “creation” stories are now being challenged, and no place is more vividly involved in its reinvention than Cuba. For more than half a century Cubans have struggled to remake themselves and their country. This is a time of coincidences and historical reflection in Cuba, for 2012 was the bicentennial of José Antonio Aponte’s legendary militancy against slavery (for which he was beheaded). It also marked a compelling centennial inquiry into the meaning of the Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color—PIC), made up mostly of those who had long fought for dignity under Spanish colonialism. How should they be remembered? Who has the power to interpret historical events and to assign meaning to the War of 1912? Does Cuba’s historical reflection offer lessons for today?

The account that follows is fourfold and international and seeks to unearth the hidden bedrock underlying race and racism in international relations. The first objective of this story is to demonstrate how an open letter signed on October 30, 2009, by the revered Brazilian activist Abdias do Nascimento (now deceased) accusing Cuba of racism against black people, with a supporting document entitled “Acting on Our Conscience” and signed by 59 respected U.S.-based public figures of African descent, became part of the continuing U.S. foreign policy objective of fomenting “regime change” in Cuba. Nascimento’s letter expressed concern for Dr. Darsi Ferrer, a physician described as a “civil and human rights activist . . . of the Cuban Black Movement” and called for Ferrer’s release from prison. This “declaration of
African American support for the civil rights struggle in Cuba,“ partly in support of Ferrer, was reportedly promulgated by the disaffected Cuban writer Carlos Moore, whose opposition to communism has shaped his struggle against racism in Cuba (Moore, 2008b: 288).

Another goal of this paper is to reveal the enduring power of the Reagan administration policies that targeted egalitarianism at home and abroad and the way the 1983 creation of the National Endowment of Democracy (NED) has affected struggles for social justice in the hemisphere in general and Cuba in particular. A third objective therefore is to address the Afro-descendant artists and writers whose struggles for equality in the Americas led them to perceive the 2009 “Acting on Our Conscience” as something rooted in honor and important for them to sign.

Finally, a special mission of this paper is to share some of the authentic achievements of Cuba on the racial question and especially to contribute to the “reflection, debate, and solution” about race and racism that Cubans who live in Cuba say their people are demanding. It is a plea for Cubans to avoid at all costs the silencing narrative of “colorblindness” and continue the bold and inspiring critique of race and racism in which they are currently engaging.

Although these events began at the end of 2009, their repercussions still resonate and have become ever more complex and more important to place into context. A key question is how the current assault on equality and social justice in the United States affects the way the issues surrounding domestic and foreign policy are conceptualized.

MANIPULATING THE LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE OF FREEDOM

This saga goes back decades to the purposeful hijacking of the language of justice, equality, and democracy by the Reagan administration. Of special import is the impact on Cuba over time of U.S. conservatives’ efforts to transform these concepts in both domestic and foreign policy. Central to this effort has been the Heritage Foundation, cofounded in 1973 by Paul Weyrich and Edwin Feulner with initial funding from arch-conservatives Joseph Coors (of $250,000) and Richard Mellon Scaife (whose donations over time reached $23 million [Kaiser and Chinoy, 1999]). The objective of the founders was to facilitate a conservative expansion by unifying right-wing positions (Woo, 2008).

The narratives presented in the Heritage Foundation’s Mandate for Leadership book series demonstrated how the U.S. right wing could stake a claim to the cause of justice and human rights. For example, Kamenar (1984: 155) wrote frankly that between 1964 and 1984 the most important struggle in the field of civil rights was for control of the language of social justice. In his view, because U.S. citizens at that time opposed “discrimination” and “racism” and favored “equality,” “opportunity,” etc., the secret to gaining conservative victories—whether in court or in the U.S. Congress—was “to control the definition of these terms.” The linguistic subterfuges were initially applied by the right-wing analysts on multiple fronts in popular U.S. culture but were particularly geared toward defeating affirmative action at all costs. In fact, a 1986 phrase, “radical egalitarianism,” became the Reagan
administration’s term for those interested in civil rights (see Greenhouse, 1990; Pear, 1986). Moreover, Reagan’s “constructive engagement” with apartheid South Africa and interventionism in the Caribbean and Central America revealed a commitment to defeating social justice and racial equality, whether at home or abroad. From the beginning of his presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three voting rights activists were murdered, to his labeling black women parasitic “welfare queens,” Reagan’s antigalitarian legacy was a plethora of domestic and international policies. The manipulation of discourse was present in all the Mandate for Leadership volumes, but in Mandate III the Heritage Foundation took special pride in the Reagan administration’s imperial lens as it revealed a more openly interventionist approach, hostile to the United Nations and developing nations (Weinrod, 1989: 466–467).

The establishment of the NED began a process that would take rhetorical flourishes to a new level. Funding operations would come to be known as “democracy promotion.” According to its web site, “NED programs focus on long-term efforts to open up Cuba.” William Blum (2005: 238) describes the NED as an organization that “often does the opposite of what its name implies.” “Democracy” has one primary definition—a free-market economy that promotes foreign investment—and this is the reason that “Cuban dissident groups and media are heavily supported” (242).

