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Antiracism in Cuba

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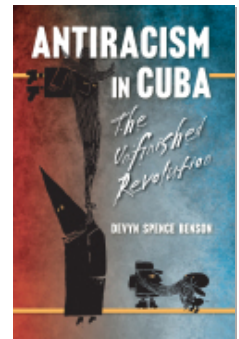
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Poor, Black, and a Teacher

Loyal Black Revolutionaries and the Literacy Campaign

When questioned about the 1961 Literacy Campaign, Cubans recount stories of national highs and lows, fears and opportunities, and excitement and estrangement. Teenage *alfabetizadores* (literacy teachers) remembered Fidel Castro's call to join the revolutionary literacy army, traveling to far-flung areas in the rural countryside, and the joy of sharing their knowledge with other Cubans. But, the most common story I heard when I inquired about this period of the Cuban Revolution was a recounting of the brutal murder of an eighteen-year-old volunteer teacher named Conrado Benítez. More than one literacy teacher recalled how counterrevolutionaries assassinated Benítez outside of his schoolhouse in Escambray because he was "poor, black, and a teacher." Using nearly identical wording, these now elderly Cubans remembered that a band of countergovernment rebels tortured and killed Benítez because of his support for the revolution *and* his marginalized race and class status.¹ It is not surprising that Cubans retell almost verbatim the story of Benítez's death since a large proportion of the island's population participated in the Literacy Campaign (either as members of national teaching brigades or as students learning to read) and even more Cubans attended one of the memorial services held in the fallen teacher's honor. During the spring of 1961, community events and Literacy Campaign publicity created and solidified a lasting narrative of Benítez's life and death, fondly remembered today, that described a young man who sacrificed himself for the nation. Revolutionary leaders held mass rallies where they proclaimed that the murder of Benítez epitomized Cuba's ongoing struggles against imperialism, counterrevolution, and social injustice. National media outlets repeated the words announced by Prime Minister Fidel Castro, explaining how the young man had been murdered for being a "poor, black, teacher."² By linking Benítez's assassination to counterrevolutionary distaste for Afro-Cubans, the new government created and transmitted a narrative of the young man's life that both declared the successful end to the campaign against racial discrimination and further discredited counterrevolutionaries as racists.

The 1961 Literacy Campaign was a foundational moment for the Cuban Revolution. Over the course of the year, the campaign dramatically reduced illiteracy from 23.6 percent to 3.9 percent with the help of some 270,000 literacy teachers. Nearly half of these volunteer teachers were youth members of Conrado Benítez brigades—as the groups named after the fallen youth were called—who taught in rural areas, while adults (the other half) offered instruction in urban settings after work and in their free time.³ Afro-Cuban participation in the campaign was high and blacks and *mulatos* composed nearly 19 percent of the brigades.⁴ However, the “Year of Education” was a national mobilization that taught Cubans more than simply how to read.⁵ The Literacy Campaign also provided Cubans with a new “political education,” spreading the values and ideals of the revolutionary government.⁶ *Brigadistas* (a common term for the literacy teachers) carried textbooks that included sections about the perils of U.S. aggression, the benefits of the Agrarian Reform, and information about how the new government planned to fulfill the dreams of José Martí.⁷ Teaching manuals also taught lessons about the need to eliminate racial discrimination and the Literacy Campaign encouraged Cubans to open their homes to Afro-Cuban volunteer teachers. At the end of the year, when the young teachers returned to Havana for the December celebration where Castro announced that Cuba was a “territory free of illiteracy,” Cubans celebrated the movement’s achievements and solidified fond memories of 1961 that have endured for over fifty years.

The life and death of Conrado Benítez played a central role in the construction of these memories and in Cuba’s political education in general. The literacy movement coincided with the end of the public campaign to eliminate racial discrimination. Celebrations honoring the martyred Afro-Cuban teacher gave revolutionary leaders a means of asserting that they had achieved a raceless nation where blacks, like Benítez, could be seen as the counterparts to other national icons like José Martí and Camilio Cienfuegos.⁸ The national press even linked conversations about Benítez’s murder with reports about the assassination of two other black men, Afro-Cuban communist Jesús Menéndez and Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba, to create a pantheon of revolutionary black male icons.⁹ Popularized images of these men allowed the revolutionary government to insert darker-skinned faces into a national leadership cohort that was almost completely white, with the exception of rebel army leader Juan Almeida. Revolutionary leaders invoked the story of Benítez in particular to vilify countergovernment groups by labeling them as racist murderers willing to

kill innocent teachers. Blaming his death on counterrevolutionaries funded by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency allowed Cuban leaders to depict the Year of Education not only as a movement against illiteracy, but as a battle against U.S. imperialism, coded as “white” and “racist” as well.

Similar to moments discussed previously when national rhetoric about race, racism, or people of color was at its highest, certain contradictions underlie the iconization of black martyrs and signaled the incomplete end of the campaign to eliminate discrimination. In fact, despite its impressive accomplishments in teaching Cubans to read and the unprecedented move to use a black man’s face on revolutionary visual materials, revolutionary leaders also used the Literacy Campaign to stand in for additional conversations about blackness. The Literacy Campaign epitomized the contradictory end to official debates about racism in post-1959 Cuba. On one hand it included racially integrated brigades, celebrated Afro-Cuban revolutionaries, and produced dramatic education reforms. At the same time, the stories revolutionary leaders used to explain the deaths of Benítez, Menéndez, and Lumumba fashioned lasting impressions about appropriate Afro-Cuban behavior and acceptable black contributions to the new nation that allowed stereotypes about black gratefulness to persist. The emphasis placed on Benítez’s humble background and his loyalty to the revolution celebrated a vision of patriotic blackness that highlighted a particular, nonthreatening Afro-Cuban citizen who was both grateful to and dependent on the new government. Cuban leaders created an image of a safe, strong, committed black patriot that left little space for other (living) Afro-Cubans to disagree or challenge the course of the revolution. Benítez was nonthreatening because he was a martyr and could not contest the revolution’s portrayal of him or his life. The limited number of women—white, *mulata*, or black—invoked in these conversations also suggests the limits of who could serve as a symbol for the nation in the 1960s.¹⁰ In many ways, the 1959 antiracist movement that began when Castro publicly declared the new government’s plans to tackle the “hated injustice” of discrimination ended in 1961 with indirect suggestions about revolutionary loyalty and undefined paths for future debates about blackness.

1961: The Year of Education

Revolutionary leaders announced plans for a campaign to educate all Cubans while attending the 1960 United Nations (UN) meeting in New

York. “In the coming year, our people intend to fight the great battle against illiteracy, with the ambitious goal of teaching every single inhabitant of the country to read and write in one year.” Noting that student organizations, teachers, and workers were preparing for the task, Castro promised that “Cuba will be the first country in the Americas which, after a few months, will be able to say it does not have one single illiterate.”¹¹ Back on the island, the Ministry of Education established a National Literacy Commission (Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, CNA) to oversee the project, recruit teachers from urban youth groups, and create new teaching manuals and workbooks for the campaign.¹² Conrado Benítez volunteered for one of these pilot brigades and spent the final two months of 1960 training with 1,400 other new teachers in the Sierra Maestra. The culmination of their preparation occurred on New Year’s Eve 1960, when Benítez’s group along with nearly ten thousand other Cuban youth attended a large rally in Havana. Castro announced the goals of the Literacy Campaign and gave the students certified diplomas identifying them as official *brigadistas* in Cuba’s national education drive.¹³ A *Verde Olivo* article, “From the Peaks of the Sierra Maestra to the Heights of Havana,” described the challenges the youth faced sleeping in hammocks, camping in the rain, and working with the rural poor before being welcomed as heroes into the capital. Revolutionary officials arranged for the *brigadistas* to stay in the Havana Hilton, much in the same way Castro and other M 26-7 rebels had returned from the rough life of guerrilla warfare in eastern Cuba to the comforts of the famed Havana hotel two years before. Photographs of these pilot brigades captured racially integrated groups laughing and posing together in smart uniforms and wearing beads from the celebration.¹⁴ Like so many other young Cubans who volunteered for the campaign, Conrado Benítez was a part of this merriment. Unbeknownst to him or his proud *compañeros*, the continuation of the civil war, now against Castro rather than Batista, soon changed the campaign against illiteracy into a battle for revolutionary hearts and minds.

