

Castro's Racial Tokenism

The new regime's neo-abolitionist integrationism was bound to appeal to the majority of Cubans—the marginalized descendants of African slaves. Of all Cubans, the latter were the most rejected sector. Torn by an unresolved conflict between a deep craving for acceptance by, and dissolution into, the dominant group, and a reviving awareness of its distinct ethnic self-interests, Black Cuba was seduced by Castro's integrationist promises. Integration thus became a magic word. As observed by an analysis of U.S. ethnic relations, the social consciousness of Blacks in the Americas "possesses inner qualities of different degrees of nationalism and integrationism."¹³ Castro's approach had simply been to fuse both these aspects into the concept of "national integration" and therefore declare all matters closed.

By excluding the arena of political power and cultural dominance from his sketchy overview of the racial question, while concentrating exclusively on its segregationist aspect, Castro could honestly put himself on the back. Cuba's new white ruler was convinced that he had "given" Blacks their freedom. The breakdown of racial segregation within such a narrow context, however, left only one way open to Cuban Blacks: uncritical adoption of the cultural outlook and lifestyle of the politically dominant Hispanic revolutionary elite. The Afro-Cuban Communist poet Nicolás Guillén Landián could thus gloat over the most trivial results of desegregation: "You don't know how pleased I was to see, in the first days of the Revolution, a Negro boy playing golf in one of the old aristocratic clubs in Cuba," he said. "I do not know whether it was in the Baltimore Yacht Club or what. The fact is that I approached the little fellow and asked him if he liked that sport. The boy looked at me, his face lit up with joy, and he replied: 'No! No! I'll have become an Eisenhower!'"¹⁴

Conducting a series of interviews during the earliest stage of Castro's rule, a European journalist recorded characteristic black Cuban responses to the new order. He spoke to a twenty-two-year-old woman, an enthusiastic Castro supporter who had joined the Army:

"We are proud to serve under Fidel. He is a real leader, a genius, a hero, a true noble hearted man." She was gazing at me dreamily. I laughed. "What are you thinking about? Your planet? The moon?" "Nothing," she replied abruptly. The next moment she said, quite unexpectedly, "You are a real white. Cuban girls like me, with mixed blood dream of going out with a white man like you. The Revolution has done away with color prejudice but to marry a white man—"

hundred percent white, that would be great. That's a wonderful thing the Revolution could do. It ought to step up the process of making Cuba white. It wouldn't be difficult. You'd only have to marry white men and women to come and settle here. There's room for plenty of people. In that way the coloreds would soon become absorbed, and there'd be no more Negroes, no more prejudices, no more anything, but that's a good idea! If you see Fidel you should suggest it to him."

Another interviewee, a Rebel Army officer's bodyguard, expressed similar feelings, though in different words:

A prosperous looking villa in Marianao, the great residential quarter of Havana. . . . To one side, a smoking chair, seated in it, a tall lanky Negro with his Tommy gun across his knees. . . . "There is a Comandante who lives in it. . . . Mand, I live here too. Look up there, the window on the left. That's my room. I sleep in it. Yes, yes, in this house built by white men, for white men. And I'm a Negro. What's more, they feed me, do my washing and give me sixty pesos a month. . . . Negroes don't feel like Negroes anymore. They have become white men. . . . Before Fidel, I was a shoeshine boy at the Miami. . . . Then Fidel came along. He said: 'Negroes and white folks are all the same, all of us just men.' . . . When Fidel said: 'Negroes and white folk are all the same, all of us just men,' I believed him. Every Negro believed him. We've got reason to believe Fidel!" (ibid., 63, 63-64)

Social improvement, however slight, was seen as synonymous with the adoption of the dominant Hispanic lifestyle and, in fact, becoming white:

"You know," the senory went on. "Fidel thought about the women too. He said to the Negro women: 'That's all finished your old life. You're going to live like the white women.' I've got a sister, Rita. Before Fidel there were only two things she could do: become a maid for white folk or become a whore. . . . Now that's all finished. They gave my sister a job sweeping up in an office. She's quite happy now" (ibid., 65-66).

Deep seated self-hatred, the desire to escape the black persona and dissolve into whiteness, could now become "revolutionary" qualities:

He searched through his pockets and pulled out a cardboard folder. . . . "Look at this. It's my country club membership card. . . . Negroes in the United States, they can't go to a country club. That's reserved for the white. They couldn't here either, before Fidel. They'd get thrown out. It was reserved for the whitest of the whites. . . . It's hard to say to myself: Pahlito, all that's finished. You're not a nigger any more. Ever since Fidel said, 'Negroes and white folk are all the same,'