The NED was ostensibly organized to “promote ‘democracy’ via private, non-profit, nongovernmental efforts,” but what developed was a new strategy for interference by government-allied corporations in a nation-state’s management of its society—especially by using expensive technology (computers, untraceable cell phones, fax machines, supplementary funding, etc.). With this equipment, opposition forces could be developed, enhanced, and armed. Strategic maneuvering in the media has been essential to “transmuting the old anticommunist vocabulary into the language of democratization” (Peck, 2010: 86).

There are four affiliated institutes underpinning the NED’s global outreach: the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), and the AFL-CIO’s American Center for International Labor Solidarity (now Solidarity Center). The definitions of “freedom” and “democracy” that are advanced by the NED and its network are still those espoused by corporate spokespersons in Larry Adelman’s classic 1978 film Controlling Interest—cheap labor, cheap resources, new markets, and the political climate to guarantee them.

National discourse was ripped apart as each successive year saw this strategy applied to foreign policy initiatives through the use of soothing words like “humanitarian aid,” “civil society,” and “nonprofit nongovernmental organizations.” This is how the new language of the antigalitarian frame emerged. In today’s world this is now the dominant discourse accompanying intervention and militarism. And though those involved in the open letter might have been unaware of it, the NED is the current strategic platform for intervention in Cuba.
ASSAILING SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH FISCAL INTERVENTION

Funding sources are a good indicator of the true purposes of the NED. Its web site (http://www.ned.org/about) identifies its uniqueness as based on its nongovernmental character. However, the concept of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) comes from the United Nations and refers to civic, local, national, or international nonprofit groups that are primarily humanitarian and that have “consultative status” with the UN’s operations through the Economic and Social Council. This status confers on them the official recognition necessary to petition agencies of the UN on behalf of a particular principle or group. Freedom House (which does have consultative status), originally founded to defeat the Nazis in 1941 and at one time led by Eleanor Roosevelt, was transformed into a conservative vehicle via the NED and USAID, the government agency that provides most of its funding.

Indeed, support for U.S.-originated “grassroots democratic organizations” around the world is specifically authorized in U.S. law. Spelled out in an NED report called “The Backlash against Democracy Assistance” (NED, 2006: 18) is the ideological frame of reference buttressing this revealing assault on international sovereignty:

Few regimes are as despotic as . . . Cuba . . . [which] has had a long-standing policy of harassing and impeding civil society groups that refuse to conform to the regime’s Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. . . . Independent civil society groups have been organized by dissidents on the island and by Cubans in exile. . . . Experienced foreign NGOs and Cuban exile groups continue to carry out their work by adopting operational strategies that are secure and effective in this closed and restrictive environment.

Note the strategic use of the words “independent civil society groups,” “experienced foreign NGOs,” and “operational strategies that are secure”—concepts that evoke “low-intensity warfare.” Fomenting what would never be countenanced in the United States, the perspective implies a “legal” right to intervene in a country and carry out one’s own mission: by supporting opposition forces, arming antigovernment rebels, and labeling and otherwise disseminating negative views about the government being targeted. The Miami-based NED affiliate the Cuban Democratic Directorate (CDD), in its Steps to Freedom (2007), claims to provide “an analysis of civil resistance in Cuba” but instead unmasks something more sinister—how to use local organizations to take advantage of people who could be unaware of the sources and objectives of those who provide the funding for their “independent libraries,” foundations, civil society organizations, and religious liberation movements.

Both Cuban and U.S. scholars have long been aware of the relationship between the U.S. legislated mission of covert or overt regime change in Cuba and the flouting of international law (see esp. Berkowitz, 2001; Blum, 2005: 238–243; Morales and Prevost, 2008: 140–141). The widely disseminated assertion by Allen Weinstein that “[a] lot of what we [NED] do was done 25 years ago covertly by the CIA” (Ciment and Ness, 2006; Ignatius, 1991) raises crucial questions for U.S. citizens committed to a legal and open foreign policy. Within
Cuba, the role of USAID has been exposed and even incorporated into popular culture via television programming on the island (LeoGrande, 2011: 41).

If the U.S. government supplies the majority of funding for activities such as the NED, it should not be considered an NGO; as Richard Falk (2012) has pointed out, a more accurate term would be “informal governmental organization” (IGO). Though referring to the Middle East, Falk’s influential critique of the role of U.S. representatives of “nongovernmental nonprofits” led him to conclude that countries would be wise to “prohibit American IGO’s from operating freely . . . especially if their supposed mandate is to promote democracy as defined and funded by Washington.” As if to provide evidence for Falk’s assertions, the Center for Democracy in the Americas’ Cuba Central Newsblast, dated July 6, 2012, described multimillion-dollar grants for two NED affiliates—the IRI and the NDI (CDA, 2012).

Where does the money trail begin and end? Would this kind of “assistance from abroad” be allowed in the United States? Why should other nations be forced to accept what the United States itself would not?