The murder of Benítez by countergovernment rebels supplied this battle with its first and most famous martyr. Benítez was killed on 5 January 1961. The official narrative—that he was tortured and murdered by counterrevolutionaries—went uncontested in 1961 and fit with persistent attacks both internally and externally against the new government. Yet, while the circumstances of Benítez’s death remain unclear due to the lack of access to classified archival materials, revolutionary leaders

quickly publicized a narrative about how the teacher died that celebrated his unwavering commitment to the revolution and his humble class and racial background. According to published testimonies from his friends and family, Benítez missed and wanted to return to his students in Villa Clara and left the capital shortly after the New Year's celebration. A band of counterrevolutionaries captured and assassinated Benítez while he was traveling to his school along with a local worker and a militia member.¹⁵ A few weeks later, revolutionary leaders and the increasingly consolidated national press swiftly named the young black man a national hero and the official symbol of the Literacy Campaign. Having a black youth serve as the representative for the Year of Education was an unexpected turn of events, since the Ministry of Education had planned for nineteenth-century nationalist José Martí to act as the figurehead for the campaign. Before Benítez's death, posters of Martí decorated rallies celebrating volunteer teachers and quotations from the historical figure repeatedly accompanied newspaper articles announcing the upcoming campaign. Revolutionary leaders even set 28 January, Martí's birthday, as the official kickoff date for the battle against illiteracy in honor of the nineteenth-century intellectual.¹⁶

After the murder of Benítez, however, Cuban leaders changed these plans and made the young teacher and the story of his brutal death the rallying force for the campaign. To be fair, the image of Benítez did not erase completely Martí's presence from the Year of Education. Quotations from the intellectual along with signs with his photograph continued to decorate some literacy rallies and materials. Yet, revolutionary leaders named future groups of volunteer teachers after Benítez, not Martí, and framed calls for youth to join the movement as "Honor the Teacher Martyr! Join the Conrado Benítez García brigades!"¹⁷ (figure 5.1) The image of the young teacher dressed in a suit and tie became the standard representation of the Literacy Campaign and endured in Cuban memories throughout the twentieth century.¹⁸ Selecting a dark-skinned working-class youth from outside of Havana as the symbol of a national education movement over a white independence leader was a strategic decision in line with previous discourses about incorporating Afro-Cubans into the nation.¹⁹ The swiftness with which a young black man, who barely participated in the campaign, became the face of the movement highlights the willingness of revolutionary leaders to consciously and purposely build on prior invocations of loyal Afro-Cuban soldiers and construct narratives that



Figure 5.1 “Honor the Teacher Martyr! Join the ‘Conrado Benítez García’ Brigades!”
From *Noticias de Hoy*
(18 February 1961).

HONRA AL MAESTRO MARTIR!
INSCRIBETE EN LAS BRIGADAS
"CONRADO BENITEZ GARCIA"

celebrated their racial politics in comparison to those of the United States and Cuban exile groups.

This was not the first time, however, that republican or revolutionary officials had emphasized black heroes. The representations of Benítez, Menéndez, and Lumumba celebrated by revolutionary leaders emphasized a particular set of characteristics that scholars of nineteenth-century Cuba have referred to as the “ideal black insurgent” or “patriotic blackness.”²⁰ In the 1880s, Cuban intellectuals, both white and black, promoted a narrative of the ideal black insurgent to challenge Spanish claims that independence from Spain would lead to a race war, like the Haitian Revolution. The ideal black insurgent was a selfless and unthreatening patriot who believed in raceless nationalism and willingly sacrificed himself for Cuba’s independence.²¹ In 1961, Castro and other M 26-7 leaders recycled this nineteenth-century rhetoric and applied it to the new revolutionary context. As earlier chapters have discussed, the pattern of locating

and publicizing Afro-Cuban voices to support the new leadership had occurred since 1959. Similarly, frequent visits from African Americans had provided the revolution with opportunities to show how people of African descent from the United States admired and enjoyed the equalizing measures implemented since the new government came to power. And while publishing commentaries by Afro-Cuban intellectuals and African American leaders demonstrated the popularity the revolution had achieved with some people of color, the limits of this strategy quickly became apparent when these same men and women attacked the revolution's policies. For example, when Afro-Cuban Juan René Bentancourt, the leader of the National Federation of Black Societies, went into exile and vocally criticized claims that the new government had eliminated racial discrimination, Castro lost the potential support of an influential leader of color. Likewise, Joe Louis's public denouncement and distancing from revolutionary leaders showed the danger of highlighting the opinions of blacks and *mulatos*, who were as capable of changing their minds and choosing not to support the new government as any other citizen.²² In contrast, revolutionary leaders had successfully invoked the memories of black men like nineteenth-century nationalist Antonio Maceo and Amardo Mestre, an M 26-7 member killed in the 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks, to reach out to Afro-Cubans without increasing white anxieties about black social mobility. By calling upon the memories of slain Afro-Cuban men to legitimize their authority, revolutionary leaders signaled awareness that black support was necessary to the success of the new government. The iconization of young Benítez followed from this history and constructed contradictory lessons about the great potential a nationally integrated Cuba had for overcoming social inequalities and what revolutionary leaders believed to be the appropriate space for blackness in the revolution.

Black Martyrs and Lessons from the Literacy Campaign

On 7 February 1961, Cubans attended a massive demonstration to protest the murder of Benítez. Leading the parade, two Afro-Cuban students carried a large poster of the slain teacher with the words "Glory to the Martyr" written in black ink and decorated with white flowers. Thousands of other young people marched behind this poster carrying signs, flowers, and Cuban flags to the presidential palace where they listened to speeches by Fidel and Raúl Castro and President Osvaldo Dorticós.

The next day, almost every national newspaper printed the text of these speeches along with a photograph of Benítez ringed with carnations and a caption reading, “We cannot let the living memory of Conrado Benítez, the volunteer teacher assassinated by counterrevolutionaries, falter. . . . The young sacrificed teacher is now a guide and an example for all revolutionary youth.”²³ With these sentences, *La Calle* contrasted Benítez’s commitment to the national project with the misplaced intentions of counterrevolutionary groups. Revolutionary leaders used rallies such as this one along with other visual media and editorials in Cuban publications to create a lasting symbol of the slain Benítez that promoted a new set of values in the new nation. Cubans learned lessons about national sacrifice and racial and class inclusiveness through their work in the Literacy Campaign and the commemoration of black martyrs.

The official organ of the CNA, *Arma Nueva*, popularized what later became the iconic photograph used to honor Benítez on the cover of its January–March 1961 issue, which the editors dedicated to the young man. The image showed a clean-cut, dark-skinned Benítez wearing a neat button-down shirt, suit jacket, and tie.²⁴ The Ministry of Education used this photograph to decorate literacy badges, identification cards, education workbooks, and the pages of national dailies throughout 1961. The image of the slain teacher differed from the typical revolutionary archetype of a white-bearded man in army fatigues, suggesting a hesitation to portray black men as dangerous, armed combatants. Benítez’s photographs also clashed with the regular portrayal of impoverished Afro-Cuban law breakers featured on the crime pages of national dailies. Rather, revolutionary discourses emphasized his well-kempt appearance and respectability.

Public demonstrations celebrating Benítez allowed Cubans across the island to become familiar with his story and the principles with which he was identified. Mothers of volunteer teachers attended meetings where they signed petitions condemning Benítez’s assassination and demanding the execution of his murderers.²⁵ Youth in the Havana neighborhood of Regla marched through the streets shouting, “Firing wall!” for his killers and “Long live the revolution!”²⁶ The National Confederation of Cuban Workers hosted an event where President Dorticós, his wife, and Minister of Education Armando Hart spoke against counterrevolutionary activity in front of a large banner bearing the teacher’s face and repeating the words “Glory to the Martyr.”²⁷ Each of these gatherings memorialized Benítez and speakers referred to the young man as a national hero who

was killed because he was “poor, black, and a teacher.” Repeatedly, the publicity accompanying the Literacy Campaign stressed that counter-revolutionaries killed the young black man due to his dark skin color and economic status. Cubans attending state-sponsored events learned a particular narrative of Benítez’s death that demonized enemies of the revolution as racists while celebrating humble supporters who were committed to the new government. Even Cubans unable to go to a memorial service would have been familiar with how Benítez died, since the national press repeatedly highlighted his class, race, and occupation to contrast the demographics of the masses, many of whom were poor and black, with the growing opposition movement, depicted as rich and white.

