Critical Perspectives on Race and Revolution: 
Fugitive and Dissonant Afro-America through a Cuban Lens

Geoffroy de Laforcade
Norfolk State University
International Representative, Red Barrial Afrodescendiente

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Ethnographer, choreographer and poet Rogelio Martínez Furé (August 1937- October 2022), whose written and performed excavations of the idiosyncracies and fugitivities of interwoven African and Cuban cultural and spiritual tapestries is as timeless in acumen as unbounded in fecundity, leaves a legacy of emancipatory erudition. Zanj honors his memory by giving voice to those who, from the pulpits of scholarship to the archives of orality and the credos of everyday struggle, forage Cuban history for clues to the mysteries and palimpsests of identity. We are indebted to his patient disavowal of the shackles of epistemic colonialism, linguistic and disciplinary silos, and to his knowledge of sacred and profane Afro-diasporic storytelling. 2012 was the year of the bicentennial of the Yoruba-descended carpenter José Aponte’s planned rebellion for freedom against slavery, the centennial of the uprising and repression of the Independent Party of Color led by mambi veterans Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonnet, and the founding of the community-based Red Barrial Afrodescendiente (Afro-Descendant Neighborhood Network) in Cuba. In an issue of Caminos published that year, the maestro said this of “protean racism”: it “constantly reinvents
itself, reconstitutes itself and acquires millions of masks, millions of *yagruma*  

faces.”  

Elsewhere Richard Price commented that maroon responses to racism and oppression are equally ubiquitous: “Those who were regarded for a long time as ‘savages’ and thus denied any form of action or civic life possess their own concrete utopias, theologies of liberation and political spiritualities. And it could be that in our struggles to come – struggles for a world no longer governed by the fear of the other, by generalized predation and commodification – we will have to learn a few subterfuges from them.”  

Martínez Furé expressed this sentiment when he continued: “Cuban identity did not rain from above, but rather emerged from below.”  

Central African-French author Dénètem Touam Bona employs a poetic metaphor for subterranean resistance to the contemporaneity of racism and vitality of popular strategies of escape from its persistent predatory enclosures. “Lianas,” he writes, "derived from the term *lyannaj*, used in the sugar plantations of Guadeloupe and Martinique to describe the technique of weaving the cane into bundles." The fruit of enslaved labor, he describes it as a heuristic device embedded in practices of solidarity, alliance, and creative improvisation: “The vine is this line which enables the encirclement of the oppressor, by multiplying forms of conjuration and unpredictable actions.”  

This issue of *Zanj* is the first of two dedicated to Black resistance against racism in Cuba, a nation which, while defying the hydra of prejudice in complex, ongoing and visible ways since the Revolution of 1959, is as prone as any contemporary society to its aporias and perennial systemic assaults on freedom. It is an exercise in intellectual marronage, in the midst of resurgent expressions of latent and overt racism in the contemporary island-nation and the world.  

Only days ago, a group of individuals dressed in Klu Klux Klan garb celebrated Halloween in Holguín’s Calixto García Park, a folly that echoed an incident which occurred in Havana the previous year. More than just a grotesque celebration of infamy, these widely disseminated images on social media serve as stark reminder that ignorance of history and injury to society continue to inform the targeting of Black equality in banal and insidious ways. “A holiday,” the Aponte Commission declared, “whatever its origin, should not be mixed with racial hatred. Halloween, although not ours, is not a racist tradition and it is an act against culture to tarnish it with a felony like the one that occurred.”  

President Miguel Díaz-Canel, who in 2019 lamented “manifestations of racism that are perceived in jokes, in certain attitudes at the social level and in some convocations for positions in private businesses that specify skin color,” established a National Program against

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1 “Tree of the *moraceae* family, with large, palmate leaves, green on the upper side and silvery on the underside, and clustered flowers, pink with yellow tints. It has medicinal qualities.” (Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la lengua Española*, [https://dle.rae.es/yagruma](https://dle.rae.es/yagruma)).

2 Furé 2012.

3 Price 2002: 56.

4 Furé 2016.

5 Bona 2021: 14.

6 A body attached to the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC), named after the leader of the 1812 conspiracy of José Antonio Aponte.


