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Special Identities in Cuba's Special Period

Race, Region, and Revitalization

But, more than the guarantee of success for a cultural initiative in our quotidian work of the promotion of ties of friendship, cooperation and solidarity between the peoples of Cuba and Jamaica, that which we valued in this project was perhaps the start of a stage of more profound work which leads us to the necessary deepening of our cultures, idiosyncrasies and common features which constitute the germ of our necessary integration. . . . There are many challenges which our small insular nations face as a result of globalization. It is because of this that we are obligated to globalize our knowledge in particular, our mutual knowledge. This will make us stronger through our culture, as is expected in today's times.

José Francisco Piedra Rencurrel, Cuban ambassador to Jamaica, 2002

We from the Anglophone Caribbean understand [the persistence of racially motivated discriminatory practices against those of visibly African ancestry] well. Our history was forged in the same circumstances of plantation slavery that created Cuba's own society. We know firsthand the experience of being discriminated against and marginalised because of the colour of one's skin, despite personal emancipation and freedom from the obscenity of slavery. It was precisely this experience that gave rise to the struggles of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, who captured the imagination of Blacks all over Africa and the Americas, including Cuba where he had more branches of his Universal Negro Improvement Association than anywhere else except the United States of America itself, with his message of racial pride and equality. . . . So, Your Excellency, we do understand. The Cuban Revolution may well have liberated the structural exploitation of the Cuban people, Black and White, but the attitudes, some overt, some subtle, that have sought to justify the centuries of enslavement of Black Africans do not yield so easily.

Rex Nettleford, Barry Chevannes, Rupert Lewis, and Maureen Warner-Lewis, "Letter from Jamaica," November 26, 2009

There has been considerable recent public controversy over "the *negro* problem" in Cuba, marking a shift away from the staunch position that the

revolution has solved racial discrimination. This debate has been ongoing between Cubans on and off the island and across the racial spectrum, as well as within and between Cubans of color and other diasporic groups. For instance, in 2009 a group of sixty prominent African Americans joined Afro-Brazilian intellectual and icon of Black activism in Brazil, Abdias do Nascimento, in declaring their support for the Afro-Cuban population in its struggle against racism in a document entitled “Acting on Our Conscience.”¹ Those Anglophone Caribbean leaders quoted in the opening of this chapter joined them in criticizing the state’s unwillingness to allow for independent dialogue and protest of racial discrimination. This public criticism of Cuba was unique in that it marked a departure from what has for the most part been a supportive stance toward the Cuban Revolution. It was met by a flurry of responses, including a counterdeclaration by other African Americans artists, intellectuals, and activists entitled “We Stand with Cuba!” (Azikiwe et al. 2009) and a “Message” from prominent Afro-Cubans who strongly objected to Cuba’s characterization as a racist nation (Morejón et al. 2009). The primary evidence that the Afro-Cubans provided in defense of their nation is Cuba’s dismantling of the structures of inequality as well as support of Africa and the Caribbean through technical and humanitarian aid. For them, any assessment of Cuba’s “*negro* problem” must take into consideration national and foreign policy.

A more recent incident that set off a maelstrom of commentary occurred in 2012 when the *New York Times Review* published a severely distorted version of an article submitted by Roberto Zurbarano, then editorial director at Casa de Las Americas, who was dismissed from his post after the article’s publication. In his article, originally entitled “The Country to Come: And My Black Cuba . . . ?” but changed by the *New York Times* editor to “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun,” Zurbarano argues that “in the last twenty years Black Cubans have suffered a reversal or paralysis of the great social mobility that propelled them from 1959 to 1989” and explains the predicament in which Blacks find themselves, highlighting the uncertainty of the role that they will play in the nation’s future (Zurbarano 2013; West-Durán 2013). Unfortunately, as a result of the inaccurate translation, the article failed to communicate this more nuanced perspective of the predicament of Cubans of color and provoked an avalanche of both criticism and support of Zurbarano.²

These more recent public debates reinforce what I found in my fieldwork

among Black Cubans of Anglo-Caribbean descent whose lives were marked by the Special Period, namely that, in addition to the economic deprivation, Cubans of color have had to grapple with the erosion of that “space of dignity” around racial equality that the revolutionary project provided (Allen 2011:81). This is a point of conjunction between Black Cubans who are and are not of Anglo-Caribbean origin. This erosion of gains made toward containing racial discrimination, coupled with the relative weakening of the state's ability to provide even minimally adequate support for the entire population, surrounded efforts to invigorate the Anglo-Caribbean connection. While Anglo-Caribbean Cubans shared the challenges of the Special Period with other Black Cubans, thus illustrating the erasure of the boundary between them, they depart from their Black and mulatto compatriots in the pursuit of particular strategies to navigate the crisis. As I will argue, at a time when conversations about racism on the island were still taboo, Black Cubans of Anglo-Caribbean origin used the guise of ethnicity to challenge economic, psychological, and moral assault.³

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Unveiling Cuba's precarious position within the global economy, the Special Period intensified tensions between socialist ideology and daily survival, between the rhetoric of racial equality and reality of discrimination. For Black Cubans of Anglo-Caribbean descent, it also created an opening for both the reinvention and reassertion of connection beyond the boundaries that the revolution had demanded prior to the 1990s. The revitalization of Anglo-phone Caribbean associations, strengthening of transnational ties facilitated by the state's investment in certain forms of diasporic connections, continuity and disjuncture across generations of immigrant families, and assertions of respectable Blackness occurred under the cloud and then in the shadow of the Special Period.

