

UFE 301: Cuba Experience

Examining anti-Black bias in the Cuban revolutionary press

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Abstract

As U.S. newsreels showed African Americans fighting for freedom from a Jim Crow South, Cuban headlines informed readers of a colorblind revolution across the Gulf, in which its leader Fidel Castro sought to end racial discrimination and provide vital services for all. Many news reports – from both outside and within the island – have since deemed Cuba a post-racial society. However, a more critical analysis of the revolutionary media landscape reveals much to be desired of racial progress on the island. This paper will examine how racist messages in the pre-revolutionary press were spread and recreated on and off the island, in mainstream American newspapers, in Cuban revolutionary papers, and in pamphlets distributed among exile communities 300 miles away. In each landscape, messages about Blackness were packaged in various ways: Batista-era advertisements, for example, capitalized on stereotypes of Afro-Cubans as entertainers and domestic servants, while revolutionary cartoons depicted Afro-Cubans and African Americans as childlike figures waiting to be saved by Castro's leadership. In America, headlines warned against the dangers of communism abroad while downplaying racial terror at home. Among other things, what arguably resulted from each of these varied, racist messages was a collective silencing of Afro-Cuban and African-American experiences. While the beginning of this paper will focus on the formation of anti-Black bias in predominantly White spaces, the second half of this paper will document the efforts of African Americans and Afro-Cubans in creating a diasporic press, and it will evaluate the ways in which this type of press was simultaneously a target and a tool for resistance. Ultimately, this paper will argue for a more critical analysis of racism in news media, and it will urge journalists to fiercely interrogate claims of racial equality at home and abroad.

Introduction

While it is useful to look to early- and late-20th century examples for context and projections for the future, racism and anti-racism in white and Black diasporic publications is perhaps best analyzed through the lens of the Cuban Revolution. At the end of a six-year revolt built on ideals of clean government, independence and social justice (Sweig 26), the Socialist revolutionary Fidel Castro ended U.S. economic control in 1959 and partnered with the Soviet Union, ultimately deeming Cuba a communist country (Sweig 36-37). Under his leadership, a racially stratified country became arguably unified through anti-discrimination policies and universal access to fundamental goods (Sweig 44). The sweeping changes brought on by the revolution have stamped Castro as either a hero or a zealot in global imaginations – a sentiment that uniquely situates the Cuban Revolution as an object of historical fascination, and, importantly, critique. Recent pushes to critically examine “progressive” historical movements – and the literature that helped canonize them – have inspired a twofold argument: In their domination of global newstands, white-owned and -illustrated versions of the revolution in Cuba have either romanticized or vilified Castro’s fight for racial equality and, while doing so, they have suppressed the voices of Afro-Cubans and African Americans – who were meanwhile working to resist anti-Black racism and white hegemony by crafting their own stories of hemispheric Black mobilization.

The Pre-Revolutionary Press

In order to analyze shifts in American and Cuban newspapers during Castro’s revolution, it is important to first illustrate how stories of race were portrayed *before* the revolution. In

Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution, Devyn Spence Benson compares newspaper ads and cartoons that were published under Batista's rule to those published under Castro's, ultimately concluding that both relied on racist tropes to promote a Cuban Republic and an impending revolution, respectively. An ad in the news-weekly *Bohemia* in 1952, for example, shows a light-skinned woman with smooth wavy hair. The message, advertising a hair-straightening cream, translates to "specially created for people of color." This advertisement reveals that Cuban companies, which belonged to a republic prone to "cultural messaging" from its capitalist neighbor to the north (Sweig 33), were quick to profit off white ethnocentric beauty standards at the expense of Afro-Cubans. The fact that a woman who appears to be white is modeling a product "for" Black women highlights a prevailing message: In order to achieve an image of success, Afro-Cuban women must relinquish their Blackness at the hands of white Cuban advertisers.

