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## **Sugar, Black Belonging and the Anglo-Caribbean Cuban Experience: A View From Backstage**

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The Sugar Curtain is a metaphor for much more than the economic, political, and ideological disconnect between Cuba and the United States that followed the 1959 Revolution. Sugar formed the bedrock of Cuba's 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial and post-colonial economy, aborting—making a mockery of, really—aspirations and declarations of freedom and sovereignty for more than a few. When you pulled back the Sugar Curtain, blood, broken backs and heartache poured from the stage in torrents filling the theatre like the Overlook Hotel hallway in *The Shining*, Stanley Kubric's classic 1980 horror film. When we take the long view, when we consider Michel Rolf Trouillot's silenced past and the hidden histories that are often not hidden from the sugar makers, the Sugar Curtain was there before the troubles that the Cuban Revolution caused by disrupting the naturalized order of things, before the seizure of businesses and severance of diplomatic ties. Evidence of the Sugar Curtain's magic is not that it purports to have cut off two historically, culturally and economically intertwined nations just ninety miles apart from one another but that the black bodies that fueled the industry after which this curtain is named are largely invisible in its evocation. From my vantage point, the Sugar Curtain does the work of separating simultaneous interdependent realities: owners from enslaved, Spanish soldiers from *mambises*, mistresses of the house from maids, U.S. military officers from the Guantánamo Naval Base's Cuban and West Indian workers, the embargo from *el bloqueo*, Castro from Fidel, and perhaps even my American researcher self from my black diasporic self.

That being said, going beyond the Sugar Curtain calls upon us to make visible not just that which the curtain obscures, but the illusions that it creates. One such illusion, related of course to disappearing the sugar makers, involves the erasure of hundreds of thousands of black English-speaking Caribbean laborers who migrated to and within various comparatively capital rich destinations in Latin America, forming what Lara Putnam called an "expanding migratory field" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (*The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica 1970-1960*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). While it was the railroad, canal and bananas that drew people to Panama and other Central American countries, the post-(Cuban) independence sugar renaissance fueled by U.S. capital was largely what put Cuba on the list of desirable destinations.

Similar to the other locations, the people who composed this mobile labor force, referred to as undesirable aliens due to the threat that their blackness posed to the Republic's preferred racial destiny, developed an institutional infrastructure: ethnic associations, mutual aid societies, religious institutions, fraternal lodges, English schools, and cricket teams. Indeed, at the height of the Garvey Movement, Cuba was second only to the United States in the number of UNIA (United Negro Improvement

Association) chapters, with English-speaking Caribbean immigrants constituting the majority of their membership. The British West Indian Welfare Centre, established in 1943 in Guantánamo, was one of the most prominent of the immigrant organizations as there was a significant internal migration of people from Camagüey and other parts of Oriente to Guantánamo in the late 1930s and 1940s due to the employment boom that accompanied the expansion of the U.S. Naval Base. Communities in close proximity to the Base developed to meet the needs of U.S. servicemen on furlough; indeed, one of the Jamaican Cubans I worked with while conducting ethnographic field research in Santiago recounted his role as a tour guide for “El Franco,” his knowledge of English allowing him to facilitate the purchase of anything from sexual services to alligator skin shoes. West Indians who lived in and around Guantánamo and commuted to their relatively well remunerated, stable and thus highly coveted Base jobs physically crossed the border each time they left, moving between the social, material, and political worlds of Cuba and the United States.

In the post-1959 period, Guantánamo became a contentious space upon which the escalating hostilities between the United States and Cuba played themselves out, impacting the lives of those in English-speaking Caribbean communities. The border between the naval base and Cuban soil became increasingly militarized as was evidenced by the construction of a wall and guard post on the Cuban side as well as incidents in which military personnel exchanged fire (see Jana Lipman’s *Guantánamo: A Working Class History Between Empire and Revolution*, University of California Press, 2009). Workers bore the brunt of this animosity on a daily basis, enduring strip searches on their way to and from work and, ultimately for many, being terminated from their employment. In addition, the revolutionary government identified those living within and around Guantánamo as a potential threat to national security. Their social and financial ties as well as geographic proximity to the U.S. Naval Base, which allowed for successful and thwarted attempts at exile on the part of those Cubans disenchanted with revolutionary society, made them suspect. Their presence was associated with U.S. imperialism—they had been drawn to Cuba by American companies in need of a cheap and vulnerable labor force to work the plantations, cook and serve their food, launder their clothes, take care of their children, tend to their grounds, build up their naval base. Links to family and institutions in the English-speaking Caribbean and the United States placed their loyalty to the revolution in question and suggested an identity not exclusively Cuban, which was frowned upon by a state whose nationalist agenda it was to consolidate their revolution in part through cultural unification and homogenization.