After the murder of Conrado Benítez in January 1961, Cuban discourses about the Literacy Campaign became increasingly militarized.²⁸ Revolutionary leaders invoked the martyred teacher as a soldier for the nation, especially in the ongoing discursive and physical battles against counterrevolutionaries and U.S. aggression. One way of doing so was to claim that countergovernment groups killed innocent Cubans simply because they were black, poor, and loyal to the new government. This move created an “us” versus “them” mentality, where Cubans of color were pushed to support revolutionary leaders, since according to popular representations countergovernment groups murdered blacks. Cuban leaders associated themselves with the minority position, since they too were outcasts from exile groups funded by the United States and thus open to attack from “imperialists,” even though they were not black.

Literacy Campaign publicity invoked Benítez as a soldier for the nation in a literal sense as well. Across Cuba, young volunteer teachers joined Conrado Benítez brigades, wore army-like uniforms, saw themselves as members of an educational army, and marched to spirited lyrics about defeating the counterrevolution.²⁹ *Brigadistas* wore patches on their sleeves identifying them as members of the Benítez “Army of Literacy Teachers.”³⁰ Additionally, most descriptions of the Literacy Campaign imagined it as a “battle” against ignorance, and encouraged Cubans to equate acquiring an education with defeating the enemy who wanted to keep the island illiterate. Lyrics to a song popularized by *brigadistas* claimed that the literacy teachers were “fighting for peace” and encouraged them to “bring down imperialism and lift up liberty.”³¹ Imaging the Literacy Campaign as a national battle against both illiteracy and countergovernment forces raised the intensity of the movement. Stories of Benítez and other slain black martyrs along with revolutionary discourses encouraging Cubans

to “overcome or die” served to push Cubans to interpret the revolution in increasingly militarized ways.

Revolutionary leaders combined stories about Jesús Menéndez, an Afro-Cuban union organizer murdered in 1948, with the commemoration of Benítez in 1961 to highlight the historic contributions of Afro-Cuban citizens to the nation. It is likely that Cubans would have celebrated the anniversary of Menéndez’s death on 22 January even if Benítez had not been murdered during the same month, since the slain union leader’s commitment to racial equality and anti-imperialism fit with ongoing revolutionary projects. However, with the assassination of the young teacher, Cuban leaders inserted plans to commemorate Menéndez’s life into a larger national conversation about black patriotism. Cuban journalists frequently portrayed the union organizer as the predecessor to Benítez, and emphasized his humble background and blackness as well. For example, a political cartoon honoring the union leader labeled him as an unassuming man whose grandparents had fought alongside Maceo in the wars of independence.³² Like comments reporting Benítez’s personal history, highlighting that Menéndez was from a poor family, albeit one with a strong revolutionary background, worked to teach Cubans that the revolution respected commitment and hard work.

Black icons also appealed to certain spiritual beliefs by relating the assassination of Benítez to how Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross. Fidel Castro characterized the dead teacher as “a martyr whose blood will erase ignorance.”³³ Claiming that Benítez had “noble blood,” Castro offered to construct a monument to honor the spot where the youth’s blood fell.³⁴ An interviewed literacy teacher concurred, saying that the blood of Benítez had made Cubans more eager to “rise up” and end illiteracy during the Year of Education.³⁵ In each of these comments, the blood of the slain youth was called upon to work for the revolution and the Literacy Campaign. It was Benítez’s sacrifice, like that of Christ, which was going to allow Cubans to achieve literacy, fight imperialism, and become better people. Other spiritual references concluded that the soul of the young martyr continued to live on and encouraged Cubans to see his death as a light that would brighten the way for future revolutionaries.³⁶ By labeling Benítez as a martyr and discussing his legacy using religious metaphors, Cuban leaders substituted traditional Catholic icons with revolutionary ones. A line from the chorus of the Conrado Benítez brigade song, “Estudio, trabajo, fusil” (“Study, work, gun”), illustrated this point.³⁷ In 1961, Raúl Castro proclaimed the phrase the “new trinity” to replace

the Catholic version of the “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”³⁸ The narrative of Benítez’s life, as popularized by revolutionary leaders, celebrated each of these elements along with sacrifice to the government as the new national ideology.³⁹

Cuban revolutionaries iconized another black figure, Patrice Lumumba, less than one month after the public martyring of Conrado Benítez. When antigovernment forces captured and murdered thirty-five-year-old Lumumba, the nationalist leader of the newly independent Congo, Cubans returned to the streets to express solidarity with the man known as the “African Fidel.”⁴⁰ Cuban leaders applied the same tropes used in creating the narrative of Benítez’s death to memorialize Lumumba. The Congolese revolutionary was depicted with a clean-shaven face and wearing respectable clothing like the popularized images of the young teacher⁴¹ (figure 5.2). The wire-rimmed eyeglasses worn by Lumumba signaled his intelligence and offered a model of blackness based on propriety and a commitment to revolutionary values of hard work and education. Revolutionary leaders also used religious metaphors to honor Lumumba. Echoing the Christian references used to comment on Benítez’s murder, Nicolás Guillén said that Lumumba had been “crucified” by the Yankees.⁴² *Noticias de Hoy* suggested that the soul of the Congolese nationalist would endure by calling him an “immortal symbol of African rebellion.”⁴³ And a poet writing in *Bobemia* claimed that in death Lumumba would be “more grand and victorious” than in life.⁴⁴ Repeated allusions to the spiritual longevity of black martyrs solidified their position in Cuban memories as symbols of revolutionary blackness.

Celebrating Lumumba, a global figure, linked Cuba to its African ancestors and legitimized the revolution’s future participation in global social struggles. An editorial titled “Two Martyrs, the Same Idea” epitomized this connection by applying the language used to explain Benítez’s death to discuss Lumumba’s murder in the Congo. “Why did they kill Patrice Lumumba? Because he was a leader, a teacher of his people, and a black. . . . Conrado Benítez and Patrice Lumumba are not two martyrs of distant lands . . . they are two brothers in the same fight, two martyrs fallen for the same cause, two teachers.”⁴⁵ In this piece, the editorialist related the common phrase “poor, black, and a teacher” to Lumumba by claiming that he was targeted by Congolese counterrevolutionaries for being a “teacher of people” and a black man. Doing so both offered an explanation for the leader’s assassination and connected Cubans to their “brothers” in Africa. Similarly, *Noticias de Hoy* claimed that messages of



Figure 5.2 Popularized photograph of Patrice Lumumba printed in *Hoy Domingo* (19 February 1961).

support sent to the Congo after Lumumba's death "are not routine pieces of diplomacy." "Cuba is interested in strengthening relationships with all the young states from which many of our grandfathers came . . . whose sons were the Maceos, the Moncadas, the Quintíns and whose grandsons were named Jesús Menéndez, [Juan] Almeida, and Conrado Benítez."⁴⁶ This statement reminded readers of the ancestral connection between Cuba and black Africa by identifying people of color as the grandfathers of the nation. It also linked popular black revolutionary figures like Lumumba, Menéndez, Almeida, and Benítez to Afro-Cuban independence heroes, thus legitimizing their roles as contemporary icons.

Ultimately, adding an international figure to the pantheon of revolutionary black icons continued the linking of the Cuban Revolution to global racial struggles. Like the measures taken by the government to reach out to African Americans in 1960, these gestures made sense to Cubans because they fit with ongoing narratives about the revolution's conflict with U.S. imperialism, often depicted as white and racist. Moreover,

most Cubans found meaning in the celebrated story of Lumumba's assassination because it paralleled the familiar narrative of Benítez's death. The revolutionary rhetoric surrounding the lives and deaths of these martyrs reiterated the most common components of post-1959 revolutionary discourses, especially efforts to undermine counterrevolutionary movements and combat claims that the revolution was communist.

In a speech before the Communist Party (Partido Socialista Popular, PSP) committee, *mulato* Blas Roca discussed how counterrevolutionaries claimed they killed Benítez because he was a communist. Roca disagreed: "The young teacher was no communist." He continued, "With anticommunism they want to preserve the imperialist regime, colonial oppression, inhumane exploitation, racial discrimination, and unemployment."⁴⁷ *Noticias de Hoy* concurred, saying that the "*gusanos* (worms) assassinated him for being a worker, for being black, and for being poor," not because he was a spy.⁴⁸ Castro, meanwhile, called the murder of Lumumba a few months later a mixture of "imperialism, colonialism, and savagery."⁴⁹ Articulations such as these demonized counterrevolutionary groups as savage racists and created a paradigm whereby anyone who disagreed with the revolution was as well. The case of the principal of the private school La Luz illustrated this point. Eight students from the school wrote letters to *Noticias de Hoy* saying that they had been expelled for holding a rally protesting the murder of Lumumba. In the letter, they characterized the principal as a counterrevolutionary whose entire family lived in exile and called for his termination because he did not support their demonstration against imperialism.⁵⁰ Revolutionary journalists also condemned other private schools for failing to participate in activities objecting to the assassination of Benítez. One editorialist claimed that members of the privileged classes remained silent unless threatened with losing their "precious private" institutions.⁵¹ By linking counterrevolutionaries to the killings of Benítez and Lumumba, these Cubans further vilified opposition to the state. This move allowed the new government to identify other whites as racists without having to respond to questions about their personal preferences. Moreover, these conversations continued to divide the island into two groups: those who supported the revolution and therefore publicly embraced black martyrs; and those who did not, namely counterrevolutionaries. By spring 1961, these camps had already been forged, but inserting the death of the young teacher and the Congolese leader into national debates served to reiterate previous ideas.