As I will describe, this reconnection has a highly functional component: these “lifelines” are a source of potential economic support and offered some relief from the deprivations suffered by the severe shortage of key resources and consumer goods. However, for those who are passionate about the “rescuing of their roots,” the reward for attempting to rebuild their cultural institutions is more complicated than actual or potential material gain. As the children and grandchildren of Black English-speaking working-class migrants who had been closely associated with the U.S. presence in Cuba, their

emergent identities reveal a “critical Black subject” whose analyses of post-Cold War Cuba are articulated not through hip-hop lyrics, Afro-Cuban religions, or erotic practice, but through the Black experience of social mobility and racial discrimination in revolutionary society.

In this chapter, I first convey some of the contours of daily life during the Special Period in order to contextualize the revitalization and its intersection with personal, community, national, and regional alliances. I go on to discuss the community’s efforts to establish connection with the Anglophone Caribbean, paying particular attention to how this is situated within Cuba-CARICOM (Caribbean Community)⁴ relations and thus folded into the agenda of the state. This is an example of the convergence of personal, local, national, and regional agendas; however, the reasons for investing in these connections at a national level differed from those at a personal level. Then, through the cases of two Rastas of Anglo-Caribbean origin, I explore generational differences in articulations of diasporic connections.

Echoes of the Special Period

Although there is considerable debate regarding when and whether the Special Period ended, by the time that I began my research in 2001,⁵ the worst years of the crisis were over. Nevertheless, it inserted itself into this project both by providing a reason and context for the resurgence of Anglo-Caribbean identity and by serving as a marker of the most dramatic transition that has occurred in the lives of all Cubans. What emerges from accounts of experiences in the early 1990s is how all-encompassing the crisis has been as well as the gravity and traumatic nature of the situation. The food and water supply was severely reduced, there was no gas to cook with, and public transportation practically disappeared. Clothing was scarce, soap and toothpaste came every few months, and sanitary products not at all.

When such consumer goods began to become more available in the second half of the 1990s, inflation was astronomical. According to one university professor with whom I worked, people at all levels of society had suffered from problems experienced from the inability to maintain personal hygiene. She relayed to me a discussion she had had with a neighbor in which the neighbor talked about the bug infestations and skin rashes people developed from the various soap substitutes that were widely used, denying that she herself experienced this condition. My interlocutor reasoned that

many have suppressed this and other memories of the worst period of the crisis.⁶

To explain the extent of the scarcity, women were particularly vocal. They talked about having to cook the little food there was without oil and the desperation with which neighbors fought for water during its infrequent delivery. With no gas for the stove, people dismantled each other's fences as they scavenged for wood to burn so that they could cook their meager meals, only to find themselves with no means to clean their bodies of the smoke's sooty residue.

The only people who remarked that they did not suffer from the loss of food included one who works as a clerk in a produce store and could pilfer goods for his family, and another who lives in a more rural area further north where they had livestock and could grow their own food. The other exceptions were those who had family members who worked on the naval base and had more resources with which to acquire the little that was available on the black market. These cases were clearly the exception, and thus the majority of people were forced to endure material deprivation and the psychological consequences of insecurity.

The importance of the Special Period's deprivations is revealed in how often the topic emerged, even in conversations whose beginnings were seemingly innocuous. For instance, what started out as a casual inquiry about Hortencia's relationship with her Jamaican grandmother who was then ninety-two took a turn toward the deprivation of the recent past. She recalled that her grandmother used to be strong, but with the lack of food during the Special Period, her stature diminished. Having seen photographs of her grandmother at different periods of her life, I now questioned my assumption that time itself was the culprit of her visible deterioration. Saying that her grandmother was not one to complain, Hortencia remembered detecting the toll that the lack of nutrition and worry exacted. She recalls that they went hungry a lot during this time as there wasn't meat, rice, or any of the food upon which they had relied. Consequently, they often ate cornmeal porridge with beans. According to Hortencia, this lasted for five years as things began to get a little better by the late 1990s.

"Thanks to nature and the Holy Spirit that we survived," Hortencia stated, to punctuate the recollection of her grandmother's decline and to introduce stories of her own suffering and humiliation. At the onset of the crisis, Hortencia was a young teenager and attending high school away from home