



An 1872 map of Cuba shows the stark delineation of east and west.

CUBA

Ever the Twain Shall Meet

By Rebecca Bodenheimer

Derived from the late-19th-century writings of Cuban national poet José Martí during the struggle for independence from Spain, the notion of *Cubanidad* — “Cubanness” or the essence of Cuban identity — has always imagined a unified, hybrid nation where nationality trumps all other axes of identification. This projection of national unity became even more crucial following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which ushered in the socialist regime, as the island has faced an ongoing political threat to its sovereignty by the United States for the last half century. However, despite the revolutionary government’s unifying rhetoric celebrating the population’s dedication to socialist ideals of egalitarianism and cooperation, expressions of regionalism are pervasive, and many Cubans cling tightly to their regional identities. Not only is there fierce loyalty to one’s province of birth, but often explicit antagonism toward people from other provinces, particularly between *habaneros* (people from Havana)

and *orientales* (people from the eastern provinces). These regionalist antagonisms are often entangled with notions of race. This article examines various manifestations of contemporary regionalism in Cuba and the ways that race is mapped onto different regions and cities on the island, a racialization and regionalization of Cuban society that challenges the nationalist notion of a unified *Cubanidad*.

Regionalism in Cuba

Far from constituting a novel social dynamic on the island, regionalism has a long history in Cuba, dating back to the early colonial period and the Spanish settlement of the island. Due to its proximity to the island of Hispaniola (the site of Columbus’s first landing in the Americas), Oriente (eastern Cuba) was settled first. Santiago de Cuba, the island’s second-largest city, was founded in 1515 and became the first capital of the colony. By the mid-16th century, Spanish colonizers had moved west,

and Havana had grown in significance; in 1607, colonial authorities moved the capital to the western city. From that point on, western Cuba became the focus of the colonial government and its commerce, and Oriente was neglected and marginalized. Regionalist hostilities flourished due to the very distinct social and economic conditions of eastern and western Cuba under Spanish colonialism.

In the mid-19th century, while central and western Cuba were enjoying the economic boom produced by high levels of slave-driven sugar production, eastern Cuba was suffering from an economic downturn, partially due to harsh taxation by the colonial government. This explains why Oriente was the site of the first rebellion in 1868 that began the 30-year struggle for independence from Spain. Oriente’s tradition of rebellion did not, of course, end with the wars of independence. The Cuban Revolution officially began on July 26, 1953, with a failed attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago by a group of rebels led by Fidel Castro, a native of another major eastern city, Holguín. After being released from jail in 1955 and spending a year in exile gathering forces for another invasion in Mexico, Castro landed in the southeastern province of Granma in late 1956. From that point on, guerrilla activity against

dictator Fulgencio Batista’s forces was based in the Sierra Maestra range in the eastern provinces of Santiago and Granma. Thus, like the struggle for independence from Spain, the Cuban Revolution historically has been linked to Oriente, evidenced by the fact that Santiago is known as “la cuna de la Revolución” (the cradle of the Revolution).

While regionalism has a long history in Cuba, contemporary antagonisms are quite pervasive on the island, especially in Havana between natives of the capital and orientales. Baseball is perhaps the most visible arena for regionalist antagonism, and the fierce and longstanding rivalry between the teams of Havana and Santiago is often played out on the national stage. Since the “Special Period” — the decade of extreme economic crisis precipitated by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 — the level of hostility has grown, primarily due to the marked increase in migration to Havana by Cubans from *el campo* (the countryside). Like the natives of many capitals throughout the world, *habaneros* consider every locale outside the capital to be “el campo,” even large cities like Santiago and Camagüey.

Orientales face particular hostility in Havana, as evidenced by the term that *habaneros* often use to refer to them — *palestinos* (Palestinians) — drawing a parallel

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Fidel Castro seen playing for his favorite team, Oriente, against a team from the west’s Pinar del Rio in 1964.



Photo from Associated Press.

between the political conflict in Palestine/Israel and the antagonism between orientales and habaneros in the Cuban capital. This term not only reveals the longstanding unequal power dynamics between Havana and Oriente, but also contains racialized overtones. In fact, even the seemingly neutral term “oriental” often functions as a euphemism for rural and/or poor blackness and even general backwardness.