Other images made direct caricatures of Afro-Cubans, and specifically Afro-Cuban women. That same year, an advertisement for a coffee packet featured a dark-skinned woman known as "Tu-py." In contrast to the photographed model on the hair cream ad, Tu-py is cartoonish and closely mimics the blackfaced minstrel images being spread across the Americas ("Blackface: The Birth of an American Stereotype"). Tu-py is also shown serving coffee in a uniform that resembles something a server would wear, a trope that is carried over in Benson's third example: In a comic-advertisement titled "Problema Doméstico," a white family sits around a kitchen table while a darker-skinned character, in what looks like a maid's outfit, struggles to keep them satisfied. The product, "Kresto," apparently saves the day, and the maid and the rest of the family are shown smiling (Benson 34-39).

Each of these examples represents how one newspaper, *Bohemia*, commoditized and profited off Eurocentric beauty standards and racist tropes of Afro-Cuban women as domestic servants. While these clips are taken from one source, it is worth noting that *Bohemia* was generally critical of the Machado period (Luis 62), which established a Cuban republic that saw some of the island's highest levels of racial inequality (Sweig 30) and violence (Sweig 33). Conversely, *Bohemia* strove to be more objective and informative (Luis 62) during Castro's rule, even though its founder Miguel Ángel Quevedo sought exile in 1960. That means it was likely one of the more progressive publications on the island at that time, which makes it a good barometer for measuring and analyzing these kind of racist messages in places where Benson and newer critics are more interested: the progressive press.

The Revolutionary Press

Most of Benson's work extends beyond Batista's Republic and seeks to break through the colorblind philosophy behind Fidel Castro's revolution, dispelling myths of post-racialism as both its goal and its effect. Benson does this by applying a critical lens to histories of resistance, particularly where those histories intersect with the construction of race in Cuba, an approach mirrored by historian Julia Sweig:

“The issue of race was not a particularly prominent part of the political program promoted by either the 26th of July movement or any of the other revolutionary groups active at the time. During and after the insurrection, a number of well-known Afro-Cuban figures sympathetic to the Castros urged

the new government in public and in private to make discrimination an important social issue under the revolution. By March of 1959, it was clear that the subject would receive pronounced, if in retrospect somewhat superficial, attention from the new government.” (Sweig 33).

In a 1959 issue of *Revolución* published just a few days after Castro assumed his position as Cuba’s new leader, interviews from nine Afro-Cubans living in Havana’s poorest slum, Las Yaguas, were placed alongside other “competing images about race in Cuba” (Benson 1-2). The interviewees told of “extreme poverty, limited access to resources, and endless searches for affordable housing” as a result of their race, and asserted their right to equality in this new era (Benson 2). Castro, Benson noted, was responsive to these pleas, passing “over 1500 pieces of legislation... delivering land redistribution, free health care, and educational scholarship programs” and delivering a 189-page speech announcing a “public anti-discrimination campaign” to “build a raceless and unified Cuba” (Benson 2, 32). Yet, she argues that this state campaign was limited and remains unfinished, and that anti-racist discourse in Cuba effectively “hid racial prejudices instead of wiping them out” (Benson 4). Benson’s argument urges readers to question top-down approaches to eliminating racism and instead advocate for a more systemic, socio-cultural, bottom-up fight against white paternalism, assimilation tactics, and a silencing of Black voices, each of which acted as invisible tools for Castro’s “raceless” campaign.

Ultimately, examples from all forms of media acted as the driving evidence behind Benson’s assertions. Benson explored censorship of films and other media that showed spaces where Afro-Cubans shared joy in the absence of white Cubans, such as nightclubs and social

gatherings (Benson 51, 233-34), while duly noting that the government-controlled papers continued to promote “integrationist” causes (Benson 51). An editorial in *Revolución*, for example, watered down racial integration plans proposed by Afro-Cuban intellectuals by noting that “white Cubans were not to blame for lingering racism on the island,” instead deeming Afro-Cubans mere “victims of a social injustice” (Benson 50). A subsequent article introducing the National Integration Front used the term “racial integration,” but was later corrected to state “national integration is not ethnic integration,” bearing the headline, “Racial Integration, No; National Integration, Yes.” (Benson 50-51), an argument that would be used to accuse Black social clubs that often espoused race-based approaches to integration and social reform, as “unconstitutional and counterrevolutionary” (Benson 51). Here, efforts to control the message of the revolution negatively impacted Afro-Cubans who often sought refuge from these safe, separate spaces.