Progressive U.S. groups such as the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) point to the link between bias in the media and the NED’s so-called democracy promotion. The CMD’s exhaustive online bibliographies reveal that the real purpose is to foster conflict and cater to U.S. corporate needs in targeted nations (SourceWatch, 2012). But it can be difficult to link these complex intersections to NED-controlled NGOs and their relationship to global destabilization because of their “illusion of innocent philanthropic activity” (O’Connor, 2012: 7).

Conservative foundations such as Bradley (one of the wealthiest), Richard Mellon Scaife, Coors, and Olin contribute funding to both domestic and international causes. The 2007 annual report of the Bradley Foundation lists a grant to Freedom House—of US$50,000 to “support the development of grassroots civic leadership in Cuba.” Though seemingly a trivial amount, its importance lies in the assumptions justifying such a grant.

With each passing day, more and more U.S. citizens are learning what much of the world already knows—that this spiderweb of foundations and NGOs affiliated with the NED and USAID is putting in place the mechanisms for maintaining corporate control globally with a definition of “freedom” that implies that the world’s resources, human labor, and ways to buy, sell, and trade really belong to the wealthy of the world. If that agenda is challenged—whether by another definition of development or in the name of equality and equity—then destabilization is imposed in the guise of “encouraging democracy.”

Who defines “freedom”? The slave owner or the slave?

**RACISM AND THE FOREIGN POLICY CONUNDRUM**

Cuba has been targeted for “regime change” ever since 1824, when John Quincy Adams suggested that the island was a “natural appendage” of the United States. Whether by annexation as a pro-slavery state or by purchase from Spain, Cuba has been an object of attack by U.S. expansionists for much of its history. Since the Cuban Revolution challenged the Monroe Doctrine by
asserting a right to authentic independence and international mutuality between the United States and Cuba, no effort has been spared to gain control of the island nation. As one Jamaican economist has suggested, “Cuba is the second Haiti.”

To this end, Miami exile strategists and the NED have appropriated the discourse of “nonviolent civil disobedience,” a tactic made famous by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in struggles for Afro-descendant and workers’ civil rights in the United States. Manipulation of this discourse has accompanied the “discovery” of Cuban black people by the NED and USAID and their allies in the Miami “plantocracy”—those whose wealth in Cuba stemmed primarily from the slave-owning and labor-intensive sugar production that enabled them to emigrate to the United States as power brokers (Betancourt, 2010). Thus the “race” question opened the way for the publication of Carlos Moore’s (2008a) open letter to Cuban President Raúl Castro in the Miami Herald, a newspaper that is very sensitive to Cuban themes. This letter advanced the objectives of those who want regime change in Cuba. It varied in style and effect from overly formal to almost intimate scolding, in places appearing to be addressed to an old acquaintance. Its individualistic tone echoed that of Moore’s memoir Pichón (2008b), whose subtitle promised a discussion of “race and revolution in Cuba” but instead offered anecdotes of an extremely personal nature. Moore’s assertion that the Cuban “revolutionary government was not prepared to concede anything resembling racial power sharing” (2008a: 327) should have been juxtaposed with an examination of the raging antiegalitarianism strangling the United States since the 1980s and increasing with each neo-conservative policy victory. It overlooked the way “anticommunism was used to defeat equality, and racism was used to fight communism,” a strategy that targeted struggles for equality in the United States and abroad (Gilliam, 2010: 181).

As recently as 2006, the CDD’s annual Steps to Freedom booklet charted the development of manufactured dissent within Cuba but did not raise the question of race. The civil disobedience involved was based on themes such as “Christian liberation” and “change.” Indeed, photos in it include one of Dr. Darsi Ferrer and his wife and son on the porch of their home holding a sign bearing that word (CDD, 2007: 148). His transformation into a black leader came later.

This, then, is the back story—the tale that lurks in the shadows of history. It is the true frame of reference for Nascimento’s open letter, addressed to both President Raúl Castro of Cuba and then-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil. The English translation created the context for “Acting on Our Conscience,” and the announcement of the latter in a front-page story in the Miami Herald (Tamayo, 2009) included the report that it was “largely driven by Carlos Moore.” Could Nascimento, a wise Brazilian politician, artist, and human rights activist, have written this letter more out of loyalty to a friend than after full reflection about the way it could be used? Moore engaged his actions without referencing the work of those Cubans who have long struggled openly against the historical legacies and personal prejudices of the past. By placing his message in a Florida newspaper, he seemed to be suggesting that the United States was the model of antiracist achievement to be emulated.
Many who have been dismayed by the civil rights reversals taking place in the United States would disagree with any such conclusion.

The letter by Nascimento concerned racism in Cuba in general and identified Dr. Darsi Ferrer as one of the “civil rights militants” in Cuba as well as an embodiment of world activism for “civil, human, and democratic rights.” Yet evidence of Ferrer’s being so identified in Cuba is difficult to find. Moreover, now that he and his family live in the United States, the fact that his supporters include members of the right-wing Miami elite has tainted his claim to human rights militancy.