However, during the economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a revitalization of these linkages. The lodges, churches, and ethnic associations that had been established in the first half of the twentieth century by British West Indian immigrants became vital community spaces rooted in cultural claims beyond Cuba’s borders. In 1993, for instance, a group of professionals in their 40s founded what they called the Young People’s Department of the British West Indian Welfare Center. During the most difficult times of Cuba’s Special Period when the government was allowing and, in some cases, encouraging the development of connections abroad out of economic

necessity, this branch of the traditional Centre claimed as its mission the rescuing of Anglophone Caribbean roots and set out to do so through developing and promoting linkages to the English-speaking Caribbean past and present.

My own engagement with Cuba's Sugar Curtain began in 1996 when I was searching not for the suffocated stories of Caribbean peoples but for a national space of black belonging—I had been told the Cuban revolution had secured this and needed to see for myself. However, it was the stories of *los jamaicanos* (as they are collectively known though migrants were from all over the British West Indies) that I initially stumbled upon and later sought out, this particular view from backstage, that held my attention. I suspect that this is in part because of the points of connection I found with those whose British Caribbean parents and grandparents made a life in Cuba while mine made theirs in the United States, and in part because of the revelations about diaspora that revealed themselves to be a distinct dimension of this Caribbean story. For example, in the process of getting to know West Indian immigrants and descendants in Guantánamo, I was talking to one of my key contacts about our musical tastes and he mentioned that he'd always loved Luther Vandross. Knowing the limited access that Cubans had to music from the U.S., I asked him how he got a hold of Luther's music. He told me that the folks in Guantánamo had been able to pick up the satellite signal that carried all of the U.S. programming to those living on the Base and thus had access to a lot of shows in the '70s and '80s, Soul Train being one of them. He described how he and all the folks in his neighborhood would gather around the television and watch Soul Train on Saturday mornings and then spend the afternoon practicing the dances. Sharing with him my own experience of Soul Train as a lifeline to an affirmative blackness that I craved as a young person, I later reflected that this particularly powerful breakthrough in U.S. black popular culture was one that opened up a diasporic space. Rather than have diasporic space exist through the presence of those who come from elsewhere, I see it as something that is created. In my research, I also found that such moments of black belonging do not negate the kinds of entanglements and asymmetries of power that are often ignored in understandings of diaspora.

Another exchange that highlighted this dance between connection and disconnection and how the Sugar Curtain acts as mediator in and is a metaphor for the global distribution of power occurred when one of my interlocutors began asking me questions about being black in the United States. He wanted to know if I had ever read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and if I knew that Cuban independence leader Antonio Maceo's legacy was intellectual as well as military. At one point, he looked at me and said in an almost conspiratorial tone as if he were exposing a well-kept secret, "*todos somos iguales...pero todos no somos iguales*" [we're all equal...but we're not all equal]. Recounting the ways in which Cubans of color still experience social discrimination and inquiring further about U.S. race relations, he ended by saying, "I don't have a problem with the United States. I just want to live the rest of my life in peace. I'm tired of all of this war war war!" Embedded within this particular moment are connections and cross-fertilizations emblematic of migrations forced and voluntary. Humberto, the descendant of Haitian immigrants to Cuba who is married to the daughter

of Jamaicans, in a conversation with a black anthropologist of Montserratian descent from the United States, draws upon his knowledge of a black nationalist leader from the U.S. whose mother was a mixed race Grenadian and father was a Georgian Garveyite, and a Cuban general who was the son of a black Venezuelan farmer and *mulata* Cuban mother and who exiled in Haiti, Jamaica, and Costa Rica in the long struggle for Cuban independence. Evoking two leaders who are in many ways the penultimate symbols of black masculine strength, dignity and self-respect Humberto illustrates the centrality of the struggle against misrecognition and abjection in articulations of diaspora (see Smith, Hintzen and Rahier's introduction to *Global Circuits of Blackness: Interrogating the African Diaspora*, University of Illinois Press, 2010). My presence as a researcher who could travel in and out of Cuba at will (sort of) was an ever present reminder of the limitations in resources and mobility that Humberto faced vis a vis his U.S. counterparts. Though much has changed in the intervening years since that moment—significant economic reforms, the death of Fidel, the restoration of diplomatic relations, the end of the Wet Foot Dry Foot immigration policy, the rise in anti-racist activism—the fact that I could experience his backstage but he had to be content with my version of ours remains. Diasporic intimacies and shared racial subjugation notwithstanding, the Sugar Curtain, the one that was hung long before 1961, the one that demarcates positions of privilege from those of subordination and has the power to hide itself in plain site, remains.