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Havana Up in Harlem: LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse and the Making of a Cultural Revolution*

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ABSTRACT: During the 1960s the Cuban Revolution was a seminal influence on black Americans. In July 1959, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Harold Cruse traveled to Cuba, where they witnessed the Rebel Army becoming the new Cuban government. That trip shaped Cruse's and Jones' ideas about the relationship between First World protest and Third World revolution. Jones' participation in the Black Arts Movement and Cruse's ideas in *Rebellion or Revolution?* and *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* were informed by their comparison of African Americans to colonized peoples and their assertions that cultural production was central to the forging of oppositional identities. Consideration of their political and cultural activism lends critical insight into the U. S. Third World Left, a group of African-American, U. S. Latino/a, and U. S. Asian writers, artists and activists who created cultural, material and ideological links to the Third World in order to challenge U. S. economic, racial and cultural hierarchies.

I came to realize that Fidel and Cuba's embrace of socialism was the key to understanding the protracted nature of the struggle, not only in the United States, but worldwide.

—LeRoi Jones (Jones, 1998, 7)

The fault of our artists and intellectuals lies in their original sin: they are not truly revolutionary.

—Ernesto Che Guevara (Guevara, 1967)

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IN JULY OF 1959, BEAT POET LEROI JONES (later Imamu Amiri Baraka) and culture critic Harold Cruse went to Cuba to see Fidel Castro's revolution up close. With Castro barely in power a year, the three men witnessed firsthand the young rebel army transforming itself into the new Cuban government. Unlikely traveling companions, Cruse and Jones were part of a delegation organized by journalist Richard Gibson for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). The trip was an effort to enlist black left support for Castro, and as such was originally to include several prominent African-American artists and intellectuals, including Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and Alice Childress (Gosse, 1993, 147). Though they all declined, Jones and Cruse eventually traveled with armed self-defense advocate Robert Williams, novelist Julian Mayfield and historian John Henrik Clarke. The trip proved to be a pivotal one, shaping Jones' and Cruse's ideas about African-American culture, community and the likely prospects for black revolution.

Upon their return from Havana, both men wrote extensively about Cuba. In his autobiography, subsequent interviews and in the 1960 essay "Cuba Libre," Jones reflects upon Cuba's radicalizing influence on both his politics and art, charting his movement from disengaged Beat to black radical. Unlike Jones, the somewhat older Cruse did not move dramatically to the left after his Cuba visit. Instead, the trip crystallized Cruse's fundamental disagreements with Jones and the rest of what he termed the "black New Left," a perspective articulated in his seminal work, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.¹ If the Cuban Revolution initially opened a bitter ideological chasm between the two men, by 1965 they found themselves on common intellectual and political ground. During the 1960s, Cruse and Jones not only became allies, but their intellectual and political work drastically shifted the cultural terrain on which black leftists fought during the decade, fueling their search for a black national culture and the belief in cultural revolution as the key to political liberation. As we shall see, identification with the Cuban

1 Though Cruse's primary target in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* is, in fact, black leftists who have worked with or been substantially influenced by the CPUSA, he is concerned with the possibility that a new generation of leftists, the black New Left, will fall into the CPUSA's orbit and repeat many of the mistakes he alleges have been made by earlier generations of black leftists.

Revolution allowed Jones and Cruse to craft revolutionary theory and practice for the U. S. context. Guided by its example, they likened the relationship of African Americans to colonized peoples, debated the viability of armed struggle and asserted culture's centrality in forging oppositional identities.

The fact that Jones and to a lesser extent Cruse were so indelibly shaped by their visit to Cuba lends critical insight into one of the 1960s' unexplored cultural and political formations, the U. S. Third World Left. Part of this left formation, Jones and Cruse produced reflections on the Cuban Revolution that allow us to explore why this group found Cuba such a compelling example, and to discern how it shaped their conceptions of the relationship between culture and politics, between the First and the Third Worlds. Active in the 1960s and 70s, this U. S. Third World Left was forged in the interstices between the New Left and Civil Rights, between the Counterculture and the Black Arts movement, between domestic rebellion and international revolution. A generation of African-American, U. S. Latino/a, and U. S. Asian artists, intellectuals and activists created cultural, material and ideological links to the Third World as a mode through which to contest U. S. economic, racial and cultural arrangements. Crafting what Arjun Appadarai has called "new diasporic public spheres," LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse, and many others including Robert Williams, Angela Davis, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Third World Newsreel, and the Young Lords Party, emphasized the relation between cultural experimentation and radical politics, theorizing and enacting a distinctly new radical racial and ethnic subjectivity (Appadarai, 1997, 22). These new subjectivities were not vehicles for a narrow identity politics — as some New Left historiographers would have it — but rather means for linking local racial and ethnic oppression to global patterns of Western imperialism and economic exploitation.² Often, this meant building coalitions across race, ethnicity, gender, generation and national lines. It meant crafting a new theoretical and political language and adapting the rhetoric and tactics of Third World anticolonial movements for First World mobilization.

2 For examples of the New Left historiography I am disputing, see Gitlin, 1987; Miller, 1987.

The Traffic to Cuba

Cruse and Jones were by no means the only or even the first visitors to Castro's Cuba. In December 1959, former heavyweight champ Joe Louis and baseball stars Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella traveled there, eating New Year's dinner with Castro himself (Moore, 1998, 59). That spring, armed self-defense advocate Robert Williams also went to Cuba, a trip he later described as "a pilgrimage to the shrine of hope," offering "three weeks of the only true freedom I have ever known" (Gosse, 1993, 153, quoting Robert Williams, *The Crusader*, July 30 and August 13, 1960). On his recommendation, other members of the Armed Deacons for Self-Defense began visiting Cuba in 1961 (Moore, 1998, 120). Later in the decade, other black radicals, particularly those influenced by Williams, visited Cuba, including members of RAM, the Revolutionary Action Movement (an underground black nationalist organization), the Detroit militants who subsequently formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (Kelley and Esch, 1999, 16). In 1967, Black Panther Stokely Carmichael briefly visited, and in 1972 recently released political prisoner Angela Davis drew huge crowds when she visited the island to thank Cubans for spearheading the international effort on her behalf (Reitan, 1999, 44). If U. S. Third World Leftists found Cuba an important site for political education, it was also a critical outpost for those seeking political asylum. Castro's government found itself flooded by immigration requests as U. S. government repression against black radicals intensified. In 1961, Williams went into exile there, as did Black Panther Party members Eldridge Cleaver in 1968, Huey Newton in 1974, and Assata Shakur in 1979.