Discussions such as these contrasted the disdain counterrevolutionaries held for people of color with the new government's claims to have eliminated racial discrimination. Castro summarized these comments in a speech where he argued that counterrevolutionary forces would use anticommunism as a justification to assassinate every "worker, *humilde*, and black."⁵² Others argued that the UN forces, led by the United States, must only protect whites, since they allowed Lumumba to be assassinated while occupying the Congo.⁵³ *La Calle* meanwhile concluded that Uncle Sam only approved of people of color when they conceded the sidewalk to white women or played the guitar in tourist venues in Havana. According to this piece, "imperialists" sought to eliminate blacks and latinos when they tried to learn, teach, or rebel against the status quo.⁵⁴ By popularizing the idea that the opposition movement would murder innocent people of color because they feared change, revolutionary leaders worked to solidify Afro-Cuban loyalty to the new government. Yet, implicit in these conversations was the view that prejudicial attitudes belonged to the "other side," not to Cuban revolutionaries who had waged successfully the war against racial discrimination.

The iconization of Conrado Benítez and other black martyrs that occurred in 1961 served as a public celebration of the end of the campaign to end racial discrimination and the rhetorical move to transform Afro-Cubans into citizens. By the start of the Literacy Campaign, national discourses about racism claimed that the problem had been solved. The growing threat of U.S. intervention and counterrevolutionary opposition pushed Cubans toward national unity. However, publicly announcing the completion of national projects was a familiar aspect of revolutionary moves to consolidate state control. In December 1961, in front of crowds holding flags decorated with Benítez's name, Castro declared "Cuba a territory free of illiteracy."⁵⁵ For the youthful, mixed-race audience, the moment came to be remembered as a turning point in Cuban race relations. And while racial prejudices continued to exist privately, revolutionary leaders used the figures of black martyrs and the integrated work of the Literacy Campaign to conclude the debate over racial equality opened in 1959.

Literacy Campaign teaching manuals created by the Ministry of Education were effective tools in this form of "political education" and spread new claims about achieving racial equality in 1961. *Trabajo*, the official organ of the Ministry of Labor, published an article describing why the government printed the new manuals: "To teach literacy they had to begin

by making the workbooks and manuals, because it wouldn't have been worth it to teach half the country to read, if they were going to continue to learn the lies that the *Histories of Cuba* told us, like for example, one said, 'the Americans helped us in our independence' or 'North America is a bulwark of democracy.' They had to build consciousness. They had to awaken the sleeping man inside each Cuban who could not read. They had to give something more than eyes to the blind man in our civilization. They had to give him the weapon of knowledge, but also show him the path."⁵⁶

Consequently, Conrado Benítez *brigadistas* used lessons from *Alfabeticemos*, the official manual for literacy instruction, to reeducate their students about different topics in Cuban history, including the Agrarian Reform, U.S. imperialism, and the role the new National Institute of Tourism (Instituto Nacional de Industria Turística) played in opening private beaches to the public. A photograph accompanied each of the twenty-four themes. Trainers instructed volunteer teachers to begin conversations with learners by asking them to discuss the photograph as a means of gauging prior knowledge about a given topic. Theme Ten was about "Racial Discrimination" and included a full-page photograph of four children of different skin colors sitting on a park bench. And while we cannot know what types of conversations emerged between *brigadistas* and new readers about the manual's integrated scene (showing a white boy, a black boy, an Asian boy, and a little *mestiza* girl), the explanation for Theme Ten promoted a raceless national identity and blamed racism on "exploitative countries." The first line of the theme, "Racial discrimination always has economic origins," framed discrimination as a social problem and linked it to colonialism and slavery. The last line told Cubans never to forget "the joint struggles of Martí and Maceo, Guillermo Moncada and Calixto García, Fidel Castro and Juan Almeida, and as Martí has said, 'There is no racial hatred because there are no races.'"⁵⁷ The Ministry of Education published *Alfabeticemos* before the announcement about the socialist nature of the revolution in April 1961. Therefore, the book's analysis of racism was more a result of Cuba's racial past (and the ways revolutionary leaders invoked it, namely by blaming continued discrimination on the 1898 U.S. intervention while applauding the joint work of black and white nineteenth-century patriots) than the coming turn to socialism.

It was not a coincidence that racial discrimination was a prominent theme in Literacy Campaign teaching manuals. As we have seen, Benítez's

death and the narrative constructed by revolutionary leaders about the role race played in counterrevolutionary hostility toward the young teacher (and other blacks) guaranteed a collaboration between the campaigns to eliminate racial discrimination and illiteracy. Literacy teaching materials fit with previous state rhetoric about race in Cuba and used the national mobilization to spread those ideas across the island. These lessons taught both *brigadistas* and their students that Afro-Cubans were a key component of the country, especially when they served as soldiers in national battles. Both the *Alfabeticemos* manual and *Producir, Aborrar, Organizar*, the textbook for arithmetic, explicitly contrasted the racial violence and continued discrimination facing African Americans in the United States with the lack of racial prejudice in Cuba. For example, the math textbook included the following word problem: “There have been 3,000 lynchings in the United States in the last 20 years. What has been the average number of lynchings per year in that country?”⁵⁸ In the index for *Alfabeticemos*, Cubans learned that the “KKK, Ku Klux Klan” was a “Racist North American organization that persecuted black citizens.” Literacy Campaign resources fully proclaimed that Cuba had accomplished the goal set in 1959 of ridding the island of racial discrimination and employed references to Cuba’s past and the United States’ present in doing so. A poem by Afro-Cuban author Nicolás Guillén, printed on the last page of *Venceremos* (*We Will Overcome*, another literacy campaign workbook), sat alongside a photograph of José Martí and reinforced this idea: “Fidel came and achieved that which Martí had promised.”⁵⁹ In the end, the Literacy Campaign and the paraphernalia that accompanied it acted as commemoration of the government’s declared victory against racism and positioned Cuba for its newest battle against counterrevolution and the increasingly hostile United States.

National dailies echoed these sentiments by publishing pieces that marked the end of racial discrimination and expressed gratitude for the work of Cuban leaders. One article described how “thanks to the Revolution” Cubans have this “marvelous example of human solidarity,” and included images of a small black child visiting a predominantly white school to show the progress of racial integration. Throughout the article, the author attributed the prevalence of racially integrated classrooms and groups to the successes of the revolutionary government.⁶⁰ In doing so, he portrayed white leaders and the white Cubans who had fulfilled their demands as the heroes of racial equality. An article by Afro-Cuban journalist Reynaldo Peñalver in *Combate 13 de Marzo* shows the ways some

blacks and *mulatos* agreed with these new claims. Peñalver applauded revolutionary efforts to eliminate racial discrimination and argued that the martyred Benítez believed that the new government had accomplished this feat as well. Benítez, the journalist wrote, “looked to the future with faith, having the security that the new country was free of racial prejudices and constructed for everyone.”⁶¹ By invoking the popular black martyr to thank the new government for creating a more positive future for Afro-Cubans, this author linked the voice of Benítez to the successful elimination of racial discrimination.

Images further emphasized the success achieved by the campaign to eliminate racial divisions in favor of Cuban unity. The billboard for the 1961 Congress on Literacy recycled imagery from 1940s PSP advertisements and the recent 1959 May Day parade publicity by illustrating black and white hands coming together⁶² (figure 5.3). The text of the poster, “For every illiterate, a literary teacher and for every literary teacher, an illiterate: We will overcome!” highlights the potential for interracial organizing. A drawing that appeared regularly in *Noticias de Hoy* shows four Cubans (two white men, a dark-skinned black man, and a white woman) walking together with linked arms and dressed in army fatigues, the implication being that the Cuban army is inclusive of all citizens.⁶³ Such visuals differed from images produced at the start of 1959, because rather than encouraging Cubans to begin a conversation about racial equality, 1961 representations celebrated its achievement. The act of glorifying a black martyr as a symbol of the nation fit into this trend.