Considering the fact that Israelis occupy significant portions of Palestinian land, the use of the term “palestino” to refer to orientales is curious because the latter are characterized by habaneros not as the occupied (the situation of actual Palestinians), but as the occupiers of Havana. Nonetheless, the use of the term seems to be related partly to the perception that eastern Cuban migrants are like refugees from a foreign country who have no real homeland, which is sometimes the way that exiled Palestinians are depicted.

In the eyes of many habaneros, orientales have colonized large sections of their city, packing themselves and their numerous relatives into crumbling colonial apartment buildings and contributing to the deterioration of the capital’s once-great architectural accomplishments. Habaneros also tend to paint orientales as the main culprits responsible for petty theft and hustling-oriented crime that targets tourists. Many habaneros assume orientales have sinister intentions in migrating to Havana, whether to try to make a living *jineteando* (hustling tourists, which can involve a large variety of activities, including the exchange of sex for material goods or money) or to engage in the illicit buying and selling of goods on the black market.

Another principal source of tension is the police force composition: the state recruits many officers from the eastern provinces. Given that the police function as the main agents constricting Cubans’ freedom of movement, orientales represent by proxy the repressive state forces that Havana residents collide with on a daily basis. Policing technologies take on a variety of forms in contemporary Havana, the most common being the random detention of citizens on the street to ask for identification, particularly if they are black Cubans walking with (white) foreigners. Furthermore, habaneros engaged in black-market activities — from non-licensed taxi driving to the illicit buying and selling of goods — often rail against the “palestino” cops for curtailing their economic ventures and enforcing the heavy-handed policies outlawing non-licensed, individual private enterprise.

Ironically, while a significant proportion of the police force is from Oriente, orientales are the most heavily criminalized and policed population in Havana. When the

police randomly detain a Cuban on the street, one of the first things they check is the citizen’s place of residence. If a Havana-based residence is not listed on the *carnet* (identification card), the citizen is questioned about the purpose of their stay in the capital, the result of a 1997 law that restricts migration to the capital and requires that Cubans from other provinces get authorization from the local police to be in Havana. While it has been possible in the past for Havana residents to add non-Havana residents to the registry of occupants in a given domicile, thereby providing the latter with legal residency in the capital, the state authorities have been curbing these permits since the late 1990s due to overpopulation within Havana generally. Owing to stereotypes of orientales as petty criminals and hustlers and the already-large proportion of them in the capital, they are less likely to be given authorization to stay in Havana, and many do, in fact, remain “illegally.”

I have witnessed firsthand this “regional profiling” when orientales are stopped by the police. Not only does the officer radio in to the precinct to check if the detained citizen has a criminal record, but even if that person has no prior convictions, they automatically may be brought in to the precinct in a police car and subjected to a long wait while the authorities conduct a more in-depth investigation. At the very least, people who are detained are held at the precinct for several hours and sometimes released after midnight. If they have prior convictions or *advertencias* (warnings) on their record, they are sometimes deported back to their province of origin and prohibited from coming back to Havana for a certain period of time. While it is disconcerting to recognize that the criminalization of orientales in Havana is often perpetrated by their regional compatriots, it is also important to note that the police officers recruited from Oriente and other provinces often have very few occupational options and, in the end, are constrained to carry out orders issued to them from above. In sum, orientales function as scapegoats for a whole range of social problems in contemporary Havana: housing shortages, the crumbling infrastructure, police repression, black market activities, petty crime, hustling, and prostitution.

Intersections of Race and Place

As mentioned above in relation to the term “palestinos,” different cities and regions in Cuba are often associated with particular racial attributes. I refer to these notions as “racialized discourses of place,” by which I mean the ways that regions and locales are linked with specific racial and cultural attributes. The common assertion that Oriente is the “blackest” region of the island



A stereoscopic image of sugar plantations in Cuba, circa 1900.

exemplifies this phenomenon. Camagüey and Pinar del Río, on the other hand, are commonly racialized as white, with the former viewed by many Cubans as the most racist region in the country. Known as “la cuna de la cultura afrocubana” (the cradle of Afro-Cuban culture), the city and province of Matanzas is also associated with blackness, albeit a very different sort of blackness than the one attributed to Oriente. Finally, Havana, as the capital and geographical signifier of Cubanidad and national identity, is often represented as the center of racial and cultural hybridity, more open to foreign influence, and less “pure” in cultural terms.

