

Más Allá de Harvard: Analogues in Contemporaneous and Later Times

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The most thought-provoking histories are colored in grey, not black and white. Tales with clear moral lessons are important. But those historical chapters that leave us unsettled arguably teach us (and our students) a more valuable lesson: the omnipresence of ambiguity. The Harvard Cubans is one such story. It is tempting to see the invitation of over a thousand Cuban teachers to Cambridge in the summer of 1900 as “a simple gesture of friendship,” as one prominent Cuban scholar puts it in Danny González Lucena’s film. Yet the material that Danny has gathered also makes it clear that there was nothing simple about the politics of this educational exchange.

Forged in the crucible of American imperial expansion abroad, the Harvard Summer School for Cuban Teachers certainly did not conform to the more bellicose manifestations of U.S. policy toward the Caribbean at the time. Unlike other U.S. actors who saw Cuba as mostly an island to be subdued and controlled, the creator of this program, Alexis Frye, and many of the Cubans’ hosts in the United States, had genuine sympathy for the Cuban independence cause. Cambridge itself was a hotbed of *anti-imperialist* sentiment in the United States at this time, and many residents looked positively on the Cuban teachers’ ambitions to bring updated knowledge and a vision of reform to their own professional practice. But Alexis Frye was also an agent of U.S. empire at the end of the day, albeit an unconventional one. And sometimes paternalism, however well intentioned, can easily echo and amplify brute expressions of force.

The history of the Harvard Cubans thus leaves us as confused as moved. On the one hand, it suggests that in the midst of improbable and, for many Cubans, disappointing circumstances—the occupation of the island by the U.S. military—people of good faith,

American and Cuban, still attempted to forge partnerships that could be beneficial to all. Cuban teachers themselves showed a remarkable degree of agency, earning sympathy in Cambridge society as bearers of Cuban nationalism, not simple imbibers of foreign educational models. Still, as much as the story of the Harvard Cubans is a story of collaboration, it is also a story of enduring lines of difference, and of neocolonial attitudes and presumptions. We see this in the feelings of Harvard students—willing to lend their rooms to guests over the summer, but not their furniture. And we see this in the concern among many at Harvard about the racial composition of the Cuban delegation, which often abetted a portrait of the Cuban teachers as “other,” and in need of some form of tutelage, though in a kind-spirited mode.

Much more can certainly be said about the history of the program and its legacies. And the best way to learn more is to see Danny’s wonderful film. Instead, what I propose today is to use the case of the Harvard Cubans as an invitation to reflect on different but sometimes analogous moments of educational exchange across Cuba’s twentieth-century history. Some have been researched, and others not at all. But embedded in each are potential ambiguities—in power and race relations, or with regard to the fine line between partnership and paternalism—that often look very similar or the same.

What follows, therefore, is less a research paper than an extended comment, drawing on the scholarship of others. In particular, I am interested in grouping together episodes where Cubans went abroad to the “developed” world *and* when Cuba played host to its own foreign pupils, particularly after the Cuban Revolution. Doing so, I suggest, allows us to begin envisioning a wider genealogy of Cuban educational exchange across the twentieth century. But

it also permits us to adopt a new vantage point from which to assess what did and did not change on the island after 1959.

Case 1: Afro-Cubans at the Tuskegee Institute (via Frank Guridy)

The story of the Harvard Cubans is neither the only history of educational exchange between Cuba and the United States, nor the only one that took shape at the turn of the twentieth century. A year before any Cubans arrived at Harvard, the first of an admittedly smaller, but no less interesting contingent of Cuban students—all Afro-Cuban—began arriving at another well-known U.S. institution: the Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington. Thanks to the work of historian Frank Guridy, we have a compelling portrait of how this exchange came about and what the experience of the Afro-Cuban students who passed through Tuskegee’s halls was like.¹

On the one hand, the case of the Cuban students at Tuskegee represents a more grassroots, informal kind of collaboration than the Harvard Summer School for Cuban Teachers. The Tuskegee-Cuba exchange evolved largely through contacts between the school’s leadership and Cubans themselves. It was not an official program sponsored by the U.S. occupation government of the island, and the presence of a small contingent of Cuban students at Tuskegee lasted much longer: through the 1920s. Nor did the end product of the Cubans’ experience so narrowly reinforce a sense of mission to a nation-state. Tuskegee, Guridy reminds us, was a crossroads not only for African-American students from all over the post-Reconstruction South, but also a wide Afro-diasporic world. Afro-Cuban students who attended engaged in a process of “forging diaspora” by linking up with students of color of diverse origins. Here the blackness of

¹ Frank Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African-Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), Chapter 1.

the Cuban students was not the obstacle or source of anxiety as it was in the case of the Harvard Cubans. It was the point.