Memories of the Literacy Campaign confirm that young Cubans took life lessons from their experiences as volunteer teachers in Conrado Benítez brigades. For many black *brigadistas*, the national education movement allowed them to invoke revolutionary antidiscrimination rhetoric to gain entrance into rural homes where white farmers were initially uncomfortable with racial integration. In Holguín, a city on the eastern corner of the island, a young *guajiro* (farmer) described how his grandfather was hesitant to offer a black *brigadista* quarters in their home during the campaign. Noting that the electric lanterns the literacy teachers carried were appealing, the young man said that his grandfather finally allowed the “sweet black girl” to sleep in their house simply so the family could use her lamp.⁶⁴ Another volunteer teacher told a similar story about the debate over lodging that occurred when his group arrived in Guantánamo: “We met to divide up the available rooms. Some men did not want boys sleeping in the house with their women. Some women

CONGRESO NACIONAL DE ALFABETIZACION

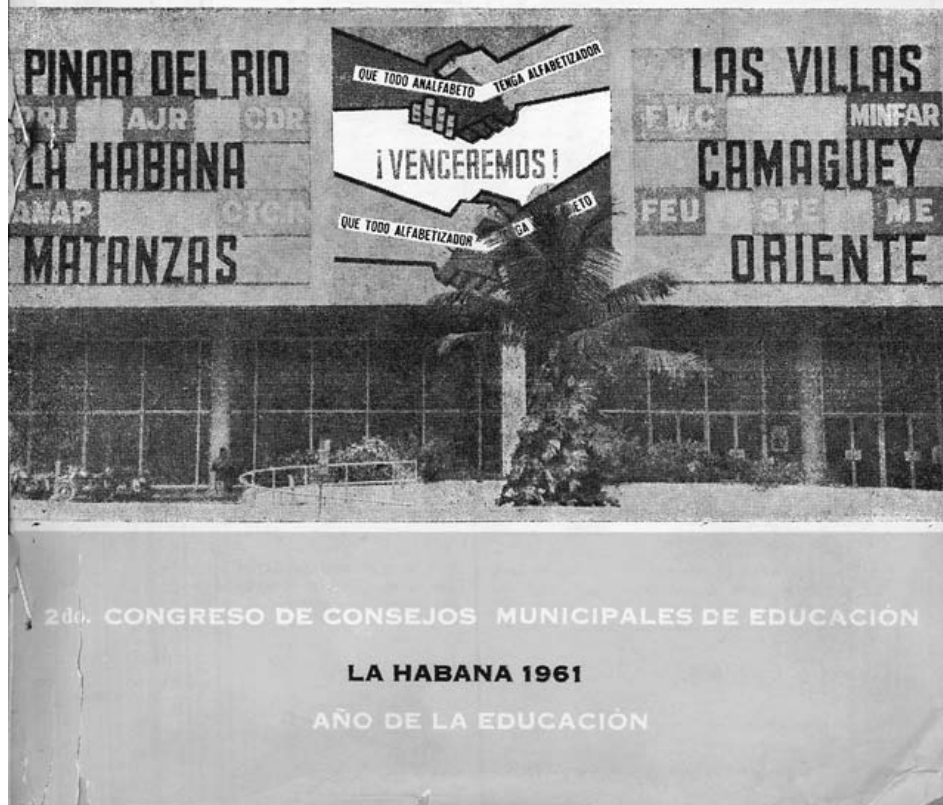


Figure 5.3 “For every illiterate, a literacy teacher and for every literacy teacher, an illiterate: We will overcome!” From the cover of the Second National Literacy Congress pamphlet.

refused to provide lodging for pretty girls from Havana, who they feared would seduce their husbands. And another group would not agree to accept the three or four blacks, who were as dark as the night. I resolved the situation by reminding the group of the words of the Commander in Chief [Castro], where he highlighted the role the popular masses had to play in defending and spreading the Revolution. In this work especially, age, sex, nor race were as important as overall unity.”⁶⁵ These situations reveal the continued anxieties toward racial integration existing in Cuba in 1961, especially in private spaces such as the home. In each case, certain aspects of revolutionary antidiscrimination rhetoric worked to settle the issue and create positive memories of *brigadistas* overcoming adversity. In the first, the girl was allowed entrance into the house because she was an acceptable type of Afro-Cuban; she was “sweet” and came bearing an electric lantern, technology that the rural family did not possess. The literacy teacher in Guantánamo invoked the very language used by M 26-7 and national calls for unity to encourage reluctant elements to admit Afro-Cubans, but not without pointing out that the four literacy teachers in question were “black as the night” and belonged to the “popular masses.” Another young *brigadista* remembered the shock rural farmers expressed when she said she was going to interview a black family to see if any illiterates lived in their house:

Brigadista: Who lives in that little house?

Farmer: Oh just some blacks.

Brigadista: Can they read and write?

Farmer: I don’t know, they are blacks.

Brigadista: Well, I’ll just drop in and see if they have illiterates in the house.

Farmer: No, no, you can’t go there! I tell you, they’re blacks.

Brigadista: All right, I heard you, but I’m going.

They tried to stop me, but seeing my mind was made up, the old man said, ‘Elias will take you on horseback and wait for you outside.’ It was then I realized the country people were a lot more prejudiced than city people. They discriminated brutally against blacks. They never visited them and feared for my safety. They hinted that the black boys might molest me and also said they practiced bestiality. Later I learned that this was true. After a time, I realized everybody here practiced it. Frankly I was scared, but I said to myself, ‘Buck up

kid, be brave,' and I went to visit them. I found that nearly every one of the blacks was illiterate, so I decided to give two classes a day, and, wanting to make people go to the blacks' house, I chose that one for afternoon classes. My hosts of course were shocked.⁶⁶

Like other volunteer teachers, this young girl describes having to overcome her own fears and prejudices about blacks and rural Cubans to accomplish the goals of the Literacy Campaign. The young woman's story gives insight into how anxieties about black male sexuality took both similar and different forms in the countryside. Rather than being concerned about whites and blacks dancing together in social clubs, some rural Cubans assumed that black boys were sexually deviant and feared that they abused animals and young women. But, in telling herself to "buck up" and in refusing to accept the antiblack advice of the older farmer, the young *brigadista* illustrates how the collective efforts of the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination, the literacy movement, and the national celebration of Benítez taught a new generation of Cubans revolutionary values and pushed them to try to construct a more inclusive society.

Ironically, however, revolutionary rhetoric about race could also be used to hinder integration. A dark-skinned woman named María remembered how she encountered resistance when she sought lodging from a white rural family as a *brigadista* in 1961: "I was going to stay with one family, a white one, but they decided that it would be best for me to stay in a black house, so that the counterrevolutionaries would not notice my arrival to the region."⁶⁷ By referencing the threat counterrevolutionary militants presented to María, this household was able to deny lodging to the black youth without facing the stigma of being labeled racist. In fact, the family invoked the very paranoia revolutionary leaders had publicized when claiming that the counterrevolutionaries wanted to kill black teachers to steer the Afro-Cuban girl to another residence. In both of these stories, *brigadistas* worked to make sense of their prior prejudices, lived experiences, and state rhetoric. The young woman who was afraid of teaching in the countryside made herself approach the black family's house because the revolution told her to do so, but in the end she reaffirmed her previous beliefs about the lack of civilization in rural Cuba by saying that everyone practiced bestiality. Similarly, María discursively bridged her uncomfortable experiences of prejudice with her hope that the revolution had eliminated racist thinking by framing her story in a way that excused the white family for their failure to open their home to

a black woman out of a supposed fear for her safety. The contradictory messages in revolutionary racial rhetoric and the challenges of creating a new Cuba from the island's colonial, slave past required such discursive gymnastics.