What accounts for the black radical interest in and traffic to Cuba during the 1960s and 70s? For one, the Cuban Revolution actively courted black Americans from the very moment of its victory, emphasizing the new government's vanquishing of racial segregation. Waging a media war of position, Cuba's tourism board, via a U. S. public relations firm associated with Joe Louis, promoted Cuba as a land "free of racism" in advertisements flooding black magazines and newspapers in the early 1960s (Plummer, 1998, 137-8). This reputation was built on the fact that Castro outlawed segregation and dis-

crimination just two months after the guerrillas assumed power, an extremely important act for black Americans in light of an accelerating Civil Rights Movement.³ The Cuban government also established an open-door policy for black visitors through the FPCC and other organizations. In the early 1960s, these visits were intended to publicize the Cuban Revolution's successes, but later on they were explicitly designed to train and educate black revolutionaries. When visitors returned from Havana, many praised the regime's treatment of Afro-Cubans, explicitly contrasting it with the U. S. government's support of racial segregation. Such publicity fueled a propaganda war between Havana and Washington on the race question, a war that reached fever pitch during the fall of 1960 when Castro arrived in New York City to address the United Nations (Moore, 1998, 62).

Havana Comes to Harlem

Fidel Castro's visit instantly created a crisis exposing the omnipresence of racism in the United States. Accusing the hotel staff of discrimination, the Cuban delegation left the elite Shelbourne Hotel where UN delegates habitually stayed for Harlem's Hotel Theresa, a move that deliberately flouted the era's segregationist conventions. That single act helped cement Castro's status as folk hero, the champion of oppressed black and U. S. Latino/a peoples. Exhilarated by his presence, thousands of African-Americans, Cubans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean peoples surrounded the hotel throughout Castro's stay (Gosse, 1996, 307). During one such rally, a Harlemiter held a sign that read, "US Jim Crows Fidel just like US Jim Crows Us Negroes" (Moore, 1998, 79). On one level, this slogan merely compares the Cuban delegation's one-time experience to the daily discrimination faced by African Americans. However, read within the larger context of Castro's opposition to Western imperialism generally and U. S. imperialism specifically, the slogan and the mass demonstrations indicate the protectors' sense that the new Cuban government was on the side of subjugated peoples

3 I do not mean to suggest that Cuba was indeed a land free of racism. Instead I am highlighting the reputation actively cultivated by Castro's regime and the ways in which African Americans shaped and invested in that discourse. Vigorous debate on the question of Castro's treatment of Afro-Cubans continues. See, for example, Moore, 1998; Booth, 1976; Cole, 1980.

in the United States and worldwide. No matter that Castro and the white, Cuban middle class had defeated the mulatto Fulgencio Batista; racial "origin" was not the overriding means of identification with the Cuban Revolution. Rather, identification with Cuba marked and facilitated a growing internationalism among peoples of color in the United States, which according to Bernice Reagon challenged African Americans' binary understandings of race: "Cultural differences in racial perception, coupled with Cuba's oppositional stance, challenged taken-for-granted categories of domination" (Plummer, 1998, 144). As decolonization accelerated in the Third World, Harlem's black and U. S. Latino/a population increasingly understood that U. S. racial domination was intimately interconnected with global relations of economic, cultural and above all territorial domination. As such, mobilization against racism entailed mobilization against Western imperialism, a task that required the forging of alliances between and among U. S. national minorities and emerging postcolonial nation-states.⁴

The political impact of Castro's Harlem sojourn made this point abundantly clear. In declaring Harlem his base of operation, Castro insisted upon world recognition of black Americans and their plight. Not only did the renegade leader meet with Nikita Khrushchev there, but he also received Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru there. Harlem, thus, temporarily became a center of Third World negotiation and anticolonial solidarity. *The Amsterdam News* best captured the significance of these meetings, writing: "Castro's move to the Theresa and Khrushchev's decision to visit him gave the Negroes of Harlem one of the biggest 'lifts' they have had in their cold racial war with the white man" (Plummer, 1998, 140). A ghetto routinely neglected by local and national officials alike was suddenly a politically significant site. Symbolically, Castro had moved the UN uptown, centering the Third World — both Cuba and Harlem — at the very heart of the First World.

This point was further reinforced at the UN General Assembly when Castro linked the cause of African Americans to Third World struggles for national liberation. Calling for "African American na-

4 This was not the first instance of African Americans linking anti-racist and anticolonial politics. Penny Von Eschen, 1997, depicts this dual mobilization in the 1940s and 1950s.

tionhood," Gayle Plummer writes, Castro stressed "the need for economic self-sufficiency, and independence from white cultural and political domination" (Plummer, 1998, 135). These comments were not the express reason for Castro's UN address, but they were far from tangential. Instead, they must be understood as part and parcel of his assertion that Cuba was a leading force in the global anticolonial movement. Castro depicted black Americans struggling for equality as a revolutionary force akin to Cuban guerrillas and African freedom fighters.

This assertion was strengthened by the main text of Castro's speech, which unveiled Cuba's policy towards Africa. Reminding UN delegates of the history of slavery and colonization shared by Cuba and Africa, Castro declared common cause with "the remaining colonial peoples in Africa and on the side of the Negroes against whom discrimination is exercised in the Union of South Africa" (Plummer, 1998, 142). The Cuban leader then pledged his nation's assistance in decolonizing Africa, a policy already well underway by 1960. In fact, Cuba had already lent political and military support to many of the 21 new nation-states formed in Africa between 1955 and 1961 (Reitan, 1999, 33). Thorough in its denunciations — Castro spoke for over four hours — the speech was characteristic of the Cuban's rhetoric during the 1960s. Such speeches secured Cuba's status as an active foe of Western imperialism in both its European and North American guises, resonating with U. S. Third World Leftists who saw Castro as an ally in the fight against racism at home and imperialism abroad.