It is clear that Castro’s failure to acknowledge the importance of cultural spaces spelled out several flaws of a revolution built on colorblindness rather than multiculturalism or racial pride. However, even if one chose solely to focus on Castro’s commitment to equality without critiquing his failure to acknowledge issues of equity, it can be argued that the revolution was painted as a white man’s cause from the very beginning. In his 1971 book *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, Hugh Thomas, an English historian, hints that the revolution replicated some of the white power structures that it sought to abolish: “When Captain Yañes came upon Castro hiding asleep in a bohío, it will be recalled that the soldier who found them cried: ‘Son blancos!’ ‘They are white!’ ... It is not clear how many of the rebel army in the Sierra were black but a majority certainly were not, and Almeida, a mulatto, was the only officer of importance who was.” While

it may be true that few Black soldiers ascended to high ranks, only few accounts showed their presence in the revolution at all. Andrew St. George was a Hungarian-born, Columbia University dropout who worked as an investigative reporter and photographer, focusing much of his work on Latin America. He lived in Cuba in 1959 and 1960, where he captured the revolution through photographs and magazine articles. Because he was an independent reporter, some of St. George's work varies from what was presented on both Cuban and American newsstands. In St. George's papers, Black revolutionaries are not always named, but they're shown and presented alongside another group that was often left out of conversations of a violent, tactical, sweeping revolution: women. A 1957 photo in the collection shows a Black captain who fought alongside Castro's guerillas. Tucked under his right arm is a gun (No. 45407). Another photo shows a Black officer weighing coffee beans for the army with the help of female guerilla fighters (No. 45475). In the same collection are photos of police restraining Black protestors in Harlem, who are holding signs to welcome Castro during his visit to the States. St. George's photos highlight a key contradiction between two alternate realities portrayed by himself and by Thomas. Both, however, are noteworthy: Thomas' account reveals how Castro's military was perceived, or framed, as predominantly white, while St. George's papers reveal a more diverse, yet silenced reality.

It is difficult to understand the full significance of St. George's photos, however, without having a clear vision of what available, prominent images depicting the conflict in Cuba typically looked like. Perhaps St. George sought to expose this, because another one of his photos in the collection, this one taken in 1960, shows a newsstand in an unidentified location that features only government-controlled media and magazines from socialist countries (No.

46007). The covers that appear to feature actors, politicians, or any kind of powerful cover-worthy individual are usually men, and they are usually lighter-skinned. However, covers depicting revolution aren't much different; they usually only feature the lighter-skinned Castro or show women as cowering victims of the regime. Ultimately, Blackness was either relegated to spaces behind the covers or between the lines.

The Post-Revolutionary Press

Though the Cuban revolutionary press was known for its narratives of equality and freedom, its pages were lined with anti-Black bias. With the use of popular images – including propaganda, educational materials, and advertisements meant to aid revolutionary causes – Benson reveals the racist attitudes of not just Castro himself but the government programs of the 1960s traditionally thought to fight against discrimination. In 1959 issues of *Noticias de Hoy*, Black and white Cubans are shown fighting racial discrimination, hand in hand. “Cubano es más que blanco, más que negro,” one states, asserting a revolution that sought to abolish racial stratification and segregation on the island. However, just a year later, as Castro took office as Cuba's new leader, the political cartoons, advertisements, art covers and headlines that lined these texts relied on racist tropes to depict Afro-Cubans as children, as lazy, as objects of entertainment, as hypersexual, and as criminals. A 1960 cartoon in *El Mundo* shows a Black and white Cuban shaking hands – the darker-skinned figure drawn shorter and with white lips that, again, mimic racist caricatures of Jim Crow and the Sambo – with a giant Abraham Lincoln looming behind them. The line at the bottom translates to, “At last, someone who understands me!” which paints the white figure as a savior and the Black figure as helpless and hopeless.