Despite, or maybe because of overcoming, these challenges, Cuban literacy teachers interviewed nearly fifty years after the end of campaign had strong memories about the Year of Education. Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera told me in 2007 that “those were years of so much movement. . . . We broke all the norms. The world turned upside down. But everyone won something. Because the young people who went to teach learned about the difficulties people faced in the countryside. These were productive years for everyone.”⁶⁸ One of the norms broken by the literacy movement was the decision to send young Cubans, some of whom had not reached their teenage years, into the countryside to teach. Afro-Cuban Graciela Chailoux, who is now a professor at the University of Havana, recalled that she was eleven when she joined the Literacy Campaign and spent eight months away from home. On 22 December 1961, when Castro declared, “Cuba was an illiteracy free territory,” Chailoux participated in the mass mobilization of volunteer teachers marching in Revolution Plaza. In an emotional interview about her involvement, she described the campaign as one of the revolution's greatest achievements. Chailoux, with tears in her eyes, explained, “Yes, I think so, I think so, [this was Cuba's finest moment] because Fidel said that everybody had to study. . . . It was a special moment and everyone's strength was put into it.”⁶⁹ Norma Guillard, another black Cuban, concurred in the 2013 documentary *Maestra*, saying, “I have many years left, but until today, in my fifty-eight years I don't have another experience as enormously powerful as this one [the Literacy Campaign]. It evokes this feeling . . . it is the most important thing that I have done.” Guillard was a fifteen-year-old girl from Santiago when she decided to join the literacy movement. Like Chailoux, today she is a university professor, specializing in social psychology.⁷⁰ For each of these women, participating in the Literacy Campaign had profound effects on their childhood memories, investment in the revolution, and future careers as intellectuals and teachers.

Volunteer teachers also conveyed their gratitude to the revolution for exposing them to the inequalities that existed on the island and offering them the chance to make a difference in other Cubans' lives. In many ways, participating in the Literacy Campaign allowed young Cubans to join the revolution and show their fidelity to the leaders who had fought

against Batista.⁷¹ One Conrado Benítez *brigadista* wrote a letter to Fidel Castro thanking him for the opportunity to serve the nation. “I feel very grateful and proud as one of the *compañeras* that taught. Do you want me to tell you why? Because now I feel more human, more revolutionary, more Cuban for having helped my *semejantes* [equals or people like me] and also because I have learned that people don’t only exist in the city, they exist in the rural areas too.”⁷² A young Afro-Cuban girl from the Las Yaguas community in Havana shared the same sentiments and told a journalist from *Verde Olivo* that she has always wanted to teach, but had never had the opportunity until after the revolution. According to this young woman, brigade members learned “the pain of the rest” and “gave back” to their nation by teaching in the countryside.⁷³

One Campaign Replaces Another: Contradictions and Silences about Blackness

Cubans remember 1961, the Year of Education, as one of the most important moments in their lives because as a whole the year highlighted the potential of revolutionary Cuba. But sitting alongside the many possibilities of racially integrated teaching brigades, celebrations honoring black martyrs, and Cuba’s defeat of U.S.-backed exile forces in the April Bay of Pigs invasion lay remnants of an old, republican Cuba that had yet to embrace blackness on equal footing. Literacy Campaign publicity and commemorations about black martyrs replaced direct debates about antidiscrimination in 1961. Moreover, rather than make efforts to answer the demands of black consciousness thinkers and insert black history into the national culture, revolutionary leaders silenced future debates about racism. In fact, as we have seen, state leaders declared that the revolution had resolved the problem of racism and used the iconization of black heroes to do so. But even as depictions of the three men taught Cubans lessons about humility, sacrifice, and revolutionary loyalty, it is telling that revolutionary leaders constructed these ideas using the stories of the dead Afro-Cubans. Unlike in the 1880s, when Cuban intellectuals worked with black and *mulato* Cubans to carve a space for living war veterans, in 1961 state leaders held up these martyrs as the ideal black insurgent.

Popular representations asserted a particular type of patriotic blackness that used martyrs, not living Afro-Cubans, as soldiers for the nation while appealing to standing perceptions about the inherent physical strength of black men. As one historian has noted, Conrado Benítez’s blackness

“carried specific messages that promoted black militancy as an exclusive arm of the state.”⁷⁴ A poster advertising the “Week of Cuban Youth” illustrated the role revolutionary figures allocated to Benítez and other black martyrs as soldiers in national battles.⁷⁵ Unlike most images of the teacher, this poster, created by the Association of Cuban Youth, depicted Benítez without his customary suit. Rather he is a warrior for the nation, wielding a large pencil as a weapon to stab, and thus defeat, Cuban illiteracy. This image redirected stereotypes about black masculinity away from threatening the state—as in the threat of the Independent Party of Color (Partido Independiente de Color, PIC)—and toward the revolution’s current enemy, illiteracy and the counterrevolutionaries who attacked the education campaign. Cubans had used the bodies of black men to fight national battles previously during the wars of independence, where national journalists often referred to Maceo as the strength behind Martí’s leadership. In 1961, revolutionary discourses invoked a similar trope of strong, black masculinity through the image of Benítez to undermine counterrevolutionary movements. However, both Maceo and Benítez had died before revolutionary leaders applied their muscle to Cuban battles. The attention given to black martyrs as loyal revolutionaries in this period suggests an underlying belief among some Cuban leaders that blacks and *mulatos* were safest when they could be controlled and their stories manipulated.

A central component of the Literacy Campaign and the values it promoted among literacy teachers was the idea that it was noble to fight and die for the fatherland. Audiences across the island repeatedly encountered articles and editorials explaining how the counterrevolutionaries had offered to free Benítez and allow him to live if he would only join their forces. “Conrado said no! ‘I am a revolutionary and will not betray my people. Do to me what you will!’”⁷⁶ Publicity about the young teacher repeated this narrative and encouraged Literacy Campaign volunteers to remain faithful to the revolution, regardless of the sacrifices requested of them. In the same way, the code for the Conrado Benítez brigades pledged, “We will not abandon our task no matter how great the deprivations, difficulties, or sacrifices. A Conrado Benítez *brigadista* never will be a deserter.”⁷⁷ This code and a photograph of the slain teacher appeared on the back of every identification card carried by members of the Benítez brigades to remind young Cubans of their obligations to the revolution. National publicity for the Literacy Campaign coded these responsibilities as universal characteristics found in “true revolutionaries” of all colors;

however, because revolutionary leaders taught these values through the story of a black martyr, promises to never desert reaffirmed expectations of loyalty for Afro-Cubans (namely staying on the island) as well.

Cuban newspapers also highlighted Benítez's modest origins to promote the new government as a revolution of *los humildes*. Revolutionary leaders repeatedly identified themselves and M 26-7 "as a rebellion of *humildes* and for *humildes*" as a means of redefining what it meant to be Cuban after 1959. For Cubans, *los humildes* signified that someone was working-class, humble, and possibly uneducated, but also determined and honest. This was the formula for the new man and representations of black martyrs glorified the concept.⁷⁸ Cuban leaders specifically named Benítez a "*humilde* teacher" and used examples from his background and work ethic to outline this new type of citizen.⁷⁹ Castro told crowds of graduating teachers that the slain youth was just like them and others said he was a "man of the people," to link the dead teacher to the popular masses.⁸⁰ Editors for *La Calle* recounted Benítez's life history and celebrated his willingness to sacrifice to get an education. He was from a black working-class family in Matanzas, where his father was an agricultural worker and his mother a domestic servant. Distinguishing the young teacher as "a shoeshine boy, a bread maker, and a student who went to night school because he worked during the day," the same article noted that Benítez had not been to Miami, did not drive a Cadillac, and was not the son of a businessman. Literacy Campaign materials like this one contrasted Benítez's modest life to the supposed extravagant existence of counter-revolutionaries and exiles.⁸¹

While such editorials and photographs might have elevated a new idea of national character dependent on humility, continual references to the meager class background of the black martyr depicted Afro-Cubans as indigents in need of government aid. Photographs of Benítez's parents crying in a crumbling apartment depicted a black family that was helpless due to its limited economic power and inherently grateful to Cuban leaders for the opportunities they provided. These associations routinely depicted people of color in safe and harmless ways that emphasized their poverty and allegiance to the new government. By celebrating the stories of working-class Afro-Cubans who had dedicated themselves to the revolution, M 26-7 prescribed the ideal type of black citizen, namely someone who had come from nothing, was indebted for the opportunities provided after 1959, and faithful to the new government as a result. Notably, this conceptualization left little space for black intellectuals,

especially those proposing a black consciousness approach, to be ideal revolutionary citizens. Cuban leaders demanded loyalty from all citizens during this period; therefore this practice was not uncommon and was applied frequently to white working-class Cubans as well. However, publicity celebrating two black centenarians who learned to read during the Literacy Campaign illustrates how revolutionary leaders used stories about loyal Afro-Cubans in particular to stand in for direct conversations about racism and position the new government as the solution to previous inequalities.