A New Revolutionary Experiment

Castro's uniting of anti-racist rhetoric and anticolonial politics in his appeals to black Americans enabled them and other U. S. Third World leftists to connect domestic struggles for racial equality to Third World liberation movements. If the Cuban Revolution was immensely popular among African Americans and other U. S. national minorities in the early 1960s, it was an especially powerful emblem for writers and intellectuals who gravitated towards it because of the centrality of cultural production to Castro's victory and subsequent rule of the nation. During the seven-year war, Castro's July 26th Movement astutely used various cultural technologies to enlist support for their cause. Professionals in advertising agencies created campaigns for

products such as Tornillo Soap that covertly challenged the legitimacy of the Batista regime (Chanan, 1985, 83). Cubans also heard news of the guerrillas' progress over Radio Rebelde, a station the Rebel Army set up in the Sierra Maestra to contravene Batista's censorship codes. Even after Batista's defeat, Castro continued to use the mass media ingeniously. Television became an important means for publicizing the new government's programs and policies as the charismatic Castro often delivered speeches via the medium, a technique that visually underscored his enormous popularity by presenting the spectacle of huge and enthusiastic crowds.

The Rebel Army's savvy use of popular culture and media technologies is perhaps best exemplified through its development of Cuba's filmmaking tradition. Just two weeks after the Rebel Army's victory, Ernesto Che Guevara created a military cultural school devoted to documentary filmmaking. Members of the underground filmmaking scene, including Santiago Alvarez, Julio Garcia Espinosa and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, soon joined the fledgling organization, and two months later, the Instituto Cubano de Arte y Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) was born. As film historian Michael Chanan has noted, the decree establishing ICAIC "declared cinema an art, an instrument for the creation of individual and collective consciousness." ICAIC was initially sustained by government grants, but its acquisition of a record factory and an advertising studio soon established it as an independent cultural force to be reckoned with. In a relatively short period of time, ICAIC was able to transform film from what Chanan has described as an "industrialized art and agent of cultural imperialism" into a truly populist art form and a "powerful new mode of perception" (Chanan, 1985, 20, 81). In its first two years of production, ICAIC completed several films, including *Esta Tierra Nuestra*, *Tierra Olvidada*, *Ritmo de Cuba*, and *La Vivienda*. Most of these early works were didactic treatises on the government's reforms, patriotic records of Castro's decisive battles, or films celebrating Cuba's "indigenous" cultural traditions and excoriating Western imperialism. ICAIC's mobile cinema units traveled to isolated, rural communities, showing these films in schools and village squares where they reached a largely illiterate populace and sparked vigorous public debate.

Under ICAIC, Chanan asserts, "Cuban cinema had become a powerful force in the collective memory of the Cuban people, popu-

lar historian of the Revolution second only to Fidel, and thus a force for social cohesion." In addition to garnering widespread public appeal, Cuban films also earned international acclaim. In 1960, Cuban films won five international awards, including ones at the Leipzig Film Festival and at the Festival of the Peoples in Florence (Chanan, 1985, 3, 99). Cuban films were compelling not only for their subject matter — the progress of a young revolution — but also for their innovative forms. Cuban filmmakers crafted a new documentary style by combining cartoon sequences, montages, newsreel footage and reenactments. Through its film journal, *Cine Cubano*, ICAIC even began publishing a series of theoretical texts on the relationship between cinema, aesthetics and revolution. The theoretical and cinematic language of Third World Cinema was slowly emerging, and although its roots originated in the Documentary Film School in Argentina and Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, Cuba was the "first territory in Latin American where it was possible to envisage a new film culture, both popular and critical, on a national scale" (Chanan, 1983, 3). Much more than a film production company, ICAIC became a meeting ground for artists and intellectuals of all stripes.

This was also the case for Casa de Las Américas, the country's newly formed literary and cultural center. Casa's mission was to promote Cuban culture and pan-American exchange, and it did so in a variety of ways. Through its influential journal, edited for much of its history by renowned writer Roberto Fernández Retamar, and its publishing of Latin American and Caribbean writers, Casa promoted a literary generation and facilitated intellectual debate. The organization also sponsored frequent conferences, literary competitions and cultural festivals, attracting artists, writers and intellectuals to Cuba from all over Latin America (Jameson, 1989, ix). In its early days, Casa even hosted renowned figures from the West, including filmmaker Maya Deren and writers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre. It is no coincidence that Casa was the primary Cuban sponsor for the FPCC trip in which Jones and Cruse participated. In addition to these activities, Casa also founded an adult education school devoted to disseminating and popularizing Cuban culture among its largely illiterate and rural populace. Answering Retamar's famously ironic question, "Does a Latin American culture exist?" with a resounding "Yes!," Casa's activities helped spark a pan-American revolution in the

arts and catapulted Havana onto the world cultural stage (Jameson, 1989, 13).

Together ICAIC and Casa did more than just disprove the widespread misconception that political revolution necessarily stymies cultural innovation; they helped diminish the relationship of cultural imperialism between North and South America. Instead of serving as a dumping ground for Hollywood's B-movies, Cuban filmmakers created internationally acclaimed films of local relevance. Instead of voraciously devouring Western literature, Latin American intellectuals focused on the works of Alfonso Reyes, José Carlos Mariátegui, and Carlos Fuentes. Though it would be a mistake to ignore the contributions of other Latin American countries, Cuba's principal role in this cultural revolution is indisputable. "From the beginning," Fredric Jameson writes, "the Cuban experience affirmed itself as an original one, as a new revolutionary model" (Jameson, 1984, 201). Jameson is referring here to the Rebel Army's successful deployment of Che Guevara's *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare, but his words might just as easily refer to Cuba's artful blending of political and cultural concerns. It was this dual focus that rendered the Cuban example such an impressive and important one for U. S. Third World leftists. With its insistence upon both political and cultural autonomy and its commitment to Third World solidarity, Cuba inspired an entire generation of political and cultural activists, particularly LeRoi Jones and Harold Cruse.