Norma Guillard (interview, April 4, 2011), a Cuban psychologist and educator, told me that Nascimento’s letter “was good in a sense”: “There are now many conversations, organizations and studies to determine how he could have come to that conclusion. It’s like the blockade—something good came out of it because it has made us grow.” The Cubans’ response to their North American counterparts was swift and succinct. Writing with purposeful mutuality, on December 2, 2009, artists and writers reached out with respectful but pointed dissent. They not only revealed the importance they attached to Cuba’s medical internationalism in Africa and foreign policy but challenged the U.S. interpretation of racism and how it played out not only in domestic but in foreign policy. Referring to Cuba’s historical role in Africa, their words were firm: “From Africa we brought home only [our compatriots’] remains . . . [keeping] not one property, not one bank, not one mine, not one oil well.” In addition, they listed numerous examples of historical and contemporary cultural initiatives such as the Permanent Committee of the Writers’ Union “to struggle, from a cultural . . . perspective, against every vestige of discrimination and racial prejudice.”

Recognition of the right of Cubans to identify their own path toward development and similar support came from more than one Afro-descendant initiative in the United States. Coincidentally, two initiatives in support of Cuba were immediately put online almost simultaneously (S. E. Anderson, personal communication, 2011). There were radio programs and public events centered around the slogan “We Stand with Cuba!” Online outreach via petitions or website analytical commentary by specialists was crucial for the acquisition of authentic information that the conventional media were not providing. Thus, U.S. progressive activists and intellectuals (especially Afro-descendants) were eager to publicize position papers and/or statements in opposition to the declaration. In this way, alternative interpretations immediately circulated as to who best represented human and civil rights advocacy. The We Stand with Cuba! group pointed out that the people of Cuba, “in electing their representatives to the National Assembly, not only have chosen a very diverse group, including dozens of Black Cubans prominently working in many key roles,” but also “exemplify how ordinary working people actually govern and make foreign policy via the workplace” (S. E. Anderson, personal communication, October 9, 2012). This demonstrates that international affairs is a legitimate concern of the global working class—something that U.S. Afro-descendants have been reluctant to engage seriously given the lethal rage arrayed against Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X by governmental and nongovernmental forces when they dared to have an opinion regarding this broader arena. Yet
only those who support official foreign policy objectives are hailed in the U.S. media as experts. Those who espouse alternative analyses and interpretations of international themes—King on the war in Vietnam or progressive support for Cuba today—have encountered either outright hostility or patronizing suggestions that foreign policy is beyond their capability or understanding. Nonetheless, U.S. Afro-descendant scholars have long added complexity and diversity to narratives about race and class in Cuba (Brock and Cunningham, 1991; Early, 1999; Marable, 2000; Mealy, 1993).

To what degree is this complex cultural conjunction about Cuba part of the recent hidden history of the United States in its relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean?

**DIALOGUE WITH CUBAN ARTISTS, FILMMAKERS, AND WRITERS**

Anthropologists who study relations of inequality usually investigate patterns of hierarchy within one culture. But the flow of ideas between two countries—one hegemonic, with the capacity to impose international rules of exchange, and the other the recipient of an international blockade—requires reevaluation. A visit to Cuba in March 2010 as a member of the delegation of the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration, whose theme was “Women’s Rights, Racial Justice, and Social Welfare,” promised to give depth to these themes, especially in view of the attention generated by the “Acting on Our Conscience” document. The delegation was made up of women who were eager to learn from Cubans. Some had read of the debate among progressives about the charge of racism in Cuba, but putting it all together in its historical context was not so simple. What was the role of racism itself in the country-to-country exchange?

The contrasts between the U.S. and the Cuban group were grounded in the fact that the Cuban government has mobilized citizens to participate in struggles against racism, including those linked to the United Nations, for years. The United States, in contrast, withdrew from the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban because of the UN’s engagement with Palestinian rights (and Israel’s objections to that) and for the same reason refused to attend any of the subsequent meetings either in Geneva (in 2009) or New York City (in 2011) to measure progress toward the original objectives. This is lamentable because it has left U.S. people uninformed about the ongoing international efforts to recognize “the historic legacy of the transatlantic slave trade” and the fact that even those of “African descent” whose ancestors were not slaves face enduring racism and discrimination because of that history. But the United States has been at war with many UN initiatives ever since the organization became a venue for economic and cultural decolonization across the globe (Gilliam, 1985).

One vital component of cultural interrogation in Cuba has historically been the use of cinema in the political reexamination of the past. This “reaching and teaching” is a crucial part of the nation’s debate about the meaning of the centennial of the 1912 war. One of the more complex depictions of race in cinema is the work of Gloria Rolando, which directly challenges the obscuring and
otherwise backgrounding of the black Cuban historical experience. Among Rolando’s films is *1912: Breaking the Silence*, a three-part masterpiece about the Partido Independiente de Color, some thousands of whose members were massacred in 1912 after the party was declared illegal. In her discussion of the film Rolando said that “a party of blacks would not be allowed on the island,” especially since Cuba was then controlled by the United States, which had strict expectations of obedience to racial segregation. She told the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration that, although she had studied at the university, she had never heard about this incident in Cuban history. “The Revolution [of 1959] came, and still we can’t talk about 1912.” This observation is echoed in Part 3 of the film by the words and rap artistry of Sekov Messiah, who says that he felt “betrayed by the silence kept about the event . . . as if I had been denied something that was mine.” He concludes by sharing how empowering it was for him to learn about this history and have it acknowledged. As if to definitively participate in the debate about that period, the film ends with a quote from one Rosa Brioso from the May 1910 issue of the journal *Previsión*: “The Partido de Independientes de Color is a party of advancement and progress, and its men have never thought of [ex]changing the independence of their homeland for an annexation that would bring ruin to this land.”