Verde Olivo published front-page feature articles about Isidra Pupy y Ponce de Leon and María Sentmanat in July 1961 that used the lives of Afro-Cuban women to connect the Literacy Campaign to revolutionary achievements. In “Why Isidra Wanted to Go to Playa Girón,” a 102-year-old dark-skinned woman laments how she had fought in the Ten Years’ War, but that after the War of 1895 her life changed little, saying, “I had to fight hard against the Spanish and afterward, you know, nothing.” The journalist for *Verde Olivo* expanded on her comment in a way that positioned racism as a problem of the past: “Nothing. The people got almost nothing [out of the wars for independence]. New foreign masters—more voracious than the old ones—they appropriated all the riches of Cuba. The poor continued to be poor. The black continued to be discriminated against. . . . Isidra is now in a new position to fight because the people have come into real power, because now the Revolution has brought real justice for all.” *Verde Olivo* represented Isidra’s life story within prevalent revolutionary narratives about race. Racism was a legacy of the colonial past aggravated by U.S. intervention and eliminated by the revolution, in this case through the work of the Literacy Campaign. In the concluding lines of the article, the author tied Isidra’s gratitude to the revolution to her willingness to sacrifice her life fighting against the Bay of Pigs invasion. “In a hundred years of existence no one has tried to take away her ignorance. Today the Revolution brought her a way to illuminate her hard life. It’s for this reason that she wanted to fight.”⁸² The story told by *Verde Olivo* about the older woman’s past directly positioned revolutionary leaders as the heirs and saviors of Cuba’s nineteenth-century past because her life spanned the century.

Like the 1966 book *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, where Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet interviewed another centenarian, Esteban Montejo, stories produced after 1959 about Afro-Cubans who had survived slavery centered on comparing horrors of racial discrimination in the late

nineteenth century to opportunities provided by the revolution.⁸³ But even as the articles about the two Afro-Cuban women invoked previous racial inequalities, they also intentionally silenced parts of black Cuban history like the government massacre of the PIC in 1912 or any reference to persistent racism in the present.⁸⁴ The journalist's comments also epitomized the complex package that was revolutionary discourse on race because at the same time that the article celebrated Isidra as a revolutionary citizen, it also called attention to her "ignorance" in a way that did not fit with the wealth of knowledge she had surely acquired from over a century of living.

Verde Olivo iconized a second black woman, this time a 106-year-old, after Castro spoke with María Sentmanat during a public rally in July 1961. Castro invited Sentmanat to the podium and they discussed her experiences learning to read. Fitting with the gratitude portrayed in the lives of black martyrs, Sentmanat thanked the young Cuban leader for the Literacy Campaign and invoked religious imagery to do so. She called Castro an "apostle," and he said, "No, Martí was the apostle, I am only the disciple." To which she responded, "No, you are Jesus Christ."⁸⁵ Sentmanat, however, was more than simply appreciative of the revolution for her reading lessons because she viewed education as a right, not a gift to be bestowed. She made Castro repeat her name out loud to the crowd and said that she was only willing to act as a "mascot" for the campaign if revolutionary leaders told her story and sent someone to her house to transcribe her life.⁸⁶ It is unknown whether the stenographer Sentmanat requested ever visited her home in Havana, but *Verde Olivo* sent a journalist to interview her a few days after the magazine printed its feature on Isidra.

In the resulting article, "Maria Sentmanat, You Are Free," editors for *Verde Olivo* presented the Afro-Cuban woman as an ideal black revolutionary. Rather than highlight her agency in learning to read or her terms for being the revolution's mascot, however, the journalist framed Sentmanat's story as a linear progression from slavery to freedom as a revolutionary citizen. Saying that "at last Maria de la Cruz can learn to read and write! Now, there aren't masters who impede, nor slaves chained to exploitation and ignorance. Our patria is free! Now, you are free Maria de la Cruz!" this piece attributed Sentmanat's "freedom" to the revolution and again juxtaposed nineteenth-century oppression to 1960s opportunities. The article also referenced racism in the United States, following trends linking the Literacy Campaign to battles against imperialism:

Journalist: What do you think about the persecution of blacks in the United States?

Sentmanat: Look, there, they have a regime that isn't interested in anything but gold; there is not democracy, there is not liberty, and as long as there is exploitation, slavery, and this thing called discrimination there can be no liberty. They—*referring to the Yankee imperialists* [editors' note]—said to us that the Russians continue to have slavery, that the Russians are communists, and that the communists are bad. . . . Lies! . . . lies, all this is lies. The bad ones are them. The Russians help us, if the Russians are communists, well then the communists are good.⁸⁷

Here, Literacy Campaign publicity, revolutionary narratives about U.S. racism, and the lives of Afro-Cubans collided to legitimize the new government's alliance with the Soviet Union and shift to socialism. The attention given to the stories of elderly Afro-Cuban women mirrored the emphasis revolutionary leaders placed on the sacrifice, gratitude, and loyalty of black martyrs because like dead Afro-Cuban heroes, female centenarians appeared safe and nonthreatening to the revolution. This is not to say that these women were duped or that they did not appreciate their interactions with Literacy Campaign volunteers. The images, letters, and stories memorialized in documentaries and films about the movement, some housed in the Literacy Campaign museum that sits outside of Havana and hosts school children, tour groups, and others interested in learning more about one of Cuba's most ambitious and impressive achievements, say otherwise. Nevertheless, the ways that photographs of Benítez and framed articles about these two Afro-Cuban women disproportionately decorate the walls of the museum (and decorated the Cuban press in 1961) illustrate how narratives about blacks as beneficiaries of the Literacy Campaign replaced direct debates about continued racism and conversations revaluing blackness in 1961. And while closing one door might have opened another, the rhetoric of black gratefulness and loyalty left little space for Afro-Cuban intellectuals, workers, or exiles to participate in the revolution on equal footing.

Conclusions: Incomplete Racial Revolutions

Cubans I interviewed in 2007 claimed that there was a black man among those that invaded and were captured on the island at Playa Girón (Bay of

Pigs) on 17 April 1961, just four months after Benítez's death. According to the informal account told by these now elderly Cubans, when Fidel Castro caught a glimpse of the dark-skinned prisoner during a public interview, the young leader became enraged. Castro called the black prisoner over, and asked, "What are you doing here? With everything that I have given you blacks, why are you fighting against the revolution?" In response, the black man stepped forward and answered, "No sir, I didn't board the boat to fight, I'm just the cook!"⁸⁸ Older Cubans recounting this humorous narrative follow the punch line with laughter, saying, "You get it? He was the cook; he was not helping the invaders."

An estimated fifty Afro-Cubans participated in the exile expeditionary force Brigade 2506. Official transcripts of the interrogations tell a story of a puzzled and angry Castro demanding to know why an Afro-Cuban would attempt to reinstall a government that had supported racial discrimination, but they do not show anyone trying to avoid being punished by claiming to be a domestic laborer:

Castro: You have the audacity to . . . land here on the beaches of Playa Girón to fight the Revolution, but you were not allowed on the beaches for recreation. Nevertheless, you came together with that gentleman who never cared whether or not you were let into the club to bathe, as if the seawater could be stained by your skin color!

Black prisoner: The fact is that I did not come to Cuba out of considerations of whether or not I could be allowed on the beach . . .

Castro: Very well, that is not the point.⁸⁹

National discourses highlighted that white leaders expected black clients to be appreciative of revolutionary integrationist policies while not understanding that Cubans of color might have their own independent political ideas. The contemporary, altered version of this story—the joke I described above—demonstrates the ways revolutionary leaders shaped conversations about race in Cuba and how those narratives shifted, grew, and became legend as they fit with existing preconceived notions about blackness. In fact, Cubans I interviewed in 2007 told me this "humorous" anecdote whenever I asked about race during the first years of the revolution without any prompting on my part about Playa Girón or Conrado Benítez. Rather, this joke was the de facto or automatic means through which my interviewees remembered the changes that

occurred on the island in those years. Castro's questioning of the black combatant reveals the common belief that the revolutionary government "gave" Afro-Cubans unprecedented opportunities, including access to education, employment, and health care. Reminiscent of the way the white Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) official in the introduction to this book criticized his Afro-Cuban neighbors for having a party after the announcement of Castro's failing health in 2006 by saying that the "Revolution had made blacks into people," the Bay of Pigs joke reinforced Afro-Cuban loyalty and gratitude. The early 1960s joke and the 2006 statement both contend that blacks and *mulatos* owed something to the revolutionary government and that Afro-Cubans needed to pay that debt with unquestioning loyalty. And finally, the joke's punch line, which identifies the Afro-Cuban as a cook, positions him in the familiar role of a nonthreatening, domestic servant. The comedic story mocks the political naïveté of the black member of the invading brigade, and depicts him as someone incapable of forming his own critical opinions. The brigade member and the Afro-Cuban neighbors end up being helpless, if amusing figures, open for manipulation by *both* counterrevolutionaries and the Castro government.