From Beat to Black Radical Via Havana

LeRoi Jones dedicated an entire essay to the 1960 Fair Play for Cuba trip. The lengthy "Cuba Libre" charts Jones' transformation from Beat poet to black radical. In it, we are presented with a compelling conversion narrative, one that contrasts Jones' New York life of letters with the revolutionary dynamism of Cuba. Examining the way in which Jones frames that conversion narrative allows us to see why he invested his own cultural production with the same revolutionary potential evident in the new Cuban government. After Cuba, Jones is no longer a politically disengaged Beat poet; he is a nascent black revolutionary. Originally published in the Beat journal, *Evergreen Review*, "Cuba Libre" also serves as the opening salvo in his 1966

collection, *Home: Social Essays*, an angry assessment of U. S. cultural and political life. In the introduction to that collection, Jones argues that traveling to Cuba brought him metaphorically home; upon his return to the States, Jones became in his words the "Prodigal" growing "even blacker" under the Cuban sun (Jones, 1998, 9–10). Through his identification with the series of (mostly) white Cuban men he encounters on the trip, Jones forges a new "black" identity and a critique of the United States that depends upon his newly acquired anti-colonial perspective.

This profound shift in Jones' world view has been primarily expressed through his persistent search for an African-American national culture that would serve as the foundation for the revolutionary black American state. In 1965, Jones wrote: "A culturally aware black politics would use all the symbols of the culture, all the keys and images out of the black past, out of the black present, to gather the people to it" (Baraka, 1971, 44). As we have seen, this sentiment was perfectly in keeping with Castro's investment in revolutionary culture. By demonstrating the integral role culture plays in political change and offering literal embodiments of the male, revolutionary hero, the Cuba trip enabled Jones, the Beat writer, to become Jones, the U. S. Third World leftist.

In order to understand fully the significance of his conversion, it is necessary to situate Jones within his artistic and political milieu. Everett LeRoy Jones was born in Newark, New Jersey on October 7, 1934, the child of Anna Lois Russ, the daughter of small business owners who cut short her education at Tuskegee when she found herself pregnant by Coyt LeRoy Jones, a high school graduate and itinerant laborer (Baraka, 1984, 3–11, 113). Jones grew up in Newark's West Ward, a section of the city populated by Eastern European immigrants and black Southern migrants. After leaving Howard University in 1954, Jones enlisted in the U. S. Air Force where he spent the next three years. Soon he found himself permanently stationed in the U. S. colony of Puerto Rico, where he established the Ramey Air Force Base Salon, a gathering of white and black photographers, painters and intellectuals. Although it has never been acknowledged by Jones, it seems to have been a familiar paradox of colonialism — a member of a dominated group, in this case a black American, enforcing U. S. imperialism abroad — that fueled his intense alienation. Decidedly ill suited for his role as colonial enforcer, Jones retreated

into the world of arts and letters, self-consciously fashioning himself as an intellectual. Interestingly, his intellectual inquiries failed to encompass his own local context; Jones' memoir does not even mention San Juan's economic or political subordination, let alone describe it as a colonized city.

Jones was eventually dishonorably discharged from the Air Force in 1957. Soon after, he took up residence in Greenwich Village, quickly becoming a fixture in New York Bohemian life along with fellow writers Diana DiPrima, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and Frank O'Hara. With his wife, Hettie Jones, he began editing the literary magazine *Yugen* in 1958, which was devoted to the publication of Beat and Black Mountain poets. By July of 1959, Jones had made quite a name for himself in New York literary circles when suddenly the chance to visit Cuba presented itself:

A man called me on a Saturday afternoon some months ago and asked me if I wanted to go to Cuba with some other Negroes, some of whom were also writers. . . . I hesitated for a minute, asking the man just why would we (what seemed to me to be just "a bunch of Negroes") be going. For what purpose? He said, "Oh, I thought that since you were a poet you might like to know what's *really* going on down there." Being an American poet, I suppose, I thought my function was simply to talk about everything as if I knew. . . . it had never entered my mind that I might really like to find out for once what was actually happening someplace else in the world. (Jones, 1998, 12.)

So begins the section of "Cuba Libre" entitled "What I Brought to the Revolution." With this introduction, Jones begins to position himself and his Beat circle as skeptical libertines, arrogant enough to write about the world without experiencing its complexity firsthand. Implicit in this assessment is the assumption that artists — at least Beat writers — consciously remain removed from contemporary politics, content to obtain their information from sources that will not say what's "really going on" in Cuba or anywhere else.

Even before his trip, Castro and Guevara were already mythic characters for Jones. He recalls in his autobiography:

This was 1959 . . . and for the last few months I had been fascinated by the headlines from Cuba. I had been raised on Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood* and the endless hero-actors fighting against injustice and leading the people to

victory over the tyrants. The Cuban thing seemed a case of classic Hollywood proportions. (Baraka, 1984, 161.)

Bound up in Jones' casting of the Cuban guerrillas as Hollywood gunslingers is at once his desire to emulate them and his recognition that he is a poor imitation. Jones' identification with Castro enabled him to transform himself into a spokesperson for black American cultural and political revolution. In Castro's Cuba, Jones would begin to equate the mythic guerrilla fighter with the black American artist, aligning the black ghetto and the Third World colony. His admiration for guerrilla fighters impressed upon him the need to utilize his literary skills in the service of revolutionary change.

All told, "Cuba Libre" is as much an exercise in self-criticism as it is a mechanism for skewering the West. It is as much an expose of Baraka's own radical pretensions as it is an indictment of U. S. society. For all his rebellious trappings, in Cuba, Baraka discovers himself to be just another "ugly American": "The rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics." He reflects:

The young intellectual living in the United States inhabits an ugly void. He cannot use what is around him, neither can he revolt against it. Revolt against whom? Revolution in this country of "due processes of law" would be literally impossible. (Jones, 1998, 39-40.)