Another film that openly confronts the silence about race in general and 1912 in particular is *Raza* (Race), directed by Eric Corvalán Pellé, a powerful short documentary that grabs the viewer from the first scene and presents such a daring challenge to deal with reality that it makes many Cubans uncomfortable. In it a combination of spontaneous answers of people on the street to the filmmaker’s questions with discussions by a variety of researchers, artists, government officials, dancers, and intellectuals reveals a certain tension about whether there is racism in Cuba. The documentary had its Cuban premiere on December 10, 2008, at the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema and is frequently used to frame sensitive discussions around the country and abroad for audiences that might be reluctant to speak about subjects that, as the filmmaker put it (personal communication, May 11, 2011), “one either doesn’t see or doesn’t want to see.” Thus, in 35 minutes the viewer witnesses a painful admission that the complexities of Cuban history involve a “colorblindness” similar to the one that afflicts some in the United States. Some of the scholars or artists interviewed in the film have been present in the audience during the film’s screenings throughout Cuba to encourage questions and commentary afterward and/or to frame a formal presentation subsequently. Being a part of such an audience was a poignant experience for one Cuba-based U.S. filmmaker at a University of Havana screening, who noted the differences in the students’ responses based on their likely relationship to the subject (C. Murphy, personal communication, April 15, 2011). Unsettling issues came bubbling forth, revealing that few felt comfortable talking about “racism” and “race” and their significance.

In a separate context altogether, one U.S. visiting professor, noticing the difference at the University of Havana between the 1970s and 2001, worried that “racism today is being reproduced that is not merely a legacy of colonialism and pre-1959 structure; the proportion of black students declined significantly over this period” (P. Bohmer, personal communication, October 6, 2012). His
concern echoes those of scholars in and outside of Cuba who speculate about a “material basis for the silenced subject of racism” (W. Sales, personal communication, October 10, 2010) and note that a receding state sector inching toward privatization without resolving such thorny issues may hasten the appearance of even more inequities (De la Fuente, 2011; Saney, 2004: 117). That analysis is reinforced by Alberto Jones (2013), who maintains that between 1960 and 1975 “Cuban Afro-descendants from Guantánamo and Santiago constituted a large portion of the physicians, nurses, teachers, and dentists graduating in Cuba” but today these demographic groups are barely visible in those fields. Jones adds that this socioeconomic transformation is contributing to “stagnation, frustration, and demoralization” in young people, making them susceptible to activities that attack the sovereignty of the nation.

Esteban Morales, one of Cuba’s most outspoken scholars on the subject of race and equality, used his appearance as one of the scholars interviewed in Corvalán’s Raza to repeat a pedagogical position he has expressed in writing (2013a:25-26) and that is relevant to the entire Western Hemisphere: By educating within white hegemony, “in practice we educate to be white….What is not taught is anything of Africa, Asia, the Middle East.” One of Raza’s more painfully etched scenes is of the artist Roberto Diago reporting that when he was a child a teacher advised him to “hide his bembá” (full lips; the closest English translation is the pejorative “liver lips”) and how traumatic it was for him to attempt to follow those instructions and “tuck his lips in.” Commenting that being a father to a six-year-old boy made him more focused, he said, “There comes a certain moment when one begins to feel hatred of yourself, of not seeing yourself.”

For me, Diago’s observations evoked Nicolas Guillén’s (1952) poem Negro bembón, a powerful symbol of the ability of language, poetry, and storytelling to rescue the body from shame. Afro-descendant women intellectuals have taken Guillén’s example of confronting the “aesthetic alienation from the body” (Caipora Women’s Group, 1993: 52) to another level and thereby have become essential components of the vigorous debate about “race” that is now a part of the Cuban landscape. The landmark edited volume Afrocubanas (Rubiera and Martiatu, 2011), dedicated to all women but particularly Afro-descendant ones for their “arduous battle for freedom,” burst upon the Cuban literary scene with complex historical and contemporary analyses that were uniquely incisive. González Chacón (2011: 181), for example, credits hip-hop with helping Afro-descendant women to emancipate themselves with regard to their hair texture. The continuum that begins with pelo bueno (good hair [straight]) and malagazo/rizado (wavy or curly) derisively ends with pasas or pelo malo (bad hair [kinky or frizzy]). Such distinctions devalue the darker woman and are used especially by black or mestizo men who have assimilated the “deculturation that makes them equally or more inferior.” When Obsesión, the husband-wife hip-hop duo of Magia Lopez and Alexey Rodríguez, surged forward with its musical critique about hair (“Los pelos”), an important step in explicating the body as a site of struggle was taken.