Still, there is much that linked the presence of Afro-Cuban students at Tuskegee to the same imperial context that gave rise to the Harvard Summer School for Cuban Teachers. For one thing, Booker T. Washington—the school’s famous, controversial founder—was not opposed to U.S. intervention in Cuba in 1898. Against the backdrop of the rising entrenchment of Jim Crow, he, like other African-American leaders, saw black participation in the “Spanish-American” War as a way to “stave off the onrushing tide of disfranchisement” by demonstrating the community’s utility to the nation as a whole.² In this spirit, Washington offered to organize and put “ten thousand loyal, brave, strong black men of the South” at the U.S. military’s service.³ Though his offer was ignored, in the war’s aftermath he became a “broker for U.S. interests in Cuba who [believed they] needed ‘Negroes’ for their projects on the island.”⁴ These are just some of the ways Washington was firmly embedded in the imperial politics of his age, at whose service he hoped to place his unique project of racial uplift. As Guridy puts it, “If white men in the United States and Europe could take up the ‘white man’s burden,’ African-American men could make their own claim to imperial citizenship by articulating their own ‘black man’s burden.’”⁵ It was in this spirit, blending “loyalty to the United States with an identification with the worldwide colored race,” that the idea of bringing Cubans to Tuskegee was born.⁶

Booker T. Washington also relied on the formal and informal structures of U.S. empire to spread the word. Though, again, his efforts were not the idea of the U.S. occupation government,

² Guridy, 23.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Guridy, 24.

⁵ Guridy, 23.

⁶ Guridy, 20.

Washington counted on their help to translate and distribute free copies of his memoir *Up from Slavery* throughout the island—which led to a flood of interested applicants. The occupation government also directly identified a small number of Cubans who did attend the school, while the leaders of black U.S. regiments in the war of 1898 also lent their support. Later on, influential employees of U.S. interests on the island, or investors in their own right—including a few prominent African-Americans—helped identify potential recruits. Among Washington’s extended network of white boosters, the idea of bringing Afro-Cubans to Tuskegee found allies too.

Why were particularly the latter parties and the U.S. occupation government interested in helping? In a word, just as Tuskegee’s model favoring industrial education over demands for political equality appealed to conservative white reformists (and segregationists) in the United States, so could this school of thought fit neatly with the roles ascribed to parts of the Cuban racial order in U.S. imperial thinking. Even if U.S. occupation authorities ceded to Cuban demands that universal manhood suffrage be guaranteed on the island—both during the occupation and subsequently—a school run by the author of the famous Atlanta Compromise was an attractive choice. It would teach black Cubans to be useful contributors to society, not imbue them with “radical” thinking.

But as in the Harvard case, Afro-Cuban students (and the parents who sent them) saw Tuskegee through their own prisms and sought to take advantage of the opportunity in pursuit of their own goals. While a number wrote to Washington in pursuit of the idea of mastering a vocation, Tuskegee also became the destination for young students connected to a small Afro-Cuban elite. Given poor educational opportunities for Afro-Cubans on the island, such

families saw Tuskegee as a place not to form tradesmen but professionals and intellectuals, like Washington in his own right. There is scant evidence that Cuban students at Tuskegee challenged Washington's cautious thinking on "the racial question." In fact, given the links between a number of Cuban students at Tuskegee and moderate Afro-Cuban leaders—like Juan Gualberto Gómez (whose son attended and even roomed with Booker T. Washington's own) and Martín Morúa Delgado (the author of an infamous 1909 law that would ban the organization of political parties in Cuba along strictly racial lines)—this fact is not entirely surprising. Still, Cuban students did resist the school's strict rules and regulations, at times facing expulsion as a result. In these and other ways, as Guridy puts it, "Afro-diasporic subjects in Cuba...gave the Tuskegee phenomenon a meaning that transcended the racial politics of the United States in the Jim Crow era."⁷ Just as with the Harvard Cubans, the case provides an example of Cubans who "attempted to take advantage of the opportunities created by the imperial structure" as much as they challenged it outright.⁸ In the case of Gualberto Gómez's son, who graduated from Tuskegee in 1906, this is particularly ironic, as his father had been one of the fiercest opponents of accepting the United States' imposition of the Platt Amendment as the price for ending the U.S. military occupation in 1902 and granting Cuba its independence.