Nonetheless, these racialized discourses of place do not necessarily reflect racial demographics. For example, in regards to Oriente’s racialization as black, this discourse of blackness functions as a signifier for backwardness and criminality, and it simultaneously acts to “whiten” western Cuba and signal its civility and modernity. To give another example, singling out Camagüey as the whitest and most racist place in the country allows people to disavow racism in other places, like Havana or Santiago. In addition, these notions do not correspond with racial demographics, as the province is home to one of the largest populations of (black) Haitian and West Indian descent on the island. Regarding Oriente, one of the primary reasons

for revisiting its racialization as black is the fact that Holguín and Las Tunas (two of Oriente’s five provinces) historically have been home to large white populations. Furthermore, during the colonial era the percentage of African-born people on the island was concentrated in the west: in 1774 almost 70 percent, in 1817 about 75 percent, and in 1899 more than 90 percent. These demographics are linked to the location of the largest sugar plantations and concentrations of slaves in western-central Cuba. At the height of the sugar boom, in 1862, both slaves and whites were overwhelmingly concentrated in the west, which created a more polarized racial climate there, but also a whiter population overall. The notion that Oriente is the “blackest” region likely stems from the demographics of the southeastern part of the region. The provinces of Santiago and Guantánamo historically have been the most nonwhite areas of the island, partly due to various waves of Antillean immigration, primarily from Haiti and Jamaica; the first major wave was propelled by the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution in the 1790s, and the second occurred in the early 20th century in response to the need for cheap laborers to work on sugar plantations in Oriente and Camagüey.

The discursive association of Oriente with blackness continued throughout the 20th century. In 1932, the

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Cuban Communist Party proposed the creation of an independent black state within Cuba, to be made up of the municipalities in Oriente that constituted the *faja negra* or “black belt,” where more than 50 percent of the population was of African descent; most of these locales were in the Santiago province. Cuban scholars now consider this proposal to have been a misguided attempt to promote racial equality that was influenced by binary racial thinking from the United States. Moreover, only 22 percent of African-descended people on the island — including blacks and *mulatos* (those with some percentage of African ancestry) — lived in the “black belt” during this period. The proportion of nonwhites to whites was certainly higher in Oriente than in other regions in the first half of the 20th century, yet because of the overall concentration of the population in western Cuba, less than one-fourth of blacks and *mulatos* on the island actually lived in this province. The 1953 census showed a continuation of the demographic trends of the first half of the 20th century: whites were heavily represented in the western and central provinces and less so in eastern Cuba, but Oriente had a much higher incidence of mixed-race inhabitants. The census counts conducted after the Revolution have tended to omit information on race, which correlates with the official policy of silence on issues of racial inequality, as the regime argued that the socialist distribution of wealth had supposedly eradicated racism.

More recent national censuses were conducted in 2002 and 2012. Many researchers consider the results to be flawed, in that the figures in both seem to continue the trend of official statistical “whitening.” The population in 2012 was reported as approximately 64 percent white, 27 percent *mestizo* (mixed race), and 9 percent black, figures not very different from those of the 1981 census (66 percent white, 22 percent *mestizo*, and 12 percent black). They seem especially dubious when taking into account the racial composition of the large majority of Cuban émigrés (white) during that period; in other words, Cuba should be a demographically blacker nation now. Interestingly, in the 2012 census the government recorded racial demographics not only of each province, but of each municipality: Villa Clara and Sancti Spíritus (in central Cuba) and Holguín (in Oriente) had the highest proportions of whites, all more than 80 percent. Santiago and Guantánamo continued to have the lowest percentages, both around 25 percent, and Guantánamo, Santiago, and Granma (all in Oriente) had the highest incidences of *mulatos* (all more than 54 percent). However, the city of Havana had the highest incidence of black Cubans, 15.2 percent, followed by

Santiago with 14.2 percent. This means that the capital city is now the location with the highest percentage of blacks, which is quite ironic, given the tendency of *habaneros* to stereotype all orientales as black.