Gisela Arandia’s (2011) trenchant and poetic analysis demonstrates vividly how this alienation from the body had material consequences for many Afro-descendant women during the revolutionary moment. An unfortunate
by-product of the positive and “culturally favorable” changes toward equality promulgated by the Revolution of 1959 was that the “black woman was left behind, her beauty and features aesthetically devalued by a ‘white aesthetic’” (2011: 56). But black Cuban women activist writers and artists remain committed to the Cuban Revolution even as their fervor to improve it rings loud. New intersections and strategies strengthen this purpose. Sandra Álvarez uses her membership in the prestigious Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba and the hip-hop community, as well as her renowned blog, Negra cubana tenía que ser, to confront what she refers to as “invisibilization,” whether of race or of sexuality. In an interview available on YouTube, Álvarez (2012) says that it is important for people outside of Cuba to become aware of the diversity of the debates and discussions currently taking place in Cuba.

Perhaps the twentieth-century Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz would say that transculturation—the complex, mutual interpenetration of different cultures and the physical representation that is juxtaposed—was a natural part of revolutionary struggle. In any event, Diago’s memories demonstrate powerfully that we must interrogate the relationship between the body and one’s role in society in every former colonial plantation economy. In different ways, both Rolando’s and Corvalán’s films make ample reference to 1912, suggesting that the importance of the issues raised may go far beyond the commemorative centennial events.

The contentious character of memory and the multiplicity of possible interpretations complicate the painful legacy of 1912 and the role of the PIC. To whom was a political party made up of blacks and mestizos appealing at the time? Who were its allies and who its heroes, and who should represent the nation in the historical narrative about it? Books and articles on one side or another demonstrate the seriousness of purpose of Cubans in reexamining this part of their past. Moreover, many books related to 2011’s being the UN Year of the Afro-descendant have been published (or translated, as was Walter Rodney’s iconic How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (see La Jiribilla, 2011). In the words of one historian, “The studies must not stop with the [Cuban] massacre of 1912 but should continue in order to understand the deep psychosocial imprints that this event produced in all corners of Cuban society like a ghost, and the silences that it caused still haunt the descendants as well as a good part of the population of the island” (Lanier, 2012).

A significant reason for the vitality of the discussions about 1912 is the Cuban commitment to the “strengthening of nationality through racial equality” (Arandia, 1994). In short, many Cuban writers and activists—including those concerned with women’s issues—perceive their role as part of the national project, not part of a marginalized “minority.” In contrast, within the United States a crucial antiracist struggle involves combating the distracting and infantile attempts to denationalize President Obama by claiming that he was not born in the United States, which by extension implicate not only other U.S. Afro-descendants but immigrant communities as well—including those of Cuba.

In an interview on June 3, 2011, Esteban Morales maintained that why people left Cuba and when they did so determine the positions they take in the United States. Group 1, the main group of Miami, mostly white, arrived between 1959
and 1980 and had a contradictory relationship with the new 1959 government of Cuba and its political objectives. These immigrants were wealthy pro-Batista politicians, people with business in the United States, and even musicians, and today they have little contact with Cuba. Group 2 includes those who, while they could accept the good of the revolution, wanted to leave for economic reasons, often to be able to help the family in Cuba. They continue contact and do not accept terrorism in Cuba or a war. Their emigration began in 1980 and was almost a shared family strategy, often from the province to the capital to Miami. This group has included more black and mestizo Cubans, but it is complex and not monolithic. On one hand, politicians may claim allegiance to or membership in Group 1 because of the political prominence of exile elites. On the other hand, the second and third generations may resist being identified with that group and seek independence from such confining and manipulative political power. Morales (2011b) has argued that the struggle against racial discrimination is influenced by the different long-term goals of these two groups: Group 1 holds the Cuban government and/or Fidel Castro responsible for all the problems of Cuban society, including the remaining vestiges of racial prejudice, and considers “regime change” the solution, while Group 2 feels that without the revolution the lives of blacks and mestizos would not have improved at all. Do U.S. Afro-descendants need to ask questions regarding the U.S. role in seeking civil and human rights “leaders” as precursors to violent “regime change”?

Indeed, a series of distinct but related events in spring 2013 coalesced to heighten the contradictions in the use of racism in Cuba as the preeminent foreign policy toward that country. First, there was the journalistic kerfuffle around Roberto Zurbaro’s (2013a) March 23 article in the New York Times and the debates about manipulative translation of the title that followed (see West-Durán, 2013). Though Zurbaro lost his prestigious position at the Casa de las Américas, the resulting debate in Cuba and beyond about what he said was very productive, especially the support he garnered from Cuban intellectuals such as those in the Articulación Regional Afrodescendiente de América Latina y el Caribe (Regional Network of People of African Descent in Latin America and the Caribbean—ARAC) (Petit, 2013a). In an open letter dated April 14, Zurbaro (2013b) summarized the incident and vowed to continue to “listen, learn, and carry on the struggle.” Around the first of April, the fifth-wedding-anniversary trip of musical artists Beyoncé and Jay-Z to Cuba, accompanied by their mothers, caused the next stir. News reports maintained that Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario Diaz-Balart and Senator Marco Rubio criticized the couple vociferously for having visited Cuba. While important, these two issues pale in comparison to what happened in May.

