Reyita

REYITA

The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century

DAISY RUBIERA CASTILLO

María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno
as told to her daughter
Daisy Rubiera Castillo

With an introduction by Elizabeth Dore
Translated from the Spanish by Anne McLean

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Introduction

Afro-Cuban history from below

It is commonly said that people make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing; they make history under conditions they inherit from the past.[1] *Reyita* is the story of a woman who did *not* make history because of the conditions she inherited from the past. *Reyita* is about the life of an ordinary black woman who witnessed the brutal suppression of Afro-Cuban politics in the early 20th century. The massacre of black political leaders and of thousands of ordinary blacks in 1912, and its violent aftermath, terrified the entire Afro-Cuban population into submission. Never again did Afro-Cubans organize to fight for racial equality and justice.

Reyita tells a story that has never been told in public before. She recounts growing up poor, black and female in Oriente Province. Her account is very personal; it is also very political in the sense that her personal life was conditioned by the politics of the era in which she lived. But without knowledge of Afro-Cuban history we fail to make sense of the politics, or mostly the anti-politics, of Reyita's life and times.

Reyita's life, as she describes it, falls into three periods that coincide with watersheds in Afro-Cuban history. Reyita begins her testimony by describing how her ancestors and later she herself participated in Afro-Cuban struggles for freedom and equality. The years between 1868 and 1921 were times of widespread Afro-Cuban political action for social change. First, slaves and free blacks in massive numbers voluntarily joined

the struggle for Cuban independence from Spain, in large part to end slavery. Then, following abolition in 1886, and the end of Spanish colonialism in 1898, Afro-Cubans mobilized again to struggle for equality in the new Republic.[2] Reyita tells of this period largely through the experiences of her grandmother and mother who participated in the anti-colonial struggles as noncombatants. Reyita's description of this era, especially of Cuba's independence wars and their aftermath, is not the one routinely offered. Whereas Cuban historians present the wars as a male experience, and one that generated black pride among its Afro-Cuban protagonists, Reyita's account focuses on the female experience of war, which was far from glorious.

Reyita vividly recalls the next defining moment in Afro-Cuban history: the 1912 massacre of the Independent Colored Party (the Partido Independiente de Color, or PIC). The creation of the PIC in 1908 followed a decade of black political exclusion. Blacks felt betrayed after independence because they had played a leading role in the anti-colonial struggle but were denied the rewards of citizenship whites enjoyed. Increasingly frustrated by the failure to achieve social and political equality with whites, Afro-Cubans formed autonomous organizations to redress racial injustice. The PIC, one of the first black parties in the hemisphere, focused on racial equality and working class demands.[3]

The PIC rejected the prevailing ideology that Cuba was a racial democracy. The white Cuban elite and some black leaders held that Cuban society was characterized by racial equality. They maintained that in the absence of legal segregation, through hard work and clean-living, deserving blacks could achieve equality with whites. If blacks did not progress socially and economically, it was not the result of discrimination and racism: it was their own fault. From this point of view, the fact that the upper classes were exclusively white and the lower classes largely black had nothing to do with social policy and

racist ideology. Instead, it was evidence that whites were naturally superior and blacks naturally inferior. A less racist rendering of the myth of racial democracy legitimated the idea that blacks suffered from cultural, educational and economic deprivation, and needed to be uplifted *before* they could participate as full citizens in the political life of the country.[4]

The PIC rejected these views of Cuban society. Their leaders proclaimed that it was white racism and whites' monopoly on political and economic power, not black inferiority, that prevented blacks from gaining 'their rightful share' of power, wealth and jobs.[5] The demands of the PIC included full political equality for Afro-Cuban men and their proportional representation in public sector jobs. This platform had widespread appeal among blacks, and the Party quickly established a nationwide organization and mass membership.

The Party's success brought forth a violent reaction from the state. The Party was outlawed in 1910, and the government launched a campaign branding the Party as a black racist conspiracy against whites. In 1912 leaders of the PIC organized an armed protest calling for legalization of the Party. In retaliation, the Cuban Army massacred the leaders and thousands of followers of the PIC, bringing an end to Afro-Cubans' challenge to white rule. The slaughter of 1912 signalled 'the end of black Cuban radicalism'.[6]

For its part, along with repressing black movements, the Cuban state actively pursued a policy that sought to 'improve' the island's so-called racial stock through whitening. The government subsidized the immigration of whites, particularly Spaniards, in order to reduce the proportion of blacks in the population and to increase the possibility of 'whitening' by way of mixed-race marriages.