Another cartoon by the same paper that year is filled black except for a stark-white pair of minstrel lips, eyes, a tuxedo, gloved hands, and the Cuban flag. Titled “Fiesta en Harlem,” the cartoon is supposedly reflecting African-American support of Castro’s revolution, and it does so by making caricatures of its Black supporters. A 1961 comic strip from *Mujeres*, a women’s magazine, calls back the images of Tupy and Problema Domestico by showing a dark-skinned woman in a maid outfit. In the last frame, an elaborately dressed white woman has her back turned to the maid (who is waving goodbye), and she says, “Goodbye Marquise! Cleaning floors is hard, but you will get used to it!” so as to make some sort of statement about role reversals and Black enfranchisement during the revolution. The comic resembles attitudes of white Cuban resentment (Benson 129) that were increasingly present during Castro’s push for racial equality – a movement that, arguably and ironically, didn’t prove much of a threat to these power structures white Cubans fought so desperately to uphold.

The Counter-Revolutionary Press

Meanwhile, resistance to the revolution swelled in exile communities – but, mostly, for all the wrong reasons. The Truth About Cuba Committee, Inc. was headed up by Luis Manrara, who fled the Castro regime relatively early, leaving his lavish life as a Havana accountant and trustee of various social clubs amid political turmoil (“Brief Biographical Data of Mr. Luis V. Manrara,” Publication No. 110). Upon landing in Miami, Manrara created the committee to better inform Cuban exiles of news coming out of their homeland, which he published in the form of bi-monthly newsletters, or bulletins. The bulletins excerpted reports from Cuban magazines and newspapers such as *Revolución* and *Bohemia*, as well as the radio broadcast

Venceremos, and provided critical commentary on what he perceived to be misinformation, or at the very least pro-Castro bias. There was also a clear purpose behind the dissemination of these newsletters beyond just informing Cuban exiles of foreign affairs. Lining the bottom of each page is the phrase, “THE BEST DEFENSE AGAINST COMMUNISM IS KNOWLEDGE OF ITS METHODS,” and the commentary accompanying each excerpt says as much, suggesting that its readers should be alert to the class struggles, social strife, the poverty, and the acts of violence happening in Cuba and because of Castro (“Bulletin on Cuba,” No. 1-25). In this way, Manrara’s bulletins acted as a medium for counter-resistance, where the Castro regime was both analyzed and scrutinized, and concerns of communist influence were loudly and clearly voiced from a distant pulpit.

These bulletins are interesting because they reveal how the newly instated resistance press (albeit a highly censored one) in Cuba was interpreted by those who did not agree with the revolution against Batista. However, what is most noteworthy is what the bulletins don’t discuss – namely, race relations. Out of 25 bulletins, there are only two discussions of race, both of which are mentioned solely in the excerpts, not in the commentary. In both of these examples, Cuban columnists criticize America for allowing racial terror such as lynching to happen (“Bulletin on Cuba,” No. 3 and “Special Edition”). Interestingly, though, these excerpts are prefaced by commentary on behalf of the committee – commentary that is overtly critical of the speakers and their supposedly communist motives, rather than an acknowledgement of the issues they bring up (“Bulletin on Cuba,” No. 3 and “Special Edition”). These bulletins, then, reveal the role that race plays in larger conversations of resistance and counter-resistance: When it’s brought up (if at all), it’s largely ignored.

But for other, more diverse exile groups who fled the island several years before and after the revolution, and for a host of Afro-Cubans *on* the island, these scathing, yet silent critiques were never the answer to achieving equality in Cuba.

Forging Freedom: The Black Press in Cuba

These phenomena – of abolishing safe spaces; of censoring papers that criticized the regime; of creating a kind of propaganda that relied on racist tropes; and of situating the revolution as a raceless regime, even from afar – collectively worked to silence Afro-Cubans. But, despite suppression, Black folks in Cuba and abroad were capable of and effective in raising their voices for change. The remainder of this paper seeks to illuminate the efforts of Afro-Cubans and African Americans in Castro’s revolution and in their own, more homegrown fights for freedom, starting with a brief historical account.

