

# A racial geography: The meanings of blackness in a Havana neighborhood

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Cultural and social capital are defined in part by physical space and the constructions of blackness can be dependent on spatial location. The barrio of Cayo Hueso, a ten square block section of Centro Habana, is not only a geographic entity that can be traced on a map but a racial formation as well that generates symbolic associations between skin color, place, and, in the case of this barrio, a host of negatively valued attributes ascribed to blackness. Social hierarchies help determine spatial structures and, in turn, spatial structures reinforce social hierarchies. As a result, the two—spatial structures and social hierarchies—cannot be separated. Further, identity and difference are rooted in space, place and locality. In Cayo Hueso, there are two competing meanings of blackness and place.

The examination of race and space unfolds around a statue of General Quintín Bandera, a black independence fighter. It was first unveiled in 1948 by then Cuban President Grau. Bandera was a fascinating figure, especially to grace the center of Parque Trillo, a park located in the barrio of Cayo Hueso. The statue draws significance not only because of its central location, but



*Quintín Banderas*

moreover because it embodies some of the complex and conflicting race issues in Cuba. It simultaneously and quite literally, places blackness symbolically and geographically at the center and margin of Cuban society.

Although Bandera achieved a high rank in Cuba's struggle against Spain, he was later court-martialed and stripped of his rank and position shortly before Cuba gained its independence in 1898.<sup>1</sup> His accusers, most of whom were white, argued that he had avoided military combat and had very publicly ensconced himself with his concubine in the army camp near the eastern city of Trinidad. Bandera did not deny these accusations, but in his own defense argued that having lovers in camp was common practice among military leaders and that he was being singled out because of the racism of local officers.

Historian Ada Ferrer wrote in 1999 that the charge of racism cannot fully account for the case against Bandera.<sup>2</sup> She argued that his behavior defiled the moral purity and honor of the rebel cause. She added that a national hero derive his political and spiritual authority by resisting the temptation of women, i.e. renouncing corporal pleasures that might distract him from his mission.

According to insurgent leaders, Bandera's questionable moral actions were exacerbated by his deliberate lack of discretion, and the reputed character of the predominantly black group of men under his command who themselves were thought to lack moral rectitude.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Bandera considered himself a "rustic," uneducated man who drew little cultural distinction between himself and his troops. On the contrary, Máximo Gomez, a white hero of the independence war, felt that leaders should serve as moral examples for their soldiers. He thought they were to subdue, not reflect, the

inclinations of the poor, uneducated enlisted men.<sup>4</sup>

Bandera's court-martial and strip of his rank and position were rooted not only in his lack of military discipline, but moreover in issues of morality, civility, and refinement — all racially coded traits. He did not serve as an appropriate role model for the citizens of the emerging republic because of his lack of civility and refinement. His court martial effectively guaranteed that he would have no leadership role in the new republic. Indeed, many black military leaders were excluded for one reason or another from leadership positions when Cuba gained its independence. Thus, at the very start of the republic, despite a strong abolition movement closely tied to the independence movement, and a national ideology of creating a nation for all Cubans, the historical reality reflected the ambiguous position blacks had in the new society.<sup>5</sup>

Like many Latin American nations at the turn of the century, the new Cuban republic struggled to reconcile dominant ideas of progress and modernity that were tied to whiteness, with its racially diverse and mixed population. Yet, less than fifty years later Bandera's statue was placed by President Grau in a location of honor, at the center of this small urban park situated in the most "city" part of the city (in "la parte mas ciudad de la ciudad") — as Centro Habana was described by Cuban troubadour Silvio Rodriguez.

One way we can see the persistent ambivalence toward blackness embodied in Bandera—the iconic image at the center of the neighborhood—is in how blackness is constructed, contested and spatially constituted in Cayo Hueso today. The spaces in Cayo Hueso are contested precisely because they concretize and literally locate funda-

mental and recurring ideological and social frameworks that structure everyday interactions.

There are two main contesting images of the Cayo Hueso barrio that we find create emerging struggle over the politics of representation invested in public spaces. First, the image is that it is a bad neighborhood that is a site reproducing and locating the negative symbolic capital associated with blackness. This is ascribed to Cayo Hueso in part due to the many tenements (*solares*) there that are populated predominately, but not exclusively, by AfroCubans. The negative association of these tenements as black spaces stigmatizes the entire barrio as a place of crime, delinquency and moral degeneracy – low culture.

Second, is the images that try to revalorize these tenements and rescue the barrio's reputation by seeing it in general and the tenements as important sites of the production and perpetuation of the rich AfroCuban cultural heritage. Therefore, this image does not deny that this is a black space, but rather capitalizes on that perception and tries to give blackness a new more positive spin.