Baraka critiques the United States for rendering revolution a seeming impossibility and for instilling in him a false dichotomy between politics and art. In Cuba, these views are challenged by the government officials and the ordinary citizens he meets. When a visiting, Mexican student calls him a "Yanqui imperialist," Jones can only sputter, "I'm a poet . . . what can I do? I write, that's all, I'm not even interested in politics" (Jones, 1998, 43). At this moment, a gaping aporia exists between who Jones imagines himself to be — the rebellious artist — and who people in the Third World perceive him to be — a middle-class American poet smug in his derision of politics and political art. In his memoir, Jones later recalled:

In the face of what I'd already seen in Cuba and in the faces of these young Latino activists and intellectuals, already politicized, for whom Cuba was the first payoff of a world they had already envisioned and were already working

for, I was the oddball, the world weary traveler/tourist from the U.S. of A. (Baraka, 1984, 245.)

The ideological as well as literary problem for Jones is then how to forge a convincing and concrete affiliation between himself and the Third World rebels in his midst. The engine for this ideological magic trick is gender. It is on the basis of gender identification and not-a-little projection that Jones is able to effect his own transformation into a radical black man. We see this in the contrast between the passive objectivity of the Western critic and the heroic men of the Cuban Revolution. In his tours of the National Agrarian Reform Institute, the Ministry of Education, and Casa de Las Americas, Jones encounters a series of highly idealistic and extremely articulate young men. In many instances, they are flanked by soldiers in full dress gear: "huge pearl-handled .45s" and "faultlessly polished boots" (Jones, 1998, 32). These bureaucrats are Jones' Hollywood cowboys come to Cuban life. They are the rebels who appear to have beat the West at its own game, escaping their manifest destiny.

The most impressive of these figures is Dr. Jiménez, the man responsible for implementing the government's land reform program. As Jones describes him, Jiménez becomes the ideal politician, an amalgam of the intellectual, the soldier, and the sex symbol. Jiménez, a university professor, is characterized by Jones as "beautiful, a tall, scholarly-looking man with black hair and a full black beard." His sexual magnetism is only heightened by his attire: "the uniform of the rebel army with the black and red shoulder insignia of a captain" (Jones, 1998, 33). In his belt, he carries a square-handled .45; in his hand he proffers a copy of his latest book. In short, he is the guerrilla intellectual *par excellence*, the incarnation of Jones' latent literary and political fantasies.

As soon becomes clear, however, Jiménez is only the narrative understudy for Fidel Castro, who makes his appearance in the final third of "Cuba Libre." Near the end of the North Americans' visit, signs appear announcing a celebration in the Sierra Maestra at which Castro is scheduled to speak. In order to get there, Jones and the others must survive an odyssey across the island, a journey it seems the entire population is undertaking as if in one body. In crowded trains and packed trucks, through winding mountain passes

and muddy rivers, Jones is repeatedly struck by the “unbelievable joy and excitement” evident despite the physical hardships of the trip. He sees “people moving, being moved . . . something I had never seen before, exploding all around me” (Jones, 1998, 44). The experience culminates with the black poet’s unexpected meeting with the “tall young Cuban” whose appearance has whipped the country into a frenzy (53). Jones, never one to be awed into silence, answers Castro’s inquiries as to his occupation by firing questions at the young leader:

I told him I was a New York poet, he seemed extremely amused and asked me what the government thought about my trip. I shrugged my shoulders and asked him what did he intend to do with this revolution. (53.)

His answer less than inspiring, Castro counters: “That is a poet’s question and the only poet’s answer I can give you is that I will do what I think is right, what I think the people want” (52). When asked what role Communism plays in his government, Castro fires back: “I am certainly not an anti-communist. The United States likes anti-communists, especially so close to their mainland. . . . I consider myself a humanist. A radical humanist” (53). With that, Jones is swept aside as the crowd clamors for autographs, kisses and photos, treating Castro more like a rock star than a head of state.

Castro’s claim to be both a radical and a humanist surely appealed to a Bohemian poet struggling to marry his creative impulses with his nagging sense of social responsibility. Despite the relentless sun and then the pouring rain in the Sierra Maestra, the crowd is transfixed by Castro’s speech. For two and a half hours, he condemns Eisenhower, Nixon, and the Monroe Doctrine, his words punctuated by the Cubans’ chants of “Fidel, Fidel . . .” and “Venceremos, Venceremos!” Though he does not describe his own reaction to Castro’s speech, Jones notes that the “crowd went out of its head roaring for almost forty-five minutes” (Jones, 1998, 55). However, the celebration does not end there. Instead it becomes what the poet describes as “a strange mixture of pop culture and mainstream highbrow *haute culture*.” A choral group and ballet dancers share the stage with Calypso dancers and West Indian performers who enact a Carnival scene complete with “floats, huge papier-mâché figures, drummers, and masks” (56). Once again, the

intertwining of culture and politics is a prevalent characteristic of Castro's revolution.

"Cuba Libre" concludes with Jones' reactions to the trip, which has irrevocably altered him. "The idea of 'a revolution' had been foreign to me," Jones reflects. "It was one of those inconceivably 'romantic' and/or hopeless ideas that we Norteamericanos have been taught since public school to hold up to the cold light of 'reason.' That reason being whatever repugnant lie our usurious 'ruling class' had paid their journalists to disseminate" (Jones, 1998, 61). As if to punctuate his point, Jones' first stop on U. S. soil is a Miami newsstand where he glances at a paper. The headline reads: "Cuban Celebration Rained Out" (62). Struck by the contrast between his own experience and the mainstream U. S. media's description of the event, the growing disjuncture between his own beliefs and those of the hegemonic cultural apparatus, Jones found himself increasingly alienated from the intellectual, literary and cultural milieu in which he had formerly thrived. Revolution or at the very least, radical political action no longer seemed an impossible fantasy; rather it became a concrete goal towards which to strive.

Fidel Castro and the band of guerrilla intellectuals Jones meets provide a model for incorporating thought and action, cultural work and political revolution.

