For My Teacher, Walterio Carbonell

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Editor’s Note: In the summer of 2021, Tomás Fernández Robaina received the Casa del Caribe International prize which recognizes personalities who have excelled in research on, and the promotion and development of Cuban popular culture. He received a mpaka or divination instrument used in the Cuban Regla de Congo or Palo Monte religious tradition, one of several that thrived historically in the island nation.

This essay is dedicated to Walterio Carbonell (1920-2008), the controversial Afro-Cuban Marxist thinker, on the 50th year of the publication of his masterpiece Como Surgió la Cultura Nacional (“On The Emergence of National Culture”). It was published in a 1961, a year marked by the official declaration of the socialist character of the Cuban Revolution, the victory of Playa Girón (the “Bay of Pigs”), and the launching of a massive literacy campaign.

Carbonnell’s text confronts the traditional version of Cuban history, which assigns the leading role of the gestation of Cuban nationality to an enlightened aristocracy of White Creoles of Spanish origin. According to this version, such intellectual groups generated an ideology of independence that led to the beginning of the anti-colonial wars against Spain in 1868. Today, this explanation, with slight modifications, continues to be the most widespread in Cuba.

Carbonnel writes that the so-called White “fathers of the nation” (with the exception of the priest Félix Varela and the poet José María Heredia, both of whom were exiles) did not seek the independence of Cuba nor the end of slavery; they were representatives of a reactionary strain in racist thought. He argues instead that the key role in liberation struggles and in the creation of
Cuban national culture befalls to the majority of African origin, exploited and marginalized in colonial society, who indelibly influenced the family structure, the language and the music of the Cuban people.

The original edition of the 131-page book was issued in approximately 200 copies by a private printing house and paid for by the author. Currently, Carbonell’s book is a mandatory reference who those who study race in Cuba and is partially available on the web. Still, the author and his work are practically unknown to most Cubans of all racial backgrounds and social strata.

I want to begin by expressing the joy that I feel in writing about my mentor, whose death in 2008 ended a long life and was widely commented. The false announcement of his passing had spread three years earlier, a tidbit of manipulated news that reached me one late Sunday night through a telephone call to my house. I was greatly surprised, because the day before, I had spoken with mutual friends and some colleagues from the library, with whom I had inquired about Walterio, and none of them mentioned his death. I called his house, but to no avail. I then immediately communicated with other connections, who were unable to confirm it; something told me the news was a hoax. Had it been true, his family would have left a message for me. On Monday morning, another call confirmed my intuition: Walterio had just entered the National Library.

Obviously, the news of his death, which came out of the blue, caused Juan Goytisolo, an old friend of Walterio’s, to pen an article in which, without corroborating its veracity, he considered him gone. Goytisolo outlined a set of personal opinions that did not take into account the changes that had taken place in our country since his last visit in 1961. Every revolutionary process, history shows, goes through different stages of intolerance and misunderstandings. Mistakes and injustices are sometimes made which paint as enemies individuals who support and seek to improve the system with proposals that clash with those of the positions of the ruling party, putting them in the same category as those who actually seek to undermine the process. Recall the film “Strawberry and Chocolate”, in which a homosexual is forced to leave the country for displaying aesthetic criteria contrary to those that prevailed at the time. The foregoing reflects a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in the study of any revolutionary process that traverses stages of more or less acute intolerance.

The Marxist revolutionary Carbonell is a case in point for anyone who wishes to attract the spotlight by attacking or defending the Cuban Revolution. For me, the important thing is that by virtue of this unfortunate error, many have reflected on the centrality of this figure, who was well known to those of us who regard ourselves as his students, and who have seriously studied the origins of our culture and national identity and referenced his classic book. It is not difficult to infer the relevance to young generations of the work of this man, who despite the challenges he faced, remained faithful to his ideals and to the Revolution. He continued to profess fondness for his friend from the university, Fidel Castro Ruz. He considered the equitable representation of Blacks in our society, which Fidel later demanded at the closing of the Third Communist Party Congress in 1986, central to his own revolutionary engagement; not just that of an ethnic group but also of women and youth in all levels of the state, the public administration, and the party. Unfortunately, this call did not yield the expected results.