As noted above, Matanzas is also associated with blackness, largely through the notion that it is the “cradle of Afro-Cuban culture,” and because of the province’s strong links to plantation slavery. I do not view the racialized discourses attached to Oriente and Matanzas as contradictory or mutually exclusive, but instead find that each place is associated with a very particular type of blackness: Matanzas with cultural blackness and Oriente with social blackness. I believe that orientales are subjected to a process of “social blackening,” in which racial blackness is projected onto all eastern Cubans regardless of their race, with blackness standing in for poverty, underdevelopment, and/or criminality.

Patricia Hill Collins theorizes about social blackness, asserting that people are racialized in terms of their position in the social hierarchy in ways that do not necessarily relate to skin color. For example, undocumented Latino immigrants are socially blackened, while middle- and upper-class African Americans are considered to be “honorary whites.” I find this conceptualization of social blackness to be very productive for examining the discourse of race that adheres to Oriente. Orientales tend to be lumped together in the minds of western Cubans as poor, black, and uneducated, despite large populations of whites in Holguín and Las Tunas. However, many eastern Cubans whom I interviewed push against this social blackening and posit their overwhelming hybridity, both racially and culturally. Perhaps this is their way of inserting themselves into the hegemonic formation of Cubanidad that privileges *mestizaje*, being of mixed-race. On the other hand, if, as Hill Collins suggests, the racial category “black” stands in for a position of powerlessness — which I believe it does — then perhaps orientales are also fighting for a more privileged place in the hierarchy of social and economic relations on the island.

Returning to a comparison of the tropes of blackness used to discuss Matanzas and Oriente, the former is constructed as the site of the most authentic and well-preserved African-derived traditions, which is a positive discourse that alludes primarily to the past and historical phenomena. On the other hand, the racialized perceptions of Oriente are negative, in that easterners are often thought to represent a criminal, even foreign blackness. The “foreign” element is exemplified on one hand by the long history of Haitian migration to Oriente and the ways that Afro-Haitian culture is still widely viewed as outside



Photo by Petr Dosek.

An “oriental” girl in Santiago de Cuba.

the limits of Cuban identity. However, a connotation of foreignness is also constructed through the use of terms such as “palestino” to refer to orientales in Havana, which suggests that eastern Cubans are not really Cuban. In addition, this notion of foreign blackness is tied to contemporary social problems (as opposed to Cuba’s slave past), exemplified in the idea that the “illegal” migration of orientales upsets the stability of the capital and creates residential overcrowding. Thus, the discursive blackness that adheres to eastern Cuba is not “good” or celebratory like the one attached to Matanzas, which invokes images of purity vis-à-vis African-derived culture. Unlike the social blackness projected onto orientales, this is a benign form of blackness that neither provokes social tensions among Cubans from different provinces nor threatens the hegemony of the nationalist hybridity discourse that consigns racial difference to the colonial past.

Conclusion

The revolutionary government has always projected a picture of absolute national unity to the world, which is symbolized by a prominent billboard one encounters when driving from the Havana airport toward the city center that asserts, “Welcome to Havana, capital of

all Cubans!” However, the expressions of regionalist sentiment that I have detailed in this article betray the cracks in the wall of Cuban national unity and socialist egalitarianism and illuminate how regional provenance is an influential axis of identity formation that can foster divisiveness. As evidenced by the discussion of the hostility towards orientales in Havana, the state’s own policies that restrict and criminalize internal migration belie this unifying rhetoric. Moreover, the ways that race is mapped onto particular locales in Cuba — particularly Oriente’s association with blackness — reflect longstanding inequalities between eastern and western Cuba. Examining these regional inequalities, as well as the intersections of race and place, provides a more critical view of contemporary social realities in Cuba.

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