Reyita witnessed the birth and violent demise of the PIC. As a child she lived in La Maya, where the Party had a large following among peasants and workers. Reyita's aunt was

President of the Party's Committee of Ladies, and Reyita remembered the comings and goings of the Party's leaders, as well as the violence of the massacre.[7] Here too, Reyita's telling of events gives us a view of female experience that has been hidden from history. Whereas historical sources provide few clues about women's participation in the PIC, it is interesting to note that in Reyita's household her aunt, not her uncle, was the Party militant.

Reyita participated in one of the last Afro-Cuban collective efforts for what could be called loosely 'black liberation'. After the 1912 massacre, when many Afro-Cubans abandoned hope of living with dignity in Cuba, Reyita and others in Oriente joined Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association.[8] In 1921 the Cuban state stepped in again and crushed the movement. This marked the end of Reyita's participation in organized race politics.

With their possibilities for collective action blocked, Afro-Cubans developed alternative goals and strategies. Many Afro-Cuban men joined trade unions and political parties, particularly the Cuban Communist Party. A few middle-class Afro-Cuban women participated in the suffragette movement. Being a poor black woman, these avenues of political action were for the most part closed to Reyita. Like other women of her class and colour, Reyita devoted herself mostly to community forms of self-help and mutual assistance that Aline Helg describes as 'constituting a kind of alternative way of life.'[9] In addition, Reyita dedicated herself to upward mobility.

Reyita's life, as she recounts it, from the 1920s until the triumph of the revolution in 1959, was a never-ending struggle to earn enough money to 'make something' of her children. The struggle for family advancement is the centerpiece of her story. Reyita was driven to improve herself and her children, as measured by a society from which, as a poor, black woman, she was largely excluded. To realize her ambitions, Reyita

'married white' to lighten the skin colour of her offspring. She dedicated herself relentlessly to street vending and to other shoestring ventures, and to installment-buying of things she could barely afford. She was submissive to a white husband she disdained, even though he thwarted her ambition and that of their children at every turn because he was racist – or so she suspected. She indebted herself up to the eyeballs to buy things – like a living room suite – that she enjoyed showing off. These aspirations created almost unbearable tensions in her life.

Reyita's life shows the multiple contradictions of living in a society with a myth of racial democracy, and on top of that a society where Afro-Cubans had learned painful lessons about what was politically possible and impossible. Although Reyita was denigrated by her own mother on account of her colour, Reyita herself subscribed to aspects of the ideology of white superiority/black inferiority; she strove to improve the race – at least her family – through whitening. Furthermore, she put into practice the official ideology that Afro-Cubans could get ahead through hard work. And she was so successful in her upward mobility that her story might seem to confirm what she otherwise explicitly rejected: the myth of racial democracy. On the other hand, Reyita displayed great pride in her African heritage. Her quasi-political action took the form of practicing African religions that were reconstructed in Cuba.

With movements for racial justice hounded out of the political sphere, Afro-Cuban race politics went underground. It flourished in popular religious practices, such as *santería*. As Helg argues, *santería* constituted 'a strand of "politics" that can only be understood as such in the context of Afro-Cuban history'.[10] In the 1920s whites demonized *brujos* (male *santería* priests). Because the state jailed alleged *brujos*, Afro-Cuban religious practices came to be associated in people's consciousness with racial militancy. Consequently, in the absence of formal race politics, *santería* constituted a politics

of the oppressed. Understanding *santería* in this light, it becomes clear that Reyita challenged the values of white Cuban society by practicing Afro-Cuban religions. Her spiritualism and healing contributed to preserving African pride, and was a form of engagement in race politics. Moreover, as most *brujos* were male, Reyita's religious practices may have gone some way towards challenging the gender order within the Afro-Cuban community.

The different aspects of Reyita's life might be construed as inconsistent. The fact that seemingly incompatible ideas and behaviours, for instance marrying white and practicing *santería*, sat side-by-side in her life, demonstrate that in their struggle to live with dignity Afro-Cubans adopted an assortment of strategies.

The revolution of 1959 unleashed sweeping changes in Cuba. To create the conditions for socialism, the government dismantled the capitalist state and economy, and drastically reduced class differences. Keeping in mind that a large part of Reyita's life was dedicated to upward mobility, it is a testament to the popular support the revolutionary forces enjoyed, especially among Afro-Cubans, that two of her sons joined Fidel's 26th of July Movement. Reyita speaks proudly of this episode in her family history, and with pride tempered by grief about one son's death, a victim of counter-revolutionary sabotage. Other than these memories, Reyita says surprisingly little about how the revolution changed her life. Reyita lived through one of the decisive events of the 20th century and yet she has almost nothing to say about her life during the revolution.