When I first moved to Havana in 1992, academics and other professionals often asked me where I lived. When I responded Cayo Hueso they rolled their eyes, expressed deep concern about my safety, and then concluded that no one could tell me stories because I was living the real Havana (“la verdad”), not some cleaned up version that was presented to foreign visitors or tourists.

In a recent article on the Parque Trillo website for the National Center of the Committees in Defense of the Revolution, another author who grew up near the park cited experiences similar to mine. He wrote “despite the contradictory legends and stories, I never saw any act of violence that would distinguish it from other areas in

Havana. Nevertheless, its infamy reigns. When you say you live a block from the Trillo park, people look at you in such a way that it is not difficult to imagine what they are thinking”.<sup>6</sup>

Like this author, I quickly figured out that I was living in the Cuban equivalent of the South Bronx, which was by no means as dangerous a place as its counterpart in the United States. But, like the South Bronx or other ghettos in the United States, Cayo Hueso carried the stigma of being a bad neighborhood, a dangerous place, a mainly black barrio despite the large number of whites living there, a place filled with tenement houses, a place of poverty with overcrowded and dilapidated buildings. The neighborhood was perceived as a socially marginal zone filled with delinquents, blacks, and other socially marginal people. How apropos was it that Bandera, an AfroCuban national hero who was first valorized then maligned should be ensconced as the central image in the barrio's main public space. His history echoes the ambivalence toward the barrio and the park as decidedly black and reputedly dangerous spaces.

Cayo Hueso is indeed the most densely populated section of the Centro Habana. It has older, run down housing stock and is filled with *solares*, which can be described as crude wooden shacks that sometimes could be found on vacant lots. These shacks lack proper sanitation and water supplies. Further, the *solares* are sandwiched in between apartments and are basically buildings comprised of several stories of single room apartments that open onto a central paved patios. Some *solares* only have communal toilets and water and many are carved out of what had been single family residences. In the 10 square block barrio there are over 200 of these tenements. Since the



turn of the century, *solares* have been characterized as problematic black spaces.<sup>7</sup> Simply living in a *solar* can socially blacken an individual. Residency in a *solar* carries what urban sociologist Wacquant calls “territorial stigmatization”.<sup>8</sup> From non-residents’ perspective the bad reputation of the *solares* is applied to the whole barrio simply because of proximity.

Even though Cayo Hueso is a racially mixed barrio with roughly half of its population white, it was perceived as a black space with all of the negative symbolic capital associated with blackness. Nevertheless, a Cuban study conducted in 1987 found that, in most cases, high-crime areas like Cayo Hueso do not have a higher than average crime rate.<sup>9</sup> But, even a fact like this can not alter the negative image.

During the height of the economic crisis in the early 1990’s, also called the Special Period, Cayo Hueso was officially designated a “dangerous zone” (“una zona peligrosa”) due to a stint of rock throwing and vandalism that smashed a numbers of windows. As a result, residents were subjected to fewer and shorter blackouts at night. All of my neighbors rejoiced about this and hoped that the rock throwing would continue.

In general, residents of Cayo Hueso share a negative view of the barrio. Yet, they have a much more nuanced understanding of the source of this black reputation. The fine-grained distinctions and micro-hierarchies that are not apparent to outsiders are crucial to residents who seek to distance themselves from the barrio’s reputation and escape territorial stigmatization since local identity is a key part of personal identity in Cuba and is often the first bit of information exchanged when people meet. Place communicates much about a person’s “cultura”, back-

ground and respectability. Therefore, it is not just a geographic location on a map.

As a result, local taxonomies, perceptions and use of barrio space make clear distinctions between the residents who live in apartments and those who live in tenements. Furthermore, there are *solares* and then there are *solares*. Some are more well-maintained and respectable similar to apartments, while others constitute vest pocket slums, i.e. crumbling, dilapidated spaces of blackness and poverty. Despite the generally high-level interdependence on neighbors and frequent face-to-face interactions—especially at the bodega and other shops that distributed rationed food—residents who live in apartments rarely know or interact with the people who live in the *solar* next door. The *solares* and the apartments formed separate social worlds. Apartment residents, both white and Afrocuban, share the dominant perspective of the barrio’s bad reputation, but attribute that reputation solely to the problematic *solares* and the people who live in them. The distancing tactics of the apartment residents and the social differentiation within the barrio undermines solidarity and interpersonal trust. For the apartment residents, the *solares* represent dangerous black spaces that they do not enter.

Similarly, race is also inscribed in other spaces in the barrio. The Parque Trillo is for many residents another black space, especially after sundown. During the day, it serves as the site of morning exercise classes for the elderly. In the afternoon, it is the playground and gymnasium for elementary school children. After school, it is not uncommon to see children of all skin colors playing in the park. However, at night the park becomes a “black space”. Even with its broken benches and smashed streetlights, it becomes an outdoor living room for the young men who live



*Callejón de Hamel*

in the surrounding *solares*. On weekends, it is common to see a contemporary troop of “rustic” men and some women gather at the feet of the Bandera statue drinking, playing dominos, and passing the time.