Who was Walterio Carbonell? I first heard of him as the author of the well-known study mentioned above, a text that, as would later explain to me, he dictated to his secretary. It was
an essay written in one draft, sourced from memory, which says something about his erudition and breadth. Walter was a member of the Socialist Youth until he was expelled for having sent a telegram to the then young Fidel Castro, who had just escaped death during the 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago. Walter fled political repression on the island for Paris. There he participated in with other Cuban youths in activities against the Batista dictatorship, among them the raising of the July 26th flag on the Eiffel Tower. Upon his return during the Revolution, he was appointed Cuban ambassador to Tunisia, where he lived for a short time. Upon returning to Cuba, he dedicated himself to writing articles on the general situation in Africa and worked as a professor of Marxist and Leninist philosophy, a position which he resigned in opposition to the use of Soviet manuals to teach the doctrine in Cuba. The anecdotes Walter told of his close personal friendship with Fidel reveal his appreciation for the political genius of the Revolution’s top commander.

Despite all the setbacks he faced for his ideas, he never considered emigrating, and did not consider any option for resolving our social and economic problems than the socialist one. Toward that goal, he began to draw attention to the importance of Black representation in official positions. He also spoke of the beauty of Black women, of the necessity for Black artists to express themselves and underscore the shared heritage of a common national identity. He made efforts to organize panels on Black identity and the social, economic and cultural problems inherent in it during the January 1966 Tricontinental Conference which resulted in the creation of the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAL). Evidently this attitude was not considered appropriate at the time, given that the policy of open hostility displayed by United States, which was eager to destroy the Revolution, attempted to divide Cubans and promote counterrevolution. Due to his repeated pronouncements on the existence of racial discrimination on the island, he was retired from public life.

After roughly a year of confinement to a farm Walterio decided to join the workforce, but he encountered repeated bureaucratic obstacles that prevented him from achieving that goal. He sent a letter to Fidel Castro informing him of the situation. Shortly thereafter Dr. Julio Le Riverand, the director of the National Library at the time, granted him a position as a library assistant in the stacks, an offer Walter rejected. When the Minister of Culture Dr. Armando Hart congratulated him during a working visit to the institution, Walter informed him of the reality of his circumstances. Within a week Walterio began in a new position as a researcher. Of course, his intellectual and investigative concerns pertained to the area of slavery, particularly the 1844 La Escalera conspiracy. He reached controversial conclusions that ran contrary to the foregone conclusions of most historians regarding he existence of a Black petty bourgeoisie. Walterio alleged that the sum total of all the members of that class did not reach a third of the capital owned by the Creole slave owner Miguel Aldama.

His interest in the contemporary situation of Cuban Blacks was no expressed in articles and conferences, but in letters sent personally to Fidel in which he laid out his views on the need to enhance their representation in the Revolution. At least one witness who saw them testifies to the veracity of these epistles. That person later recalled the joy he felt when he heard the First Secretary’s comments to the Third Congress of the party in 1986, believing that Walterio would have been pleased to hear the speech. The Guadeloupean professor Dr. Alain Yacou translated Como surgió la cultural nacional into French. The reissuing of the book, carefully edited with the sources bibliographical material it referenced, is urgent and timely. The compilation of Walterio’s
articles, published in the newspaper *Revolución* and in magazines such as *Nuevos Rumbos* (1942-1948) and *Bohemia*, has since made strides.

I personally met Walterio at the National Library, where I identified him after having seen his photo on the cover of an issue of *Nuevos Rumbos*. I was already familiar with anecdotes about him shared by Clara Moreira, an artist and mother of his only Cuban male child, Kimane, who was also a creator in the artistic sphere. In the final years of his life, one of his two French daughters, professional singer Dora Campbell, traveled to Cuba to meet him after knowing him only through their correspondence. I remember the joy that filled Walter’s expression when he showed me photos of his daughters some years ago. Our first conversations, and the many that followed, are very present in my mind.

For example, when I asked him if Carlos Moore was a pseudonym he had used to write a very controversial article in the magazine *Prénsence Africaine* (1966), he smiled and told me he would not hide his name in that way. Carlos Moore was a real Black Cuban in flesh and blood. He met him when Moore resided in Cuba in the early years of the Revolution and had had no further direct contact with him until he resumed visits to the island in the late nineties for family and educational reasons.

I am grateful to Walterio for having made me fully understand our revolutionary process, in all of its contradictions and complexities. He transmitted to me in a simple way from our very first dialogues the conviction that solving the world’s problems of social, economic, and racial inequality entailed following a path toward socialism, but in a real, democratic, participatory, and free of all dogmatism and intolerance. The false news of Walterio’s passing obviously served not to raise him from the dead, but to make him a better-known figure to the young generations, as well as all those who have not had the opportunity to fully comprehend his thinking.

**Published works by Tomás Fernández Robaina**

*Books:*


**Articles and Chapters:**