On May 2, the FBI officially put the U.S. Afro-descendant activist Assata Shakur (née Joanne Chesimard) on its Ten Most Wanted Terrorists List. This aggressive move was accompanied by two actions: the prior $1 million bounty on her head was raised to $2 million and billboards announcing this fact along with the FBI telephone number to call were reportedly seen in several places in New Jersey (Hap Bockelie of the Seattle/Cuba Friendship Committee, personal communication, October 24, 2013). Shakur was acquitted more than once, but the medieval “felony murder rule” maintains that a person can be
held criminally liable for any death by merely being present (Democracy Now!, 2013). The question remains: Why? Assata Shakur has been living in Cuba since 1979. Has the FBI decided to target U.S. Afro-descendant critics of domestic or foreign policy?

Coming on the heels of all this was the participation of five Afro-descendant Cuban dissidents in the annual AfricAméricas Week at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh May 6–11, followed by their appearance at the Latin American Studies Association meeting in Washington, DC, May 30–June 1. Most were members of the Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration: Leonardo Calvo Cardenas, Manuel Cuesta Morúa, Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna, and Rafael Campoamor, all recipients of NED funding. Also included was Dr. Juan Antonio Alvarado, the editor of *Islas* magazine, published by the U.S.-based and -financed Afro-Cuban Alliance. As Andy Petit (2013b) points out, the increasing openness of communications in Cuba is being accompanied by “new money pouring into AfroCuban issues from the State Department and USAID.” Together these events represent a complex cultural and politically charged conjuncture for U.S. progressives and Afro-descendants. One of the astute strategies the dissidents developed was to appropriate the work of the Cuban revolutionary intellectual Gloria Rolando and present her film in the United States as if she too were part of the pro-embargo “racial right” (see Morales, 2013b).

**BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION**

It has taken more than 30 years for Reagan’s antiegalitarianism to become both the master narrative—the nation’s sacred text—accepted even by many self-identified liberals and progressives and the leading ideology of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. Antagonism to the UN is one example of that continuing legacy. For U.S. Afro-descendants, the enduring principle of equality has long functioned the way the North Star did for those seeking to escape slavery—as a guide in the sky that would not fail to help locate true freedom. But the words uttered by President Obama in Cartagena, Colombia, at the conclusion of the Sixth Summit of the Americas on April 15, 2012, could have been spoken by the most intransigent of the right-wing partisans who opposed his reelection (Democracy Now!, 2012):

> Cuba, unlike the other countries that are participating, has not yet moved to democracy, has not observed basic human rights. I am hopeful that a transition begins to take place inside of Cuba. And I assure you that I and the American people will welcome the time when the Cuban people have the freedom to live their lives, choose their leaders, and fully participate in this global economy and international institutions.

Given the often irrational positions taken by many candidates for office in their effort to appeal to conservative Cuban Americans, this statement had the effect of pulling progressive people to the right or, at best, into uncertainty. More recently, President Obama’s meeting with the pro-embargo dissident
Berta Soler of Ladies in White at a fundraiser in a suburb of Miami revealed his financial ties to the Miami exile elites (Tamayo, 2013). The U.S. Afro-descendant community and other ordinary people are caught in a vise, squeezed by those who declare that the president needs a loyal base, on one hand, and frightened of both the president’s foreign policy and those whose hatred of him as a person evokes irrational and unstable discourse, on the other.

Many Cuban Americans increasingly attach great importance to developing a new narrative about Cuba. New groups such as Cuban Americans for Engagement (CAFÉ) resist being subsumed under the mantle of the hard-line Cuban exile elite and are growing in importance. Some Cubans who live abroad, whether in the United States or elsewhere, prefer “émigré” to “exile” as an identifying political and cultural marker. In a November 8, 2013, letter to President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry, CAFÉ joined 54 other organizations and Congresswoman Barbara Lee calling for removal of Cuba from the State Department’s State Sponsors of Terrorism list, lifting of all restrictions on permissible travel to Cuba, and initiation of direct high-level dialogue with Cuba’s government (Havana Times, November 22, 2013). That the antiegalitarian forces in the Cuban American community are also those using race as a symbol of dissidence in Cuba is therefore noteworthy and leads to this question: Are there really “rising numbers of Cubans of African descent in the opposition” (Perez-Stable, 2011: 140)? Or is this dissent being manufactured by people with an inconsistent commitment to racial democracy? For a brief moment, the Occupy Wall Street movement offered a glimmer of hope that a confrontation with the antiegalitarian juggernaut would emerge in the United States. But if the domestic political landscape does not represent social justice and equality for all at home, why should anyone expect an authentic commitment to the principles of human rights abroad? In any event, there is no broad-based discussion in the United States as profound as the one that is occurring in Cuba around the issues of race and racism.