Reyita speaks about racism in the revolution, albeit very briefly. 'These days you don't have to worry about the colour of your skin,' sits uneasily alongside, 'I know of quite a few people who still have serious racial problems...', which she follows up with some telling examples. Her contradictory statements reflect contradictions of the revolution. Racism in

Cuba declined precipitously after 1959.[11] The revolutionary government proclaimed that racism was a product of capitalism and U.S. imperialism, and that socialism would solve the problem of racism. With this analysis, the revolutionary government downplayed the question of race, and actively discouraged Afro-Cubans from thinking about themselves as in any way different from white Cubans. Lack of official attention to racism may be part of the reason why Cuba has failed to end racial discrimination.

Race

So far I have used the words race, white, black and Afro-Cuban unproblematically. But they are very problematic terms. Therefore, I turn to a discussion of how we might usefully think about race, particularly to shed light on Reyita's life and times.

Race is not a category grounded in our genes; nevertheless, race is very important as an ideology of human difference.[12] People include or exclude others based on their perception of physical difference. Therefore, because people behave *as if* races exist, race does exist, but as a *social* category rooted in supposed natural differences, not as a biological category rooted in verifiable genetic differences.[13]

Race and racism as we know them in modern Latin America, the Caribbean and North America are largely the product of European conquest and colonization. Europeans differentiated themselves from the peoples they conquered and enslaved on the basis of observable shared physical attributes, which they called race. Peter Wade calls shared traits – skin colour, hair type, and facial features – physical 'cues'. These particular physical cues became racial signifiers of superiority and inferiority and played their part in a historical process of political domination. Furthermore, colonization served to legitimate the idea that

social and cultural differences among groups are caused by natural physical differences. However, in our effort to lay bare the ideological roots of race and racism, there may be a danger in going too far towards jettisoning physicality. The point is that how we interpret certain physical traits is a product of history and of social conditioning.

In the case of people of African descent living outside Africa, race is an idea forged in the history of slavery, but not limited to that history. As George Reid Andrews argues in the case of Brazil, race and racism are continually recreated in the context of changing social conditions.[14] This partly explains why 'black' identity is different across the Americas. In the United States, historically a 'black' identity was assigned to any person with traceable African ancestry, what was sometimes called 'the one drop of black blood rule'. As a consequence, the U.S. has a largely binary black-white colour code. However, in many countries of Latin America there is a continuum of black racial categories that originally purported to describe varying mixtures of black and white ancestry, and that came to be associated with shades of skin tone. As a consequence of different colour codes, a person considered mulatto (mixed race) or white in Cuba, might be 'black' in the U.S.[15] The important point here is that the meanings of black and white are not fixed; they vary according to the social context.

It would be an exaggeration to say that understanding race helps us 'to make sense of' racism in Reyita's life and times, for the simple reason that frequently it is impossible 'to make sense of' – to logically explain – racism. Racism by its very nature frequently defies logic. Nevertheless, it might be fair to say that understanding what race is goes some way to sensitizing us to racism in Reyita's changing world.

Reyita describes a tripartite colour code that characterized Oriente when she was coming of age. For instance, separate social and political organizations existed for black, brown

(mulatto), and white Cubans. It is apparent that the racial order she describes was considerably different from the more binary divide between black and white that existed then – and now – in the United States. The differences in race politics between the U.S. and Cuba in the early 20th century were products, among other things, of black Cubans' massive participation in their anti-colonial struggle, and an interaction between race and class in Cuba that allowed some Afro-Cubans a certain level of social mobility.

Reyita's story tells us more about how racism infected everyday life than we can learn from other historical accounts. Historians have often characterized the first decade of the 20th century as a period when Afro-Cubans manifested pride in their 'blackness', largely because of their heroic contributions to the Cuban Wars of Independence. But this is not the world Reyita knew. Reyita describes how her mulatta mother and sisters abused her because her skin colour was darker than theirs. In these memories, as in others throughout her testimony, *Reyita* provides a rich vein of information about the varied and contradictory nature of Afro-Cuban identities. Reyita's narrative is replete with the ambiguities of race in everyday life. Because the paradoxes of Reyita's experiences of race are not excised from her narrative, she helps us dispose of overly simple understandings of Afro-Cuban identity, or what has come to be called *Afro-Cubanidad.*

'Waking up'

Reyita's story highlights how race, class and gender were inextricably woven into the fabric of her life. One aspect of the testimonial genre in general, and of her story in particular, is that through the narration of experiences we, the reader, can appreciate the subtle and not-so-subtle interconnectedness of race, class and gender that historians often find hard to decipher as well as to explain.

