A lithograph by A. Leclerc of 1819 depicts South American revolutionary leader Simón Bolívar in a bust-length portrait and identifies him in French as “Chief sub-General of Venezuela” (figure 3.1). His military standing is communicated by epaulettes adorning a sharp uniform, while beneath the portrait an allegorical vignette of a seminude female Indian with bow, arrow, and quiver reclines against a rock as a ship departs in the background. Behind the rock, a protruding alligator identifies the allegorical figure as the embodiment of America, a visual practice dating to the sixteenth century (Rabasa 1993). The Indian woman supports a liberty pole upon which rests a liberty cap, co-opting the French and North American signifiers that circulated widely in the Atlantic world. This imagery in combination, including the bust of Bolívar, offers the Amerindian as an emblem of liberation and the South American revolutionary as a hero in the struggle for independence from Spain (Ades 1989; Acevedo 2000; Carrera 2006; Widdifield 1996, 2001).

The Leclerc print exhibits the Bolivarian movement’s appropriation of Amerindian imagery as a vehicle of mythology, offering Bolívar as the liberator of an “authentic” America reimagined in non-Spanish terms (Anderson 1983). A similar conjunction of images appears in the portrait Simón Bolívar, Libertador y Padre de la Patria by Pedro José Figueroa, oil on canvas, from the same year (plate 1). In this painting Bolívar stands with his right arm around the shoulder of the allegorical female Indian who, in this case, is fully clothed with pearls and jewelry, perhaps evoking the civilizing promise
Figure 3.1. A. Leclerc. Simón Bolívar. 1819. Lithograph. 15 ⅜” x 10 ¼” (40 × 26.75cm). Collection Museo Nacional de Colombia. Photography © Museo Nacional de Colombia / Ángela Gómez Cely.
of an American republic. Such imagery operated in what Hugo Achugar has termed “a visual city,” before and after national revolutions (2009, 11). He argues that nation states and hegemonic groups have systematically manipulated the visual along with the textual in the construction and consolidation of national consciousness. Yet the multiethnic and multiracial composition of the societies under Bolivarian Revolutionary persuasion produced a tension between an essential image of the nation and the problem of social assimilation in disparate areas. In other words, the ability of Amerindian imagery to signify a non-Spanish, American identity in Bolivarian discourses was complicated by the difficulties that revolutionary movements and national republics faced in constructing a homogeneous national language amid social heterogeneity.

The fraught issue of the emancipation of slaves following Bolivarian independence in Venezuela and the Caribbean-bordering territories of Gran Colombia with the profusion of pardo/a (Spanish-African mixed) and moreno/a (black African) identities in this region suggest such representations of the india/o (Indian) as a racialized figure as much as an abstract political allegory. The issues at stake in these translations become more complex when we examine the imagery in comparable cultures of slavery and race that existed on the Spanish Caribbean island of Cuba.

The Bolivarian movement’s production of Amerindian imagery for revolutionary and protonational purposes in Venezuela, then part of Gran Colombia, likewise appeared in Cuba. The 1823 conspiracy of Soles y Rayos de Bolívar (Suns and Rays of Bolivar) emerged in association with José Francisco Lemus, originally from Havana and a colonel in the Colombian army of Bolivar in South America. Lemus mobilized a movement to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule with the aid of Masonic lodges on the island (Gott 2004, 49; Thomas 1998, 101–2). Cuban rebels under Bolivarian persuasion would join an invading force from South America led by Venezuelan General José Antonio Páez (1790–1873), but it never materialized (Cunningham-Graham 1929, 227–32). This movement used Amerindian imagery as a cultural sign, evident in its attempt to establish a republic of Cubanacán, co-opting an Amerindian word for Cuba. The Spanish authorities exposed, investigated, and suppressed the conspiracy in July and August 1823, the process of which is detailed through historical accounts and primary documents in the 1929 book Historia documentada de la conspiración de los Soles y Rayos de Bolívar by Roque E. Garrigo.
In Bolivarian imagery pertaining to the Amerindian in Cuba and South America during the 1810s and 1820s, conceptions of national liberation and emancipation in each context became entangled with local constructions of race and shaped by disparate conditions. Amerindian imagery became a trope in the manufacture of difference from Spain. Yet symbols of things pre-Hispanic could also mediate between questions of independence and race, which included the emancipation of African slaves.

The racial politics of early nineteenth-century Cuba developed from a number of conditions particular to the Hispanic Caribbean. The outbreak of the slave rebellion on the neighboring island of Ste. Domingue in 1791, later known as the Haitian Revolution, destroyed French dominance in Atlantic sugar production and compelled Cuban planters to petition the Spanish Crown for authorization to further develop Cuba's sugar economy. Spain relaxed centuries-old restrictions on the African slave trade to allow for unfettered slave imports, which rapidly increased the population of African descent in Cuba. Thus Cuban planters faced the contradiction of profiting from a French economic calamity in ways that had the potential to lead to their own demise. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, Creole planters, wealthy from the sugar industry and perhaps content with the Spanish Crown's numerous accommodations, abstained from the independence movements of the mainland and preserved their loyalty to Spain. By 1791 the slave population of the island had reached 85,000 and more than tripled by 1827 to 287,000 (Gott 2004, 46; Pérez 1995, 86). The total population of African descent was actually much higher with the proliferation of libertos/as (free people of color) and their offspring. Phobias over this growing number of blacks on the island led to the founding of a special council staffed by Creole and peninsular (Spanish-born) elites, the Junta de Población Blanca (Council of the White Population) to find ways to increase the number of whites (Gott 2004; Marrero 1983; Pérez 1995; Thomas 1998; Tomich 2005).