Racism and Racial Discrimination involving 18 agencies of the central State administration and an equal number of civil society organizations. It created a legal and political framework for organized initiatives from the grass roots to the halls of power, themselves not immune to its offenses, against a systemic problem, one rooted in centuries of enslavement, colonialism, and capitalist history, as well as a vexed legacy of denial by the socialist Revolution itself, which disingenuously proclaimed in the early 1960s to have achieved its resolution.⁹

The struggle against racism among Cubans extends to exile communities in the United States and Europe, where the complexity of the political chessboard is evidenced by the presence of Cubans of African descent in high-profile opposition roles, some of them unabashed in their celebration of imperialism and its contemporary avatars. Earlier this year, on July 17, six days after protests against scarcity and pandemic restrictions erupted in several Cuban localities, Cuban novelist Zoé Valdés, a staunch adversary of the Revolution who is acclaimed by literary establishments throughout European capitals, appeared at a protest in front of the Cuban Embassy in Paris. She brandished the flag of the Brigade 2506, a CIA-sponsored group of Cuban exiles formed in 1960 that carried out the failed Bay of Pigs invasion a year later.¹⁰ A prominent Black figure of the Cuban counterrevolution is Enrique Tarrio, an FBI informant, 2020 Florida State Director of “Latinos for Trump,” and convicted felon who chairs the far-right Proud Boys in the United States. Charged with seditious conspiracy for his role in the 2021 attack on the Capitol Building in Washington, Tarrio clashed with police at a rally this year in Miami in support of the July 11 protesters in Cuba.¹¹ The confluence of sectors of Afrodescendant society in Cuba and the contortions of imperialist and neocolonial intervention in the politics of putatively “race-blind” republican advocacy has a history, chronicled by Julio César Guanche in his article for this issue entitled “Two Republics in Conflict: The ‘Race War’ of 1912 in Cuba”. It was the first Black Cuban Senator, Martín Morúa Delgado, who introduced the law in Congress in 1910 outlawing the Partido Independiente de Color that led to its ill-fated armed uprising two years later.¹² Some sectors of the Cuban socialist establishment critically evaluated the movement for racial equality and social justice in 1912 during its centennial, arguing that by placing Black agency and protest at the foreground of its dissent against post-independence liberal elites, it threatened the nation with division and foreign intervention. The weaponization of race by the United States in its longstanding crusade against the nation’s sovereignty and revolution served then, as it does now, as a foil for claiming that Cuba is prone to disunity when it allows race-conscious protest to interfere with struggles for independence.

A leading representative of Afrodescendant voices against this line of reasoning was Walterio Carbonell, to whom Tomás Fernández Robaina, the legendary archivist and historian of Black Cuban politics in the 20th century, renders tribute in his piece, “For my Teacher, Walterio Carbonell.” One of the most prominent Marxist and anti-racist intellectuals of the revolutionary

⁹ See Benson 2016.
¹⁰ Sanchez 2021
period, Carbonell was a close collaborator of Fidel Castro in the 1950s. He participated in the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956 alongside Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, and in ideological and cultural debates in the early 1960s on Black Cuban culture and its place in the Revolution. His seminal work, *Cómo Surgió la Cultura Nacional*, a Marxist reinterpretation of the role of Black slaves and rebels in Cuban history and society, remained unavailable to Cuban scholars and activists for decades after his marginalization from politics, largely because it denounced the silencing of Black voices by official nationalist historiography on the subject of Cuban national culture. This tradition remains, in present-day Cuban textbooks, celebratory of White creole figures of the 19th century who participated in the formation of a national consensus against the Spanish empire, which gave way to the myth, still powerful in contemporary revolutionary discourse, of racial harmony in the birthing of the new Republic.