The dynamic of the revolution had touched me. Talking to Fidel or Juan Almeida, the black commander of the revolution, or to the young minister of agrarian reform, Nuñez Jiménez, or Jaime or Rubi or Pablo Fernández. Seeing youth not just turning on and dropping out, not *just* hiply cynical or cynically hip, but using their strength and energy to *change* the real world — that was too much. (Baraka, 1984, 246.)

Jones' encounter with the Cuban Revolution quite literally altered the course of the young poet's life, alienating him from the intellectual, literary and cultural milieu in which he had formerly thrived. In his memoir, he recalled, "When I returned I was shaken more deeply than even I realized. The arguments I'd had with my old poet comrades increased and intensified. It was not enough just to write, to feel, to think, one must act! One *could* act" (166). And act he did. Almost immediately, Jones broke with the Beat circle, serving as the

New York chapter chairman of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and working with the Monroe Defense Committee to raise money for Robert Williams' legal defense.

A Critic Takes Cultural Stock

If Jones found in Cuba a model for intellection and action, culture critic Harold Cruse found in Havana something altogether different. Cruse garnered many lessons from that 1960 trip, but most of them were far from favorable. Although a critical supporter of the Cuban Revolution, Cruse maintained his characteristic skepticism about the relevance of Cuba for the United States. In his two major works, Cruse scorned Jones and the black New Left for their easy identification with the Third World in general and Cuba in particular. Such an unconditional identification resulted, in Cruse's view, in an unreasonable faith in violence as the key to liberation and an insufficient understanding of the cultural differences between black America and the Third World. In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual and Rebellion or Revolution?*, Cruse thoroughly critiqued Jones' position, setting forth his own theory for successful black American revolution. Ironically, this theory proposed a series of cultural prescriptions heavily indebted to the Cuban example.

Cruse was already an established writer and cultural activist by the time he visited Cuba. An army veteran, Cruse began his career writing black film and theater reviews for the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*. By the early 1950s, he had broken with the Communist Party, wary of the Communists' propensity for collapsing race into class struggle, but he was equally dissatisfied with what he perceived as the black left's reformist demands for integration. Cruse soon sought an international community of radicals. In the late 1950s, he was briefly involved with the U. S. branch of the Society of African Culture (SAC), an anticolonial organization that published the influential journal, *Presence Africaine*, but for much of the 1960s, Cruse retreated to his Chelsea apartment and worked as a freelance writer. It was during this period that Cruse had the opportunity to visit Cuba.

Cruse traveled to Cuba an avowed Castro supporter, but his customary skepticism led him to view the new regime with a curious but cautious eye. "I was admittedly pro-Castro," he later recalled in his typically irascible fashion, "but there were too many Communists

around acting imperious and important. Moreover there was the obvious and unclarified position of the Cuban Negro to consider." While Jones seems to assume that the government's claims to have eradicated race prejudice are accurate, Cruse notes that the "revolutionary intelligentsia of the Castro regime" are all white Cubans (Cruse, 1984, 356). Nor is he altogether certain that Castro has the support of black Cubans: "... it did not escape me that Havana was full of Cubans (white and black) who were visibly skeptical about the new regime and did not hesitate to say so. How the Cuban Negroes would fare it was too early to predict in 1960" (Cruse, 1968, 185). This was quite a prescient observation. It would take other critics several years before they began to question Cuba's claim to have eradicated racial discrimination. Despite his misgivings about the new government's race policy, Cruse nonetheless realized the significance of the revolution for African Americans, arguing that Cuba had stirred up the latent nationalism in black Americans (Cruse, 1968, 185). For him, this was not entirely undesirable: "Is it not just as valid for Negro nationalists to want to separate from American whites as it is for Cuban nationalists to want to separate economically and politically from the United States?" (95). However, he thought the comparison between African Americans and Third World peoples was incorrect; the United States was not a Third World country, nor were African Americans a colonized people, although they existed in what he saw as a colonial relation to white Americans. The "American Negro does not exist within an underdeveloped country with a large population of tribes and impoverished peasantry," Cruse asserted; therefore the black movement must "cast its praxis into a theoretic frame" that was neither Marxist nor integrationist (186).

For Cruse, their unique position within U. S. society — in but not of America — explains why the Cuban Revolution resonates so strongly with black Americans. "The revolutionary initiative," Cruse wrote, "has passed to the colonial world, and in the United States is passing to the Negro" (Cruse, 1968, 75). In "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," an essay reprinted in Jones' and Larry Neal's Black Arts anthology, *Black Fire*, and widely read by black radicals during the 1960s, Cruse expresses a nuanced politics of Third World identification, arguing that the U. S. Third World left ought to use cultural politics as a mode for revolutionary action rather than idealizing guerrilla warfare. Acknowledging that the pivotal event for

the "black New Left's" reorientation towards the Third World was the Cuban Revolution, Cruse doubts if Cuba's ideology and tactics can be transplanted to the U. S. context. Unfortunately, Cruse asserts, young intellectuals like Jones have become ardent believers in "force and violence," romanticizing guerrillas and armed warfare, without seriously considering whether such an approach can succeed in the United States.

In contrast, Cruse argues for what he terms a "cultural revolution" that would transform U. S. institutions; in the 1960s this theory made Cruse what historian Komozi Woodard has described as "the foremost theorist of cultural nationalism" (Woodard, 1999, 66). Black intellectuals must build autonomous cultural institutions; otherwise the black movement will remain a domestic rebellion rather than a revolution with international impact. Like Jones, Cruse submits that the United States has reached a cultural dead end: "Western civilization is intellectually, spiritually and morally bankrupt" (Cruse, 1968, 104). Given this cultural crisis, America's racial strife is merely an "internal reflection of this contemporary worldwide problem of readjustment between ex-colonial masters and ex-colonial subjects" (105). As domestic colonials, African Americans can only spark revolution if they generate new ideas, infusing American culture with a new set of ideologies. In the case of the Cuban Revolution, the process has been reversed. Praxis, "force and violence," has forged a revolutionary theory, and by following it, the black movement thus far has "been a movement without any unique ideas" (109). In actuality, Cruse's assessment of Cuba is reductionist and inaccurate; he emphasizes the country's belief in armed revolution without paying sufficient attention to the Castro regime's support for new cultural institutions.