The other factor that contributes to the park’s blackness is the presence of several large cotton silk (*ceiba*) trees. These trees are considered sacred in the Afro-Cuban syncretic religion Santería. The base of the trees often serve as repositories of various spells or charms such as blackened bananas tied with

red string, small paper bags filled with herbs or stones, etc.. Evidence of Santería in the park also makes it a socially marginal space for residents who see this religion as primitive and dangerous.

The impossible community and negative representation of Cayo Hueso do not go unchallenged. The neighborhood, like many urban areas are what Setha Low calls a contested space where conflicts over meanings invested in sites echo broader social struggles over deeply held collective myths. (10) Thus,



the barrio's blackness which is spatial in the *solares* and park is also the source of an alternative representation of Cayo Hueso—the cradle of Afro-Cuban culture. This representation does not deny the blackness associated with Cayo Hueso but rather celebrate it. This attempt to revalorize blackness and the *solares* happen on various levels and have mixed results.

Starting in the late 1980's, the Cayo Hueso cultural center organized rumbas within some of the barrio's *solares* under the

auspices of the Central Havana Municipal Cultural Office (“Dirección Municipal de la Havana”). This project was a deliberate effort to overcome the “impossible community” and the social isolation of the *solares* described earlier. The rumbas were organized, directed, and performed by Cayo Hueso residents. The dancers and musicians were barrio residents. These events were staged in *solar* patios and were free and open to all. When possible, refreshments were served to entice attendance.

In addition to trying to bridge the divide between the *solares* and the apartments, and help establish contact between these groups, the rumbas was a way to engage local youths in a socially constructive way and to help them discover and appreciate the barrio's cultural roots. Staging the events in the *solares* was a way to get the residents to take more responsibility and pride in their solar and, hopefully, to work together to maintain it and keep it clean. The use of rumba was a way to highlight and spatially locate blackness in the *solar* and to and give it a positive spin.

The rumbas I witnessed in the early 1990's that were apart of this effort were somewhat successful in generating community within the *solar* and in engaging local youths in a productive neighborhood project, but attendance at the events tended to be low and attracted few people who were not *solar* residents. Further, this effort was plagued by a lack of resources. It started during the worst years of the Special Period and by the late 1990's seemed to have been usurped by the emergence of the Callejón de Hamel, a popular tourist attraction.

In the 1990's, Salvador Gonzalez, a local Cayo Hueso artist who was a light skinned mestizo/mulatto and practitioner of Santería, painted a mural on the wall of a

friend's house in the small alleyway of Callejón de Hamel. Gonzalez's art work draws heavily on Afro-Cuban religious symbols and elements. During the 1990's, his murals eventually expanded to cover more than 100 meters of wall in the alleyway and most of the back walls of a six-story apartment building facing the alley.

Today Callejón de Hamel is a multi-dimensional outdoor art space complete with live music and weekly rumbas. It also includes a shop where Gonzalez sells his artwork, a bar that sells cold drinks and snacks, and a stand that sells rum. Gonzalez has gained an international reputation as a muralist and has been commissioned to do murals around the world including such countries as the United States, Denmark, Venezuela, and Norway to name a few.

Despite the fact that Callejón de Hamel may have started as a space celebrating Afro-Cuban culture in an effort to help revitalize Cayo Hueso for the residents, the alleyway now serves a much broader audience, namely foreign tourists. In fact, most locals view the alleyway as a tourist attraction. A recent internet search of "Callejón de Hamel" showed that people had visited this site over 500 times. Most descriptions of the site referred to the alleyway as part of a tourist package or trip itinerary. Also, the internet touted the site as an "authentic" space that showcase Afro-Cuban culture and that it should not to be missed.

Many young Cubans, especially young black men can be found hanging out in "Callejón de Hamel". Some hope to meet foreigners, others go to enjoy the live music and the available rum. The alleyway also spatializes blackness in Cayo Hueso, but does so in the context of global tourism. Its roots its authenticity in the persistent image of Cayo Hueso as a black space; how-

ever, it simultaneously displaces blackness onto the exotic black diaspora sought by foreign tourists.

In conclusion, Cayo Hueso may have been transformed from a stigmatized place to a destination in the eyes of some. However, it is still a contested space where the continuing ambivalence toward blackness is epitomized in the heroic figure of General Bandera. Standing silently at the heart of Cayo Hueso, he presides over an undeniably black space, where the conflicting meanings of blackness are played out both locally and on the global stage.

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