Carbonell was one important figure in this debate, and there have been many since, particularly in Cuban scholarship on race and revolution over the past two decades. The influence of the Pan-Africanist radical tradition has also come under renewed scrutiny, a phenomenon underscored by Zuleica Romay Guerra, Director of the Program of Afro-American Studies at the Cuban Casa de las Américas, in her pathbreaking piece on Guyanese historian Walter Rodney entitled “Groundings in Cuba: Echoes of Walter Rodney Today.” Rodney, who believed that the history of African and Afro-diasporic peoples should be written from the Africas and the Americas themselves, first traveled to Cuba in 1961 and 1962, meeting with Fidel Castro and returning later in the decade. He was a student of the antiracist movement in the 1890s that culminated in Cuban independence, and, like Carbonell, a defiant critic of White supremacist and “race-blind” republican historiography. In his recent biography of Rodney, Amzat Boukari-Yabara noted that he was cognizant of the role of African peoples in the creation of Afro-diasporic sacred traditions in the Americas, including Cuban *Regla de Ifá* or Santería. He saw the emergence of a new, syncretic *Carabalí* identity in Cuba as an intentional strategy of resistance to cultural assimilation and social death. He also demonstrated, before a generation of academic historians, that African intelligence, skills and competencies transferred to the Americas in a variety of ways, including marronage itself, which displayed practices that developed contemporaneously on the Gold Coast and in Angola. His focus on intercultural solidarities, women, and fugitive strategies of social emancipation and cultural resistance resonates with contemporary anti-racist and Black consciousness movements in Cuba, such as the aforementioned *Red Barrial Afrodescendiente*, which will be analyzed and given voice in the second installment of this two-part issue of *Zanj*. Rodney was intent on transcending the limits of academic inquiry, in which he excelled, by making history accessible to youth, poor and marginalized working-class sectors of the population. As evidenced in his seminal *Groundings with My Brothers*, he stressed the importance of immersive popular education along the lines advocated by Paolo Freire, whose eruption onto the scene of Cuban anti-racist pedagogies in the 1980s has had a profound impact on the ideas, methods and teachings of contemporary race-conscious activism.

14 Caballero 2020.
15 See de Laforcade and Springer 2019.
17 See Pérez 2004.
Fred Moten wrote that “in the inexclusive mobile situation and idiom, to which we people who are darker than blue have been inexclusively given, our runaway history gives us this: that affirmation in and through negation, situated mobility, and differentiated presence is blackness (...).” He added that our language of racial classification and Black agency remains clouded by a focus on what is visible and evident to the eye: “Enclosure, engendering, and epidermalization of the irregular, of the alternative, mark the conceptual boundaries of regulatory technique.”

Essentialist nationalism and the pervasive depiction of Cuba as an ajiaco or “stew” – a variant of the hidebound United States “melting pot” - by steering the narrative toward a consensual acceptance of mestizaje that silences subterranean expressions of alterity or maroon logics, ignores Afro-diasporic traditions that enact belonging and transmit knowledge through the sacred, with direct lineages to African epistemologies. This is the case of the uniquely Cuban phenomenon of the Abakuá secret society, which is studied with erudition and meticulous ethnography by Ivor Miller in his article, “The Ékpé-Abakuá Continuum: Articulating Trans-Atlantic African Diaspora Heritage in Cuba and the Cross-River Region (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria).” Abakuá emerged in the early decades of the 19th century among Carabalí, or Africans who hailed, Miller teaches us, from a settlement (Abahpá in Qua-Ejaghám) in Calabar (Cross River region of Nigeria). It attracted enslaved and free Blacks as well as mulattoes and even White workers in the fiercely oppressive conditions of the 1820s and 1830s, who engaged in mutual aid and in secretive rituals of self-defense and cultural marronage that have persisted to this day in Havana and Matanzas. Abakuá is an expression of Afro-diasporic religiosity and socio-political authority on the margins of the nation-state and its institutions, of which Miller documents the complex, multidirectional transatlantic ties as well as the ubiquitous vitality in culture, music, performance and community organizing. Famously demonized as Nañiguismo in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the target of elaborate police and ideological schemes to silence, distort, racialize and criminalize its heritage and practices, Abakuá at once embodies the situated cultural identity of Cuba in its many diverse expressions, which are explored by Miller’s mentor, Martínez Furé, in his Diálogos imaginarios, and the futility of folding that identity into the streamlined civic doctrine of state-centered republicanism, which, its origins in European revolutionary doctrine in the 19th century notwithstanding, is resistant to popular subtexts of sacred and marooned traditions that challenge its abstraction of symbolic unity and territorial enclosure.