In revolutionary and postrevolutionary Venezuela and the Caribbean areas of Gran Colombia the politics of race were configured somewhat differently than in Cuba. By the 1770s, slavery was an important feature of this broader region with a majority population of African descent (Helg 2004; Safford and Palacios 2002). Even Simón Bolívar was said to have had African traces in his bloodline, although no clear evidence exists for this claim (Chasteen 2006). His tutor Simón Rodríguez addressed various assertions
that Bolívar was a zambo (man of African and Amerindian descent), yet this contention may speak more to negotiations over the essence of national identity (Briggs 2010, 52–53). Born to a family of landed elites, Bolívar expressed desires to see the emancipation of slaves as part of his revolutionary vision. However, the actual process of slave liberation proceeded slowly and in stages, with slavery persisting until the late nineteenth century. He nevertheless touted the equality of all, and at least two men of African descent served as his generals. Yet Bolívar’s complex position on race is suggested by his decision to execute his Afro-Venezuelan generals José Padilla and Manuel Piar for insubordination, while white generals received lesser sentences for the same crime.

On the issue of the nation’s government, Bolívar abhorred the thought of what he referred to as a pardocracia, or rule by blacks (Chasteen 2006; Helg 2004; Lynch 1986, 2006). Thus two important differences emerge between the political situation in Cuba and the captaincy general of Venezuela and the viceroyalty of New Granada in the beginning of the nineteenth century: first, the majority of Creole elites pursued loyalty in the former and independence in the latter; second, representatives of the Spanish state and Cuban elite sought to aggressively disavow people of African descent from public memory, as race became more sharply delineated. In Venezuela and New Granada, by contrast, blacks were co-opted into the revolutionary cause, while an ambivalent attitude prevailed toward the African’s place in the prospective nation and regarding the fate of slavery.

These divergent constructions of race between the northern South America and Cuba are registered in similarities and differences in the uses of Amerindian imagery in each context. In the former, the deployment of the allegorical Indian could relate to what Natalia Majluf (1995) has termed an “early Creole Indianism” in the context of Peru. Here, Creole leaders appropriated the pre-Columbian past to forge popular support for nationalist ideology (Brading 1991, 293–301; Earle 2007; Majluf 1995, 22–49; Widdifield 1996). Majluf argues that the Indian became a sign of victimization in order to underscore the oppression of Spanish rule. However, in terms of the mythology of Bolívar, the construction of a glorious Incan past emphasized not only non-Spanish origins but also the greatness of the Liberator as inheritor of Incan sovereignty.

In Cuba the movement known as Soles y Rayos de Bolívar began as a Masonic lodge seemingly founded by a colonel in the Bolivarian army, José
Francisco Lemus. He arrived in Havana in 1820 from the United States, where he had been negotiating in Washington for U.S. acknowledgement of the Republic of Colombia (Torres-Cuevas 2004, 76–77). The lodge in Havana possessed two grades, the first, Rayos and the second, Soles. It produced at least one bandera (flag) consisting of a sun surrounded by sixteen rays (figure 3.2), the solar motif perhaps inspired by appropriations of
Inca imperial imagery (Earle 2007, 64–67). The now lost flag is only known through its publication in an early history of Soles y Rayos (Garrigo 1929). The movement Soles y Rayos de Bolívar, apparently limited to Cuba, sought to establish an independent republic of Cubanacán. It therefore seems to have drawn upon various indigenisms from the broader Bolivarian movement and perhaps other mainland developments such as those in New Spain, the region that is now modern Mexico. The flag of Soles y Rayos appears to construct a metaphor of Bolívar as the Incan sun god with Cuba as one of its rays. The image suggests an effort to encourage the island to find its own indigenous sovereignty and perhaps to tie Cuba ideologically to Gran Colombia.

Prior to the emergence of Soles y Rayos in Cuba and its appropriation of the idea of pre-Hispanic antiquity, various populist movements on the island had already begun to fashion revolutionary signs of the Amerindian figure. In 1810 a group of libertos enrolled in black militias in Cuba, joined a white independence movement led by a group of Freemasons, and devised a flag with the figure of an Indian woman garbed in a tobacco leaf. The group likewise invoked the rebellious cacique Hatuey who had resisted the Spanish in sixteenth-century Cuba (Gott 2004, 49). In the slave conspiracy of 1812 allegedly led by free black carpenter José Antonio Aponte, authorities seized a libro de pinturas (book of pictures), now lost, in the suspect Aponte’s apartment in Havana. Trial records reveal that authorities found among the images a flag symbolizing the motherland, “which is pictured as an Indian woman” (Palmié 2002, 102). Similarly, the Cuban poet José María Heredia, born in Santiago de Cuba in 1803 and exiled from the island in 1823 for his connections to Soles y Rayos de Bolívar, produced romantic works that contain sympathetic views toward the Indian oppressed at the hands of the Spanish and perhaps inspired during his stay in New Spain/Mexico in the early 1820s (Heredia 1970). The poem “En el Teocalli de Cholula” (“In the Pyramid God-House Teocalli of Cholula”) recounts the slaughter of the innocent residents of the indigenous city of Cholula by Spanish conquistadors. Following his exile from Cuba in 1823, Heredia produced “A Bolívar” in 1827, a poem heavily inflected with pan–Spanish American ideas. The work condemns a tyrannical Spain and immortalizes Bolívar along with Colombian, Peruvian, and Ecuadorian independence and sovereignty (Heredia 1970).