So what conclusions can we draw? One obvious one is that we should not see the story of the Harvard Cubans in isolation. The U.S.-Cuba imperial encounter at the turn of the century gave rise to all manner of projects of U.S. "uplift," projects that Cubans could and often did do everything they could to make their own. To that end, both the Harvard Cubans and the Tuskegee case invite us to consider a broader panoply of such exchanges in the field of education

⁷ Guridy, 18.

⁸ Guridy, 20.

across the island's "Republican" era, filled as it was with countless stories of Cubans pursuing educational opportunities (often individually) in the United States. What other stories have yet to be uncovered, particularly beyond the shadow of the most blatant period of U.S. neocolonialism, when "the Republic" remained dependent, but had more developed institutions of its own?

Case 2: Cubans in the Soviet Union, East Germany, etc.

If initiatives like the Harvard Summer School for Teachers and the Tuskegee Cuba project are inextricably linked to empire, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 was supposed to bring any shred of deference to foreign models and institutions to a close. Not only did the breaking of U.S.-Cuban relations in January 1961 eliminate possibilities for educational exchange with the North, but why would a Cuba in revolution have a need for them? Plainly confident in its potential and destiny, the island and its institutions should have had little need for foreign advice.

Yet we know that between the 1960s and 1980s, Cuba received the help of thousands of foreign technicians from the Soviet Union. Thousands of Cuban students, in turn, studied not in the United States, but in more distant northern latitudes in the USSR and across the Eastern bloc. For the select few, scholarships to specialized programs in Western Europe were also occasionally possible. Spend time in Havana, particularly with Cubans who were becoming professionals in the 1970s and 80s, and it is not difficult to find someone who speaks Russian because they spent multiple years getting an advanced education abroad.

But aside from a few elliptical references in memoirs to such experiences, or marginalia in academic texts (1,000-2,000 Cubans went to the Soviet Union in 1961 and 1962 alone, Denise Blum tell us in a recent book), there is scarce information available about the reach of post-1959

foreign exchange programs of this kind.⁹ Nor do we know much about the experiences of Cuban students who participated in them, and their legacies and effects. Under what conditions did such programs develop? Under what terms? And for what particular degree programs and goals? If Danny's film is called the Harvard Cubans, it strikes me he may need to do "The Moscow State Cubans" sequel next.

There are serious historical matters at stake here, not just the temptation to engage in a bit of socialist nostalgia. For studying Cuban educational experiences in the socialist world would contribute to a broadening scholarly interest in tracing multiple, overlapping "Sovietizations" in Cuban politics, culture, and experience after 1959. Plus, were Danny to make this sequel—via oral history, for example—I suspect that many of the questions worthy of asking would be similar to those he asks of the Harvard case. The contexts were undeniably different, and perhaps the motivations, but perhaps the cultural dynamics of the encounter not so much.

Consider the line between partnership and paternalism, such a central theme in the Harvard Cubans story. Like most things in the Cuban-Soviet relationship, educational opportunities were likely framed as demonstrations of "friendship," not foreign influence or control. In the socialist context, the idea of partnership among equals would have been particularly important as the rhetorical underpinning of collaboration between states. At the same time, from the 1960s through 1980s, Cubans also looked to the Soviet Union as an alternate model of modernity, pinnacle of development, and source of imported appliances, equipment, and technology (while also sometimes laughing at ugly Russian design).¹⁰ If Cubans needed to

⁹ Denise Blum, *Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 70.

¹⁰ See, for example, María Antonia Cabrera Arús, "The Material Promise of Socialist Modernity: Fashion and Domestic Space in the 1970s," in *The Revolution from Within: Cuba, 1959-1980*, ed. Michael J. Bustamante and Jennifer L. Lambe (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019), 189-217.

take a special degree is nuclear physics in the USSR, for example, to be in a position to work on the nuclear reactor that the Soviet Union was going to help Cuba build in Juraguá in the 1980s, it must have been because Cuban expertise in the area was deemed deficient. That is, Cuba continued to recognize that it was “underdeveloped,” which is to say still in need of international assistance, just of the non-exploitative kind.