This anecdote and its nuances resonated with Cubans because of the government's public campaign to tackle racial discrimination between 1959 and 1961. When M 26-7 entered Havana in 1959, they recognized the importance of solidifying their power by enlisting popular support. One way they accomplished this goal was by reaching out to Cubans of color and pledging to fulfill nineteenth-century promises of racial equality. This strategy opened a brief dialogue across the island about racism that coincided with the radicalization of the revolution. *Antiracism in Cuba* has looked closely at racialized revolutionary discourses to show how Cuban leaders constructed their new antidiscrimination campaign using old symbols, images, and ideas. This contradictory process allowed racism to coexist with antiracism from the very start of the revolution.

Revolutionary leaders repeatedly invoked history to justify the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination. The new government mobilized the legacies of José Martí and Antonio Maceo to press for integration and to demonstrate Afro-Cuban capabilities. This strategy reveals the continued salience of the two independence heroes as fathers of the nation in 1959, so much so that Castro and other revolutionaries sought to portray themselves as the heirs of these icons. Yet, maybe one of the most fascinating aspects of national discourses about race was how they employed

a “new” version of the Cuban past to blame the U.S. intervention in 1898 for the failure of racial democracy in the republic. Cuban leaders deemphasized how white privilege had contributed to continued inequality, thereby erasing the historical role white Cubans played in limiting black and *mulato* social mobility in the twentieth century.

Racial violence in the United States was also a central component of revolutionary discourses used to discredit enemies in the United States and internationalize racial struggles. Revolutionary leaders were able to discourage black emigration to the United States and show the progress of Cuban battles against racial discrimination by comparing the situation of African Americans to that of Afro-Cubans. Incorporating the plight of U.S. blacks into national conversations also allowed Cubans to portray North American hostility, and any opposition group linked to U.S. interests, as white and racist. Doing so gave revolutionary leaders a moral weapon to use in the battle against U.S. criticism, and a focal point for solidifying Afro-Cuban and popular support. In the 1970s, these early events provided the social context for Cuban contributions to African anticolonial movements and the island’s willingness to offer sanctuary to African American militants hiding from the U.S. government.

Revolutionary leaders celebrated the end of the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination with the iconization of black male martyrs. Afro-Cuban teacher Conrado Benítez emerged as an icon of both the Literacy Campaign and the defense of the revolution more broadly. The narrative of his murder enabled the new government to cast its opponents as racist, and racism as antirevolutionary. National conversations about the slain teacher continued to declare public racism as unacceptable in the same manner that conversations had previously identified countergovernment groups as antiblack. This tactic depicted revolutionary leaders as the defenders of Afro-Cubans without having to address lingering instances of racial discrimination directly. The story of Benítez’s life and death also appropriated black contributions to the nation. Similar to the ways that revolutionary leaders invoked the legacy of Maceo, Benítez represented a suitable black role model due to his loyalty to the nation and humble background.

Despite public celebrations about the elimination of discrimination, racism still existed in Cuba after 1961. However, the available space to address these concerns was continually diminished in favor of a more unifying national rhetoric. The continuing presence of racial discrimination despite government attempts to address the injustice occurred

for a number of reasons. Primarily, it was an ambitious and possibly unachievable goal to try to abolish attitudes and practices that had been a part of the Cuban daily existence for so long through such a brief conversation. Secondly, certain contradictions existed within revolutionary racialized discourses that undermined Cuban commitments to racial equality.

At the same time that revolutionary leaders highlighted the blackness of Afro-Cubans to construct a supportive constituency that could fight U.S.-funded countergovernment groups, they also worked toward a goal of a raceless Cuba. The frequent repetition of comments about transforming “blacks into citizens” or “*negritos* into Cuban children” reveals strategic intentions to open a discussion about racism, “achieve” the elimination of discrimination by reforming blacks and *mulatos*, and then close these national conversations by declaring that “we are all Cubans.” Yet, revolutionary leaders frequently imagined these same Afro-Cuban citizens as dependent clients of the state. National discourses portrayed people of color as indigents in order to promote popular acceptance of social programs among critical audiences and decrease fears about black uplift. And while light-hearted political cartoons might have sought to encourage Cubans to welcome blacks and *mulatos* into the national fold, they also undermined promises of racial equality by depicting Afro-Cubans as childlike and infantile. Portraying blacks and *mulatos* in this way helped form the opinion that people of African descent, both domestically and internationally, needed the revolutionary government to rescue them from their blackness before becoming acceptable citizens.

Another paradox within conversations about eliminating racial discrimination was the ways revolutionary leaders solicited Afro-Cuban support while simultaneously prescribing a type of acceptable black contribution to the nation. Blacks were encouraged to participate in the revolution as loyal and grateful citizens. Like the question Castro posed to the black counterrevolutionary at the Playa Girón interrogation, asking why he would undermine a government that had provided Afro-Cubans with so many opportunities, national discourses highlighted the appreciation white leaders expected from black clients. Such attitudes led to frustration among some Afro-Cubans and African Americans. Intellectuals like Juan René Betancourt, Carlos Moore, and Walterio Carbonell interpreted these interactions as evidence of underlying sentiments of black inferiority among white leaders. Ultimately, constructing the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination around the tropes of parent-child or

state-client relationships foreshadowed an early and unfinished end to the program once the new leadership proclaimed the project achieved.

As discussed, Cubans responded to and influenced how revolutionary leaders constructed national discourses on race. In particular, Afro-Cubans living in the Havana neighborhood of Las Yaguas were hesitant to accept the interference by a mostly white government in their daily lives. Black consciousness thinkers proposed alternative narratives for including African and black history and culture into revolutionary nationalism. We have also seen how Cubans living in exile engaged with these discussions by denying that racial inequality existed, claiming that revolutionary leaders created the problem, and pledging to tackle the issue themselves after the removal of communism from the island. The centrality of charges of racism to revolutionary critiques against countergovernment groups in the United States forced the exile community to address how to incorporate Afro-Cubans in the nation. Likewise, this book has examined how some Afro-Cubans mobilized revolutionary racialized discourses at different times to press for additional opportunities, such as entrance into recreational and tourist facilities. In each of these cases, the sources clearly show how rhetoric initiated by the state was open for manipulation by residents. Popular involvement reveals the impossibility of separating conversations about ending racial discrimination from understandings of what it meant to be a Cuban between 1959 and 1961. The considerable participation in these discussions by students, workers, intellectuals, and Cubans from different geographical, class, and racial backgrounds highlights the pervasiveness of race in revolutionary culture.

Moreover, the common narratives remembered by diverse Cubans fifty years later that identify the exile community as racist, Harlem residents as Fidelistas, and Benítez as a martyr assassinated for his race and class status demonstrate how particular representations about racial equality and its meaning to the revolution not only took hold between 1959 and 1961, but endured and became a central component of Cuban national memory. However, as seen in the anecdote about the black Playa Girón prisoner and the exaggerated solidarity attributed to African Americans, these popular recollections do not always correspond to historical events. If anything, such fascinating inconsistencies suggest that Cuban conversations about race worked more to support the state, unify the masses, and demonize the United States than to describe actual occurrences.

The end of the campaign to eliminate racial discrimination in 1961 told through the story of black martyrs created spaces for the coexistence of

racism and antiracism, especially in private attitudes seen in jokes and humor. In many ways, this story about race and revolution in Cuba has been a story about what was said and what was left unsaid. The impressive accomplishments that the revolution made and continues to make disguise the nearly 100-year-old subtext that frequently devalued blackness in the pursuit of a raceless nation. That many blacks and *mulatos* (in Cuba and globally) participated in and celebrated the revolution's unprecedented integration efforts in education and obtained new professional positions reveals how the dream, the reality, and all of the in-between of race in Cuba worked together to make the revolution in 1959. Yet, revealing the limits of the new government's actions to eliminate racism does not discount the overall project. If anything, the many opportunities pursued by Cubans of color, often in private, to continue conversations about the centrality of blackness and black experiences in Cuba show how M 26-7 leaders sometimes unknowingly facilitated a "revolution inside of the revolution."