Paradoxically, Cruse's prescription for a black cultural revolution involves many of the measures already undertaken in Cuba. He proposes that black radicals "revolutioniz[e] the administration, the organization, the functioning, and the social purpose of the entire American apparatus of cultural communication and plac[e] it under public ownership" (Cruse, 1968, 112). As we have seen, this was one of the earliest goals of the Castro regime. Cruse asserts that creating such a cultural revolution is the most effective means to swiftly and radically democratize U. S. society. Newly revitalized cultural institutions would finally reflect the multi-racial reality of the society, top-

pling the "all-white ideal" currently propagated by "the American cultural arts." These new cultural representations would in turn produce and reflect new more democratic and racially inclusive ideologies. Postulating an "organic connection in American capitalism between race, culture and economics," Cruse sees an attack on the culture industries as a simultaneous attack on the white supremacist cultural logic that sustains U. S. capitalism (113).

Cruse's theory of cultural revolution may have been inspired by a different understanding of Third World revolution than that of Jones, but both Jones and Cruse saw national liberation as inextricably linked to cultural regeneration, an idea indebted to the Cuban example. The Cuban revolutionaries, as Cruse very well knows, also saw themselves as overturning the Western cultural logic that held sway in Havana prior to the revolution. For Cruse, national autonomy was determined by the defining of anticolonial cultural priorities and the subsequent production of culture based on them. A coherent national identity was the primary component of any successful independence movement. Jones, at least in the early 1960s, inverted the causal chain, seeing "force and violence" as generative of a new culture and national identity. But by the middle of the 1960s, Jones had reversed himself, a shift that Cruse approvingly noted at the end of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. This is not surprising, since the Cuban Revolution prompted both men to grapple with the question of how alternative cultural forms articulate with new forms of political radicalism.

Thus far, we have seen how the Cuban Revolution influenced Cruse's and Jones' belief in the power of culture to effect political transformation. Cuba provided a concrete example of how revolution might actually occur within a social order deeply marked by Western cultural and political domination. Indeed Cruse and Jones drew many of the same lessons from the FPCC trip, even though Cruse publicly criticized the young poet for his unreasonable faith in "force and violence." Whether Jones did see armed revolution as a viable alternative for black Americans, his actions during the 1960s were not centered on generating that outcome. Instead the young Jones set out to fashion in Harlem and later in Newark precisely the sort of cultural revolution described by Cruse in *Rebellion or Revolution?* Not only did Jones attempt to create an autonomous black national culture; he also connected that culture to the formation of a black radi-

cal politics and an anticolonial front in the urban ghetto. Analysis of his efforts to do so concludes this essay.

Black Cultural Revolution and the Anticolonial Front

The Revolutionary Theatre must force change, it should be change.

— LeRoi Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre"
(Jones, 1965, 4)

Immediately upon his return from Cuba, LeRoi Jones began acting on his new-found political and artistic convictions, defending the right of Third World countries and black Americans to choose their own destiny. Jones staunchly aligned himself with Robert Williams, who soon after the trip was falsely accused of kidnapping and forced to flee the country for Cuba. Jones worked to raise money for Williams' legal defense and championed his right to practice armed self-defense in the name of integration. Jones' actions did not simply constitute a radical civil rights approach — the bullet rather than the ballot. Rather, his support for Williams stemmed from his burgeoning internationalist perspective. Williams, according to Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, was a "hero to the new wave of internationalists" who saw in his controversial approach the echo of Third World armed revolt (Kelley and Esch, 1999, 14). In fact, Williams was one of the earliest figures to directly link the Cuban revolution to the struggle for black liberation in the United States, arguing in late 1959: "The American white man claims to be upset by the latest developments in Cuba. Only the fool can expect to exploit and oppress peoples over an extended period of time without provoking animosity and resistance." "Castro and all other colored rulers," Williams continues, "will do well to shun bigoted Uncle Sam's smiling false face and his racial claims of bondage" (Gosse, 1993, 170). With these fiery words, Williams links Western imperialism and domestic racism, demonstrating his belief that Castro's anticolonial stance defined him as a "colored ruler."

After Cuba, Jones also began drawing parallels between Third World colonies and black urban ghettos. In a 1961 essay, "Letter to Jules Feiffer," Jones argued the merits of self-determination by defending Robert Williams, and critiqued the condescension and moderation

at the heart of white liberalism. Declaring himself opposed to any "Negro protest that does not distress the kind of ethical sterility" white liberalism represents, Jones affirms Williams' right to bear arms in defense of his citizenship rights. He then connects that self-defense tactic to the larger context of Third World anticolonial struggles, saying: "I get the feeling that somehow liberals think that they are peculiarly qualified to tell American Negroes and other oppressed peoples of the world how to wage their struggles. No one wants to hear it" (Jones, 1998, 66). Jones' sense that black and Third World independence necessitated an attack on white liberalism is not surprising, given his former cultural and political location. However, his offensive is not only motivated by Feiffer's critique of armed protest, it is also fueled by this white liberal's objection to Negroes using the term "Afro-American" to describe themselves. Describing the term as both "historically and ethnically correct," Jones dismisses "Negro" as a vehicle for bland assimilation into a "cultureless, muddle-headed AMERICAN" ideal (67). Even at this early stage in his development, political independence was critically bound up with cultural self-determination.

This dual agenda was expressed through a range of political and cultural activities Jones undertook during the 1960s. When the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba was assassinated in early 1961, Jones joined the international outcry, participating in a demonstration organized by On Guard at the UN. Before they were beaten and arrested by police, shouting protectors chanted the modified Cuban slogan "Congo, yes! Yankee, no!," and responded to the call "The word Negro has got to go!" with "We're Afro-Americans!" (Woodard, 1999, 57). Defense of Congolese self-determination both expressed and reinforced a transnational black identity with local moorings. On Guard's leader and spokesmen Daniel Watts best epitomized the sentiment at the UN, describing the demonstrators as "Afro-Americans fighting for African liberation" (58). The fact that protest against Lumumba's murder occasioned the articulation of a new black identity is neither contradictory nor particularly surprising; as we have seen, in the 1960s anti-colonialism and black cultural politics were mutually constitutive. A new black American identity was not forged in isolation. It did not emerge solely within the U. S. political context; rather, it was always the result of a transnational consciousness, one that drew upon anticolonial critiques for its political analysis and international legitimacy.