Afro-Cubans worked for racial equality both alongside Castro and separately. St. George’s papers resemble a type of press that more accurately revealed Black life in the revolution – as Afro-Cuban soldiers and as African American supporters (who, despite being portrayed as helpless children, took to the streets to advocate for a unified Cuba, battling white police along the way). As previously noted, historians like Sweig and Benson have proven that Afro-Cubans were instrumental in gearing Castro’s revolutionary policies toward anti-discrimination and integration. Furthermore, Benson notes that while most of the state-led anti-racist campaigns were predominantly white, Afro-Cubans were the primary authors of anti-discrimination legislation shut down decades prior (Benson 17). These truths invite a crucial discussion of ownership and agency: Whose revolution was this, after all?

Minerva and the (Female) Afro-Cuban Literary Tradition

Language was a powerful tool for Black resistance in Cuba and abroad. As early as the late 1800's, Black publications thrived in Cuba. A list of these early Afro-Cuban journalists includes: Regino Boti, José Manuel Pomedá, Rita Flores de Campo Marquetti, Inocenciá Silveira, Graciela Serra, Cristina Ayala, Digna de Lisle, Camaño de Cárdenas, Laura Clarence, Ursula Coimbra de Valverde, Gloria Alonso, Angelina Edreira, Ana María Marcos, Nieves Prieto, María J. Michelena, Dr. María Latapier, and Anabella and Vitalina Morúa Delgado.

It is worth noting that women compose most of this list, which was gleaned from a review of the historical significance of *Minerva*, the country's first periodical dedicated to women of color (Arrechea 33). Founded in 1888, *Minerva: Revista Dedicada a la Mujer de Color*, was created out of a lasting struggle for respect, which, historian Carmen Montejo Arrechea argues, stemmed from sexual and labor exploitation during slavery. "Through their writings, black Cuban women called upon all of their sisters of color to cooperate in the effort 'without fear of criticism or sarcasm from others,'" Arrechea writes on page 34, noting that the paper's original goal was to advocate for education for Afro-Cuban women. According to "Black in Latin America: Cuba," a documentary hosted by African-American scholar Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., this goal was well-founded, considering the media landscape of the time. In his documentary, Gates reveals that in more mainstream papers of the early 20th century, Afro-Cuban writers and activists were villainized for using their cries of racism as "weapons," while others were depicted as monkeys and as rats from the Bubonic plague. Similarly, an editorial cartoon described by Benson in an article on the Cuban Independence movement shows a dark-skinned Cuban reaching for a knife titled "Racism," while a white woman holds a plaque asserting that racial equality already exists

(“Fears of Black Political Activism in Cuba and Beyond, 1912-2017”). These sentiments arguably led the publication to shut down just a few years after its inception, but it returned in the 1910s, this time with a more universal goal. With attention from African-Americans and Black Cubans in exile, *Minerva* shifted from fighting for rights to instilling racial pride in its readers. To situate *Minerva*'s message more broadly, Arrechea cites Black Studies scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham: “We must recognize race as providing sites of dialogic exchange and contestation, since race has constituted a discursive tool for both oppression and liberation.” But both messages were not received well by a mainstream audience, Arrechea writes, noting that many Black journalists were “forced to defend *Minerva*'s existence,” leading the publication to completely shut down in 1912. The messages, however, made a lasting impact at home and abroad, and leading up to the revolution, African-American newspapers and Afro-Cuban journalists continued the fight for equality in Cuba.

The Birth of the Black Diasporic Press

In “Scripting Race, Finding Place,” Nancy Raquel Mirabal traces the evolution of Blackness in a diasporic imaginary. In the late 1880's, she writes, “Cubanidad” was a movement to redefine Cuban identity as one that was “oppositional to Spanish rule” (Mirabal 1). To create such an identity, Mirabal notes, Cubans both erased and reimagined “blackness,” dissolving racial difference by attributing multiculturalism to a unified, national identity. “By this time, Cuba, as fiction, as racial paradise, loomed large in the imaginations of African Americans,” Mirabal wrote, arguing that this new dialogue around race caught the attention of 19th and 20th century African-American writers such as Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes as well

as in Black newspapers in the States, who began to write about possibilities of racial equality throughout the Western hemisphere. And, although many Afro-Cuban newspapers are locked up in private archives, it is clear that they exist, and that their goals leading into the 1950s were similar.