Indeed, the historical conflict with the Third World’s expressions of parity in general and UNESCO in particular has continued unabated and even acquired new urgency. The past two years have witnessed a stunning reappearance and rationalization of racism in the United States. The drug war is both a U.S. racial caste system played out in increasing incarceration (Alexander, 2012) and the potential launch pad for the U.S.-sponsored militarization of Latin America. The desire to come to the aid of people who may have suffered as descendants of slaves in the former colonial plantation economies is a logical impulse based on the solidarity of shared oppression (Fernández Robaina, 2011). This commitment surely influenced the signers of “Acting on Our Conscience,” but a realistic context requires the analyses of Cuban specialists.

The document protesting racism in Cuba has now been folded into the international battle over who and what defines racial identity and civil and human rights there. That many Afro-descendants—whether in the United States, the Caribbean, or Brazil—may have been unaware of the global context of this series of actions not only gives these events currency but also demonstrates their potential as a renewable resource, a strategy that can be expanded.
fostering of division and dissent by entities funded from the United States is not likely to have been known to many of those who signed the document.

Foreign policy definitions of civil and human rights are often contentious, especially in the former colonial plantation economies. However, Cuba has been an inspiration to poor and working people the world over, no matter how incomplete its intended objective of racial equality. If there is one way in which most Cubans are taking to heart and confronting what Fidel Castro once referred to as “the monopoly of knowledge,” it is their effort to merge the struggle to eliminate racism with the battle to improve socialism at all levels of society (Martínez Heredía, 2011; Morales, 2011a). A recent article in the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, Granma (De la Hoz, 2013), observed that the subject of *racialidad* (racialness) had become fashionable both in and outside of Cuba and suggested that this had already been addressed in an exemplary way by Fidel, notably in 2005. However, to overemphasize the praiseworthy analyses of the historical leadership on this sensitive subject may silence further critique from the voices emerging in Cuba. In this, Fidel’s important words could be transmuted like those of Martin Luther King Jr. (and now Nelson Mandela?)—used to undermine further contemplation or contributions from the vulnerable sectors of society.

In a spirited discussion of a draft of this paper, Elisa Larkin Nascimento, a scholar and the widow of Abdias do Nascimento, asked a question and gave me permission to quote it here: “Under what conditions can we raise the question of racism in a country other than our own?” For those who participated in the U.S. anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s, the answer to her question lies in that movement. If for some the domestic civil rights struggle seemed to be “a completed task,” for others Reagan’s “constructive engagement” with apartheid South Africa was an impetus to band together. Central to their cohesion was the involvement of those who were committed to equality for all people—no matter what race or nationality—and who recognized the relationship between the domestic struggle for social justice and the international anti-apartheid movement.

The Reagan administration’s support of apartheid was part of an appeal to antiegalitarian forces in the domestic arena—specifically, an effort to expand political power among the right-wing extremists in the U.S. South. In contrast, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 sought to eliminate all vestiges of racial separation and inequality and other cultural remains of the colonial plantation system. Cubans at many levels of society speak openly of the work still to be done in meeting this objective. However, solidarity with Cuba is not regime change led by those seeking a return to pre-1959 Cuba but rather a commitment to work in dialogue and concert with the forces in Cuba already laboring to address the unfinished agenda of the Cuban Revolution.

In early 2012 the former U.S. congressman Ron Dellums declared with pride on the PBS *Independent Lens* program “Have You Heard from Johannesburg?” that the anti-apartheid movement and especially the congressional vote linked to the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, which overrode Reagan’s veto, represented the “first time the African American community was able to affect foreign policy in a dramatic way. We were not alone, there were other people—non-blacks—involving in the movement all along. But African Americans were in
the forefront of that movement” that politically isolated the apartheid regime (C. Field, personal communication, April 18, 2012). It is time to renew that moral courage and vigor—especially with an Afro-descendant president—and join those in the rest of the hemisphere who are opposed to the economic and political blockade against Cuba. However difficult it may be, it is incumbent on progressives to become more knowledgeable about what is being done not just in Latin America but all over the world in their name. U.S. foreign policy is setting the stage for wars on the very people who are attempting to bring forward the beautiful hidden histories that Galeano seeks to uncover.

In the nineteenth century, the colonial powers hijacked “civilization”; in the twentieth, multinationals stole “development.” In the twenty-first, how can progressives—including many Afro-descendants of the Americas—permit “human rights” campaigns to promote intervention and inequality?

NOTES

1. In 2001, the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance made explicit reference for the first time to “people of African descent,” adding weight to the term “Afro-descendant.” Though controversial in some countries because of its lack of precision, the word is nonetheless increasingly used in the Americas. I use the term here to express solidarity with efforts at the United Nations and beyond to recognize the international struggles against racism and for social justice (see Albuquerque e Silva, 2011).

2. The letter is available in English on the web site of the Afro-Brazilian Studies and Research Institute. I was a Portuguese-English interpreter for Abdias do Nascimento during the years he lived in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s.


9. Corvalán provided me with a transcript of this important scene, as well as an e-mail discussion of his cinematic objectives.

10. The letter and the complete list of the 55 organizations are available from Latin America Working Group (http://www.lawg.org) (accessed December 18, 2013).

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