Reyita's life from the time of her marriage until sometime in the 1940s conformed closely to a stereotype of Afro-Caribbean womanhood. Reyita was submissive to her husband, to the point of putting on his socks while he was lying in bed in the mornings: 'He didn't demand it of me, I did it willingly and for a long time.' She had about a dozen children and dedicated her life to hard work in order to make something of them. Reyita was the problem solver in the household; when extra money was needed she figured out a way to earn it.

Then, when she joined the Popular Socialist Party in the 1940s, her ideas began to change. She joined the Party because it fought for equality between blacks and whites and between men and women. In the Party, Reyita mostly did 'women's work'. She organized *fiestas*, held bake sales, and helped out in the Party's dressmaking academy. Reyita sees this as a period of awakening. 'I led a very active life within the Party. Rubiera [her husband] didn't like it at all, but I paid no attention to him...I was waking up, you know. Waking up from the blindness caused by my naiveté'. Although Reyita never uses the word feminist, she is describing a feminist awakening. However, the family moved away and Reyita lost her political connections.

Another turning point in Reyita's awakening was of a very different order. She made up her mind to work hard and save money in order to have electricity installed in the house so that she could buy a radio. As she says, '[that] episode caused an important transformation in me, a big change occurred in my life: my independence! After that, I could do things without telling the old man [Rubiera], I'd broken the tradition of submission to the man of the house.' The stark difference in these two defining moments in Reyita's feminist awakening should alert us to the fallacy of trying to explain the rise of gender consciousness in clear-cut ways.

'I sacrificed everything. I sacrificed myself as a woman to be just a mother...' In these few words Reyita communicates

the plight of poor black women in Oriente in the pre-revolutionary period. What Reyita does not say here, but which she implies, is that she wanted to be much more than just a mother. Reyita wanted to be many things; she wanted to fulfil her ambitions and dreams as a person. But in the context of poverty, racism and sexism she had to sacrifice herself 'to be *just* a mother'. Her next sentence lays bare more of the contradictions of her life. She tells her daughter, 'I started to build a life independent of your dad in order to be able, with my own efforts, to give all of you what I yearned for: an education, personal development, minding the environment...' Frankly that last – the environment – strikes a distinctly odd chord. But the important point here is that Reyita did not build an independent life for herself to realize her dreams of becoming a poet or an activist. She did it to give her children what she yearned for for them. Even in her independence Reyita could not get away from being 'just a mother.'

Reflecting on the gains of the Cuban revolution, such as universal education and employment, and the virtual elimination of poverty, at this point in her narrative one cannot help but think that the next generation of Afro-Cuban women probably did not suffer in ways Reyita did. The revolution subordinated the demands of women, particularly feminist demands, on a range of issues including machismo and men's reluctance to share housework;[16] nevertheless, socialism in Cuba was associated with sweeping improvements in most women's lives. If Reyita's children had been provided for in the ways children were in the revolution, with high quality education, health care, housing and food, possibly Reyita could have been more than 'just a mother.' But Reyita says little about her life and the lives of her children after the revolution. Even though the revolution is conspicuous by its absence from the testimony, speaking as a woman after more than three decades of socialist

transformation, Reyita's ideas about sexism and racism reflect the values of revolutionary society.

Testimonies

The testimonial genre has been the subject of a debate over issues of authenticity, truth-telling and who is representing whom and for what purposes. The controversy surrounding the testimonial form began with the publication in Cuba in 1966 of Esteban Montejo's *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, as told to Miguel Barnet.[17] *Reyita* has been called its sequel. The testimonial debate gathered steam over the next twenty years,[18] and culminated in 1999 with the uproar over what was true and what was not in *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala.*[19] The accusation that Rigoberta Menchú's testimony contained half-truths and lies, included in the text for political purposes, transformed a scholarly debate about the nature of the testimonial genre into a political debate about the politics of the Left. In light of this furore, it would be unwise to read testimonials unproblematically, as true life stories.

The 1980s was the boom for Latin American testimonial literature. In the context of Central America's revolutionary upheavals, activists, most notably Rigoberta Menchú, recounted their experiences for a political purpose: to raise awareness of and build support for their struggles. At that time most academic writers argued that testimonials were 'real'. They maintained that testimonial writings made the invisible visible, and gave voice to those who previously had been silenced. Academics read testimonials as quasi-historical sources that presented the authentic voices of oppressed people who were protagonists in or witnesses to the events they narrated.[20]

After postmodernism took hold in the academy a number of scholars changed their minds about testimonials. They