In 1965 the assassination of another black liberation fighter, Malcolm X, propelled Jones to accelerate his efforts to foster black cultural independence. By then, Jones had published widely on the roots and meaning of black culture, most famously in the 1963 *Blues People*, which traces the formation of blues music to the history of slavery and sharecropping. He had also begun associating with black intellectuals, artists and jazz musicians, including Archie Shepp, Askia Touré, Ornette Coleman, Bob Thompson and Barbara Teer (Baraka, 1984, 260–262). After Malcolm's death, Jones (renamed Imamu Amiri Baraka) founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) in Harlem as, in Woodard's words, a way of enacting Malcolm X's belief in "the priority of black cultural revolution, the centrality of the African Revolution, and the necessity of developing a black ideology of self-determination" (Woodard, 59). From all accounts, BARTS' opening ceremony was spectacular. Writers and artists armed with a black and gold flag paraded down 125th Street to the live music of Sun-Ra. During the year of its existence, BARTS held a summer program for 400 students in which Harold Cruse taught black history, Sonia Sanchez and Larry P. Neal read and wrote poetry, Baraka mounted theatrical productions and Sun-Ra, Albert Ayler and Milford Graves held live jazz concerts (65–66). In many instances, speakers, actors and writers performed in the street, harkening back to the heyday of Harlem's street speakers.

These activities eventually inspired Baraka to plan a Black Arts festival in Newark at which Stokely Carmichael, Harold Cruse and many others addressed the crowd. That Newark festival and Baraka's efforts, more generally, were critical catalysts for the national development of a black arts movement. In the festival's wake, numerous journals including *Black World*, *Freedomways*, and *Black Scholar* emerged, as did Black Arts institutions in Detroit, New Orleans, and Chicago (Woodard, 1999, 67). It is critical to see Baraka's cultural endeavors as central to his desire to build a black national culture that would eventually serve as the foundation for black liberation. In Black Arts veteran Larry Neal's words, Baraka was searching for a "unified identity, an identity . . . in tune with . . . the revolutionary tendencies in the social order, the Black community, the Third World and the necessity to bring aesthetics in line with ethics" (Neal, 1966, 4). This sense that black aesthetics must produce and embody an ethics of black liberation was clearly articulated in Baraka's foreword to *Black*

Fire, in which he described the contributions as “sources, and the constant striving (*jihad*) of a nation coming back into focus” (Jones, 1968, xvii). The *Black Fire* collection blends avant-garde literary, musical and cultural forms in narrating everyday experiences in various African Diaspora locations — Harlem, Tanganyika and Georgia, for example. In doing so, the distance between geographic sites, cultural forms and avant-garde art and popular audiences is productively engaged and ultimately (symbolically) collapsed.⁵

In the years after BARTS dissolved, Baraka moved back to Newark and launched a number of initiatives combining new forms of cultural production and new ideas about political liberation. In the heart of Newark’s Central Ward ghetto, he founded the United Brothers organization, the repertory company Spirit House Movers and Players, the African Free School, and eventually the Committee for a Unified NewArk (CFUN). Convinced that political education must coincide with cultural entertainment, Baraka held events that were part political event, part community celebration. For instance, the United Brothers held weekly Soul Sessions, combining dance and song performances, speeches from Baraka, and a lively *Soul Train* style dance line (Woodard, 132). In campaigning for black mayoral candidate Kenneth Gibson, CFUN enlisted James Brown and Bill Cosby, both of whom performed in fundraisers for the “Community’s Choice” slate. Such events exploited the mainstream cultural capital of Cosby and Brown to facilitate local, community empowerment, shrinking the distance between mainstream culture and grassroots insurgency. CFUN’s campaign effort also directly emulated the Cuban mobile media example, as trucks drove through Newark’s neighborhoods televising speeches by the candidates and telling residents how to register for the election (149). During this period Baraka, heavily influenced by Maulana Karenga’s ideas about “cultural revolution,” even wrote an essay entitled “A Black Value System,” which explained the seven principles known as Nguzo Saba, combining black unity, communal self-determination and cooperative economics. This pamphlet circulated locally within Newark and nationally as black cultural nationalists in New York, Los Angeles and Detroit studied Karenga’s teachings.

After 1965, Baraka’s identification with the Third World had shifted towards the decolonizing African countries, a move that

5 I am indebted to conversations with Robin D. G. Kelley for this insight.

eclipsed his interest in Cuba though it was, in part, sparked by that very interest. Baraka explicitly credited African decolonization with inspiring him to found BARTS:

The emergence of the independent African states and the appearance of African freedom fighters, fighting guerrilla wars with white colonialism, had to produce young intellectuals (and older ones, too) who reveled in that spirit and sought to use that spirit to create art. An art that would reach the people, that would take them higher, ready them for war and victory. (Jones, 1984, 298.)

We should not, however, take this statement as evidence that the Cuban Revolution was of anything but seminal importance for Baraka. Indeed he owed his very understanding of the relation between culture and politics, his first experience of revolutionary change, to that Cuba trip during which his contact with Harold Cruse, Robert Williams, and Fidel Castro altered his political and cultural course forever. As he, Cruse and other U. S. Third World leftists struggled to define a radical, independent cultural and political identity, they based that identity on the emergent precedents of Third World anticolonialism. Frantz Fanon once wrote: "It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately only the source of all culture" (Fanon, 1963, 248). In looking at the Cuban Revolution's influence on U. S. movements for black political equity and cultural independence, it is possible to grasp what Fanon meant. Black American cultural politics in the 1960s was, from its very inception, an internationalist movement mobilizing in global and local contexts at once. Understanding this dialectic at work — the local informed by the global, a black nation produced in and through Third World identification and solidarity — expands our thinking about culture, politics and community during that turbulent era known as the 1960s.

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