In Cuba, religious institutions such as Abakuá, Masonic lodges, and the Roman Catholic Church found themselves politically marginalized and legally discriminated against during the era of official atheism that ended in 1992. Nonetheless, they remained present. Ecumenical movements such as the Baptist Student Worker Coordination of Cuba, as well as Cuban chapters of the Latin American Union of Ecumenical Youth and the Prague-based Christian Conference for Peace, emerged in the 1970s. As for Abakuá, its social and cultural manifestations, historically secretive and deeply embedded in the popular religiosity and traditions of the communities from which it emerged, its intrinsic fugitivity continued as before. When the revolutionary leadership engaged publicly with religious constituencies in the late 1980s, culminating in a 1990 encounter

19 See Ortiz 2021.
20 Furé 2016.
between Fidel Castro and some 70 ecclesiastical and ecumenical Protestant and Jewish leaders, Afro-diasporic religious entities remained the subject of a longstanding taboo. During the period of extreme scarcity and societal crisis that befell Cuba with the fall of European socialism, momentum grew among all religious communities in the development of alternative strategies of social development and civic engagement, and public debate expanded on the role of religion in socialist development.\textsuperscript{22} Convergences between grass-roots faith communities and the Communist Party, which established an office of Religious Affairs, began to emerge. The spaces opened by this new, contrasting direction in the political fortunes of the Revolution, unfolding in circumstances of extreme organizational fluidity and existential uncertainty, extend beyond the walls of political institutions and academic debate, into the neighborhoods and associations of Black communities driven by exigencies of mutual aid and the struggle against discrimination. Today the \textit{Ogunda Masa} project of La Marina de Matanzas, which is affiliated with the \textit{Red Barrial Afrodescendiente} and spearheaded by a charismatic Abakuá community leader, Raúl Domínguez (alias “Kimbo”), who received training as a popular educator from the Baptist-affiliated Martin Luther King Center of Havana, works in projects loosely connected to a myriad of diverse secular and religious movements. Among them one finds, for example, such varied entities as the LGBTQI+ association \textit{Afrodiverso} and the Protestant devotees of the \textit{Iglesia Ebenezer} in Havana.

This issue of \textit{Zanj} is completed by a scholarly-informed plea from Boricua decolonial sociologist Agustín Lao Montes, a member of the Cuban chapter of the \textit{Articulación Regional Afrodescendiente para las Américas y el Caribe} (ARAAC), on the timely question of reparations: “De-Colonial Genealogies: Towards a Reparative Justice on an Africanity Beat,” which his scholarship situates within a long tradition of Afro-diasporic, Caribbean and Latinx/American intellectual production:

bear(ing) witness to the syncopated counter-pointing between the forms of discourse and the contents of an analysis in which the political is not limited to forms of organization and participation in the formal spheres of citizenship, the state and parties, but rather extends to every power struggle, from domestic micro-politics to cultural, aesthetic and spiritual practices which have pertinent effects on the power equations of society.\textsuperscript{23}

The late Cuban political theorist Fernando Martínez Heredia identified these as notable outcomes of the decades following the crisis of the 1990s: innovative approaches to critical pedagogy, community organizing, horizontal solidarities, gender-based activism and diversity, academic inquiry into the Black Cuban heritage, artistic and economic empowerment in marginalized communities, and the acknowledgement of systemic racism and discrimination.\textsuperscript{24} The latter has local and transnational dimensions that require struggle in areas of revolutionary activism and internationalist engagement, but also fugitivity, a concept that “highlights the tension between the acts or flights of escape and creative practices of refusal, nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category

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\item[22] Cf. Alonso 2020: 147-159.
\item[23] Montes 2020: 5.
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of the dominant.”25 Black fugitivity extends beyond common understandings of resistance. It is a
dissonant, hidden but vital aspect of the Cuban revolutionary project, and perhaps its only hope
that the sirens of liberation will prevail over the dueling conventions of socialist orthodoxy and
neoliberal catastrophe.

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