Still, the power relations in such partnerships must also have been unmistakable at times, no matter how generous Soviet subsidies were. And one suspects that the sense of asymmetry might have been reinforced by the experiences of Cuban students who did spend time in the Eastern bloc. Not only would Cuban students have had to struggle to master a very different language, possibly affecting their academic performance; one wonders whether and to what degree their counterparts in host countries also saw them as charity cases or odd. On one metric—race—we can safely say there probably were clear parallels with the Harvard case. If darker-skinned members of the Harvard Cubans delegation received strange looks in Cambridge in 1900, some Cubans likely did in Moscow in 1985 too. The racialization of Cuban “friends” in the Soviet imaginary is something that requires further study. But it certainly fits an understanding of Moscow functioning vis-à-vis Cuba as a kind of alternate, quasi-imperial metropole, albeit one that did not own property, territory, or businesses in Cuba per se.¹¹

Case 3: Nicaraguans on the Isla de la Juventud (via Emily Synder)

¹¹ For incisive reflections on these and other tensions born of Soviet-Cuban exchanges, see Jacqueline Loss, *Dreaming in Russian: the Cuban Soviet Imaginary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Anne E. Gorsuch, “Cuba, My Love”: The Romance of Revolutionary Cuba in the Soviet Sixties, *The American Historical Review* 120, No. 2 (April 2015): 497-526.

But of course, what is also salient about Cuba after 1959 in this genealogy I am tracing is that the island became not just a source of students going to comparatively developed countries but a destination for students from all over Latin America and elsewhere in the third world. To this day, Cuba is famous for being an educational haven in its own right, particularly in fields like medicine and public health. So one wonders: were Cuban institutions after 1959 more successful at forging genuine partnerships among equals in the education space? Or did some of the same complications we have seen in other cases—asymmetries of power, and the politics of paternalism and race—also show their face?

Again, this is a topic that would benefit from more research. And one could point to many examples of programs that deserve further study. But for the sake of brevity, I want to highlight a recent paper by Emily Snyder, a Ph.D. candidate at Yale University, delivered at a 2019 conference at New York University, that hones its attention on one fascinating case: thousands of Nicaraguan students who were educated on Cuba's Isle of Youth in the 1980s, following the victory of the Sandinista Revolution in their own country.¹²

The Island of Youth constituted what Snyder calls a “social laboratory” for the Cuban Revolution as the site of some of its most radical experiments in agricultural collectivization, political rehabilitation, and collective farms for wayward youth in the 1960s. But by the late 1970s it had morphed into destination where thousands of students from around the world, and from Nicaragua in particular, studied in isolation from mainland Cuba itself. Just consider the numbers. The first foreign students to arrive in 1977 included 850 from Angola and 1,100 from Mozambique, reflecting the African geography of Cuban internationalist commitments at the

¹² Emily Snyder, “A Real Social Laboratory: The Isla de la Juventud and the Cuban Revolution, 1959-1989,” *The Cuban Revolution at 60: New Directions at History and Historiography*, New York University, March 7, 2019.

time. But by 1982, there were over 22,000 students on the island, housed in fifty schools for the most part segregated by nationality. Thousands were Nicaraguan, some of whom had participated in the Sandinista revolution itself barely in their teens, or simply signed up for educational opportunities in Cuba advertised at home after the Sandinista victory. Between secondary and pre-university schooling, according to Snyder, some spent upwards of six years on the island, including the most formative years of their adolescence.

Snyder did a masterful job in her paper drawing on oral histories to describe the experiences of the Nicaraguan students. Far from home, many struggled with the isolation from family, unfamiliar Cuban foods, and the strict regimen of Cuban schools (including limitations of students' mobility). But I left the conference hall that day curious to hear more reflections from Nicaraguans she interviewed about their Cuban interlocutors, or from the former Cuban interlocutors themselves. On the one hand, Snyder relates how some Nicaraguans fondly remembered the "adoptive mothers" they were assigned so they could have a semblance of a home life on the weekends when they had free time. The fact that some keep in touch with Cuban "aunts" and "uncles" suggests that the Cuban adoptive families felt the same. Yet how did Cuban teachers react to the Nicaraguan students? Metaphorically, the Sandinista revolution was treated as a kind of kid brother of the Cuban experience, and Nicaraguan students were there to be educated according to the (purportedly) superior Cuban revolutionary model combining work in classrooms and the fields. Did Nicaraguan students agree? And did Cuban teachers find that Nicaraguan students embraced their revolutionary education? What about the visitors' indigenous or mestizo backgrounds—largely absent from the island's ethno-racial mix? Did that ever shape how they were received?