In his review of *Bibliografía de temas Afrocubanos*, Laurence A. Glasco writes that newspapers and periodicals, rather than books, served as outlets for Cuban intellectuals, and that the Afro-Cuban press was especially influential. Unfortunately, one of the most comprehensive records of Afro-Cuban publications, *El Negro en Cuba*, ends in 1958 – which Glasco notes was perhaps “convenient” for Castro. But, while the actual periodicals during the revolution are barely existent or difficult to find, this gap can be filled by looking into the efforts of individual journalists, such as Reynaldo Peñalver, an Afro-Cuban journalist for *Bohemia* who was the first from the island to meet with Malcolm X, which was revealed by a photo from *Bohemia*'s magazine archives. Photos like these are significant because, while *Bohemia* and other mainstream papers drew up cartoons that showed African Americans celebrating the revolution in Harlem and dreaming of a world led by Castro, Castro would not have made it to Harlem without the work of Peñalver and, arguably, other Afro-Cuban writers and activists. Although much is left to be discovered of Afro-Cuban media, especially during the revolution, Glasco punctuates the importance – and the existence – of Afro-Cuban journalists in his review:

“We learn of Juan Gualberto Gómez, Lino D'Ou, Generoso Campos Marquetti, and Rafael Serra of the struggle for independence. We learn of one of Robaina's heroes, Gustavo Urrutia, whose column ‘Ideales de una raza’ in the nation's

leading paper, *Diario de la Marina*, between 1928 and 1931, represented a breakthrough in presenting black concerns before a national audience. We read of Nicholas Guillén, later the Cuban national poet, and his advice that Cubans avoid the "road to Harlem" traveled by their North American counterparts. We learn of the disastrous proposal of the Communist party in the 1930s for black self-determination in the 'Black Belt [Faja negra] of Oriente [Province],' although the precise relations between blacks and the party during the 1940s and 1950s remain murky. Most important, we learn about numerous Afro-Cuban newspapers— *Prevision* of the Independent Party of Color, *Labor Nueva* and *Antorcha* of the post-Independent party period, *Adelante* of the 1930s, and *Nuevos Rumbos* of the 1940s. Through those pages we see black intellectuals debating their situation, protesting discrimination, and wrestling with solutions to their dilemma.”

Even with limited information, it's clear that the Afro-Cuban press and Black journalists working independently on and off the island were both addressing silences and fighting for change since the birth of the Black diasporic press.

Robert F. Williams and the Role of Radio

Cuba's Black press was not limited to print mediums, nor was it closed off to outsiders. *Radio Free Dixie* tells the story of Robert F. Williams, an African-American activist who fought Jim Crow politics and the Ku Klux Klan as well as challenged the non-violent tactics of the

NAACP and Martin Luther King, Jr, proving that a radical Black politics existed long before Stokely Carmichael (*The Historian* 808). In 1959, Williams and his wife, Mabel, published a weekly newsletter called the *Crusader*, which advocated for “black economic advancement, black pride, black culture, independent black political action, and what he referred to as armed self-reliance” in the U.S. (Hamm 105). After fleeing the States in the ‘60s to Cuba, Williams aired “Radio Free Dixie,” where he was able to further his activism, defining refuge and resistance through a new medium: broadcast. Williams’ story, while set in Cuba, hearkens back to Black-owned papers in the American Reconstruction, as well as the abolitionist papers that were issued mainly in the North during the Antebellum period to promote freedom for enslaved people. According to a PBS write-up about Williams’ life, resistance persisted from the CIA and Cuban government, which censored and jammed the radio waves, but African Americans still found ways to keep Williams’ message alive. “Fans also circulated bootlegs in Watts and Harlem: ‘Every time I play my copy,’ one listener wrote from Los Angeles in 1962, ‘I let someone else make another recording. That way more people will hear the story of Monroe.’” In this way, Williams’ story exemplifies resistance from all fronts and in all forms, through a riveting diasporic lens. African American radicalism is met with white resistance, which is retaliated against through exile, an act that’s again suppressed by white American and Cuban forces, only to be survived by the efforts of African Americans back home – Williams’ tale of resistance come full-circle in the best, most cinematic way.