Case 4: U.S-Cuba Educational Exchange after D17

Finally, I want to come full circle—that is, back to Cuban exchanges with the United States. For after the historic announcements of “D-17” in 2014, it seemed Cubans had the chance to once again begin seeking educational opportunities across the Florida Straits. Of course, there was a recent history of educational exchange between the two countries, through study abroad programs for U.S. students in the 1990s. And in 2009, under the Obama administration but before the formal reestablishment of diplomatic ties, the U.S. government included Cuba for the first time in a State-Department-backed college scholarship program. But at that time, Cuban authorities denied Cuban awardees permission to leave the island, insinuating that the scholarships were part of a subversive U.S. ideological campaign. Even recently, that is, Cuba had shown itself more open to U.S. students spending time on the island than sending its own young people to study in the North—especially if U.S.-government funding was involved.¹³

After 2014, by contrast, it seemed U.S. institutions once again had the opportunity to bring larger contingents of Cuban students to study in their halls. Cubans, in turn, appeared to have more of a green light to take advantage of such opportunities from back home. The U.S. embassy in Havana began serving as a test center for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Records Examinations (GRE), requisites for foreign students seeking to pursue graduate degrees in the United States. The Institute for International Education led delegations to the island filled with U.S. university officials.¹⁴ And, anecdotally, I know of several Cubans who took advantage of the moment to pursue PhDs.

¹³ Wilfredo Cancio Isla, "U.S. Scholarships get Cuban Students Expelled," *Miami Herald*, September 4, 2009, <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24553864.html>.

¹⁴ "IIE Delegation to Cuba Explores Educational Partnership Opportunities," *IIE.org*, November 4, 2015, <https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2015/11/2015-11-04-IIE-Delegation-To-Cuba-Explores-Educational-Partnership-Opportunities>.

But as much as these possibilities generated excitement, some voices on the island warily painted the new U.S. posture in favor of “exchange” as a potential imperial/capitalist Trojan horse. In one instance, a summer leadership program for Cuban teenagers run by the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit World Learning, with funding from the U.S. government, was denounced as a Yankee manipulation designed to “empower” a new generation of activist in the tools of independent activism and civil disobedience campaigns.¹⁵ Were they right? Or were such programs something more ambiguous like the Harvard Cubans on repeat, in which whatever the U.S. government’s intentions, Cuban students could take advantage of what they learned for their own needs?

It may be too early to assess the legacies of U.S.-Cuba educational exchange in the D-17 era—which, three years into the Trump administration, now seems like a distant memory. But one initiative, it strikes me, does seem akin to the Harvard Cubans case in other ways. Over the summer of 2016, my own university—Florida International University—hosted fifteen young Cuban entrepreneurs on its campus for a business education program. On the one hand, such a setting could not have been more different from Cambridge in 1900. This was Miami, after all—Havana north, and the classes were in *español*. But the program also recapitulated a dynamic in which Cubans were once again looking to U.S.-based guidance and training in “modern” techniques (and a language, English) with which they were less familiar at a time of domestic reform (the opening to the private sector on the island, after 2010). Likewise, a U.S. institution once again positioned itself as Cubans’ partners, tutors, and hosts.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ortelio González Martínez, "Cuban Students Denounce World Learning," *Granma* (English edition), September 28, 2016, <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2016-09-28/cuban-students-denounce-world-learning>.

¹⁶ Tim Padgett, "Young Pioneers: How Cuban Entrepreneurs are 'Incubating' in Miami," *WLRN*, June 20, 2016, <https://www.wlrn.org/post/young-pioneers-how-cuban-entrepreneurs-are-incubating-miami#stream/0>.

Conclusion

In sum, the story of the Harvard Cubans is only the tip of the iceberg. Cubans have been involved in educational partnerships across decades, both as students and hosts, and with partners from the so-called first, second, and third worlds. Each episode I have described brought unique challenges, and each was born in particular contexts. But for all of their differences, the encounters they made possible between persons of different nationalities reveal the fraught politics of educational partnership in contexts of asymmetrical power relations between states.