Though Williams story is interesting in and of itself, it tells an important truth about the accessibility of news, and how non-print mediums can open up avenues for those who have been shut out by traditional forms. Some literaries have addressed the silence through abstract form,

such as the poetry of Nancy Morejon. Her book of poems, *Mutismos*, literally translates to “silences,” and she spaces her poems between blank pages, which allows readers to meditate on her intimate portrayals of love and identity, therefore embracing the silence. Toward the 70’s, more avant garde approaches to film emerged. In “Toward a Third Cinema,” Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino describe the camera’s role holding “primary importance” in the “battle for the complete liberation of man” (Solanas and Getino 1) and reconcile that with the fact that revolutions in “Third World” countries, such as Cuba, have been documented primarily by filmmakers without formal training. Third Cinema reclaims a “decolonized” approach to storytelling, and it was recently – and intentionally – used in a documentary “Black and Cuba” to document a trip Black Yale students took to the island in 2004 (Hayes 42). This list of audio, poetry, and film does not exhaust the ways in which new and emerging media have brought Black stories into a predominantly white canon, but it brings forth a compelling idea: If we are to study a Black press in Cuba, we must therefore reconsider what constitutes the press itself.

Personal Reflection

Most of what I gathered about Cuban attitudes toward “the media” while on the week-long trip was that most people I talked to were generally apathetic. A waiter in Old Havana noted, “The only thing that changes is the date,” and cited that as his reason for not reading the news anymore. Alejandro, our bus driver, echoed the waiter, stating that he hadn’t read a newspaper in over three years. While I didn’t do any formal interviews or prod too much about White Bias, I was able to make some observations of art and historical relics. In tobacco factories, for example, female workers are often read government newspapers to pass the time.

While touring a factory in Viñales, I noticed several familiar titles: *Granma*, *Trabajadores*, *Revolución*, among other papers, were pasted and stacked among murals of Che Guevara and inspirational quotes. While many articles called back to a “united” revolution, implicit in those messages is a kind of raceless nationalism called out by Benson. At the market, I noticed revolutionary newspapers – especially *Granma*, which is named after the boat that led Castro to defeat Batista – being used as canvases. Many of the images painted on these newsprints were of Black women, which I thought was interesting, as I couldn’t tell if the artists, many of whom were male and lighter-skinned, were reimagining the revolution or if this was their true perception of the past. As for publications that were explicitly for Afro-Cubans, I noticed our Viñales host mother, Mercy, had a copy of an Afro-Cuban magazine on her front porch, which seemed to have several articles about Trump, race relations and Black celebrities in the U.S. If I were to go back, however, I would have more conversations about how stories of Afro-Cuban life are packaged and spread, and whether those messages are accessible to modern-day Cubans.

Conclusion

Throughout my research, I was reminded of two quotes by African-American authors and historians. In Heather Williams’ *Self-Taught*, which chronicles the birth of Black education in America, she begins by noting a lack of information not only surrounding her topic, but on African American history in general: “African Americans exist in the interstices of the web” of a traditionally white canon, she states, noting throughout her book instances of Black Americans gaining the tools to write their own stories. Similarly, Toni Morrison famously quips: “Invisible things are not necessarily not there.” Several philosophers of history, including Michel Foucault,

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Michel de Certeau, have argued that this collective silencing and refusal of Black stories in mainstream media is an epistemological problem. However, the work of Benson and other historians reveals that a more critical methodology can work to reverse the damage done by previous works that have romanticized whitewashed revolutions such as Castro's without prescribing any methods for radical change. By exposing the revolution's flaws, Benson offers a hopeful resolve: Treat racism from all fronts and on a *continual* basis.

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